

Ritual, Identity, and Resilience: The Guzang Festival in Miao Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: The Miao people, one of China's most culturally rich ethnic groups, have preserved their traditions through rituals like the Guzang Festival, which embodies ancestor worship, nature reverence, and communal cohesion. This ethnographic study employs participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field note documentation to explore the Guzang Festival in Xijiang Miao Village, Guizhou Province. The Guzang Festival serves as a mechanism for social cohesion, integrating interpersonal relationships through gift exchange and kinship, distinguishing kinship through specific gift-giving practices, and strengthening clan identity through ancestral worship. The study identifies four key processes: inviting ancestors, guests entering, village closure, and completion. Dominant symbols such as ancestral spirits, the drum, the Shaman, and the Guzang leader play central roles in organizing and reinforcing cultural and social order. The transmission of Guzang leadership and the establishment of inter-familial relationships from limited intervention in the pre-1950s to severe setbacks during the social transformations and a revival post-1980s, highlight the festival's role in cultural continuity and social stability. The Guzang Festival exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of Miao cultural practices in the face of modernization and state intervention, providing valuable insights into the preservation of cultural heritage and the dynamics of ritual practices in contemporary society.

Keywords: Guzang Festival; Miao Culture; Ritual Semiotics; State Intervention; Social Cohesion.

1. Introduction

The Miao people, one of China's most culturally

rich ethnic groups, have long preserved their unique traditions through rituals that serve as both cultural expressions and social mechanisms. Among these, the Guzang Festival stands out as a cornerstone of Miao cultural heritage, embodying their deep-rooted beliefs in ancestor worship, nature reverence, and communal cohesion. This festival, with its intricate rituals and symbolic practices, not only reflects the Miao people's spiritual worldview but also plays a pivotal role in shaping their social identity and community structure. It owns the reputation of being a "living fossil" and a "museum" of traditional practices [1]. However, as globalization and state policies increasingly influence ethnic cultures, the Guzang Festival has undergone significant transformations, raising critical questions about the preservation of cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. This study explores the interplay between ritual practices and identity formation among the Miao people, focusing on the Guzang Festival as a lens to understand how cultural traditions adapt to external pressures while maintaining their core significance. The research is situated within the broader context of China's ethnic policies and the global discourse on intangible cultural heritage preservation. By examining the festival's symbolic meanings, social functions, and historical evolution, this study seeks to shed light on the resilience and adaptability of Miao cultural practices in the face of modernization and state intervention.

The significance of this research lies in its dual focus on cultural preservation and social dynamics. On one hand, it contributes to the academic understanding of how rituals function as mechanisms for maintaining cultural identity and social cohesion. On the other hand, it addresses practical concerns about the sustainability of ethnic traditions in an era of rapid socio-political change. By bridging the gap between theoretical insights and ethnographic

observations, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the Guzang Festival's role in Miao society and its implications for broader cultural heritage preservation efforts.

To achieve these objectives, this paper addresses three key research questions:

(1) How do the dominant symbols and rituals of the Guzang Festival reflect and reinforce the Miao people's cultural identity and social hierarchy?

(2) What role does state intervention play in shaping the evolution of the Guzang Festival, and how do the Miao people navigate the tension between cultural preservation and political adaptation?

(3) How do kinship networks and gift exchange practices during the Guzang Festival contribute to the maintenance of social cohesion and intergenerational cultural transmission?

By addressing these questions, this study not only deepens the understanding of the Guzang Festival but also offers broader insights into the dynamics of cultural heritage preservation in the context of globalization and state governance. Through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, semiotic analysis, and historical contextualization, this research seeks to illuminate the enduring significance of rituals in shaping identity and community among the Miao people.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 The Role of Rituals in Miao Cultural Heritage

The Miao people, an ethnic group with a rich cultural heritage, are distinguished by a unique belief system deeply rooted in their indigenous religion. This system is characterized by a complex interplay of nature worship, totemism, ancestor veneration, and the reverence of spirits and deities. These beliefs are not merely abstract constructs but are integral to the cultural practices and social organization of the Miao people, serving as the bedrock of their communal identity and continuity.

Scholarly investigations into Miao society and culture frequently employ diverse cultural elements as analytical lenses. For instance, a comprehensive analysis of Miao songs was conducted, focusing on their lyrical content and performance styles. The research underscored the pivotal role these songs play in articulating and shaping the socio-cultural life of the Miao

people. Often imbued with ethical values, these musical traditions function as a mechanism for regulating behavior, enhancing social cohesion, and preserving communal order within Miao society [2]. Similarly, the intricate designs and symbolism of traditional Miao attire was examined, positing that these garments are not merely decorative but serve as vital conduits for transmitting social values and behavioral norms [3]. Furthermore, the evolution of these designs in contemporary settings reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, highlighting the enduring relevance and adaptive nature of Miao cultural heritage. The dietary customs of the Miao people were delved, offering insights into how food practices are intertwined with life events and cultural symbolism [4]. For example, in Guizhou, the birth of a child is marked by the preparation of a hen, with a piece of chicken or fish gently smeared on the newborn's lips. This ritualistic act is not only a gesture of nurturing but also a profound blessing, symbolizing the wish for the child's health and vitality. Such practices exemplify the deep connection between cultural rituals and the lifecycle events within Miao communities.

