

# On the Value of Ethnic Yi's Traditional Culture in Ecological Maintenance

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**Abstract:** During the long period of social life and practice, ethnic Yi has created their own traditional culture, which includes the lineage system, produce and living customs, village rules and etc. The traditional culture, rich in ecological intelligence and skills, stipulates and adjusts the relation between human being and nature and gives full scope to ecological maintenance. After being excavated and arranged, it will become an important resource in maintaining the balance of nature.

**Keywords:** ethnic Yi, lineage system, taboos, village rules, ecological maintenance

With the advance of western development, the ecological environment of the minority areas of west China has degenerated gradually. How to protect the biological diversity has drawn a lot of attention of our government. To strengthen environmental protection and management and to maintain the ecological balance are the foundation of helping the minorities step into the socialist modernization. As a matter of fact, if you pay a little attention, you will find the traditional cultures of various ethnical minorities contain plenty of ecological wisdom and skills. As long as we make good use of the wisdom and skills, we can construct the important theoretical resources of ecological balance. Then we will have more effective treatment to disaster change of ecology. This paper takes Puti Village as an example and indicates it is very effective to use traditional culture to maintain ecology.

Puti Village locates in Zhaojue County of Xichang, Sichuan Province. It has a total of 449 families, with 1604 people. There are 1826 mu of arable land and 3500 mu of forest land, which includes 250 mu of economic forest. It also has a large area of public forest farm (collective tree farms). At present, Puti Village has about 600 mu of this kind of meadow, where everyone can herd. The local Yi People mainly plant corn, buckwheat, potato and a small amount of rice. Every household keeps goats.

Under the jurisdiction of Puti Village, there are Naituo, Gatuo and Shili, three teams, and a total of 18 family clans. It is located at the border of the urban areas and the suburbs and the means of livelihood is a combination of cropping and husbandry. Up to now, in Puti Village, a typical Yi community, the Yi people's culture has been preserved relatively intact.

#### I. The Balance of Ecosystem Maintained by Clans

The family clan is called "ciwei" in Yi language, which means the root bone. The Yi Clan, which is based on blood relationship, is the most influential social community in Liangshan Yi region, and yet it is the core issue of Liangshan Yi society as well. It has a very long history and involves every aspect of Yi community, which can be proved by many Yi proverbs, such as these two. "The tiger depends on its mouth, while Nuohuo(the highest rank of the Yi people's slave society) depends on the clans" and "Food and clans are indispensable." The population size directly decides how strong the clan is. After the democratic reform, the government built people's commune in Liangshan region. People have formed production team to produce and live, which restricts the activities of clans. Thus, the clans once tended to disappear. After the reform and opening, because of the relatively backward social productivity, the relation linked by blood can not be broken yet. Then the clans regained its former vigor out of the idea of helping each other in production. Through the family clans, people not only gain collective identity but also acquire cultural identity.

We have done a research in Puti Village, Zhaojue County, which shows the phenomenon of clans is relatively common here. What's more, every clan is blood related. People in this village said, "Every piece of land is connected to each other just as we are all relatives." In Puti Village, there are 18 clans in all, that is, Waqi, Sunzi, Ati, Jiada, Rida, Mahai, Erji, Shama, Shiye, Qubi, Maka, Aer, Jibu, Didi, Lewu, Ahe, Adi, and Aku, etc. In the history of Yi's family clans, there were black Yi and white Yi. The black Yi is the ruling class. The 18 clans in Puti Village all belong to white Yi. The largest clans in this village are Waqi, Sunzi and Ati. The clan mainly maintains the internal relations, solves internal contradictions, and organizes the internal

members to perform various activities which are beneficial to the clan, such as helping each other. Externally, it preserves the safety and interests of the clan, withstands outside evil forces and coordinates the outside relations. The system of clan in Yi people's villages is basically oral agreement, and has no written materials. But as long as they reach an agreement, the members of the clan will comply with it voluntarily. No matter who makes the agreement, the contents are very practical and close to life.

The Yi's family clans practice cremation. Thus every clan has its crematorium that is commonly used by its members. People of the clan are not allowed to enter it randomly, not to mention the outside clans. Furthermore, there are strict rules for cremation ceremony. Those unnaturally dead people such as those who die when they are young, or lose their life due to traffic accidents etc. will be cremated by the river that day and their bone ash will be washed away by water to avoid bringing evil influence to the descendants. But when those who have lots of children and grandchildren die, they can be cremated in the public crematorium. Now some clans are very open, and the dead can even be cremated on their farm fields. The offspring can grow crops on the fields in the coming year. There are also several ways to dispose the bone ash. One is to use a white cloth bag to gather it. The second is to gather it the next day. Then the bone ash will be put under the *Stranvaesia davidiana* on the mountains or under the pear tree in their own yard.

