

Migration and Identity: A Comparative Study of Funeral Ritual Cultures among the Hmong and Miao in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou Border Region, China

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Abstract

Funeral traditions among the Miao people worldwide exhibit notable commonalities despite regional variations in form and ritual, collectively reflecting a shared Miao conception of personhood. A comparative analysis of the funeral rites and “Guiding scripture” of the Miao and Hmong peoples in the adjacent regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou reveals that, throughout their migrations, the Miao developed localized variations in funerary practice while maintaining a coherent cultural identity. Although dispersed across diverse regions, Miao communities retain overarching cultural continuities. What changes are their living environments and modes of cultural expression; what remains constant is the enduring sense of ethnic identity. This cultural lineage links Miao people across the globe, sustaining their collective identity, even as cultural transformations and evolving forms of self-identification continue to unfold amid changing times.

Keywords: Miao funeral rites; Personhood; ethnic identity; Guiding Scripture; Cultural Localization

1. Introduction

The Hmong people, who migrated from China and later dispersed overseas, are primarily concentrated in Southeast Asia, with additional communities in Australia, Europe, and the Americas. The term “Hmong” refers to ethnic groups that identify themselves as such, including those whose self-designations are phonetically similar and who share cultural homogeneity, thereby facilitating mutual recognition through self-identification and language. Several subdialects of the Miao within the Western dialect group also refer to

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themselves as Hmong or use phonetically similar terms (Maoming 2004:19). The Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region constitutes the principal area where Miao communities self-identifying as Hmong are most concentrated. This region functioned both as a core settlement area during the Miao’s westward migration and as a point of departure or transit station for migration beyond China’s borders. The expression “Miao of the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region” designates the Miao communities concentrated in the contiguous areas of these three provinces, which together form the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou dialect region (Western Dialect Region).

Drawing on both field research and archival sources, the funeral rites of the Miao people in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region can be classified into four main components: “Daif Dlongx,” “Ngouf Jat,” “Dlaik Vangb,” and “Baik Zangt”. The Hmong funeral ceremony follows a similarly structured sequence of rituals. The religious beliefs and customs in this tri-provincial border area reflect the animistic Personhood characteristic of the local Miao population (Graham 1937, Graham 1954). Miao funeral rites represent the most profound expression of Miao culture and serve as a key marker of ethnic identity. These practices have also absorbed elements of Han Chinese funerary traditions, resulting in a number of shared ritual features (Tapp 2003). Although the Miao are dispersed across multiple countries and regions—and comprehensive genealogical tracing is no longer feasible—their culture preserves a collective ancestral memory that continues to sustain their ethnic identity (Symonds 2004). The ritual music performed during Miao funerals carries significant social and cultural value. As a core expression of ethnic heritage, it embodies the Miao conception of humanity and the relationship between the living and the dead (Morrison 1998, Falk 2003). Studies examining the effects of modernization on traditional Miao funeral practices in Western countries suggest that political, economic, and environmental policies in Miao-inhabited regions have profoundly disrupted local ritual traditions (Nibbs 2006, Ó Briain 2012, DeSantiago 2020). Despite these disruptions, Miao communities across the globe continue to demonstrate resilience and adaptability in negotiating complex identity dynamics and cultivating a sense of belonging (Vang 2016). In contemporary fast-paced societies, however, traditional Miao funeral rites—which often extend over several days and

entail substantial financial costs—are increasingly perceived as burdensome (Xiong, Her et al. 2020).

Historically, the Hmong trace their origins to the border regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. Sharing common roots with the Miao people in China, they have maintained a collective ethnic and cultural memory throughout their migrations. Despite the challenges posed by external influences and internal transformations, the Hmong have continued to safeguard their cultural heritage. Owing to successive waves of migration across generations, the ancestral lands described in the Hmong Guiding scripture funeral rites—particularly among Hmong communities in Australia, Europe, and the Americas—are predominantly situated in Southeast Asia. In contrast, within the Guiding scripture funeral rites practiced by Miao communities across Southeast Asian nations, the ancestral homeland is generally portrayed as China. This orientation differs somewhat from the eastward ancestral references found in the funeral narratives of Miao groups within China itself. Although both groups preserve memories of their ancestral homeland, their interpretations differ, reflecting distinct migratory trajectories. In essence, while environmental contexts change, the ethnic Personhood remains fundamentally consistent—yet it is continuously reshaped through the influence of local cultures encountered during migration.