While individual cultural elements such as songs, clothing, and dietary practices are significant in their own right, they often converge within the framework of rituals. Rituals serve as a pivotal practice that synthesizes these diverse cultural expressions into cohesive, unified activities. As such, rituals provide a holistic lens through which one can better understand a community's identity construction, social organization, and cultural continuity. For instance, the role of religious rituals is emphasized in fostering cultural identity and social cohesion within diverse religious communities. It illustrated how rituals provide individuals with a shared sense of identity and purpose, reinforcing communal bonds and collective values [5]. Similarly, temple rituals in Kochi, India were examined, demonstrating how these practices strengthen community cohesion among migrant populations by reinforcing social ties during periods of transition [6]. How life-cycle rituals integrate cultural elements from both Korea and America was highlighted, enabling the preservation of ethnic identity while facilitating adaptation to new environments [7].

Within this context, the Guzang Festival emerges as one of the most significant and

tradition-rich rituals of the Miao people, offering a profound insight into their cultural and social fabric. At the heart of the Guzang Festival lies the ritual of ancestor worship, which underscores the Miao people's deep reverence for their ancestral spirits. The Miao believe that the drum serves as the dwelling place of these spirits, and the act of drum worship during the ceremony symbolizes their awe and gratitude toward their forebears [8]. Furthermore, the sacrificial ox, a central element of the festival, is venerated as an indispensable offering in the ancestor worship ritual. This practice not only reflects the Miao's spiritual beliefs but also highlights their intricate relationship with nature and animals, which is a cornerstone of their religious worldview [9].

The Guzang Festival also serves as a microcosm of the Miao people's social hierarchy and power dynamics. During the ceremony, men (particularly elderly men), occupy the central positions in the drum dance area, while women and younger individuals are positioned in outer circles [8]. This spatial arrangement mirrors the patriarchal structure and hierarchical organization of Miao society. Additionally, the festival reinforces the village's social stratification through various leadership roles, such as the election of the drum master and the distinctions between households that sacrifice oxen for ancestors and those that do not [10]. These rituals not only delineate power and status but also strengthen kinship and in-law relationships, thereby enhancing the village's internal cohesion and social stability [11].

2.2 Semiotic Interpretation of Rituals

The application of semiotics in ritual interpretation has emerged as a significant approach in cultural studies, with numerous scholars employing systematic methodologies to decode the symbolic meanings embedded within cultural contexts. The semiotic and anthropological analysis of Turkish culture was exemplified, particularly focusing on the manifestation of "unknown" concepts through ritualistic practices and objects. The investigation of distinctive Turkish rituals, including kahve falı (coffee fortune telling), kursun dökme (lead pouring), and nazar boncugu (the evil eye talisman), demonstrates how these cultural artifacts materialize abstract notions such as fate and malevolence into tangible forms. The study underscores the transformative power of symbolic processes in converting

incomprehensible and uncontrollable phenomena into visually concrete representations [12].

Building upon this theoretical framework, an in-depth analysis of ritual symbols within the Ata-Manobo tribe was conducted, employing a semiotic lens to interpret specific emblems and their cultural significance. The research particularly highlights how sacrificial animals in agricultural rituals transcend their role as mere offerings, embodying the tribe's profound reverence for and ecological interdependence with nature [13]. This interpretation reveals the intricate connections between symbolic representations and the tribe's cultural beliefs, value systems, and social organization, providing valuable insights into the mechanisms of cultural preservation and transmission.

Further advancing the field, a comprehensive methodological study of the Slametan Ngawandasa Ndinteni ritual in East Kasiyan Village was employed. Through systematic participant observation and in-depth interviews with community stakeholders, the researchers analyzed the complex interplay of symbolic communication through linguistic expressions, kinesthetic patterns, and ritual objects. Their findings illuminate how these symbolic elements collectively form a sophisticated communication system that conveys fundamental aspects of tradition, religious cosmology, communal identity, and social cohesion [14].

The collective findings from these studies demonstrate that semiotic analysis in cultural interpretation operates on the premise that culture constitutes a complex system of signs, where each symbolic element possesses intrinsic meaning while simultaneously functioning within a broader network of signification. This approach enables researchers to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the conceptual frameworks and symbolic representations within studied cultures.

