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CULTURAL IDENTITY OF HMONG CHINESE: A STUDY IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract:

This study investigates the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand, a transnational community that shares ancestral origins, language, and customs with the Miao people in China. It aims to reveal the current state and influencing factors of their cultural identity within the unique cultural ecology of Northern Thailand. A mixed-methods approach was employed. A total of 222 questionnaires were distributed, with 139 valid responses analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis through SPSS 26.0. In addition, five semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the quantitative data. The results indicate that the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand maintain a moderately high level of identification with both Chinese and Miao cultures across the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Younger generations, particularly students, exhibit stronger identification compared to older participants. Age and occupation significantly influenced cultural identity, while gender, education, and religion showed no significant effect. Furthermore, there is a strong positive correlation between identification with Chinese culture and Miao culture. It is recommended to strengthen international Chinese education in Northern Thailand by incorporating localized cultural elements, enhancing online communication platforms between Chinese and Thai Miao communities, and promoting cultural exchange through cooperation with local Chinese-language schools. These strategies can reinforce cultural identity, deepen cross-border cultural ties, and support the sustainable transmission of Chinese and Miao cultures among the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand.

Keywords:

Cultural Identity; Cultural Ecology; Hmong Chinese; Northern Thailand

Introduction

The Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand—characterized by shared ancestral origins, linguistic commonality, and similar customs—are a representative group of transnational migrants who relocated from China to northern Thailand during the late Qing dynasty. Foreign scholar Nicholas Tapp once attempted to examine the culture of the Hmong in northern Thailand about traditional Chinese culture (Tapp, 1989). Influenced by his work, in recent years, Chinese scholars have continued and further developed this line of research, particularly deepening the exploration of cultural connections between Chinese and Thai Miao communities. However, research specifically addressing the cultural identity of Hmong Chinese in Thailand from the perspective of international Chinese language education remains scarce. To further cultivate this academic area, the present study aims to reveal the current state and underlying causes of cultural identity among Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand through empirical investigation. In doing so, it seeks to propose strategies—rooted in the framework of international Chinese education—to enhance their cultural identification, thereby strengthening the transmission of Chinese language and culture among overseas Chinese ethnic minorities.

Research Background

Overseas Chinese ethnic minorities occupy an irreplaceable position in Chinese civilization and among the broader Chinese nation. The Miao Chinese in northern Thailand (hereafter referred to as the “Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand”) share common ancestral origins, language, and customs with the Miao people in China. The term “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” refers to those whose ethnic origin is in China but who have, since the modern era, migrated abroad for various reasons and either remain as expatriates or have obtained permanent residency or citizenship in their host countries (Ding, 2006). Accordingly, this study defines the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand as those Miao migrants and their descendants who have, since modern times, relocated to northern Thailand either as immigrants or refugees, or who have already acquired Thai nationality. The Miao are a highly mobile and migratory ethnic group that has long attracted scholarly attention both within and outside China. Although numerous achievements have been made in the study of overseas Miao communities, it was not until the 1980s that academic attention turned specifically to the Miao in Thailand. Existing research on Thai Miao remains relatively limited and mostly concentrates on topics such as historical origins, cultural practices, linguistic features, religious beliefs, and living conditions. Since the early 21st century, influenced by Nicholas Tapp, many Chinese scholars have begun to investigate Miao culture in relation to traditional Chinese culture (Tapp, 1989). This has significantly advanced scholarly research on the Miao community in Thailand, especially in the field of cultural identity.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, “cultural identity” refers to the recognition of one’s cultural identity—essentially the question of “Who am I?” It involves a process of reflection and pursuit. Cultural identity can be broadly or narrowly defined. In its broader sense, it refers to acceptance and recognition of the host country’s language and culture, and it is characterized by its cross-ethnic nature. In its narrower sense, it refers to the recognition of one’s own ethnic culture (Zheng, 1992). Accordingly, this study defines the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand as the recognition of their cultural identity, which includes both the acceptance and recognition of the language and culture of the host country, as well as the recognition of the traditional culture of the Miao ethnic group. This identity is primarily manifested in three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behavior (Zhang, Chen, &

Yao, 2011). In recent years, while domestic scholars have increasingly focused on the Thai Miao community, attention to their cultural identity remains inadequate. In contrast, international scholarship has increasingly emphasized the cultural identity of overseas Miao communities. Unfortunately, existing research results are still insufficient in depth, particularly regarding empirical studies of cultural identity among the Thai Miao within their distinct cultural ecological settings. In light of this, this study explores the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand by framing it within their unique cultural ecology and analyzing it across the three dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior.