The ceremonial form and conceptual meaning of Miao funeral rites function as cultural symbols of the ethnic group, while their underlying essence embodies its Personhood. The concept of humanity represents the integrated framework through which individuals comprehend themselves, reflect on the nature of human existence, and define their place within the cosmos. It simultaneously provides a lens for understanding others. Understanding humanity requires an analysis from three dimensions: biological, social, and psychological (Mauss 1950:332-362). Distinct social hierarchies produce differentiated and unequal human characteristics that emerge within specific social contexts (Dumont 1980). By focusing on the objective attributes of individuals or groups, one can observe the interplay of their biological, psychological, and social dimensions. The ethnic conception of personhood is manifested in individuals through their specific qualities, rights, obligations, and capacities (Meyer 1987:273-278). Research on the notion of personhood should distinguish among the

concepts of the individual, the self, and the person from biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives (Harris 1989). Diverse social structures and cultural systems thus give rise to corresponding expressions of personhood and selfhood.

2. Hmong Funeral Culture

The drivers of Miao migration are multifaceted, primarily encompassing political and economic factors. Many individuals migrated in response to political oppression or regional instability. Others sought improved livelihoods when harsh natural environments rendered survival difficult, often pursuing a nomadic existence described as “following water and grass for sustenance.” Large-scale migration to Southeast Asia was also influenced by broader geopolitical considerations. Historically, Miao communities in the region could enter Southeast Asia via Yunnan or Guangxi, and prior to the emergence of modern nation-states, population movement faced virtually no restrictions. These migrations occurred within the China-dominated East Asian Confucian cultural sphere, encompassed by the scope of the Chinese dynasties’ concept of Tianxia. At the time, there were no national borders or immigration regulations, and the migrating Miao did not operate under concepts such as “nation” or “citizenship” (Xiurong 2017). This favorable geopolitical and cultural context facilitated and sustained the Miao people’s migration into Southeast Asia.

The ceremonial procedures and practices of funeral rites vary from individual to individual. While continuous migration of ethnic groups may lead to cultural changes, there are also moments of discontinuity influenced by the geo-cultural context of the place of residence. Despite these changes, the core cultural essence of the group remains intact, manifested in a shared sense of collective identity. The funeral rites of the Miao people in neighboring regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou exhibit similarities to those of the Hmong. Prior to burial, the deceased undergoes a series of rituals, including preparations such as the coffin, procession, offerings, and the final burial. Following the interment, after approximately 12 days, a “Ngouf Jat” ceremony is conducted on the 13th day. This ritual symbolizes the separation of the deceased from the living, marking their passage into the realm of the other world. Additionally, certain post-burial rituals demonstrate similarities in their execution.

This study primarily compares and analyzes the funeral rites of the Thai Hmong with those of the Miao people in the neighboring regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. During the Vietnam War, the Hmong in Laos largely aligned with the United States, supporting American military operations. As a result, it became difficult for local Hmong populations to maintain a foothold in their original homelands after the war, compelling them to relocate. Refugee camps established by the United States in Thailand provided temporary shelter for people fleeing Vietnam, Laos, and other countries. Subsequently, a new wave of migration dispersed the Hmong across the globe. Thailand functioned as a transit country, from which over 100,000 Hmong migrated to other nations via these camps (Chaojiang 2006). It is for this reason that Miao communities have become globally dispersed. Their repeated migrations were driven by the search for a stable place to live and build a life. Consequently, the history of migration remains deeply ingrained in collective memory—it is not merely a record of ethnic development, but also a chronicle of hardship and sacrifice. Compared to countries such as Laos and Vietnam, the Hmong migrated to Thailand relatively late; however, they occupy a distinctive position in the history of overseas Hmong migration. Using Thai Hmong funeral rites as a case study, this analysis examines the funeral culture of overseas Hmong communities.