A particularly influential theoretical contribution comes from the concept of dominant symbols, which has significantly shaped subsequent research in this domain. These central symbolic elements, characterized by their polysemic nature and cultural prominence, serve as crucial components in the symbolic systems of specific cultures, embodying core collective values and beliefs [15]. This theoretical framework has been effectively applied in various cultural contexts, as evidenced by the analysis of Palestinian symbolism. The scholar's interpretation of the

olive tree (Al-zaytuna) as representing the profound connection between the Palestinian people and their land, and the cactus (Saber) as symbolizing resilience and endurance, exemplifies the application of dominant symbol theory in understanding cultural identity and resistance [16]. Similarly, the examination of Ukrainka's literary works demonstrates the enduring relevance of dominant symbol analysis. Through the interpretation of harp, stone, and light as central symbols, the research elucidates complex themes of divine-human relationships and the pursuit of fundamental human values in verse dramas [17]. These studies collectively underscore the efficacy of semiotic analysis in unraveling the intricate layers of meaning embedded in cultural practices and artistic expressions.

This comprehensive review of literature reveals that semiotic interpretation of rituals provides a robust framework for understanding the complex interplay between symbolic representations and cultural meanings. The continued application and refinement of these methodologies promise to yield deeper insights into the rich tapestry of human cultural heritage.

2.3 The Presence of the State in Rituals

Rituals, as cultural expressions, have been increasingly recognized as potent instruments for statecraft, with governments strategically shaping and regulating these practices to advance political agendas. A nuanced examination of the Chinese government's approach to ritual regulation was provided through informal control mechanisms. By leveraging local civil society groups, the state achieves a delicate balance between cultural preservation and political alignment, ensuring that ritual practices conform to state objectives while maintaining their perceived authenticity and community-driven nature [18].

Building on Geertz's "theatre state," Jackson argues that modern Thailand operates as a "performative state" in which "power and prestige are maintained by ritual enactments both in everyday life and ceremonial events". He examines how Thai state rituals—from royal ceremonies to national holidays — project a carefully managed image of unity and hierarchy [19].

An examination of the Inca Empire further enriched our understanding of state-ritual

dynamics through the historical perspective. The Inca rulers' strategic incorporation of local divinities into state-controlled rituals and the establishment of centralized pilgrimage centers demonstrate how pre-modern states utilized ritual practices as tools for political integration and power consolidation [20]. This historical case study offers a model for analyzing how post-colonial states use ritual to project authority and manage diverse populations [19].

Building upon the theoretical foundations and research gaps identified in the existing literature, this study will focus on the Guzang Festival in the Miao village of Nanguì, with a particular emphasis on how the festival's rituals reflect the identity consciousness and social structure of the Miao people. Employing a semiotic framework, specifically the concept of dominant symbols, this research aims to analyze the intricate symbolic meanings embedded within the Guzang Festival rituals. The selection of dominant symbols for in-depth analysis is particularly apt, given the rich symbolic nature of the festival, and will provide a nuanced understanding of the cultural essence and underlying meanings of Miao traditions. This approach not only addresses a significant gap in the existing research on the Guzang Festival but also contributes to the broader discourse on the semiotic interpretation of cultural rituals. Furthermore, recognizing the inseparable relationship between rituals and state governance, this study will explore the influence of state policies on Miao rituals. As a unified multi-ethnic nation, China places considerable emphasis on the governance and cultural management of its diverse ethnic groups. Historically, Miao culture has experienced both crises and opportunities for development as it adapts to evolving state policies. This research will investigate how state policies, whether through implicit or explicit means, shape and influence Miao rituals, and how these rituals evolve within a political framework. By examining the interplay between state governance and ethnic cultural practices, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic adaptation and resilience of Miao rituals in response to political and social changes. This dual focus on semiotic analysis and state influence will offer valuable insights into the preservation and transformation of cultural heritage in a contemporary context.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employs an ethnographic approach to investigate the Guzang Festival, a central cultural practice of the Miao people, in Xijiang Miao Village, Guizhou Province. The research design integrates participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and field note documentation to comprehensively explore the festival's cultural significance, its role in fostering social cohesion, and the influence of state policies on its practice. This multi-method approach ensures the collection of rich qualitative data, providing nuanced insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of the Miao community.

3.1.1 Fieldwork duration and methods

The fieldwork was conducted over a 20-day period, during which the researcher immersed themselves in the daily life and cultural practices of the community. Participant observation was a primary method, enabling the researcher to observe behaviors, interactions, and expressions during the Guzang Festival. Particular attention was paid to the use of symbolic elements, such as the sacred drum and the role of the Shaman, in the festival's rituals. Observations were meticulously recorded in a field notebook, accompanied by personal reflections and reactions to the events witnessed. This reflexive approach allowed for critical assessment of the researcher's positionality and its impact on data interpretation [21].

3.1.2 Semi-Structured interviews

To complement participant observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including village elders, ritual leaders, and younger community members. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives on the festival's significance in their own words. Non-verbal cues and emotional expressions were also documented, offering additional context to the verbal data.