The Cultural Ecology of the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand

Specific cultural patterns are shaped in response to particular ecological environments. Each culture can only be evaluated in relation to its own "niche," and there exists no universally applicable standard. Differences between cultures primarily arise from the process by which human societies adapt to specific environments. The simpler and earlier a human society is, the more direct its relationship with the environment tends to be. Variations in terrain, animal populations, and vegetation lead people to employ different techniques and form distinct social organizations. Hence, a close interrelationship exists between cultural forms and ecological contexts (Steward, 1987). The Miao people originated in China. During the Qin and Han dynasties, they were mainly distributed in the regions of the Wuxi and Dongting Lake areas. Due to war, population pressures, and other factors, they continuously migrated southward and westward. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the branch that self-identified as "Hmong" had already spread to Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand (Mottin, 1987). It was not until the mid-19th century that they began to permanently settle in Thailand (Liu, 2010). Although they followed multiple routes into Thailand, the most significant path was through Laos. Upon settling in Thailand, they established themselves in a new ecological context, and in adapting to this relocated environment, they formed a distinct culture, which in turn entered into a dynamic, bidirectional interaction with their new surroundings. Among the various ecological factors—natural, economic, and social—their influence on the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand has been the most profound. Accordingly, this study is based on Julian Steward's theory of cultural ecology to examine the cultural identity and its formative mechanisms among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand.

Natural and Climatic Ecology

Thailand's topography is high in the north and low in the south, consisting mainly of low-relief mountains and plains. The northern region is predominantly mountainous. Thailand's highest peak, Doi Inthanon, is located in this area with an elevation of 2,565 meters (Chen & Xiong, 2012, pp. 4 – 6). The region is rich in water resources, as all four major tributaries of the Chao Phraya River originate here (Song & Jiang, 2016, pp. 14 – 16). Because this area lies relatively far from the equator, its average temperatures are lower than those in other parts of Thailand. In the hot season, the average highest temperature reaches 35.8° C and the lowest is 21.4° C, while in the cool season, the average highest temperature is 30.8° C and the lowest is 17.1° C (Chen & Xiong, 2012, p. 13). In addition, northern Thailand is endowed with abundant biological resources and lush vegetation, with a forest coverage rate reaching 56% (Chen & Xiong, 2012, p. 13). Although the region does not share a direct border with China, it is considered a critical node in China's "Belt and Road" Initiative in the south, and therefore has drawn scholarly attention.

Socioeconomic Ecology

Thailand is a multi-party country that operates under a constitutional monarchy and maintains a traditional agricultural economy. Agricultural products constitute one of the country's primary sources of foreign exchange income. The mountainous basins in northern Thailand are among the country's major agricultural production areas, where farmers grow various economic crops such as rice, cotton, and tobacco (Tan & Zhou, 2016, pp. 161 – 162). Due to geographical, economic, and political factors, the Hmong in Thailand have long engaged in a swidden (slash-and-burn) economy, producing crops and raising chickens. This practice has caused significant ecological damage, and the group has even been labeled as the "opium people" (Tapp, 1986). It was not until the 1950s that the Thai government launched a crop substitution program, replacing traditional opium production among the Miao people with economic crops, leading to substantial improvements in their economic conditions (Liu, 2010).

