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# The Transition of Cultural Ecology in Beidong District of Guizhou – A Case Study of Tianzhu Community

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**Abstract** Beidong minorities living together in Qingshui River valley are deeply influenced by Jing and Chu culture. Their ethnic and traditional culture was developed in the process of collision with foreign culture. In the several great social transformations, their cultural ecology was not imbalanced, but evolved and developed. Through the study on local knowledge of cultural ecology including agricultural production, ancestral hall and local – style dwelling house, full – scale drama and Yang Drama, genealogical system, marriage customs, religious belief, sacrificial rites and funeral rites, it is expected to reveal reasons and rules of transition of Beidong ethnic culture, favorable for correctly understanding cultural connotation and promote cultural and tourism development in ethnic minority areas.

**Key words** Tianzhu Community, Dong people, Cultural ecology, Transition

## 1 Introduction

The Dong, a Kam – Sui people of southern China, are one of the 56 ethnic groups officially recognized by the People's Republic of China. They are famed for their native – bred Kam Sweet Rice, carpentry skills, and unique architecture, in particular a form of covered bridge known as the "wind and rain bridge". The Dong people live mostly in eastern Guizhou, western Hunan, and northern Guangxi in China. Small pockets of Dong speakers are also found in northern Vietnam. With Jinping County as the dividing line, there are Beidong dialect area and South Dong dialect area. The Beidong people settle down in Qingshui River valley. They are deeply influenced by central plain culture. The Beidong ethnic culture evolves in the process of collision with other foreign culture, while the South Dong ethnic culture is relatively weak in ethnic and traditional culture. The Beidong ethnic and traditional culture develops in the process of collision with foreign culture. In the several great social transformations, the cultural ecology does not lose balance, but evolves and develops in this process. Its real decline is a just thing in recent three decades. With the social development, even in Guizhou Province which is relatively closed and underdeveloped, there is still variation and loss of ethnic and traditional culture, such as variation of rural traditional building culture, break of cultural inheritors, inclination of clothing and language to Han culture, and alienation of customs and rites, and its cultural diversity is getting threatened. Therefore, field survey of local knowledge with culture owners as subjects will be helpful for revealing feature of ethnic cultural ecology and correctly understanding the cultural connotation. This is of great significance for

cultural development and tourism development of the minority areas.

## 2 Connotation of the cultural ecology

The concept of cultural ecology includes narrow sense and broad sense. It comes from cultural ecology and ecological anthropology. The cultural ecology is the study of human adaptations to social and physical environments. Human adaptation refers to both biological and cultural processes that enable a population to survive and reproduce within a given or changing environment. Anthropologist Julian Steward invented this term, envisioning cultural ecology as a methodology for understanding how humans adapt to such a wide variety of environments. While the culture is influenced by environment, it still exerts influence on environment, and culture core is the stable core of cultural ecology<sup>[1]</sup>. However, his theory focuses on behavior pattern of production technologies centered on environment. Later, some scholars added social environment and biological environment (like pathogenic bacteria) in the aspect of environment, and emphasized cultural adaptation of population (behavior, physiological and genetic) to environment in the aspect of culture<sup>[2]</sup>.

In this study, we take the broad sense of cultural ecology, namely, the cultural ecology is ecological system of various cultural elements, cultural code of various ecological systems, and status of cultural existence<sup>[3–4]</sup>. Cultural ecology can be manifested through (material, institutional and spiritual) elements of cultural ecosystems. The elements are interdependent and mutually restrained and become a cultural entity consisted of material culture and nonmaterial culture<sup>[5–6]</sup>. At present, domestic and foreign researches about the ecological culture focus on concept of cultural ecology, characteristics, formation, and evolution mechanism of minority ethnic culture, protection of ethnic cultural ecology, and cultural diversity, while there are few field surveys about local knowledge with cultural owners as subjects<sup>[7–8]</sup>. In the aspect of

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researches about Dong people culture, scholars are devoted to researches on South Dong ethnic culture, while few researches are carried out about Beidong ethnic culture.