3.1.3 Theoretical and methodological foundations

The research design was informed by an extensive interdisciplinary literature review, drawing on works from anthropology, history, and cultural studies. This review established a

theoretical framework for analyzing the role of rituals in reinforcing cultural identity and the impact of state policies on ethnic minority traditions. Additionally, the study adopts a critical ethnographic perspective, which emphasizes reflexivity and acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity as an integral part of the research process [22]. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher remained cognizant of their role as an outsider, continuously reflecting on how their presence and background might influence data collection.

3.1.4 Ethical considerations

To ensure ethical rigor, all participant names and identifying details have been anonymized in the final text. The researcher maintained transparency with participants regarding the study's objectives and obtained informed consent prior to data collection. Reflexive notes were incorporated into the analysis to critically examine the researcher's biases and assumptions, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of the Miao community remained central to the study.

This methodological approach not only captures the complexity of the Guzang Festival but also provides a framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation, social cohesion, and state influence in the context of ethnic minority traditions. By combining immersive fieldwork with critical reflexivity, this study aims to contribute a nuanced and ethically grounded perspective to the broader discourse on cultural heritage and ritual practices.

3.2 Ethnographic Field Study

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted in Xijiang Miao Village, situated in Nangui Village, Leishan County, Guizhou Province, China. Leishan County, named after Leigong Mountain—the highest peak of the Miao Ridge—is home to a population of approximately 160,000 individuals, comprising five ethnic groups: Miao, Han, Dong, Shui, and Yao. Among these, the Miao population predominates, with 134,000 individuals accounting for 84.2% of the total population, distributed across more than 370 villages.

The journey to the field site began with a 45-minute drive from the urban area, traversing winding mountain roads flanked by dense shrubs and intertwined vines. The seemingly endless mountain path evoked a sense of anticipation, culminating in the discovery of a hidden and

picturesque Miao village. Upon arrival, the village revealed a main road leading to Wudong, a small hamlet consisting of a dozen households. Further exploration uncovered a pebble-paved Lusheng square, a century-old Wind and Rain Bridge, stilted houses built into the mountainside, and terraced farmland. Over a hundred Miao stilted houses were meticulously arranged along the contours of Leigong Mountain, creating a dynamic, flowing landscape reminiscent of a traditional painting.

The Wind and Rain Bridge serves as a vital link between Wudong's main village and its smaller counterpart, with branching alleys connecting individual households. Nearly every home features a small path carved into the mountainside, creating an intricate network of interconnected routes. Ancient trees and pathways harmonize to evoke a tranquil atmosphere, akin to a hidden paradise.

3.3 Demographic and Cultural Context

According to the deputy village head, the village is home to nine Miao clans, including the Yang, Pan, Li, Lu, Wan, Jiang, Hou, Zhao, and Jin families. Some clans have resided in the village for five generations, while others trace their lineage back seven generations. Leishan County is renowned for preserving traditional Miao cultural elements, including architecture, clothing, customs, dances, musical instruments, and crafts, all of which retain profound historical and cultural significance.

The village's traditional dwellings are constructed along the mountainside, following a "large dispersion, small concentration" spatial pattern. Most residents live in clustered communities, while a few are scattered across nearby mountains. The village's architecture is characterized by stilted buildings, constructed entirely from cedar wood harvested from Leigong Mountain. These structures typically consist of three levels:

(1) Ground Level: Used for housing livestock (e.g., pigs and chickens), storing firewood, production tools, and miscellaneous items. Some families also place toilets in this area.

(2) Middle Level: The primary living space, featuring a central room with a shrine dedicated to ancestors. This space serves as the focal point for family rituals, feasts, dining, and hosting guests, making it the largest and most significant area of the home. Surrounding rooms include bedrooms and side chambers.

(3) Top Level: Primarily used for storing grain and various idle items. During large gatherings, this level can also accommodate guests.

This ethnographic study leverages the unique cultural and spatial characteristics of Xijiang Miao Village to explore the interplay between ritual practices, cultural identity, and social structures within the Miao community. The site's rich cultural heritage and traditional architecture provide an ideal setting for examining the Guzang Festival and its associated rituals through a semiotic lens, while also investigating the influence of state policies on the evolution of these practices.

4. Research Discussion

4.1 Dominant Symbols and Ritual Processes in the Guzang Festival

The Guzang Festival, as a complex semiotic system, incorporates a variety of dominant symbols that play a central role in organizing and reinforcing the cultural and social order of the Miao community. Drawing on the semiotic framework, dominant symbols functioned as indexical guides, pinpointing specific cultural objects and establishing their hierarchical significance within a closed system of signs [15, 23].

The Guzang Festival exemplified this through its integration of diverse folk art forms, including sacrificial rites, drum-making, and dance, which collectively form a comprehensive communication system [24]. Within this system, certain symbols emerge as dominant, structuring the ritual's meaning and guiding participants' interpretations. The following sections explore these dominant symbols and their roles in the four key processes of the Guzang Festival.