Cultural and Ethnic Ecology

In northern Thailand, the region once used languages mutually intelligible with those of China's Dai ethnic group. While Thai is now the official language, the local populace still commonly speaks Lanna, also known as "Chiang Mai dialect" (Chen & Xiong, 2012, pp. 129 – 130). The Miao people who migrated from China's southwestern provinces still use Miao languages, which belong to the Hmong-Mien branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Known as the "Land of the Yellow Robes," Thailand is predominantly Buddhist (Chen & Xiong, 2012, p. 95), while the Miao traditionally adhere to nature worship and ancestor worship (Tapp, 1989, pp. 68 – 69). Historical records suggest that during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the Miao migrated overland to northern Thailand (Tapp, 1989, pp. 68 – 69). The Thai government's early efforts to promote Buddhism among the Miao met with little success: mountain temples often remained empty, with no incense offerings or believers (Tapp, 1989, pp. 116 – 117). However, as the Miao gradually took root in Thailand, many began to adopt Theravāda Buddhist practices, though their most important festival—the "Miao New Year" —still centers on ancestor worship. Rituals such as blessings and prayers continue to preserve a wide array of cultural elements rooted in nature and ancestor worship. Additionally, older generations of Miao have passed down a strong lineage of Chinese cultural traditions.

In Thailand, the Thai and Lao ethnic groups constitute the majority of the population, with the Thai being the dominant ethnic group. Besides these two, there are four other categories of ethnic groups classified as transnational or cross-border peoples: the Austroasiatic-speaking lowland groups, the Malays, the Chinese, and the hill tribes. Although these groups originate from different countries, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds, they share one common characteristic—namely, their coexistence within the mountainous environment spanning Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Yunnan, China. Within this shared "mountain ecology," they have developed similar economic production modes and cultural traits (Kesmanee, 2001, pp. 110 – 111). According to statistics from the Department of Local Administration under Thailand's Ministry of the Interior, as of 1998, there were more than 900,000 highland residents in northern Thailand, accounting for approximately 1.2% of the national population (Kesmanee, 2001, p. 110). By geographical distribution, the Hmong are one of the most prominent hill tribes in Thailand. Among the so-called "hill peoples," the Hmong population ranks second only to the Karen and is mainly concentrated in northern, western, and central

Thailand. In terms of origin, the Hmong in Thailand are considered a migrant ethnic group (Liu, 2010).

Research Design

Research Participants

This study takes the Hmong Chinese population in northern Thailand as its research participants. This group consists of Miao immigrants and their descendants who migrated overland from Yunnan, China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties and settled in northern Thailand. According to statistical data, the gender distribution of the respondents is relatively balanced, with slightly more females (45.3% male, 54.7% female). In terms of age, the majority fall within the 15-25 age group (35.3%). The participants come from various occupations across northern Thailand, with students comprising the largest portion (53.2%). Their educational backgrounds vary, but most have received secondary (including vocational) or higher education. Regarding religious beliefs, due to their long period of settlement in northern Thailand, approximately 69.1% of respondents have converted to Theravāda Buddhism. However, a minority still regard ancestor worship and nature worship as their primary spiritual beliefs.

Research Methods

Questionnaire Survey

Building upon prior research, this study developed the Cultural Identity Questionnaire for the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand. The questionnaire consists of three parts: First, personal information including age, gender, educational level, and occupation, with question types in the form of fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice; Second, a Chinese cultural identity scale, designed as a five-point Likert scale; Third, a Miao cultural identity scale, also using a five-point Likert scale format.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the two scales, critical ratio (CR) analysis and Pearson correlation analysis were used to conduct item analysis, followed by reliability and validity testing. In terms of reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the "Chinese Cultural Identity Scale" was 0.966 (> 0.8), indicating that the overall sample reliability was excellent. For the "Miao Cultural Identity Scale," the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.967 (> 0.8), also demonstrating a high level of internal consistency. In terms of validity, the KMO value for the "Chinese Cultural Identity Scale" was 0.942, suggesting that the items were highly correlated. Bartlett's test of sphericity returned a result of $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, indicating statistical significance. Similarly, the KMO value for the "Miao Cultural Identity Scale" was 0.953, again demonstrating significant correlation among the items. Bartlett's test for this scale also showed $p = 0.000 < 0.05$, confirming statistical significance. It can thus be concluded that both scales demonstrated excellent reliability and validity, and the collected data can reliably reflect the relevant issues under investigation.