The Yi people think their offspring will be more and more prosperous just as the fruit trees bear lots of fruits. What's more, the Yi people also have strict rules for the trees that are used to take the body away. The trees must be cedars or Aoki trees growing on the high mountains. If an old man passes away and his descendants could not find a proper tree to carry him away, the descendants will be considered disgraceful and unfilial. Thus, the Yi people form a tradition of not cutting down their trees growing on the high mountains. When the old family members pass away and their children can not find a proper tree, they must borrow others' trees. But even if they need to borrow from others, they have to firstly turn to those who belong to the same clan with them. As the Yi's saying goes, "no matter how good your relatives are,

they will run away immediately as long as they hear you cry. But no matter how bad the members of your clan are, they will come to help you the minute they hear you cry.” Helping members of the same clan is their inevitable responsibility and obligation. When you pick up someone’s trees, you only need to bring the owner a bottle of good wine. They said, “If you respect him, go and ask him for it. If you disrespect him, steal it. Therefore, the local Yi people seldom go to the mountains to cut down others’ trees.

In fact, cremation of the Yi nationality is beneficial for environment from the following aspects: First, its cremation is in line with local environment. People of Yi nationality reside mainly in the area with an elevation of 2000 meters where there is permafrost underground. If a dead body is buried in the ground instead of being cremated, it can not be decomposed. It will bring about the decline of arable land and forest; second, the concept of cremating a dead body may provide fertilizer for farms and trees. Concerning the custom of Yi nationality on punishment to crimes, the severest one is to punish people who violate “family law”. Taking killing as an example, for those people without ties of kinship, the punishment is to pay money for their wrongdoing; while for those with family relations, the punishment is different according to different circumstances. In some severe cases, blood must atone for blood or the criminal will be expelled from the family. The former one can leave his or her property to his or her spouse and children; however, the latter punishment is more serious partly because his or her immediate family has to leave the kinship after being impounded all belongings and partly because the family will be expelled from the family community and be looked down upon during the whole lifetime by all family members. If there are some special reasons for killing, it is allowed to pay money, but the criminal has to pay much more than the person without any family relations. So the severest punishment is to lose the protection of the whole big family after being excluded by the family, which indicates the importance and sanctity of family relations. It is obvious that family members of Yi nationality are reverent to their custom. In the process of survey, we find the fact that village committee takes advantage of this custom to hold conference in the village and seal a mountain pass. If

only they reach a consensus, they will conform to it voluntarily.

Regarding mutual assistance and protection in the same line of whole family, any person can ask for help from others, and any person is willing to extend a helping hand to others. If someone is lack of money, all family members will raise fund for him or her; if someone is building a house, others will give him a hand voluntarily; if someone has not enough money to buy goods for use during the spring festival, others will invite him or her to have dinner or lend some goods to him or her; if a child in the family will go to university, others have duty to aid him or her to finish his or her study because it is regarded as the pride in the whole family. There is a real case in Yi nationality during the time of our visit. A grandchild in a family line is going to enter junior college, but his family can not afford the tuition. The head of the clan holds a family meeting for it, and then family members and relatives come to give financial aid for celebration. The largest sum of money is about one thousand Yuan, and the least sum of it is about fifty Yuan. With the help of whole family, the child can go to college without financial difficulties. Yi nationality places great emphasis on the concept of “face”. In residence of Yi nationality, if a pig raised by a person has ruined crops of others, the owner of the pig will go to apologize with some drink, while the owner of the crops will serve him or her with chicken and duck. The custom is called “taking back the face” by local people. There is a real story about it. A child is herding cows which accidentally enter the forest of other families. According to the family custom, the first offender can be forgiven without imposing fines, but next time, he will be fined thirty Yuan as a warning. Normally, no body violates this rule after paying the penalty. About the rule on stealing, Yi nationality has distinctions about the crimes done during the daytime or in the evening, and done to the family members or other families. A person stealing in the daytime and in the same family line will be punished severely. The reason of that is they attach much importance to the concept of “face”. They further explain to me that in the daytime they can guard the house very easily. If someone succeeds in stealing from their house, it is a shame for the family, and if someone succeeds in stealing from a house owned by the same family line, it will make the whole family lose face by violating the family law. About the