The four processes of the guzang festival:

(1) Inviting ancestors, sacrificing to "Earth Ghosts," and honoring the buffalo

The Guzang Festival, known as "nongx niel" in the Miao language, begins with rituals that establish a connection between the living and the ancestral spirits. The term "nongx" symbolizes the ancestral spirits, while "niel" refers to the buffalo sacrificed to honor them. These rituals are deeply rooted in the Miao people's reverence for their ancestors and their spiritual worldview.

Three days before the festival, the head household initiates the rituals of inviting ancestors, sacrificing to "earth ghosts," and honoring the buffalo. The ancestral invitation

ritual takes place in the main hall, where offerings of sticky rice, rice wine, fish, and traditional items are presented. A shaman recites prayers, seeking blessings for prosperity and well-being for the descendants.

The "earth ghost" ritual, though less elaborate, is equally significant. As one villager explained, "If the earth ghosts are not appeased, the village will not have peace. We must perform this ritual to ensure the smooth progress of the Guzang Festival" (Yangyue, Interview transcript, 28th June). This ritual underscores the Miao people's belief in maintaining harmony with both the spiritual and natural worlds.

The final ritual in this phase, "honoring the buffalo," is led by the Guzang leader. The buffalo, a central symbol of the festival, is prepared with its mouth bound to prevent inauspicious sounds. A shaman performs a "dispelling misfortune" ritual using a duck, applying its blood to the buffalo's head and horns to remove bad omens and ensure the ritual's success.

(2) Guests entering and "pulling the buffalo into the pond"

The second phase of the festival, spanning the fourth to the eighth days, involves the "guests entering" and "pulling the buffalo into the pond" rituals. During "chicken day" and "dog day," relatives are invited to participate, bringing gifts such as sticky rice or cash. The festive atmosphere is marked by firecrackers and communal dances on the village's dance platform.

The "pulling the buffalo into the pond" ritual, held from the sixth to the eighth days, is a highlight of the festival. The Guzang buffalo, adorned with red carpets and silver ornaments, is paraded through the village. Accompanied by gunmen, elders, and musicians, the procession culminates at the buffalo pond, where the buffalo are symbolically coated with mud, signifying their role as offerings to the ancestors.

(3) Village closure and ancestral sacrifice

The third phase, on "buffalo day" and "tiger day," involves the sacrificial slaughter of the buffalo. The ritual is meticulously performed, with the buffalo's head facing the sunrise and a maple tree used to create a tripod for the slaughter. The shaman recites prayers before the buffalo is axed, and its blood is collected for medicinal or exorcistic purposes.

The buffalo's meat is distributed among relatives, while its head is reserved for ancestral sacrifice.

Unmarried adults are required to leave the village and return only after three days, a practice that underscores the ritual's role in regulating social behavior and reinforcing communal norms.

(4) Completion and follow-up

The final phase extends into the following year, with a moon dance event held on a "chicken day" in the lunar calendar. The festival concludes with the "Yaf niaof" ritual, where rice wine is shared among participants, and the drum spirits are dispersed to seek the next host village for the Guzang Festival. This cyclical process ensures the continuity of the ritual tradition until the next Pig Year.

4.2 Explanation of Dominant Symbols in Guzang Festival

The Guzang Festival, a cornerstone of Miao cultural heritage, is structured around a system of dominant symbols that organize and convey its profound spiritual and social meanings. These symbols—ancestral spirits, the drum, the Shaman (Ghost Master), and the Guzang leader—serve as focal points within the ritual's semiotic field, guiding participants' interpretations and reinforcing communal identity. Drawing on the concept of dominant symbols, these elements are not only central to the ritual's performance but also embody the Miao people's collective values, beliefs, and social hierarchy [15].

4.2.1 Ancestral spirits: the central focus

Ancestral spirits occupy the core of the Guzang Festival, around which all ritual activities revolve. The ancestors' spirits control and unfold various ritual units, including drum-making, ancestral worship, and communal feasting [25]. The festival's origins trace back to an ancient legend in which the Miao ancestors, facing agricultural misfortune, were advised by a shaman to sacrifice a water buffalo to appease the ancestral grandmother's spirit. This act restored favorable weather and bountiful harvests, establishing the tradition of annual ancestral worship.

The symbolic designs and arrangements of the festival, centered on ancestral veneration, serve as focal points for the ritual's "expression" and "performance." These elements revitalize collective memory and cultural transmission, transforming historical narratives into present-day forces that reinforce social morals and ethics. The rituals like the Guzang Festival deepen participants' commitment to communal values,

enhancing group cohesion through intense emotional experiences [26]. The ancestral spirits, as dominant symbols, not only represent personal sentiment but also embody the collective beliefs of the entire community, strengthening communal identity and continuity.

4.2.2 The Drum: a symbol of life and spirituality
The drum is the most significant element of the Guzang Festival, representing a complex symbol of Miao culture. Crafted from maple wood, the drum carries deep cultural significance, symbolizing the origin of life and ancestral totems. The Miao people believe that their ancestral life originated from the Butterfly Mother, who emerged from a maple tree, making the drum a sacred object that houses the spirits of the ancestors. Striking the drum is thought to awaken these spirits, transforming the ritual into an act of worshiping the drum itself.