A Comparative Study of Miao and Hmong Funeral Rites in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou Border Region: An Analysis Based on Patricia V. Symonds' Fieldwork in Thailand's Flower Village

According to Patricia V. Symonds' observations of Hmong funeral rites in Flower Village, the ceremonial process closely resembles that of the Miao funeral rites in the neighboring regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. In Flower Village, when a person dies, three gunshots are fired to notify the village and inform the spirits of the death. The burial practices and ritual objects for the deceased in Flower Village are similar to those of the Miao communities in neighboring areas of China. On the thirteenth day after burial, the Flower Village Hmong conduct a “Xi Pling ceremony” attended exclusively by

relatives(Symonds 2004:111), Comparable to the Miao “Duck and Dodge” ritual in the border regions, the ceremony invites the departed soul home for offerings before releasing it, thereby separating the realms of the living and the dead. The overall structure of funeral rites is largely consistent across regions, reflecting the shared origins and cultural roots of the Miao people. For example, following a death in Flower Village Hmong communities, the deceased is washed and dressed before being placed on a bamboo-woven frame or door panel—a practice known as the “corpse bed,” also observed in some Miao communities in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. In Thai Hmong funerals, the body is positioned on a stretcher, symbolically resembling a return from the battlefield (Tapp 2003:170). Similarly, the items used by ghost masters to guide the deceased, as well as the contents of the Guiding scripture, resemble those of the Miao in the neighboring regions. Flower Village rituals typically include a chicken, rice wine, boiled eggs, bamboo divination sticks, red cloth, and a small paper umbrella to guide the departed spirits. Once the memorial hall is established, the funeral procession begins. The Guiding scripture is recited over several hours, instructing the deceased on navigating obstacles, passing successive trials, ascending the sky ladder, and ultimately reaching the land of darkness to reunite with ancestors (Symonds 2004:116-117). Overall, the funeral rites and procedures documented by Symonds in Flower Village are largely analogous to those practiced by the Miao in the neighboring regions of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou.

Regardless of where an ethnic group migrates, how geography and lineage evolve, or how cultural identity transforms across generations amid modernization, ethnic culture remains the defining marker distinguishing the self from others. Throughout history, the Miao people have endured continual displacement and migration, eventually dispersing across the globe. Despite differences in nationality and variations in political and cultural environments, they share a common ethnic identity and collective sense of belonging. Funeral rites serve as tangible expressions of this cultural core, with Miao communities worldwide embodying a shared philosophy of life and death. The Miao conceive of death as

both a return to life's origins and the completion of existence, wherein death also signifies renewal. During Miao funerals, the spirit guide directs the departed soul along the path once taken by the ancestors during their migrations, ultimately leading back to the ancestral homeland. Today, as Miao communities adapt to diverse living environments, the ancestral homeland may exist more as a cultural memory than a physical place. Yet the enduring desire to return reflects both the remembrance of ancestral origins and the collective historical consciousness of the group, while also expressing the Miao conception of personhood. In Miao funeral culture, human life originates from the ancestral land and ultimately returns to it—a symbolic homecoming of the soul.

Shared cultural heritage constitutes the central thread sustaining ethnic consciousness throughout the long history of migration, as collective historical memory unites the community. The Miao people inhabit diverse regions and countries. Although specific environments have shaped the cultures of smaller Miao subgroups, they have consistently preserved a common cultural memory, most visibly expressed in their funeral rites. This shared memory forms the foundation of ethnic identity. The culture of a single ethnic group across different regions exhibits both commonalities and distinctive features. Such variations arise from the inheritance and evolution of the group's indigenous traditions, as well as the influence of external cultures, ultimately shaping a shared cultural expression.

Historically, the Miao have migrated continuously, spreading their roots to form distinct regional branches. Despite living in different regions and nations, they maintain a collective ethnic memory, and their cultural essence remains fundamentally interconnected. Rituals connect the past, present, and future through enduring and latent forms. They also link participants across generations, including ancestors and those yet to be born (Myerhoff 1984:152). The sacred and ritualistic nature of funeral ceremonies allows them to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, serving as cultural conduits that unite the living, the departed, and the ancestors—thus enabling communication across time. Among these, the Guiding scripture most clearly embodies this bridging function.

3. Deeply rooted ethnic memories

The narrative structure and content of the Hmong funeral Guiding scripture closely resembles those of the Miao funeral rites in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region, differing primarily in branch-specific historical memories. The Guiding scripture embodies the shared cultural memory of Miao groups across regions, tracing their common ancestry and origins. The version documented by Patricia V. Symonds among the Flower Village Hmong in Thailand closely parallels that of the Miao in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region.

