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Traditional Observance and Cultural Significance of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival: A Case Study of the Miao Ethnic Group in Renhuai and Tongzi Town in Guizhou, China

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Abstract

The study "Traditional Observance and Cultural Significance of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival" delves into the unique and time-honored celebration observed by the Miao ethnic group in the regions of Renhuai and Tongzi Town, located in Guizhou province, China. This paper presents a comprehensive case study that explores the festival's historical roots, its traditional observance, and the cultural significance held for the Miao community in these specific locations. Ethnographic research techniques, including participant observation, interviews with local community members, and examination of literature, are utilized to gain an in-depth understanding of the festival's practices and its role in the Miao culture. The findings reveal that the June 6th Sacrifice Festival is central to the Miao people's social and religious life. It serves as a significant occasion for expressing reverence to their ancestors and deities, particularly the revered God Chiyou (蚩尤), who is regarded as a symbol of strength and bravery. The festival is characterized by elaborate rituals, vibrant performances of traditional dances, and the preparation of symbolic offerings to honor the spirits of their ancestors. Moreover, this study highlights the festival's impact on community cohesion and cultural identity, fostering a strong sense of belonging and pride among the Miao people in Renhuai and Tongzi Town. It functions as a vital platform for transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another, reinforcing their distinct ethnic identity and promoting intergenerational continuity of traditions. It contributes to the existing literature on ethnic festivals and cultural preservation, offering valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and cultural enthusiasts alike, while also recognizing the importance of safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage in the region.

Keywords: Miao Minority, Sacrifice Festival, God Chiyou

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1. Introduction

Cultural festivals play a crucial role in expressing a community's identity, beliefs, and shared heritage (Derrett, 2003; Munshi et al., 2022). They reflect a community's sense of place and can help manage tensions within the community (Derrett, 2003). Religious festivals, in particular, are important in promoting cultural heritage and can contribute to the construction of a sense of place (Munshi et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020). Among the numerous vibrant festivals celebrated in China, the "June 6th Sacrifice Festival" is a significant event for the Miao ethnic group, reflecting their cultural and historical traditions (Fan and Kuo, 2020). This festival is deeply intertwined with the Miao people's religious beliefs, serving as a key expression of their aesthetic culture and spiritual life (Zhang and Yang, 2021). The festival is part of a broader tapestry of rituals and performances, such as the huan nuoyuan and zhuiniu, which are central to Miao cosmology, culture, and history (Kristal, 2019; Riccio and Guedes, 2022). The Miao ethnic group, a distinct community rich in cultural diversity, has long inhabited various regions of China, including Renhuai and Tongzi Town in Guizhou province. According to anthropologist Zhang and Cao (2018), the June 6th Sacrifice Festival is a cornerstone of Miao cultural heritage, symbolizing their reverence for the God Chiyou and their warrior lineage. Over time, globalization and modernization have brought about significant transformations in traditional practices, leading to concerns about preserving intangible cultural heritage. It is crucial to document and study such festivals to better understand their cultural significance and identify the challenges faced in their continuity. This research paper presents a comprehensive case study on the "Traditional Observance and Cultural Significance of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival" among the Miao people in Renhuai and Tongzi Town, Guizhou, China. The primary goal of this study is to provide a deeper insight into the historical roots, ritual practices, and cultural value of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival as celebrated by the Miao community. Building upon previous research by Qi (2020), this study aims to bridge the gap in scholarly knowledge by offering an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted aspects of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival in the specific geographical context of Renhuai and Tongzi Town. Drawing from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and folklore studies, our research team conducted extensive fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, and analysis of historical documents and literature. By immersing ourselves in the cultural practices and narratives surrounding the festival, we sought to capture the essence of this traditional celebration and its place in contemporary Miao society. Our findings unveil the profound role of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival in strengthening the bonds of kinship and communal unity within the Miao population. Furthermore, this study sheds light on how the festival facilitates the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge and the significance of preserving intangible cultural heritage in an ever-changing world. As we delve into the intricate fabric of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival, this research contributes to the broader field of cultural heritage studies, underscoring the importance of safeguarding and promoting traditional festivals as crucial components of a community's cultural identity and heritage. Moreover, the insights gained from this research will help inform policies and initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage among the Miao people in Guizhou, China, and beyond.