Interview Method

Based on the interview outline developed after the questionnaire survey, this study selected five interviewees from among the respondents with relatively high and relatively low levels of

cultural identity. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted via telephone, WeChat conversations, and other communication methods.

Research Hypotheses

Does the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand manifest across the three dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior? (Zhang, Chen, & Yao, 2011, p. 176)

Is the Hmong Chinese community's identification with Chinese and Miao cultures influenced by demographic characteristics such as gender, age, occupation, and educational background?

Is there a correlation between their identification with Chinese culture and Miao culture? Specifically, does a higher level of identification with Miao culture (positive correlation) imply a correspondingly high level of identification with Chinese culture?

Data Collection and Statistical Analysis

This study primarily utilized quantitative data, supplemented by qualitative data. From February to March 2023, a total of 222 questionnaires were distributed via the "Wenjuanxing" platform, all of which were successfully collected, yielding a response rate of 100%. From this full sample, 150 were randomly selected as a smaller subsample. After excluding 11 invalid questionnaires from the subsample, 139 valid questionnaires remained, resulting in an effective rate of 92.67%. SPSS 26.0 was employed for statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistical methods such as correlation and regression analyses to examine influencing factors. In March 2023, the researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews with five selected participants via telephone recordings and WeChat conversations. A total of 140 minutes of audio data and 87 segments of text data were collected, which were then coded and analyzed using grounded theory for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Descriptive Statistical Analysis of the Cultural Identity of the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand

Descriptive Analysis of Identification with Chinese Culture

The average score for the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand on their identification with Chinese culture was 3.81, with a standard deviation of 0.55. This places their responses at a moderately high level. Across the three dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior, the mean values (M) ranged from 3.77 to 3.87, all above 3. This indicates that the participants exhibited a relatively high overall level of identification with Chinese culture. Even though they have gradually integrated into Thai society and obtained Thai citizenship, they continue to maintain strong identification with Chinese culture, largely due to the enduring influence of Miao ethnic culture and Chinese language education.

Descriptive Analysis of Identification with Miao Ethnic Culture

The average score for the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand regarding their identification with Miao culture was 4.29, with a standard deviation of 0.65. This indicates a moderately high level. The mean values (M) for the three dimensions—cognition, emotion, and behavior—ranged from 4.24 to 4.32, all well above 3, demonstrating a strong overall cultural identification with Miao culture. This high level of identification is closely related to their identity as a “

hill tribe" and their role as cultural inheritors of Miao traditions. The Hmong in northern Thailand did not enter Thai territory until the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Their migration and resettlement were not smooth. During their nomadic movements and in the face of foreign cultural influences, the role of Miao culture as a marker of their ethnic identity became even more deeply rooted. Despite assimilation policies by the Thai government, the Hmong in northern Thailand have actively integrated into Thai society while still maintaining a strong identification with their own ethnic culture.

Correlation Analysis of Cultural Identity among the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand

Correlation Analysis Between Cultural Identity and Demographic Variables

To examine the influence of demographic characteristics on cultural identity, SPSS was used to conduct both "independent-sample t-tests" and "Pearson correlation analysis." Since gender was treated as a binary categorical variable and cultural identity factors were treated as continuous variables that followed a normal distribution, the t-test was applied to assess the correlation between cultural identity and gender. For other demographic variables that met the conditions of continuous data and normal distribution—namely age, occupation, educational level, and religious belief—Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to measure the strength of association between these variables and cultural identity.

Gender and Cultural Identity in Relation to Chinese and Miao Cultures

The p-values for gender differences in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of Chinese cultural identity were all greater than 0.05, indicating no statistically significant differences. This suggests that there were no gender-based differences among respondents in terms of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral identification with Chinese culture.