Firstly, in both domestic and overseas Hmong communities, the Guiding scripture exhibits similar narrative structures and themes. Symonds’s account of the Flower Village Hmong Guiding scripture begins by recounting the origin of life, the creation of the world, the emergence of illness and death, and the means by which people acquire sustenance from the “land of light” (Symonds 2014:117). It also describes the origins and cultivation of bamboo and tree species, which resemble the accounts in the Miao Guiding scripture of neighboring Chinese regions. The soul-summoning songs of the Thai Hmong are likewise closely aligned with those of China’s Miao. In Thai Hmong funeral rites, the Guiding scripture narrates the origins of heaven, earth, all beings, and ancestors, then recounts the life of the deceased—whose death resulted from illness—before retracing the ancestral path to the afterlife. These narratives parallel those found in the Guiding scripture of Miao communities across Southeast Asia. This tradition is not unique to Thailand; similar forms appear among the Miao in Vietnam and Laos. In Hou Jian’s edited work *The Miao Guiding Ritual*, the Vietnamese Mengzhuang ritual includes several sections: an opening invocation, interactions between humans and spirits, the seed offering, the guiding rooster, farewell to deities, and the act of guidance. The Laotian Mongdou ritual features comparable sections: the opening address, seeking the seed, the human life–death cycle, thanksgiving to homeland deities, obtaining reincarnation credentials, receiving new silk garments, returning to ancestral roots, and a closing rite. These examples demonstrate that the Guiding scripture of

Hmong communities across Southeast Asia share a common framework with those of the Miao in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region. Moreover, their narratives contain recurring motifs. For instance, in the Vietnamese Mengzhuang ritual, the departing spirit bids farewell to household deities such as the bed, kitchen, wealth, hearth, door, eave, and celestial deities (Jian 2017:98-106). Similarly, Hmong communities in Australia and the United States retain comparable narrative expressions in their funeral Guiding scripture. During Australian Hmong funerals, for example, the “Qhuab Ke,” chant directs the deceased’s soul toward the other world to join the ancestors (Yia L 2011). Overall, the narrative structure and thematic content of Guiding scripture among the Miao and Hmong across various regions remain remarkably consistent with those practiced in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region.

What has enabled this continuously migrating people to preserve their distinct cultural identity? The answer lies in the enduring sense of belonging rooted in their cultural bloodline and the collective personhood of the community. Throughout successive waves of outward migration, a people’s cultural memory may evolve, yet their cultural lineage remains inextricably connected. For instance, the Hmong in Southeast Asian countries remember their migration from China, identifying it as their ancestral homeland. In contrast, Hmong communities in countries such as Australia and the United States trace their origins to Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and other nations, regarding Southeast Asia as their ancestral land. Although historical memory has undergone transformations over generations of migration, the cultural memory of the Miao people—both in China and abroad—continues to point toward their ancestral homeland. In the Guiding scripture of the Laotian Mengdu funeral rites, the section titled “Returning to One’s Ancestral Lineage” addresses the fate of the soul during the “Setting Off” ceremony: “Now, you were born as a mortal being. A person possesses three souls. Though your body has perished, your soul remains alive. One soul will be reincarnated as a human being, while another soul must return to its ancestral lineage” (Jian 2017:161). Similar descriptions appear widely in the Guiding scripture of Miao

communities both within and beyond China. Ethnic consciousness demonstrates remarkable vitality within a people's culture, enduring the erosion of time and remaining deeply embedded in collective cultural memory.

Second, the Hmong Guiding scripture preserves deeply rooted ancestral memories. The Miao Guiding scripture implicitly embodies the Miao people's primordial understanding of life.

In the Laotian Meng Dou scripture, a dialogue unfolds between the departed soul ascending the thirteen-tiered heavenly ladder and the King of Hell:

“The King of Hell asks, ‘You come from the mortal world, where life is good and all are joyful. What brings you here?’ You must answer, ‘Leaves must fall for trees to grow; people must die for prosperity to flourish. Leaves must fall for forests to thrive; people must die for progress to advance.’” Leaves fall, trees grow tall; people die, yet families thrive. As leaves shed, forests flourish; through death, life is renewed. This is why you have come here—accompanied only by the sheng and drums on your journey”(Jian 2017:162)

The Miao Guiding scripture expresses a simple yet profound reflection on the meaning of life. In Miao cosmology, human existence—like all things in heaven and earth—follows the cycle of birth and death. Yet birth and death are not opposing forces but rather transformative stages of existence. As the aforementioned Guiding scripture suggests, Buddhist and Taoist thought have also influenced Miao cultural concepts. Within the western dialect region, similar expressions are almost universally present in the Guiding scripture of Miao funeral rites.