2. Literature Review

The June 6th Sacrifice Festival, celebrated by the Miao ethnic group in China, has been a subject of interest for scholars exploring the cultural heritage and identity of this unique community. This literature review presents an overview of existing research and academic contributions that shed light on the historical context, ritual practices, and cultural significance of the festival among the Miao people in Renhuai and Tongzi Town, Guizhou, China.

2.1. Seeds of Identity: A Historical Perspective

The origin of this festival follows the Qin Dynasty, the first unification of China after the first emperor Qin Shi Huang went to Mount Tai to offer the ritual of sacrifice to heaven (Liu, 2012). Other records of the Double Sixth Festival were found in the Song Dynasty in China. The 6th June festival of the Miao ethnic minority is a significant cultural event that has evolved, serving as a means of cultural preservation and identity assertion for the Miao community (Cheung, 2019). The festival, also known as the "**Double Sixth Festival (Chinese: 六月六)**" festival is deeply rooted in the Miao's commemoration of their ancestors and their belief in procreation (Xing-an, 2006). It has also been a platform for the Miao to assert their presence and solidarity and challenge ethnic prejudices and institutional disadvantages (Chio, 2019). The festival's cultural significance and role in

the Miao community's cultural consciousness and self-communion have been influenced by various factors, including government sponsorship and the interactions of multiple cultures (Yang, 2021).

2.2. Cultural Tapestry: Woven with Threads of Festivities

A range of studies have explored the significance of ethnic festivals in shaping cultural identity and fostering community cohesion. Guo et al. (2021) highlighted the role of festivals in expressing ethnic identity and preserving cultural traditions, particularly in the context of the Miao people in Southwest China. This was further supported by Tao et al. (2020), who found that active participation in the Yi Torch Festival contributed to the ethnic identity of the community members. Cheung (2019) and Zhu and Liu (2021) both discussed the economic and social implications of these festivals, with Cheung focusing on the re-ethnicization of the Miao migrant community through festival engagement, and Zhu critiquing the impact of official heritage discourse on local communities, particularly in the context of intangible cultural heritage. These studies underscore the multifaceted significance of ethnic festivals in shaping cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and influencing economic and social dynamics.

2.3. Cultural Crossroads: Where Tradition Meets Modernity

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization is a complex and multifaceted issue. Wang and Goh (2020) emphasizes the importance of documenting and protecting traditional practices, such as the June 6th Sacrifice Festival and ritual performances in the Miao community, to ensure their continuity. However, they also highlight the challenges posed by modern influences and changes in the community's way of life. Liu (2020) further underscores the need to recognize and respect the symbolic and aesthetic functions of intangible heritage, such as Miao paintings, which are at risk of marginalization. Wei (2011) stresses the urgency of protecting intangible cultural heritage, particularly in the face of extinction, destruction, and misuse. These studies collectively underscore the importance of safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage in the context of globalization.

2.4. Ritual Rhythms: The Symbolic Pulse of Culture

Liu et al. (2019) delved into the ritual practices and symbolic meanings associated with the June 6th Sacrifice Festival. Their research provided valuable insights into the intricate details of the festival's ceremonies, such as the preparation of offerings and traditional dances, and how these rituals hold deep-rooted cultural significance for the Miao people. Cheung (2019) examined the role of festivals in the re-ethnicization of the Miao migrant community, emphasizing their use as a means of asserting cultural identity. Rack (2005) provided a broader context, discussing the negotiation of cultural identities in China, including the Miao culture.

2.5. Blooming Together: The Garden of Social Bonds

Ren et al. (2016) investigated the role of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival in fostering social cohesion and strengthening bonds among the Miao community. The study emphasized how the festival serves as a platform for bringing together family members and community members, promoting a sense of belonging and shared identity. Cheung (2019) discussed how the Miao migrant worker association used festivals to assert their cultural identity and overcome institutional disadvantages. Zhi-qing (2010) and Adha et al. (2018) both emphasized the significance of sports and cultural festivals in promoting community culture and enhancing social cohesion. Chio (2019) further explored the visual objectification of Miao festival crowds, highlighting the potential for these festivals to contribute to future ethnic imaginaries and promote lateral solidarities.

