

“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”

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DRESSING UP THE MIAO NATIONALITY

An anthropological enquiry into the politics of minority nationalities' material culture promotion and classification in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

This paper investigates the People's Republic of China's (PRC) state-sponsored national and international promotion of the Miao costumes during the 1980s-1990s post-Maoist period. Drawing from an extensive fieldwork, mainly conducted in Guizhou province, this paper explores as well the present-day consequences of the Miao costumes promotion/classification on both the material culture and the identity formation of the members of the Miao nationality. The Miao nationality is one of the PRC's largest minority nationalities. Until the very recent massive migration towards China's urban and coastal areas, the vast majority of the Miao people lived in rural micro societies dispersed in the mountainous areas of Southwestern China, often with little or no social contact with other Miao societies; even neighboring ones. The idea that some sort of a pan-Miao bond exists between the Miao people and their (exotic) costumes is however deeply entrenched in the country's Han-Chinese dominant culture. Modern science analysts inside China did little to dispel the impression that the Miao dresses were a quintessential expression of Miao-ness. The turning point in the understanding of Miao dresses came in the 1980s, when western-trained anthropologists resumed field research in China. Their analyses transformed our conception of the Miao costumes by mentioning, although usually only in passing, the significance of these artifacts in the *ongoing process* of identity formation of the Miao *as a minority nationality* of the PRC. Yet, the classification projects and the intense promotion of the Miao costumes in and from the PRC, and their impact on the formation of the Miao identity did not, per se, attract much scholarly attention. This paper argues that the PRC's state-sponsored promotion of the Miao costumes in the 1980s and 1990s is a long-term consequence of the 1950s "ethnic identification" (*minzu shibie*) population-engineering project. The 1980s and 1990s also correspond to a time when the contours of the 56 official nationalities were being challenged from within the country. I hypothesize that the Miao costumes promotion and classification correspond to such an engineering attempt. Ultimately, this paper wishes to address a fundamental issue pertaining to the manipulation of the material culture of a subordinate Other. Is it possible to transform the representation people have of their social world by manipulating the ordering and the re-encoding of highly symbolic artifacts through which these people have been marking and negotiating their collective identity, or identities, such as for instance their traditional dresses and textiles? The Miao case seems to point out to a negative answer. Yet,....