When guiding the spirits of the deceased, the Hmong in Thailand have a ghost master who chants: “It seems like you are truly dead. The body is lying down. Is it truly dead or are you just pretending? If you are just pretending, Then get up to chase the chickens and the pigs around the house. If you are truly dead, Then turn your ears to listen. Txawj Nkiag [the chanter] will chant the death song for you to hear.” (Symonds 2004:118)

As evidenced by the aforementioned Guiding scripture, the funeral narratives of the Hmong closely resemble those of the Miao communities in the neighboring regions of

Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. This similarity reveals the Miao peoples' deeply rooted collective memory of their ancestral culture, preserved and transmitted through generations of migration.

Such memory endures regardless of the geographical environment or the distance from their ancestral homeland. In the journey of the spirit retracing the path of its ancestors to reunite with forebears, certain ritual expressions remain consistent across regions. Although the Guiding scripture of the Miao may vary in place names or narrative style, their collective memory of the ancestral path remains unified. Both the Hmong and the Miao Guiding scripture from the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region include accounts of Caterpillar Mountain and Caterpillar Valley.

For instance, the Thai Hmong Guiding scripture states:

“You arrive Ntxwj Nyoog’s caterpillar mountain and cold caterpillar valley. The caterpillars are jumping, as big as deer. You hand reaches out to put to put on your hempen shoes, So that you have a way to get to your ancestors. You arrive at Ntxwj Nyoog’s caterpillar mountain and cold capterpillar valley. The caterpillars are jumping, as big as pigs. Your hand reaches out to put on your hempen shoes, So that you have a way to get to your ancestors.”(Symonds 2004:198)

The Guiding scripture of the Lao Hmong and the Thai Hmong exhibit strikingly similar expressions, reflecting shared cultural and ancestral narratives.

“Now, when you go to Zhu Niu’s Caterpillar Slope, the wriggling caterpillar is as big as a sheep, so you take out your hemp shoes in your right hand and put them on; the wriggling caterpillar is as big as a pig, so you pick up your hemp shoes in your right hand and put them on, before you go to meet your ancestors.

Now, if you go to Shilongpo, Shilong will open its mouth to swallow you, and you will plug Shilong’s mouth with a ball of hemp; if you go to Shihushan Pass, Shihu will open its mouth to eat you, and you will plug Shihu’s mouth with a ball of hemp, before you can go and meet your ancestors. ”(Jian 2017:164)

The Guiding scripture of Miao funerary rites in the Sichuan-Yunnan-Guizhou border region almost universally feature narratives about Caterpillar Mountain and Caterpillar Valley.

As in the Miao Guiding scripture of Xingwen County, Sichuan Province:

“Mo led you across the Yellow River to the shore. Along the way, you saw swarms of maggots and hordes of snakes and scorpions. Do not be afraid. Mo gave you silk shoes to wear, so you could walk upon the maggots. Mo gave you silk straw sandals, so you could tread upon the snakes and scorpions. Only when you found the path should you proceed!”(Yonghua 2020:294)

The Guiding scripture of the Miao people in Dafang County, Guizhou Province, states:

“When you reach A-zhi’s Caterpillar Mountain, Caterpillars crawl all over the ground. When you reach A-zhi’s Caterpillar Slope, Caterpillars cover the path. You put straw sandals on your feet, You put flowered shoes on your feet, You rub your feet as you walk forward, Stepping steadily to meet your in-laws.”(Committee, D. C. E. A 1993:9)

In the Miao Guiding scripture of Weixin County, Yunnan Province, the passage Guat Daox Gangb states:

“Listen carefully to Mu's words, strain your ears to hear Mu's whispers. Mu brings you to the mortal world, yet must lead you to a place crawling with worms. Why are these worms so thick and dense, as thick as pillars?