### 3 Study on cultural ecology in Beidong rural settlement

**3.1 Agricultural production** Beidong people still follow the tradition of "raising fish in paddy field", forming characteristic agricultural production pattern. In the Dong people settlement, except field beside slope, paddy field irrigated with cool water, acid paddy with coal rusty, and dry land, all other fields such as paddy field beside river or dam with excellent water source conditions are mixed with carps. Generally, fries are released to paddy field after rice seedlings are transplanted. Before harvesting rice, water is discharged and fishes are caught. The rice yield is about 3 750 – 4 500 kg / hm<sup>2</sup> and the fish output reaches 135 – 225 kg / hm<sup>2</sup>. Each fish weighs 200 – 450 g. In the middle of lunar calendar June or August, rice becomes ripe and farmers will discharge water to catch fishes and offer a sacrifice to ancestors. The agricultural production pattern of "raising fish in paddy field" has two favorable factors: fishes eat insects and pests, and eat and kill weeds through disturbing photosynthesis of weeds; fish excrement provides organic fertilizer for rice and fish stirring provides oxygen for root system of rice. Such agricultural production pattern not only effectively promotes ecological environment of farmland and biological diversity of agriculture, but also promotes joint development of grain and fish and comprehensive development of cultivated land resource, and enriches diet structure of farmers, accordingly forming Dong people rice farming culture with regional and ethnic characteristics. This agricultural production pattern is also a best explanation for "Planting Rice and Concurrently Raising Fishes in Paddy Field" of ancient Baiyue people. Dong people are descendants of Luoyue offsprings of ancient Yue people. According to "Biography of Important Merchants" in Records of the Grand Historian, Chu and Yue areas are large in land but rare in population and people in Chu and Yue plant rice and concurrently raise fishes in paddy field. The Book of Han: Annals of Geography stated that Chu and Yue people eat rice and fishes, and survive from fishing, hunting, and felling<sup>[9-10]</sup>. Ancient Yue people bred fishes at the same time of rice farming. Their life relies on rice and fishes. Such livelihood tradition passed on all the time. Dong people eat fishes in many ways, such as burning, roasting, and frying, or making "fish in sour soup" after frying. If the output is high and fishes can not be eaten up, Dong people often cut fish viscera open, clean then up and dry, then add fried rice, salt and chilli powder, and make salted fishes. Besides, Beidong people are used to planting tea oil trees and tung trees. The production and operation history is long. It started as early as end of the Ming Dynasty to the beginning of Qing Dynasty and passed on till the present. Tung seeds can be made into tung oil. Dong people are good at using tung oil to maintain their wooden buildings. Tea oil can be used in cooking. Tea oil is high grade plant oil. It not

only contains nutrition, but also helps digestion, repels pests, diminishes inflammation and nourishes the stomach, and makes dishes tea – scented. Besides, tea cake can be used as crop fertilizer. In the past, tea cake was used in washing clothes and hair. Thus, unique farming culture of Dong people and diet culture generated therefrom are characteristic resources for developing tourism.