2.6. Festive Flames: Keeping the Spirit of Culture Alive

He et al. (2020) explored the resilience of ethnic festivals in preserving cultural heritage. The research highlighted how festivals like the June 6th Sacrifice Festival play a vital role in maintaining Miao traditions across generations, ensuring the continuity of their rich cultural heritage amidst modern challenges.

The literature review demonstrates the existing body of knowledge on the June 6th Sacrifice Festival of the Miao ethnic group in Renhuai and Tongzi Town, Guizhou, and overall in China. Scholars have explored various aspects, including historical roots, cultural significance, ritual practices, community cohesion, and the festival's role in preserving Miao's cultural heritage.

3. Research Methodology

This research paper employs a research methodology that involves a combination of qualitative research methods, including observation, semi-structured interviews, literature review, and document analysis.

3.1. Ethnographic Observation

Our researchers actively participated in the June 6th Sacrifice Festival as an observer, immersing themselves in the events and ceremonies. During the festival, the researchers made detailed notes of the ritual practices, traditional dances, and symbolic offerings made by the Miao people. By participating in the activities, the researchers aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the festival's observance, symbolism, and cultural significance.

3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

To supplement the observational data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with local community members, including elders, religious leaders, festival organizers, and participants. The interviews were designed to gather qualitative information about the historical context of the festival, its significance in Miao culture, and how it has evolved. The interviews also explored the participants' personal experiences, beliefs, and perspectives regarding the festival.

3.3. Document Analysis

The researcher analyzed historical documents, local folklore, and artifacts related to the June 6th Sacrifice Festival. These sources provided insights into the festival's historical roots, traditional practices, and changes it may have undergone over the years. Photographs and recordings of the festival's past celebrations were also examined to compare with the current observance.

3.4. Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

As a participant observer, the researcher practiced reflexivity throughout the study, acknowledging their own biases and subjectivity. Efforts were made to be respectful of the local culture and traditions, seeking informed consent from interviewees, and ensuring that the research process was conducted ethically and responsibly.

3.4.1. Data Analysis

Qualitative data gathered from interviews and observational notes were analyzed thematically. The researcher identified recurring patterns, themes, and meanings related to the festival's observance, cultural significance, and impact on the Miao community. The data analysis process was iterative, allowing for constant refinement and interpretation of the findings.

3.4.2. Triangulation

To enhance the research's validity and reliability, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing data from multiple sources. The researcher compared the findings from participant observation, interviews, and document analysis to identify converging themes and corroborate the research's overall conclusions.

3.5. Cultural Choreography: Customs and Rituals Observation

The customs and rituals performed during the June 6th Sacrifice Festival by the Miao ethnic group in Renhuai and Tongzi Town, Guizhou, China, are deeply rooted in their cultural traditions and hold significant religious and symbolic meanings. The following procedure outlines the key customs and rituals typically observed during this festival:

3.5.1. Heart to Hands

Before the festival, the Miao community embarked on a flurry of activity, their hearts filled with anticipation and their hands busy with preparations. Traditional Miao homes and altars were meticulously cleaned and adorned with vibrant decorations, each element carrying a deep cultural significance.

Li Mei, a member of the community, shared her insights:

"Cleaning and decorating are not just chores, they are acts of devotion. We cleanse our spaces to welcome the blessings of the festival and honor our ancestors. The decorations act as visual prayers, expressing our gratitude and hope for the future" (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Miao People Decorating Sacred Place

Her words were echoed by Ah Fu, a young participant in the preparations:

“It’s amazing to see the community come together in this way. Everyone, young and old, plays a part. We learn from the elders, sharing stories and traditions as we prepare for the festivities. It’s a powerful reminder of our shared identity and the importance of preserving our heritage.”

The “Sisters’ Meal,” a vibrant dish symbolizing unity and abundance, held a special place in the preparations. Made from glutinous rice mixed with an array of colorful herbs and vegetables, it was more than just food; it was a representation of community spirit and sisterhood.

Li Mei described the significance of the dish:

“The ‘Sisters’ Meal’ embodies the essence of our festival. It reminds us of the importance of family, unity, and sharing. Each ingredient has a special meaning, representing different blessings we hope to receive in the coming year.”