Why are these worms so thick and dense, as large as pillars? Your feet will be soiled, but make no sound. Mu will bring straw sandals for you to wear, The curtain will give you straw sandals to cushion your steps, the curtain will give you hemp shoes to cushion your steps. So all you need to do is grasp the rooster's wings, hold tight to the rooster's tail. As the rooster strides forward, the bamboo divination will answer you. The curtain, arrow in hand and bow on its back, will accompany you. Only when you know the path should you walk slowly; only when you recognize the way should you follow steadily, Old Stone.”(Zhaofei 2010:97-100)

As the saying goes, spirits do not partake of offerings from those outside their kin, nor do people venerate ancestors beyond their own lineage. Embedded within the cultural logic of traditional funerary rites is an ethos of mutual recognition: only ancestors linked by blood to the clan will receive the spirits of the departed who belong to the same lineage. This principle of otherness and selfhood not only delineates the foundational boundaries of ethnic beliefs concerning spirits and deities but also mirrors the underlying norms of recognition in

human society. Distinctions between closeness and distance among the living, as well as between self and other, likewise conform to this enduring cultural logic.

Overall, the Hmong Guiding scripture shares notable commonalities with the Miao Guiding scripture from the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region in terms of narrative structure, imagery, and linguistic expression. The narrative of the Guiding scripture encapsulates the ethnic group’s funerary system, deeply rooted ancestral memory, and collective sense of personhood—elements that together constitute the essence of its culture. At the moment of death or impending death, the living construct a spiritual path for the deceased, enabling the body to relinquish its attachment to life and depart in peace (Mueggler 2017:82-83). The funeral Guiding scripture thus functions not only as a ritual text but also as a ceremonial guide. In the Miao Guiding scripture, the speaker—portrayed as a Miao individual—seeks the ancestral path in the otherworld: “I came from the eastern ancestral homeland, and I shall return to the eastern ancestral homeland”(Wei 2024). Regardless of where the Miao migrate, their deceased always have a designated place of rest within their cultural framework. In mourning, the Miao lament what is imagined as their nation’s once-glorious past. Through funeral rites, the essence of Miao cultural identity achieves its most authentic expression (Tapp 2003:169). Whether through funerary symbols or cultural essence, the Miao people share a common origin, demonstrating that their cultural memory of shared ancestry has remained fundamentally unchanged despite migration and shifting social environments. This continuity reflects the enduring adaptability and resilience of Miao culture.

4. Social challenges and cultural adaptation

Throughout their migrations, the Miao people have established communities in diverse regions, each developing distinct cultural characteristics. Although regional variations exist in funeral practices, the expression of personhood within Miao funerary culture remains consistent. Whether examining Hmong funeral rites in China or those preserved by Hmong communities abroad, these ceremonies ultimately convey a shared cultural narrative. A community’s funeral rituals integrate multiple cultural elements, symbolizing its collective

identity and heritage. The oral narratives within funerals reflect the group's social structure, while the guiding scripture preserves its historical and cultural memory. Together, these elements reveal the cultural psychology and social adaptability of the Miao people.

Ethnic cultures exhibit complex structures and possess an inherent capacity to adapt to their surroundings. However, academic research has largely emphasized ecological adaptability while neglecting social adaptability. The development of ethnic cultures is shaped not only by ecological conditions but also by social and environmental dynamics, as reflected in the adaptive nature of their cultural practices. The funeral traditions of the Miao people exemplify this adaptability, revealing their cultural psychology and evolving in tandem with the community's migratory history.

First, following their migration to various parts of the world, the Hmong people have largely preserved the ethnic culture of their ancestral homeland, although tensions have arisen between their political identity and cultural identity. Hmong communities across different regions retain collective memories of migration, and their funeral narratives express a cultural consciousness that remains connected to their ancestral origins. While Hmong populations worldwide share a common ancestry and cultural heritage, regional variations in funeral rituals reflect the distinct historical experiences and genealogical traditions of specific subgroups.