**3.2 Architecture** In Dong people area of Guizhou Province, there is Drum Tower in the south (including Liping, Congjiang and Rongjiang) and family temple in the north (including Tianzhu and Jinping). Family temple building culture of Beidong takes its own characteristics in Dong people building culture, particularly in the area along the Qingshui River in Tianzhu County. Once developed wood economy contributed to prosperity of Qingshui River. Infiltration of central plain culture and Jing and Chu culture and integration with local minority culture created unique family temple culture. Most family temples in downstream of Qingshui River were built in Qing Dynasty. By now, they have a history of several hundred years. Family temples were often built in the end of villages, open area of area with high terrain. They are built in plain areas and kept a distance of tens of meters from houses to prevent fire and keep solemn silence. Building wall adopts brick wall and inner part adopts wood, and revetment adopts blue stone board. The front side is decorated archway and gate. Three sides are fireproof wall combined with horse head wall. Inside the family temples, there are outer hall, middle hall, main hall, wing room, and penthouse. Large family temples also have theater stage and have typical Huizhou style. The decorated archway is the most beautiful part in the decoration of whole family temples and also the most important part of the entire building. Decorated archway is generally 10 – 15 m, having two or three layers of eaves, equipped with several sculptures and multi – colored decoration. The decoration usually draws materials from famous historical figures or stories, such as 8 sculptures in Taiyuan decorated archway of Wang's Family Temple in Sanmentang, having 8 folk stories. Apart from sculptured figures and colored stories, many archways also have some unique decoration. For example, Liu's Family Temple in Sanmentang is a Gothic building integrating Chinese and foreign building style. Animal and plant sculptures on the archway and wall ridge are highly skilled, especially the four letters fully reflecting integration of Chinese and foreign culture. Every family temple reflects historical figure and culture of the family, and is the product of national integration, cultural infiltration, and cultural exchange, and also is the rarity of architecture art. Site selection, design, style, structure, archway, sculpture, colored drawing, shrine, antithetical couplet, sacrificial activities and patriarchal system of family temples contain profound culture and are product of Qingshui River trade and business culture, Dong people culture and central plain culture, and Jing and Chu culture.

**3.3 Full – scale drama and Yang Drama** The full – scale drama is also called Han drama. It has a history of more than 300

years. Its performance form is extremely similar to Beijing opera. With large scale, so compared with local Yang drama, it is commonly called full – scale drama. The dialogue adopts local Han language. It has acrobatic fighting and singing. Subject matters are mainly folk stories. Dramas handed down include Defeating the Heavenly Gate Militia, Gathering of Heroes, Man Jiang Hong, The Leopard Cat Trades the Crown Prince, and Three Times' Beating Monster. Performers wear ancient costume drama clothes. Gong and drum are used in the performance to set off the atmosphere. A theatrical troupe is established with a village as unit. The performance site selects stage of a family temple and the performance is free. Every villager and people can appreciate the performance. The performance is often carried out in the period of Spring Festival or other traditional festivals. Yang Drama has a history of more than 150 years. The drama dialogue adopts local Han language. Subject matters are mainly local folk allusions, stories and customs. Most dramas have simple plot. Famous ones include Liu Hai Cuts Firewood, Stealing Vegetable, Couple View of Lights, Third Sister Liu, and Double Grind. Musical instruments include Erhu, Dahu, Jinghu, and Suona. Actors include male characters, female characters, painted face characters, and clowns. Most are acted by men. A theatrical troupe of Yang Drama is founded with village as unit and the performance site generally adopts family temples or open place. The performance is free of charge and every one can watch. The performance is often carried out in the first month of the lunar year, festivals, birthday celebration of the rich men, or in happy events. These indicate that both the full – scale drama and the Yang Drama are product of integration of Han people culture and Dong people culture.

**3.4 Institutions** In institutions, especially genealogical system, Beidong area has better inheritance. All clans attach great importance to their genealogy. They always carefully collect their genealogy and let their offspring to read with respect. The genealogy mainly records origin of family name, migration, descendants, birthday and death time, burial site, and biography. Those families with family temples incorporated the family temples to their genealogy, including site selection, building, installation of shrine, deed of family temple, sacrificial rites, antithetical couplet, inscriptions on the tablet, and records of ancestral hall<sup>[10]</sup>. In marriage customs, Dong people can intermarry with Han people or any other ethnic minority people. People of different family branches also can intermarry with each other. Intermarriage includes marrying one's daughter and also includes marrying one's son (namely, a live – in son – in – law). In marriage rite, many rural areas still follow the tradition of talking about marriage, engagement, asking eight characters, and presenting gifts to the bride's family before marriage. In families, Dong people respect the elderly very much and the head of poultry is reserved for the elderly.