In contrast, gender was found to be significantly associated with identification with Miao culture in the dimensions of cognition ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$) and emotion ($p = 0.039 < 0.05$), but not in behavior ($p = 0.108 > 0.05$). This indicates that male and female respondents differed in their cognitive and emotional identification with Miao culture, but not in behavioral aspects. According to data from Thailand's 2010 national census, the male-to-female ratio in Thailand was 96.1:100, indicating a gender imbalance. Furthermore, northern Thailand was once a matrilineal society (Chen & Xiong, 2012, p. 36). Therefore, gender differences are likely to influence the Hmong Chinese community's identification with Miao culture in northern Thailand.

Age and Cultural Identity in Relation to Chinese and Miao Cultures

Age showed a significant negative correlation with identification with Chinese culture across all three dimensions: cognition ($p = 0.002 < 0.05$, $r = -0.263$), emotion ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$, $r = -0.293$), and behavior ($p = 0.008 < 0.05$, $r = -0.226$). This indicates that among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand, age was not only correlated with Chinese cultural identity but also that younger individuals tended to have a stronger identification with Chinese culture than older individuals.

Regarding identification with Miao culture, age showed no significant correlation in the cognitive dimension ($p = 0.176 > 0.05$), but significant negative correlations were found in the emotional ($p = 0.008 < 0.05$, $r = -0.224$) and behavioral ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$, $r = -0.289$)

dimensions. This suggests that age significantly influences emotional and behavioral identification with Miao culture among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand. Notably, younger participants displayed stronger emotional and behavioral identification with Miao culture. This is likely because younger individuals are more susceptible to the influence of internet media and school education. As China—their ancestral homeland—continues to grow in strength, both Thai state and private media increasingly report on China's development. Young people who are enthusiastic internet users are more likely to access such content. In addition, due to the popularity of the "Chinese language boom," "most Thai schools now offer Chinese language courses or cultural enrichment classes. These initiatives enable more Hmong children in northern Thailand to gain early and extensive exposure to China and its culture, leading to a stronger identification with both Chinese culture and the Miao culture that shares common roots with China.

Occupation and Cultural Identity in Relation to Chinese and Miao Cultures

According to the data, occupation showed significant correlations with identification with Chinese culture across all three dimensions: cognition ($p = 0.014 < 0.05$, $r = -0.208$), emotion ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$, $r = -0.341$), and behavior ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$, $r = -0.294$). These results indicate that occupation has a significant influence on the level of identification with Chinese culture.

Occupation also showed significant correlations with identification with Miao culture in all three dimensions: cognition ($p = 0.043 < 0.05$), emotion ($p = 0.029 < 0.05$), and behavior ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$). Most respondents were students, and their identification with both Chinese and Miao cultures was not only strong but also negatively correlated with occupational status. This demonstrates a clear connection between occupation and cultural identity among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand. This relationship can largely be attributed to the positive influence of international Chinese education programs targeting ethnic Chinese youth. In summary, with the growing development of China—their ancestral homeland—and the rise of the "Chinese language boom" (Hanyu Re) in Thailand, international Chinese education has provided effective channels for Hmong Chinese youth in northern Thailand to better understand and engage with Chinese culture.

Educational Level and Cultural Identity in Relation to Chinese and Miao Cultures

The participants' level of education showed no significant correlation with their identification with Chinese culture in the dimensions of cognition ($p = 0.398 > 0.05$), emotion ($p = 0.578 > 0.05$), or behavior ($p = 0.964 > 0.05$). Similarly, no significant correlations were found between educational level and identification with Miao culture in cognition ($p = 0.759 > 0.05$), emotion ($p = 0.526 > 0.05$), or behavior ($p = 0.913 > 0.05$). These results indicate that identification with both Chinese and Miao cultures among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand is unrelated to their level of formal education. This may be attributed to the long-standing migratory history of hill tribe communities, which has contributed to their relatively weak national consciousness. When faced with external cultural environments, they tend to adopt an inclusive and multicultural mindset. As a result, education has only limited influence on their cultural identity. Furthermore, due to the mountainous and agriculture-based characteristics of northern Thailand, the region's slow economic development has allowed the Miao ethnic culture to remain largely intact. Therefore, the psychological traits and slow-paced economic development of mountain-dwelling minorities may better explain their strong identification with both Chinese and Miao cultures than their formal education level.