In human societies, one of the most significant and universally shared symbolic systems for uniting and distinguishing groups is the collective memory of origins and major historical events. From this perspective, the migration of the Hmong people represents the migration of a living oral history. Wherever they settle, Hmong communities carry with them the memory of their collective past, extending and evolving their cultural identity upon this foundation. After migrating overseas, the group's historical memory underwent new transformations, influenced by their ancestral roots and local contexts. These transformations are reflected not only in the modification of funeral artifacts and ritual expressions but also in the adaptation of the Guiding Scripture. The term "Chinese" frequently appears in the version of the Guiding Scripture recorded by Patricia V. Symonds, indicating that it was not originally part of the narrative. Instead, it gradually emerged after relocation from China and through interactions with other communities, reinforcing a heightened sense of national identity. The inclusion of "Chinese" in the Guiding Scripture thus functions not only as an identity marker but also as a cultural symbol. The local Hmong continue to preserve the historical and

cultural memory of their ethnic heritage and homeland, even as they adapt to their current environments. Their responses to questions of political and cultural identity reveal both the psychological expression of ethnic consciousness and the community's broader cultural adaptability.

Ambivalence toward ethnic cultural identity is profoundly shaped by local environmental factors. In particular, younger generations of Hmong, though familiar with the performance of traditional funeral rites, often struggle to grasp the deeper cultural meanings embedded within these rituals. The substantial transformations in their living and cultural environments have made it difficult for them to understand the symbolic connotations expressed in traditional funerary practices. Devoid of personal memories of their ancestral homeland, they are unable to fully comprehend the funerary culture of their own ethnic group.

For young Hmong individuals living in developed countries, the Guiding Scripture presents particular challenges of explanation and interpretation. Composed within the ecological and cultural context of their ancestral homeland, the text's meanings are often difficult for them to relate to. Their lack of historical memory of the homeland in which their ancestors once lived further deepens this disconnection. In the Guiding Scripture, the deceased and ancestors are depicted in mythical form, while the animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and other geographical features described differ markedly from those in their current environments (Falk 1996). Consequently, changes in living conditions and cultural settings profoundly influence people's perceptions of traditional funerary culture.

Second, traditional Hmong funerals, whether held domestically or abroad, face a range of practical challenges. Restrictions arising from government policies, as well as changes in living conditions and modes of production, often hinder the practice of traditional funeral rites. In China, Hmong funeral customs have been shaped by national funeral reforms and by broader forces such as the market economy, digital networks, and modernization. Overseas Hmong communities must also contend with the policies of their host countries. For instance, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand have implemented measures that restrict Hmong cultural practices and further distance these communities from their ancestral homelands. Nevertheless, the historical memories embedded in the Hmong cultural fabric remain deeply rooted and resistant to rapid transformation. Although local policies exert some influence, they have not diminished the community's commitment to preserving traditional culture.

Nevertheless, the impact of globalization and regional policies on the preservation and development of ethnic cultures should be examined from a dialectical perspective. When ethnic cultures face practical challenges, such as environments that no longer meet their needs, they tend to adapt by making corresponding cultural adjustments.

The Hmong people dispersed across various Southeast Asian countries are not the only ones facing challenges in maintaining traditional funeral rites amid local political and ecological constraints. Similar difficulties exist in other regions, often with greater complexity. In Hmong funerals held in Australia, the Guiding Scripture is recited to lead the spirit of the deceased. Following the recitation, the mourning cries commence, and a final ceremony known as soul release (tso plig) is performed either twelve days after burial or several months later (Yia L 2011:52). The funeral practices of Hmong communities in the border areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou share notable similarities with those of Hmong groups in Southeast Asia. However, Hmong funerals conducted in Australia are significantly shaped by local government policies. For example, the practice of ritual animal sacrifice is prohibited. Moreover, a generational gap within the community has emerged, as many young Hmong Australians lack the knowledge or experience to perform these traditional rites effectively (Yia L 2011:53). The legal and policy frameworks of host countries thus play a crucial role in shaping the performance of traditional Hmong funeral practices. Restrictions on these rites hinder the transmission and development of ethnic culture. Additionally, younger overseas Hmong are increasingly influenced by local social cultures, leading to a growing divergence in their understanding of traditional funeral customs compared to that of their ancestors. Consequently, traditional Hmong funeral rituals abroad are likely to become simplified or replaced by modern forms over time. This trend is also evident in places such as California, USA, where the slaughter of cattle in residential areas and funeral parlors is prohibited. As a result, local Hmong families must locate nearby cattle farms to perform funeral sacrifices before transporting the slaughtered animals to the funeral venue (Houfeng 1997). Blood sacrifice holds profound symbolic importance in Hmong funerary culture. Yet for many overseas Hmong, such practices are constrained by legal and cultural norms, prompting adaptations in ritual form. As funeral rituals evolve, the underlying cultural meanings of the community also transform. With the continued development of society, traditional funeral customs may inevitably undergo simplification or modification.