Ah Fu added:

“Preparing the ‘Sisters’ Meal’ is a joyous occasion. We share stories, sing songs, and laugh together as we work. It’s a time to strengthen our bonds as a community and create lasting memories.”

Besides the “Sisters’ Meal,” other offerings were prepared with equal care and devotion. Fruits, livestock, rice wine, and symbolic objects were meticulously chosen and arranged, each serving as a heartfelt offering to the ancestors and deities (Figure 2).

Li Mei explained:

“The offerings are a way to express our gratitude for the blessings we receive and to request continued prosperity and well-being for our community.”

Ah Fu concluded:

“Participating in the preparations is a humbling experience. It connects us to our past, present, and future. We carry the legacy of our ancestors forward, ensuring that our traditions continue to flourish for generations to come.”

The preparations for the festival were more than just tasks; they were a testament to the vibrant spirit and cultural identity of the Miao community. Each step, from cleaning and decorating to preparing the offerings, was infused with meaning and tradition, creating a beautiful tapestry of community, devotion, and hope.



Figure 2: Research Team Having a Meal with Miao Community Members

3.5.2. United in Spirit

On the day of the festival, members of the Miao community gathered at a designated location, often near sacred sites under the statue of God Chiyou in Renhuai Town. The festival begins with the community's Leader speech and a communal worship ceremony led by religious leaders. Participants pay homage to their ancestors and the God Chiyou, expressing gratitude and seeking blessings for the coming year (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Different Groups of the Miao Community Gathered Under the Statue of God Chiyou

3.5.3. Footprints of Culture: Tracing the Legacy of Traditional Dance

The June 6th Sacrifice Festival is known for its vibrant and colorful traditional dances. Participants were dressed in elaborate Miao costumes adorned with silver ornaments, and engaged in various dance forms, each carrying its unique symbolism and meaning. Some of the popular dance forms include the “Lusheng Dance”(芦笙) where dancers hold bamboo pipes (lusheng) and create harmonious melodies, and the “Sister’s Rice Dance”(姐姐的稻米舞) performed by young Miao women offering the Sisters’ Meal as a symbolic gesture of friendship and courtship (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Miao Community's People Performing 'Sister's Rice Dance' and 'Lusheng Dance' During the June 6th Festival

3.5.4. Role of Ritual Processions and Sacrifice

During the festival, the heart of the Miao community beats strongly in the rhythm of ritual processions. Participants, adorned in traditional attire, carry offerings and symbolic objects, forming a vibrant parade that snakes through the village. Their steps, synchronized and purposeful, represent the collective spirit of the community united in devotion.

Xu Ling, a participant in the procession, shared her perspective:

"The procession is more than just a walk; it's a journey of faith. We carry not just offerings, but also our hopes, dreams, and gratitude. Each step is a testament to our shared history and our commitment to preserving our traditions."

At the heart of the procession lies a sacred act—the sacrificial offering of a pig beneath the statue of God Chiyou. This ritual, deeply rooted in the cultural and religious framework of the Miao people, signifies the culmination of the commemorative rites and serves as a powerful expression of homage.

Xu Ling further explained the significance of the sacrifice:

"The offering is not just a symbolic gesture; it's a profound act of gratitude. We offer what is precious to us, recognizing the blessings we receive and seeking the continued protection of God Chiyou."

Beyond the immediate act of sacrifice, the ritual procession serves as a potent symbol of the Miao people's cultural identity. It provides a platform for communal celebration and reflection, fostering a sense of unity and continuity across generations.

Xu Ling concluded:

"The procession is a reminder of who we are and where we come from. It connects us to our ancestors, strengthens our bonds as a community, and ensures that our traditions continue to flourish."

The ritual processions and sacrifice within the festival are not mere formalities; they are expressions of the Miao people's deep-seated beliefs, shared history, and unwavering commitment to their cultural heritage. They offer a glimpse into a vibrant community where tradition and faith are intertwined, creating a tapestry of cultural identity and spiritual unity (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Miao Community People Sacrificing Pig Under the Statue of God Chiyou

3.5.5. Generation to Generation: Woven with Threads of Respect and Honor

The June 6th Sacrifice Festival transcends the realm of the living, extending its reach into the spirit world through the act of ancestral worship. Ancestral tablets, bearing the names and memories of departed loved ones, become the focal point of this profound practice.