Religious Belief and Cultural Identity in Relation to Chinese and Miao Cultures

The respondents' religious beliefs showed no significant correlation with their identification with Chinese culture in the dimensions of cognition ($p = 0.69 > 0.05$), emotion ($p = 0.121 > 0.05$), or behavior ($p = 0.486 > 0.05$). Likewise, no significant correlations were observed between religious belief and identification with Miao culture in cognition ($p = 0.69 > 0.05$), emotion ($p = 0.698 > 0.05$), or behavior ($p = 0.231 > 0.05$). These results indicate that religious belief is not significantly associated with either Chinese cultural identity or Miao cultural identity among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand. Although the majority of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand have converted to Buddhism under the influence of mainstream Thai culture, as a key "hill tribe" residing in relatively remote and isolated mountainous areas, their religious practices are less affected by the dominant national culture. As such, they maintain a relatively strong identification with their own ethnic culture. In some cases, this sense of cultural identity may even transcend their national citizenship. Therefore, although many respondents have changed their religious beliefs, this shift does not affect their identification with Chinese culture or Miao culture.

Correlation Analysis Between Chinese Cultural Identity and Miao Cultural Identity

To examine whether participants' identification with Miao culture influences their identification with Chinese culture, the Pearson correlation analysis in SPSS was employed. Given that the data met the conditions of continuity and normal distribution, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the strength of the relationship between Chinese cultural identity and Miao cultural identity.

As shown in Table 1, the cognitive dimension of Chinese cultural identity was significantly and positively correlated with all dimensions of Miao cultural identity ($p < 0.05$), with correlation coefficients (r) of 0.674, 0.666, and 0.672, respectively. This indicates a strong positive correlation between respondents' cognitive identification with Chinese culture and their identification with Miao culture. Similarly, in the emotional dimension, Chinese cultural identity was also strongly positively correlated with Miao cultural identity ($p < 0.05$), with correlation coefficients of 0.542, 0.527, and 0.607, respectively. This demonstrates that respondents' emotional identification with Chinese culture was closely related to their emotional identification with Miao culture. Finally, in the behavioral dimension, the correlation coefficients between Chinese and Miao cultural identity were 0.485, 0.461, and 0.553 (all $p < 0.05$), suggesting that behavioral identification with Chinese culture was also strongly and positively correlated with behavioral identification with Miao culture. These findings indicate that there is a relatively strong correlation between the Chinese cultural identity and the Miao cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand. Interview data further confirm that this correlation is primarily influenced by shared cultural roots and the dissemination of Chinese culture, suggesting that respondents' identification with Miao culture has a positive influence on their identification with Chinese culture.

Table 1 Correlation Statistics Between Chinese Cultural Identity and Miao Cultural Identity (n = 139)

		Cognitive Identification with Miao Culture	Emotional Identification with Miao Culture	Behavioral Identification with Miao Culture
Cognitive Identification with Chinese Culture	Pearson Correlation sig. (two-tailed)	.674**	0.666**	.672**
Emotional Identification with Chinese Culture	Pearson Correlation sig. (two-tailed)	.542**	.527**	.607**
Behavioral Identification with Chinese Culture	Pearson Correlation sig. (two-tailed)	.485**	.461**	.553**

Note: p < 0.01 (two-tailed), correlation is significant.

Research Findings and Recommendations on the Cultural Identity of the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand

Research Findings

The Miao people in northern Thailand migrated from Yunnan, China to Thailand during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. They share deep ancestral roots with the Miao people in China. Although they reside in a foreign country, their culture still retains many elements of both Chinese culture and Miao ethnic traditions. However, it is important to note that, due to the influence of the surrounding cultural ecology in Thailand, Hmong Chinese families in northern Thailand are increasingly lacking awareness of cultural transmission across generations. Moreover, their environment provides limited support for Chinese language learning, which has severely affected the inheritance and dissemination of Chinese and Miao cultures—particularly among the younger generation born locally in Thailand. In response to this issue, and in order to promote the cultural identity and transmission of Chinese and Miao culture among the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand, this study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analysis. From the three dimensions of cognition, emotion, and behavior, the research explored their identification with Chinese and Miao cultures, and found:

First, the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand demonstrated a relatively high overall level of identification with both Chinese culture and Miao culture. This identification was primarily reflected across three dimensions: cognition, emotion, and behavior. As shown above, their mean scores for identification with Chinese culture ranged from 3.77 to 3.87, while their scores for Miao culture (cognition, emotion, and behavior) ranged from 4.24 to 4.32—all exceeding 3. These findings indicate that although the Hmong Chinese live within a culturally distinct environment, they still maintain a strong identification with the Chinese culture of their ancestral homeland and with the ethnic culture of the Miao. This reflects the continuous

enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength as well as the rapid development of international Chinese language education, both of which contribute to the inheritance and transmission of Chinese and Miao culture among this population. It is also worth noting that the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand display a strong correlation between their identification with Chinese culture and Miao culture, which underscores their common cultural roots. This close relationship highlights the profound interconnectedness between the two cultural identities.

Second, the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand was influenced by demographic characteristics such as age and occupation, but not by gender, educational level, or religious belief. As previously indicated, age and occupation were significantly correlated with both Chinese and Miao cultural identity, and the correlations were negative. In contrast, gender, educational level, and religious belief showed no significant association with cultural identity. It is particularly noteworthy that the negative correlations between age, occupation, and cultural identity suggest that younger participants—especially students—demonstrated higher levels of identification with both Chinese and Miao cultures. This phenomenon reflects the impact of international Chinese education programs on younger student populations.

Third, the cultural ecology of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand is relatively complex, characterized by the coexistence and interaction of multiple languages, scripts, and cultural systems. Within such a diverse environment, many Hmong Chinese still primarily use the Miao language, and some continue to maintain traditional Miao beliefs and transmit Miao culture. As a migrant ethnic group, many Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand still strongly identify as "Chinese." However, it is worth noting that 96.4% of respondents were gradually unclear about their generational Chinese heritage, and some even reported a declining ability to speak Chinese. In addition, while the younger generation born in Thailand generally exhibited a high level of identification with Chinese culture, their identification often remained at the surface level, with deeper cultural aspects beginning to fade. These cultural phenomena reflect the influence of a complex cultural ecology as well as the impact of the Thai government's assimilation policies on the cultural identity of the Hmong Chinese.

Recommendations for Enhancing the Cultural Identity of Chinese and Miao Cultures Among the Hmong Chinese in Northern Thailand

As part of the global migrant population, the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand have left a significant imprint on the trajectory of world history and globalization. As a group deeply connected to the Chinese nation, they have also played a vital role in China's historical progress and contemporary development. Based on the research findings and in consideration of the cultural ecology of the Hmong in northern Thailand, this study proposes three scientifically grounded and practically feasible recommendations:

First, sustained attention should be given to the development of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand. It is recommended to establish online communication platforms to strengthen interactions between the Hmong Chinese and Miao communities in China. Data indicate that under the influence of online media and international Chinese education, the Hmong Chinese generally show strong identification with both Chinese and Miao cultures. However, due to the assimilation policies in Thailand, the younger generation has gradually forgotten the Chinese language and culture. Additional data suggest that the younger generation is deeply influenced by online media; therefore, leveraging the communicative power of digital platforms to build

an interactive online space between the Thai and Chinese Miao communities would be highly beneficial. Such a platform could operate under initiatives like the “Belt and Road” or “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation” mechanisms, contributing to the survival and development of this ethnic group. In addition, China could provide language learning resources and accessible services for cultural exchange through this platform.