punishment on wrongdoings without any purpose, it will not be fined because imposing fines will make a person lose face. Considering protecting face of Yi nationality in the same line of a family, once there is a rule to seal the mountain pass, there will be no stealing. In the history of Yi nationality, each family line has common forests, meadow, wasteland and swamp. Different lines of family regard mountains, streams, forests as symbols and landmarks to divide the boundaries of their territories. Each family line is very familiar with these natural symbols, so generally speaking, no one dares to change the landmarks. Otherwise, there will be conflict and war between different family lines or different people. Each part will pay the price of life for it. Because of great stress on their land, each person or each family line cares and loves the land very much, which is shown naturally in hunting, logging, and cultivating and makes the protection of environment effectively. A Japan-born American scholar Fukuyama states: “all those who own social capital have trust in something within some range, in which cooperative norms are effective, if the social capital in a group has positive effect on the outside, the range of trust will be larger than the group itself”, all forms of traditional culture—social groups such as tribes, clan community, and religious sect are all established on the basis of shared specifications. They accomplish the purpose of cooperation with these norms. Yi nationality in Liangshan Mountain has many lines of family which have mutual recognition and standard of conducts. That is the social law in Yi nationality. Members of each family line strongly agree kindred relationship in the same family which enhances the trust among members. Consequently it constitutes most important safeguard factors of Yi nationality. Many public affairs of Liangshan Mountain community are managed autonomously based on high confidence, such as environmental protection in the community. In the villages of Liangshan Mountain, trust is most important premise of coordinated action in public life of Yi community.

#### Part Two. Taboos Sustain Species Diversity of Ecosystem

In view of Puti village, Yi nationality makes a living by combining agriculture with animal husbandry. Therefore, they highly utilize and rely on forest, and there are several customs and taboos embedded in production and life, which are presented by

etiquette and ceremony. These customs and taboos are beneficial for local environmental protection.

The Yi nationality is a nation of mountain, which can be seen everywhere in their living land, and the climate there is so changeable, intensifying local people's sense of awe to the land. As a Yi proverb says: *The Yi reside beside mountains, Han beside waters*. Dominated by the idea of "animism", every family branches in Yi district worships various mountain gods. There are many holy mountains in Piti village which we have investigated, every branch or family can tell the name of these holy mountains. One villager in Waqi family told me "There is a very effective sacred tree on the mountain just in front of my house, it's so magic that nobody dares to touch, to approach. Old men say that one would get punishment if he touches it". Generally speaking, villagers would not herd on these sacred mountains. The ashes of the deads would be put in different caves according to their family branches, every festival people'll go there for memory. As a Yi proverb says "good mountains depend on trees, good trees depend on cliffs" So as a result, there are dense forests and abundant water grasses on these mountains, which being called "holy forests" by the locals. People are not allowed to profane them, let alone destruction. They are not only being strictly protected, but are also being worshipped on certain seasons. Due to these, the eco-system of the forests remain intact, presenting a view of life and energy. There are many similar kinds of forests near the village we've investigated.

Yi people have lived in the embrace of mountains for generations, not only reside there but also feed on them. Herding and hunting were once their most important production ways. The agriculture, animal husbandry and the forests have bred these Yi people, as a return they have a convention to seal off mountains to facilitate afforestation. In the Puti village we've surveyed, every year after the Yi new year, the head will hold a representative meeting, discussing the issues on closing mountains and breeding trees. Generally speaking, they'll ask Bimo(the priest) to recommend a good day to perform the ceremony, which is attended by the village heads, ordinary villagers, forest rangers, etc. The ceremony which requires everyone to attend is called "Dafeng"(big ritual) conventionally. The procedure of this ceremony goes like this:

set a pile of fire with smoke at first, Then Bimo will kill chicken and dogs while incanting, some extreme words like “chicken and dogs die, whole family die”, the chicken must be cocks, the blood drops on tree branches, as well as the feathers, then cut down the head of the chicken or the dog, hang it on the tree branch which is accessible to the forest. Chicken meat will be taken away by Bimo, ordinary people cannot have it, for the reason that in the custom of Yi, there is a particular taboo on dog and chicken’s head. For example, if there’s a dispute between two family branches in the village, they will kill a chicken and throw it out, which means the two families have become fued. In the process of closing mountains, comparatively more chickens and dogs would be bought, thus more money will be cost. If any one violate the taboo, then all the expenses will be put on the shoulder of this violator of punishment. Some families would invite Bimo to hold this ceremony in their own forest, which is called “Xiao feng”(small ritual). If anyone dares to cut trees after the ceremony, it will bring misfortune to him and his family.