**3.5 Spiritual culture** With reverence for nature and respect for the elderly, the Beidong settlement still keeps their belief, witchcraft sorcery, sacrificial rite, folk stories, and funeral customs, which still play a great role in their daily life. Nearly all

families worship shrine in their hall. A shrine is a holy or sacred place, which is dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint, daemon or similar figure of awe and respect, at which they are venerated or worshipped. Shrines often contain idols, relics, or other such objects associated with the figure being venerated. In the Beidong settlement, a shrine is often made of a wood rectangular cabinet with door, window, drawer and closet. The whole shrine body is engraved with flower pattern and coated with red paint. It has two layers. The upper layer is for worshiping ancestors and the lower layer is engraved with auspicious patterns, such as Good Fortune, Prosperity, Longevity and Happiness, Peace and Prosperity, Good Harvest, etc. Before the New Year's Eve Dinner, every family will offer sacrifices such as pork, glutinous rice cake, wine, joss sticks and candles, and joss paper to ancestors, door god, pig god, cow god, horse god, tree god, kitchen god, and land god in front of the shrine, top of a kitchen range, door of central room, door of livestock pen, old tree surrounding houses, simple land god shrine built beside houses, and land temple collectively built by villagers, to bless safe and prosperous in the next year. The belief of "everything on earth having a soul" is ultimately manifested. As for the funeral, it is still mainly burial in the grounds. After the death of elderly, his/her son should invite a Master to select a treasured place through practicing divination to settle the soul of his parent. The burial place is generally located in the same place as their clan. This place is deemed the most sacred place of their clan. They believe that the soul of the elderly will bless their descendants. In rites, it still follows the process of connecting spirit, bath, haircut, taking to the bier, changing clothes, calling back the spirit, releasing soul from purgatory, placing in the coffin, holding the funeral, burial, adding grounds and sweeping the tomb, and filial piety dinner<sup>[10]</sup>. Apart from the filial son holding solemn funeral, nephews should also hold some memorial ceremony activities to express the respect and memory for the elderly. The idea of "believing in the elderly" is deep in Dong people. In Qingming Festival (Tomb Sweeping Day), they will hold offer sacrifice to their ancestors. All male people (especially son and grandson) should show up, while daughter may not present. Grand funeral ceremony of Beidong people reflects their excellent social customs of respecting the elderly, but also reflects their deeply – rooted soul belief and idea of regarding men as superior to women. These ideas are not only manifested in funeral, but also reflected in villagers inviting Masters to dispel the evil thing or disease. Although villagers are active to seek medical advice, they still invite Masters to communicate with soul through certain sacrificial methods and rites, to dispel the evil, disease and prevent retribution and seek safety.

## 4 Conclusions and discussions

The development of cultural ecology is a metabolic process. In this process, it is a question how to keep and bring into play vitality and creativity of cultural ecological system, ensure balance of cultural ecology, and maintain cultural ecological diversity. Once

there is problem in ecosystem of ethnic culture, their living condition will have crisis. Through the above analysis, at the same time of keeping their culture core, the Beidong people integrate their local and ethnic culture with Han people culture and modern culture. These are manifested in their family temple, full – scale drama, Yang drama, marriage customs, religious belief, sacrifice, and funeral ceremony, which jointly form colorful Beidong people. Apart from inheriting cultural features of their ancestors, the Beidong people absorb foreign culture actively and passively, and innovate upon their ethnic culture, forming their unique cultural quality. However, with transformation of society, unique features of local ethnic culture and diversity are gradually disappearing. Therefore, the study on local knowledge of ethnic cultural ecology is helpful for revealing special features of ethnic cultural ecology and favorable for protecting, passing down and developing culture from the perspective of innovation and rebuilding, instead of simple protection of cultural heritage. Besides, it is also favorable for correctly recognize and treat the relationship between ethnic traditional culture and foreign culture and economic and social development, to promote economic development and construction of spiritual civilization of ethnic minority areas.

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