Second, international Chinese language education in northern Thailand should be strengthened. Leveraging ethnic cultural resources can aid the dissemination of the Chinese language and culture in the region. Survey results show that Hmong Chinese students who learn Chinese and Chinese culture in school exhibit a relatively high level of identification with Chinese culture. Therefore, exploring culturally relevant pathways to enhance their interest in learning Chinese and Chinese culture presents a promising strategy. Data also suggest that learners are most attracted to unfamiliar aspects of culture (Liu, 2017), whereas they often feel disconnected from Chinese culture due to physical and emotional distance from their ancestral homeland—China. As such, international Chinese language educators can incorporate familiar Miao cultural elements that share common roots with Chinese culture into their teaching. This approach not only aligns with their learning needs but also reflects the educational principle of

“using the familiar to introduce the unfamiliar.” Wu (2022) emphasized that incorporating typical and localized cultural elements into teaching has significant value for international Chinese education. In contrast, mainstream teaching resources such as tai chi, calligraphy, martial arts, and paper cutting often emphasize elite or symbolic culture, which may fail to resonate with learners. Therefore, in Chinese language classrooms, when familiar elements of Miao culture that align with Chinese cultural identity are introduced, they can trigger recognition, emotional resonance, and appreciation, and deepen students’ enthusiasm for learning Chinese culture. This can also strengthen their sense of belonging and identification with both their own ethnic group and Chinese culture, ultimately enhancing the transmission of Chinese culture and Chinese language education in northern Thailand. In terms of implementation, international Chinese educators should avoid abstract symbols and instead deeply mine local Miao cultural resources, select suitable and representative cultural content as teaching material, and adopt diverse pedagogical methods to vividly convey cultural meaning. Only in this way can Miao and Chinese culture truly “come alive” in the hearts of the Hmong Chinese in northern Thailand—rather than remaining at a superficial level.

Third, efforts should be made to strengthen the dissemination of Chinese and Miao cultures and enhance close ties with local Chinese communities in northern Thailand. As part of the “Golden Triangle” region, northern Thailand features complex natural and social ecosystems. Therefore, reinforcing cultural identity among the Hmong Chinese in this region—who share common roots with China—is of great significance. Language and culture both serve as expressions of collective identity and symbolic consciousness. Enhancing their understanding of Chinese, Miao, and broader Chinese cultural traditions will help to scientifically reinforce emotional and cultural ties between China and this population. Such efforts will also promote unity and cooperation between China and local Chinese communities in northern Thailand, thereby increasing the influence of Chinese language and culture in the region and contributing to the long-term stability of the Golden Triangle. To this end, China’s international Chinese language education agencies could actively create opportunities for learning exchanges between local Hmong communities and Chinese ethnic groups. By collaborating with local Chinese-language schools—especially those serving ethnic minority Chinese students—they

could provide diverse educational resources. These efforts could offer more platforms for students like the Hmong Chinese to study Chinese, engage in cultural exchanges, and seek their ancestral roots in China.

Conclusion

Located in the "Golden Triangle" region, northern Thailand possesses a linguistically and culturally diverse ecological environment. The Hmong Chinese who migrated from Yunnan, China, during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties have maintained a strong cultural identification—with both Chinese culture and Miao ethnic culture—across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions despite the passage of time within this unique ecological context. However, under the influence of the Thai government's assimilation policies, the region's special linguistic and cultural ecology, and various demographic factors, their cultural identity—particularly that of the younger generation—has been transforming. In adapting to the new environment, although they continue to identify with Chinese and Miao cultures, they gradually embrace other cultures. Moreover, their cultural identification often remains at a superficial level rather than penetrating deeper cultural layers. With the acceleration of globalization through online media and the long-term promotion of assimilation policies in Thailand, this shallow form of cultural identity is gradually weakening.

Notably, international Chinese education has begun to positively influence the cultural identity of the younger generation born in northern Thailand. Specifically, younger students are showing stronger identification with Chinese and Miao cultures under the impact of such education. Therefore, institutions engaged in international Chinese education in China should proactively select culturally enriched teaching materials that integrate both Miao and Chinese cultural elements and adopt more visualized and concrete pedagogical approaches to deliver Chinese language education to this population effectively.

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Author Contributions

Juanjuan Liu contributed to conceptualization, literature review, field investigation, and manuscript drafting.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethical Consideration

This study involved minimal risk to participants. All participants were informed of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the survey, and they provided consent before participating. No identifiable personal data were collected. Ethical approval will be provided to the journal if required during the review process.

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