The drum's symbolic meaning is further amplified through elaborate rituals. Before cutting the maple tree for drum-making, a ritual involving live chickens and ducks is performed, accompanied by prayers and animal sacrifices. The tree is felled with great care, ensuring it falls eastward, and is then shaped into a drum covered with buffalo hide. This process, rooted in ancient totemic beliefs and animistic religion, solidifies the drum's position as a symbol of divine power. Its role as a signifier with inherent sacred qualities makes its spiritual and communicative functions undeniable.

4.2.3 The Shaman (Ghost Master): mediator between worlds

The Shaman, or Ghost Master, plays a pivotal role in the Guzang Festival as the mediator between the human and spiritual realms. During the festival, the Shaman recites prayers and performs rituals, such as before cutting the tree for drum-making or during communal worship. In everyday life, the Shaman is sought for healing and spiritual guidance, as villagers believe they can communicate with departed souls and ancestors.

The Shaman's performance relies heavily on visual presentation and symbolic communication. Dressed in special garments and adorned with symbolic decorations, the Shaman's body becomes a carrier of ritual meaning. The Shaman's visual impact draws spectators into the ritual context, intensifying their engagement and belief in the spiritual connection [27]. The Shaman's role as a spokesperson for the villagers, delivering structured hymns and prayers, further

reinforces their authority within the ritual space. This authority is bolstered by the semi-classical nature of the chanted texts, which are heavily edited and difficult for ordinary villagers to understand, highlighting the Shaman's elite status and dominance.

4.2.4 The Guzang leader: organizer and symbol of authority

During the festival, the Guzang leader holds a priority right in key activities, such as pig slaughter for ancestral rites and leading the lusheng dance. Any deviation from this order is believed to bring misfortune to the village, underscoring the leader's symbolic and practical importance. The Guzang leader's dual role-balancing sacred duties with human touch-reflects the Miao people's integration of religious and secular life. Their ability to set the mood with humor and interjections during the festival highlights the dynamic interplay between the sacred and the secular in Miao culture.

In summary, the significant roles of the Shaman and Guzang leader control the dual expression of the divine and the human. On one hand, the Shaman, as the mouthpiece of communication, holds a sacred duty to mediate between the spiritual and the human realms using the power of deities. On the other hand, the Guzang leader, filled with human touch, presides over various performances and activities during the Guzang Festival, skillfully setting the mood with humor and interjections. The interaction between the sacred and the secular reflects their functional duality, mirroring the Miao's dual characteristics of religious and secular life.

4.3 The Evolution of the Guzang Festival: State Intervention and Cultural Resilience

The Guzang Festival, a cornerstone of Miao cultural heritage, has undergone significant transformations over time, shaped by the interplay between state policies and local traditions. These changes can be divided into three distinct stages: pre-1950s, characterized by limited government intervention; the 1950s to 1970s, marked by severe setbacks due to state-imposed restrictions; and the post-1980s era, which saw a revival and thriving development of the festival under more inclusive cultural policies. This evolution reflects the complex relationship between state power and local cultural practices, highlighting both the resilience of Miao traditions and their adaptation to broader socio-political changes.

4.3.1 Limited government intervention: Pre-1950s

During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), the Miao region experienced significant cultural and social changes due to the influence of Han culture and government policy adjustments. The implementation of the "Gaitu Guilü" policy in the mid-Qing era abolished the traditional Tusi system, replacing it with county administration and extending central government control directly into minority areas [28]. This policy facilitated inter-ethnic communication and commercial development while strengthening central authority over these regions [29].

The Qing government also intervened in religious activities, such as prohibiting traditional Miao cattle sacrifice rituals and promoting Han culture through the establishment of temples. These measures fostered cultural integration, altering Miao religious structures and social organizations. While the introduction of Han culture aimed to strengthen political control and cultural assimilation, it inadvertently facilitated the wider dissemination and acceptance of Miao culture, maintaining its influence over a larger region [30].

During the Republic of China period (1912-1949), the Nationalist government implemented forced cultural assimilation policies to establish a modern nation-state. These policies sought to replace Miao culture with dominant Han culture, promoting Mandarin education and Han festive customs. However, due to social instability caused by warlord conflicts and Japanese invasions, the government lacked the capacity to fully transform local cultures [31]. As a result, traditional Miao culture remained largely intact, and the government's assimilation goals were not achieved. Instead, these policies sparked cultural resistance and reinforced Miao identity, as communities continued to use their languages and maintain traditional celebrations.

4.3.2 Severe Setback: 1950s-1970s

The 1950s marked a turning point in the relationship between the state and Miao cultural practices. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the government implemented policies to regulate religious practices and folk beliefs. These efforts aimed to dissolve centuries-old traditions, including the Guzang Festival, which was labeled as "feudal superstition."