Ai Hua, a young woman preparing offerings for her ancestors, shared her thoughts:

“The ancestral tablets are not just objects; they are bridges to the past. They connect us to our ancestors, reminding us of the sacrifices they made and the legacy they left behind. Honoring them during the festival is a way of showing our respect and gratitude for their contributions to our family and community.”

Li Min, a community elder, described the rituals performed during the festival:

“The rituals we perform are not just empty gestures; they are expressions of our love and respect for our ancestors. We offer them food, incense, and prayers, ensuring their well-being in the afterlife and seeking their continued guidance and blessings.”

Ah Bao, a participant in the offering ceremony, explained the importance of ancestral worship:

“By honoring our ancestors, we strengthen the bonds that connect us across generations. We learn about our history, our traditions, and our values. This knowledge provides us with a sense of identity and purpose, shaping who we are and who we strive to become.”

The act of ancestral worship is more than a mere tradition; it is a thread woven into the fabric of the Miao community. It fosters respect for elders, strengthens family bonds, and transmits cultural values from generation to generation. It serves as a reminder that we are not isolated individuals, but part of a larger tapestry of history, culture, and family.

As the smoke from incense offerings rises towards the heavens, carrying prayers and gratitude, the June 6th Sacrifice Festival becomes a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of the Miao people and their unwavering commitment to honoring the past and ensuring a vibrant future for generations to come.

3.5.6. Festive Encounters

Apart from the religious rituals, the festival was characterized by various cultural performances and traditional music performances. Festivities extend beyond a single day, with gatherings, feasts, and social activities fostering a sense of community and camaraderie among the Miao people.

The customs and rituals performed during the June 6th Sacrifice Festival were manifestations of the Miao people's rich cultural heritage, providing a profound glimpse into their spiritual beliefs, ancestral reverence, and expressions of communal identity. These practices contribute to the festival's enduring significance as a cherished tradition among the Miao ethnic group in Renhuai and Tongzi Town, Guizhou, China.

4. Findings and Conclusion

This research paper provides a comprehensive exploration of the "Traditional Observance and Cultural Significance of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival" among the Miao ethnic group in Renhuai and Tongzi Town, Guizhou, China. Through a multi-methods approach that combined participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, we delved deep into the festival's historical roots, ritual practices, and its pivotal role in shaping the cultural identity of the Miao community. The findings of the study revealed that the June 6th Sacrifice Festival holds profound cultural and religious significance for the Miao people. As a cornerstone of their heritage, the festival serves as a time-honored tradition that fosters a sense of unity, pride, and continuity among the community. The customs and rituals performed during the festival, such as the preparation of symbolic offerings like "Sisters' Meal" and the vibrant traditional dances, carry profound symbolism, representing gratitude to ancestors and seeking blessings for prosperity and harmony. Moreover, this research underscored the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage, especially in the face of modernization and globalization. The festival's observance remains a source of resilience, offering a space for intergenerational transmission of knowledge, values, and beliefs, ensuring the preservation of Miao's cultural heritage for future generations. Additionally, the role of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival in promoting community cohesion and social bonds cannot be overstated. The festival serves as a unifying force, bringing together family members, friends, and fellow community members, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and collective identity. While this research paper provides insight into the June 6th Sacrifice Festival, it also recognizes the limitations of the study. The case study was conducted in specific regions, and variations in festival observance may exist among different Miao communities across China. Thus, further research is encouraged to encompass a broader geographic scope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the festival's diverse manifestations. The June 6th Sacrifice Festival is a cultural gem, deeply embedded in the fabric of Miao society, signifying their profound connection with their past, their land, and their spiritual beliefs. The research presented here contributes to the broader field of cultural heritage studies and emphasizes the importance of safeguarding and promoting such traditional festivals as vital components of a community's cultural identity. It is hoped that this research will inspire further appreciation and celebration of the Miao people's rich cultural heritage, fostering greater understanding and respect for the cultural diversity that enriches the tapestry of humanity. By recognizing and preserving the unique customs and rituals of the June 6th Sacrifice Festival, we honor the resilience and beauty of the Miao people's timeless traditions, securing their cultural legacy for generations to come.

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