The Hmong people across the world live within diverse political, cultural, economic, and geographical contexts, all of which shape their collective and individual identities. When external forces threaten the survival or continuity of their ethnic community, they often strengthen internal unity to resist outside cultural influences. Sharing common ancestral roots with the Miao communities in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou Border Region, the Hmong possess a collective historical memory of migration. Yet over centuries of movement, they have made distinct choices regarding settlement and adaptation to local environments. Despite these regional differences, the Hmong continue to preserve the memory of their migration from ancestral lands in China. Thus, the cultural memory of the Hmong and the Chinese Miao can be understood as a shared communal consciousness—one grounded in both lived experience and historical imagination, sustained through a collective ethnic and cultural heritage.

Through their continuous migrations, the Hmong have become increasingly eager to assert their identity and distinctiveness, highlighting both their cultural centrality and local significance. Among the Hmong who migrated to Southeast Asia, funeral rituals surrounding death symbolize communal unity and serve as a cohesive force that reinforces group solidarity. As one of the most enduring cultural practices preserved within ethnic communities, funerals play a crucial role in cultivating ethnic consciousness. For instance, Hmong communities in California, USA, often experience tensions with local political, cultural, and legal systems, which in turn heighten their sense of ethnic identity. While traditional Hmong culture unites the community, it frequently comes into conflict with Western values and worldviews (DeSantiago 2020). Throughout prolonged periods of migration and resettlement, the Hmong have persistently sought both organizational structure and a tangible sense of belonging. Studies of Hmong ritual music in Vietnam demonstrate that, compared with many other ethnic groups in the country, the Hmong place greater emphasis on ethnic identity than on national identity and remain relatively less integrated into the nation-state framework (Ó Briain 2012:260). Under diverse political systems, cultural and economic factors have further reinforced their sense of cultural self-esteem, enabling the preservation of ancestral memory and the continuity of Hmong cultural traditions.

5. Discussion and conclusion

During their long history of migration, the Miao people—dispersed across diverse regions—developed a culture marked by distinct regional variations. Although funeral practices differ regionally, the underlying expression of ethnic identity conveyed through Miao funerals remains fundamentally consistent. The funeral rites of the Hmong, both in China and abroad, exhibit remarkable similarities, with the oral narratives of the Guiding Scripture reflecting a shared cultural framework. These traditions, transmitted through oral narration and embodied ritual practices, function as vital repositories for preserving the historical memory of the ethnic group. Despite residing in different countries and regions, the funeral traditions of the Hmong and Miao communities in the border areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou display striking parallels. Such similarities originate from a shared ancestral memory of adaptation to changing environments during migration, as manifested in practices of ancestral worship and enduring ethnic worldviews. Over time, however, Hmong funeral culture has been notably influenced—both in ritual structure and in the ways individuals perceive and interpret these traditional practices.

The funeral narratives and expressions of the Miao people in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou Border Region exhibit deep commonalities with those of Miao communities worldwide. These shared elements have gradually evolved under the combined influence of geography, kinship networks, interethnic interactions, and factors such as social transformation, local policies, and environmental conditions. Although migration has produced regionally distinct cultural centers and funerary practices characterized by local features, the collective worldview they embody remains fundamentally consistent.

Whether in China or other countries, the funeral practices of the Miao people display remarkable consistency. The oral narrative of the Fingerprint Sutra further highlights the group's cultural cohesion. This orally transmitted and experiential tradition not only preserves the historical memory of the Miao people but also embodies the depth and continuity of their cultural heritage.

The Hmong people around the world face a common challenge in balancing modernization with cultural preservation. On one hand, they must adapt to mainstream cultural expectations to ensure their survival and development; on the other, they must safeguard and sustain their own heritage to secure the continuity of their community.

Cultural adaptation—whether internal or external—demonstrates the resilience and flexibility of ethnic traditions. The modernization of ethnic culture reflects the intersection of historical choices and the practical imperatives of survival and progress. Nevertheless, the ultimate trajectory of these cultural transformations remains uncertain.

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