The social transformations dealt the most severe blow to Miao traditional culture. Folk religions

and rituals, including the Guzang Festival, were suppressed, and ritual instruments were confiscated or destroyed. As one villager recalled, "Our drums and ritual items were taken away, some were even burned. The elders were terribly upset, but we continued to perform small rituals secretly at night" (Yangyue, Interview transcript, 28th June). During this period, rural society lost the space for self-organized community groups, and traditional sacrificial activities were forced underground.

4.3.3 Thriving development: Post-1980s

With China's reform and opening-up policies in the 1980s, the state adopted a more inclusive approach to ethnic cultures, allowing the Guzang Festival to gradually revive. The festival's recognition as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006 marked a significant milestone in its recovery. The "Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018-2022)" further emphasized the importance of developing rural culture, positioning the Guzang Festival as both a cultural heritage and a tourism resource.

Today, the Guzang Festival has transitioned from the "backstage of life" to the "forefront of entertainment," with village committees actively promoting it as a tourist attraction. However, as one villager noted, "What we really care about is the meaning behind the festival, the traditions passed down from our ancestors" (Yangyue, Interview transcript, 28th June). This sentiment underscores the tension between cultural preservation and commercialization, as the festival becomes increasingly integrated into state-led development initiatives.

4.3.4 Discussion: state power and cultural autonomy

The evolution of the Guzang Festival illustrates the complex interplay between state intervention and local cultural resilience. State policies often aim to incorporate local cultures into a unified national system, endowing traditional rituals with new symbolic meanings [32]. The Guzang Festival, for instance, has become a symbol of national prosperity, ethnic unity, and social stability, aligning with the state's goal of building a harmonious society.

However, local cultures retain a degree of autonomy, adapting to state forces while preserving their core traditions. During periods of suppression, such as social transformations, Miao communities continued to practice their rituals covertly, demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of folk culture. Traditional rituals

like the Guzang Festival not only serve as bearers of cultural heritage but also participate in the construction of national identity and social order [33].

4.4 Ritual, Kinship, and Social Networks: The Guzang Festival as a Social Cohesion Mechanism

The Guzang Festival, deeply rooted in Miao ancestor worship, serves as a complex ritual system that harmonizes human, natural, and divine elements. In both sociological and anthropological terms, rituals are understood as symbolic, performative, and standardized practices that transcend everyday life, reinforcing social ties and hierarchies [34]. Through the Guzang Festival, the Miao people facilitate the transformation of ancestral spirits from unrest to tranquillity, achieving psychological balance for the community. Moreover, the festival functions as a collective activity that integrates and mediates societal conflicts, fostering a unified social system [35]. This section explores how the Guzang Festival strengthens kinship ties, establishes inter-familial relationships, and transmits cultural leadership, highlighting its role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity.

4.4.1 Integration of interpersonal relationships: gift exchange and kinship

Gift exchange during the Guzang Festival is a central mechanism for maintaining and reinforcing interpersonal relationships. In Chinese social interactions, kinship and ethical factors are often expressed through the exchange of gifts, which reflects the spirit of reciprocity and mutual obligation [36]. During the festival, the nature of gifts varies according to the closeness of relationships. Close family members bring substantial gifts such as rice, wine, pigs, and cows, while neighbours and distant guests offer monetary gifts. These exchanges are meticulously recorded to ensure future reciprocity, reflecting the Miao society's emphasis on balanced and mutually beneficial relationships.

For instance, during the drum ritual, close relatives were expected to reciprocate gifts in kind, such as returning a pig for a cow or vice versa [37]. Monetary gifts are reciprocated with meat, with amounts over 300 RMB typically rewarded with a whole pig leg. As one villager noted, "I received invitations from 27 households, and I gave about 300 RMB to each.

Giving more would mean I couldn't finish eating all the reciprocated meat" (Huahen, Interview transcript, 28th June). This practice underscores the importance of maintaining equitable relationships within the community.

The role of the uncle in the Guzang Festival further highlights the significance of kinship. As the first person to strike the sacrificial cow, the uncle holds a revered position in the family, symbolizing the close relationship between uncles and nephews [38]. Gift exchanges with uncles are often more substantial, reflecting respect and gratitude for their role as family elders. This custom reinforces the ethical responsibilities and emotional bonds within Miao society [39].

4.4.2 Distinction of kinship through gifts

The Guzang Festival also serves to distinguish kinship through specific gift-giving practices. Close kin, or "inner kin," bring gifts such as glutinous millet, rice, and wine, while other guests offer monetary gifts. Glutinous millet, in particular, serves as a marker of close relationships, reflecting its historical value in traditional agrarian societies. As one villager explained, "Uncles and aunts bring about 20 pounds of glutinous millet, while other guests give 50 to 100 RMB" (Huahen, Interview transcript, 28th June). This distinction reinforces the boundaries between close and general relationships, emphasizing the importance of kinship in Miao culture.

