Extramarital Court and Flirt of Guizhou Miao

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Abstract

The Miao in Eastern Guizhou, *Hmub* is providing an alternative in the theorizing of courtship and marriage, since they have a flirtation zone for continued expression of personal desire within a larger context of social restraint. Today, much like before 1949, there are two forms of institutional flirt as manifested in everyday and ritualized settings. One is the long term flirtation alliance lasting during the life time of one’s own marriage, while the short term will end either with a break up or marriage. The textual description of the *Hmub* courting songs also reveals there are no necessary relations between marriage and courtship, and the hybrid display of flirtatious physical contacts are among courting men and women with diverse genealogical ties, affinal relations and marital status—unmarried and married. Along this direction, this article explores how the *Hmub* may be a special case of allowing for a private personal emotional zone to be created within a highly structured or institutional setting that honors social status, age and gender separation. Institutionalized flirting of the *Hmub* does serve as a means to an end—marriage, a sociological identity. It is also the psychological reassurance of one’s personal identity in the form of a viable, sexual and desirable human being.

Keywords
courtship, marriage, extramarital flirting, Miao (*Hmub*), Southwest China

Generally speaking, no women in any culture and society are indifferent to their partners’ extramarital affairs. Even women in societies with double standards in this regard, would become anxious and angry whenever their own spouse or partner is sexually involved with other women. They assume that

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even a brief sexual encounter has the potential to undermine the marital bond. Thus, continued vigilance is required. Most studies of extramarital affairs focused only on the community’s reaction to the affair. These studies note that there are double standard societies where men are allowed to enter into an affair while the women cannot. Some cultures distinguish between emotional involvement and sexual involvement. For example, evolutionary psychologists found that American women make a distinction between emotional involvement and sexual involvement. For them, emotional threat to their marriage or other forms of relationship is more serious than their partner’s incidental sexual trysts with a stranger. In general, “young men are more distressed by a partner’s sexual infidelity, whereas young women are more distressed by a partner’s emotional infidelity”.3 However, there are few studies of women’s reactions to their partners’ flirtations in either formal or informal contexts.4

During my fieldwork in a Hmub village in Guizhou (1998–2000), when I first heard about “extramarital flirtation”, I wondered whether wives became angry or jealous when their husbands deliberately flirted with other girls in the evening. One woman said to me, “No, I am not unhappy at my husband singing for another girl at night. That means he has a good voice.” The term “flirtation” is tentatively used in translating the native term of iut fub among the Hmub in eastern Guizhou. I will introduce how the Hmub dialectic term of iut fub defined locally with details later. Briefly, iut fub for the natives can transcend the line between unmarried and married, creating an extramarital flirting zone. This Hmub practice stands in sharp contrast to that of their neighbors, the Lahu, who identify intimacy with monogamous marriage, while love is expressed as harmonious teamwork in marriage.5 Though monogamous marriage has also been long practiced here and the marital bond will continue to tie the couple as ancestors after life, today, much like before 1949, the Hmub approve and institutionalize extramarital flirtation for men until their middle age (approximately between thirty to forty years old) and for women until they become married mothers. The flirting practices of the Hmub in eastern