

Xiao Zhang, 化茧成蝶: 西江苗族妇女文化记忆 [Hua Jian Cheng Die-Xi Jiang Miao Zu Fu Nv Wen Hua Ji Yi; Reinvented as the butterfly-cultural memory of the Miao women of Xijiang]

Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2018. 314 pages. 26 illustrations, 3 tables. Paperback, \$17. ISBN: 9787100163613.

This work is a study in anthropology and ethnology based on the oral records of fifty women of the Miao nationality from Xijiang in Guizhou Province. It reflects the customs, life, and inner world of several generations of local Miao women and describes the cultural changes in Miao society. As a Miao herself, Xiao Zhang has experienced life in a typical Miao settlement. Zhang demonstrates the two-way process of development and creation between human beings and culture, thus providing a dynamic, lively, concrete specimen of women's culture with distinctive geographical characteristics.

Zhang believes that the people in Xijiang inherited the history and culture of the Miao nationality and formed an effective social order before or upon moving to Xijiang. For thousands of years, the Miao of Xijiang have been trying to pass on their traditional culture and maintain their original social order. However, with the con-

tinuous growth of people's needs for survival and continuous social development, the social culture of Xijiang is at risk. Amid this contradiction between traditional culture and social development, and the two-way movement of cultural disintegration and revival, the Miao women's culture has changed.

This book is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1, "Village of Primitive Simplicity," introduces the status quo, cultural, and ecological environment of Xijiang and the background of its Miao women. The chapter locates them geographically in terms of village relations, marriage, surname, history, laws and regulations, folk customs, ancestor worship, and religious activities.

Chapter 2, "The Ideal of Patriarchy and the Glory of Women," illustrates the social structure of Xijiang and feminine characteristics of Xijiang culture from historical and realistic perspectives. Xijiang is traditionally a patriarchal society. It unequivocally maintains the supreme power and status of men. Property and children belong to the father. However, women enjoy freedom and power in terms of culture, customs, and daily life outside the social system. As a result, women feel that they are not subject to the oppression by men under normal circumstances. The inequality between the two genders has not incited a consciousness of resistance among women. On the contrary, in the face of ancient patriarchal norms, Miao women make important contributions by virtue of their hard work, intelligence, loyalty to the group, and modesty.

Chapter 3, "Types of Destiny," classifies the female groups by way of making a living and their state of living and focuses on the main types of women depicted in this book. The first is the traditional type, from ancient to modern agricultural families of peasant women, while the second is professional women, who are separated from agricultural production and make a living in new ways outside of agriculture. There is a third type that is also discussed, which is somewhere in between. This type includes one spouse that inherits the traditional way of making a living, while the other spouse adopts newer ways of making a living.

Chapter 4, "Life Melody and Happiness Standards," shows what the Miao women of Xijiang pursue throughout their life and discusses their standards of happiness and misfortune. Among them, it is worth mentioning that the Miao women fear that their offspring have no boys, which in their eyes is the greatest misfortune. They believe that boys come to save their lives, both to give them hope for the continuation of life but also to earn their face in the world.

Chapter 5, "Sexual Shame," explores the essence of Xijiang culture by highlighting the control that deep-rooted culture has over the Miao women's behavior and thus points out that cultural control leads to the alienation of women from men. Xijiang society, in order to maintain its patriarchal lineage and social stability, has given "sex" an ugly image. Cultural norms require people in Xijiang, especially women, to be pure, dignified, stable, and to be shy and appear to be afraid of "sex."

Chapter 6, "Small Groups of Women and the Chain of Cultural Inheritance," discusses women's alienation from men and their affinity to their own gender, for which the small groups of women are formed to maintain cultural norms. While exchanging traditional skills with each other, women constantly create and pass on traditional culture, such as clothing, poetry, diet, and etiquette to future generations, so that culture is preserved as well as possible. But at a crucial time of cultural transition, small groups of women are disintegrating and the culture is becoming increasingly frivolous and less and less valuable.

Chapter 7, “Variation for Equal Rights,” the core of the book, discusses how Miao culture, in some contexts, respects women and serves as the starting point to advocate for equal rights between men and women. However, due to the influence of foreign culture and the deepening of ethnic contradictions and class differentiation, women’s status has been constantly lowered. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, their status was elevated as the gender equality laws stipulated. The equality-inequality-equality curve demonstrates the dialectical relationship between the de facto equality between men and women and inequality in principle, as well as between the equality in principle and the de facto inequality.

Chapter 8, “The Dialectics of Forbearance and Optimism,” exemplifies what women encounter during menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and other special physiological experiences, and illustrates their pain, tolerance, and optimistic attitude toward life.

Chapter 9, “Cultural Changes: A Joy or A Worry,” draws attention to changes in the younger generation of women in Xijiang after they leave their hometown. The chapter, thus, reflects upon the changes and loss of traditional Miao culture and invites people to reflect on the cultural value and the future of Xijiang. The last chapter, “Encounters,” presents oral histories of several women that have had different experiences.

Zhang explains that the traditional culture of Xijiang has effectively regulated its internal relationships and guaranteed the steady development of society for more than two thousand years. It is suitable for the survival of the Miao tradition in Xijiang and maintains the balance between the society and natural environment of Xijiang, its people, and their inner world. However, balance does not indicate rationality. In some aspects, balance is obtained by sacrificing the interests of a certain part of the whole. Balance in traditional Xijiang comes from the physical hardship and psychological loneliness of women. Therefore, we should notice the inevitability and rationality of a culture as it emerges and exists, as well as its limitations and possibility of extinction.

Zhang—both a woman from Xijiang and someone trying to communicate with readers as an observer—discusses her personal feelings in the book. She also wants to make readers aware of the conditions surrounding the Miao women mentioned in the book and provide a bridge for readers to understand their life stories. The book marks her exploration and endeavors in cultural anthropology with her unique perspective. The book reminds readers to think about how a new type of culture should be reshaped in the constantly changing Xijiang society and what kind of cultural ecology meets the needs and interests of the Miao people.

Yongzhen Jin
Zhejiang University