4.4.3 Interaction of clan relations

The Guzang Festival also strengthens clan identity and cohesion through ancestral worship. The festival is typically celebrated by the entire clan, but as populations grew, some families began to hold separate celebrations. For example, in one village, the Long surname was the first to migrate and thus the first to "eat Guzang," while the Wang and Liang surnames, who arrived later, celebrated together (Weiyi, Interview transcript, 28th June). This division reflects the practical challenges of managing large-scale rituals while maintaining familial identity.

The festival also serves as a means for distant clan members to reconnect with their ancestral homeland. As one villager noted, "If distant clan members want their ancestors' spirits to return, they must come back to participate in the Guzang Festival" (Xuanbo, Interview transcript, 29th June). This practice not only reinforces blood ties but also solidifies clan identity and cohesion.

4.4.4 Transmission of Guzang leadership

The selection and training of Guzang leaders are integral to the festival's continuity. Leaders must be well-versed in Guzang chants and receive ancestral approval through divination. Traditionally, learning these chants involved apprenticeships, where elders taught younger generations through mutual aid. As one song master recalled, "We learned the ancient songs as children, visiting song masters in nearby villages. Nowadays, young people are busy and don't remember as many songs" (Kaiwen, Interview transcript, 29th June). This transmission process not only preserves cultural heritage but also strengthens interpersonal and familial bonds.

4.4.5 Establishment of Inter-Familial relationships

The Guzang Festival also facilitates the establishment of inter-familial relationships through practices such as "adoptive kinship." This system integrates families of different origins and surnames into quasi-kinship relationships for mutual support. As one villager explained, "My great-grandfather became sworn brothers with a diligent worker, establishing an 'adoptive kinship' relationship. Over time, more families settled here, and we helped each other" (Kaiwen, Interview transcript, 29th June). This custom reflects the importance of kinship ties in resource distribution and social cohesion.

The Guzang Festival serves as a vital mechanism for maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity within Miao society. Through gift exchange, ancestral worship, and the transmission of cultural leadership, the festival reinforces kinship ties, establishes inter-familial relationships, and integrates diverse ethnic groups. These practices highlight the festival's dual role as both a cultural heritage and a social institution, ensuring the resilience and adaptability of Miao traditions in the face of modernization.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the Miao Guzang Festival, elucidating the pivotal role of rituals in cultural transmission, social structuring, and identity construction. The research identifies key ritual symbols-ancestors, drums, shamans, and the leader-as not merely central to ritualistic expression but also as potent representations of the Miao social hierarchy and power dynamics. Through intricate ceremonial

practices, these symbols serve to reinforce cultural identity and enhance social cohesion within Miao communities. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant influence of national policies on the festival's evolution, showcasing the Miao community's remarkable adaptability and resilience in navigating the delicate balance between cultural preservation and political accommodation. The festival's role in fostering social solidarity and facilitating intergenerational cultural continuity is further amplified through its intricate systems of gift exchange and kinship network interactions.

These findings make substantial contributions to multiple academic domains, particularly ritual semiotics, state-local cultural interactions, and social network theory. The study advances our understanding of the Miao culture's dynamic adaptation mechanisms while offering valuable insights for safeguarding and transmitting ethnic cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world. The theoretical framework of dominant symbols derived from the Guzang Festival presents a replicable model for analyzing ritual systems across cultures, and the examination of state-local cultural dynamics provides policymakers with a nuanced framework for balancing cultural preservation with developmental objectives.

Notwithstanding these contributions, the study acknowledges certain methodological limitations. The relatively constrained duration of field research may have limited the comprehensive documentation of the festival's intricate details and evolutionary patterns. Moreover, the focus on a single Miao village necessitates caution in generalizing the findings, suggesting the need for broader comparative studies across different Miao communities to fully capture the cultural diversity within this ethnic group. As globalization and modernization continue to accelerate, future research should particularly examine the evolving attitudes and engagement patterns of younger generations toward traditional rituals. Critical areas for investigation include youth participation dynamics, contemporary interpretations of traditional symbols, and intergenerational perspectives on cultural transmission.

In conclusion, this multi-dimensional analysis of the Guzang Festival illuminates its multifaceted roles in Miao society, offering innovative theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches for cultural anthropology,

sociological studies, and ethnological research. Subsequent studies can build upon this foundation to further explore the adaptive transformations of traditional rituals in contemporary society, thereby contributing to the theoretical discourse and practical strategies for cultural heritage preservation and sustainable development.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by , Research and Creation Project of Zhejiang Provincial Department of Culture, Radio, Film and Tourism (2024KYY017), Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics United Front Research Special Project (TZ2025002), Zhejiang Graduate Education Association (2022-009), National College Students' Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Project (202411482035), Zhejiang Province College Students' Science and Technology Innovation Activity Program (New Seeding Talent Program) (2024R414A010), Zhejiang Province College Students' Science and Technology Innovation Activity Program (New Seeding Talent Program) (2024R414A013).

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