In the folk riligion of Yi, Everything has a spirit, including sky and land, sun and moon, mountains and rivers, even a sigle grass, tree aminimal. Out of their awe to the nature, Yi has formed a lot habits in their livings and productions in order to guarantee the growth of animals and agricultures. For example, the hunt of helpful birds and animals is forbidden, Yi people in big and small Liangshan do not eat primate animals like cat,monkey, bear, horse and etc. In their views these animals share the same source with human, one’s soul will be polluted if he breakes the restriction to eat meat of these animals. In Yi’s custom, if there is a dispute over land between two branches or families, they’ll dig a hole in the disputed land when things get worst, burying a horse or an ox in it, then nobody dares to cultivate on this land. During my interview, I got to know that once in Puti village, Hailai family had a dispute with another family over a land, they invited Bimo to do a ritual and buried a horse in it. From then on, no others dare to do this again. Now the two families have moved out. We had a look at that place, covering about 100mu, are still left uncultivated.

We also get to know in our investigation that Yi villagers in Puti always ask Bimo to do a ritual after illness. They’ll buy a horse or a goat, sheep, dispel it to the

top of mountain, there he'll build three houses respectively in bamboo, wormwood and pine tree, the meaty skin would be hung on the houses, foot, head, liver and heart will be given to Bimo, the rest would be distributed and eaten by family. The pine house in the middle remains untouched, other two houses, the bamboo's and wormwood's will be burned down. For the reason that story of ancestor still prevail, with descriptions that they are born from or because of bamboo. A Yi classic *ZUOJIXIANYAOGONGSHENGJING* says: "in ancient times, a cow lost the cattle would go for seek, a horse lost the crowd would search, a deceased mother lost you'll go to find it in bamboo", "ancestors and people are all tuned into bamboo". The memorial tablet of Yi ancestors are also made of pine wood, pennisetum and other woods besides the bamboo. These ideas, taboos and convention together reflect Yi people's respect and care to the nature, and protect the wild animals and plants indirectly.

In addition, living in the high and cold mountainous region, people of the Yi nationality accumulate a set of production etiquette in the long-term production practice. According to the survey, in spring plowing and winter, the Yi nationality families in Puti Village invite Bimo to hold a ceremony in the house, in order to worship ancestors, pray for a harvest year and ward off evil spirits as well. This ceremony usually should slaughter livestock, such as chickens, sheep, cattle etc. In the village we investigated, the Yi nationality families usually invite Bimo to hold the ceremony for two times. Spring is the season of sowing, all the farmers should choose a lucky day, on which invite Bimo to hold a ceremony of sowing to pray for smooth spring production and a fruitful autumn. After the autumn harvest, they also have to choose a lucky day, on which slaughter a sheep to pray for scare away evil spirits and have a good harvest next year. The farming customs run through the Yi nationality's agriculture activities all along, which shows that as the change of the farming season, the Yi people need to adjust themselves to environment and resources by ceremony. Meanwhile, it expresses the respect for nature and wishes to have a harmonious relationship with nature.

Thus, the production of custom and taboos of the Yi people in the long-term

production and living practices imply a rich cultural connotations, reflect the ecological values of the Yi ethnic and effectively regulate the relationship between man and nature, make environment and resource for people effectively protected and harmoniously developed. We should pay attention to local knowledge like the Yi people, and incorporate the knowledge into the ecological protection system.

### Part Three

#### Harmonious Relationship between Environment and Man under the Rules

In Puti village, how to strengthen the rural governance, to maintain the stability of communities, and to explore the rural governance strategy, has been an issue for the grass-root administrators. Even though there are a lot of rules and factors in the management, the village rule is one of the important rules of the normal operation of the countryside. Puti village developed ten clauses, five of which are on ecological environmental protection. The content read as follows:

In order to build Puti Village as a material civilization, spiritual civilization of socialism new countryside, some actions must be taken to safeguard the interests of nation and collective, insist on fighting against all seeking self-interest at the public expense behavior, fully implement the responsibility for production system, encourages people to achieve prosperity through hard work, do legal sideline activities, and fight against illegal economic activities. According to village meeting's agreement and village committee's discussion, some clauses are established as follows, and everyone must comply with them.

1. The farmers must manage their livestock. If the livestock tread on crops, destroy potatoes and corns, 1.50 RMB will be punished per nest, and 600 kilograms will be punished per mu for other crops.

2. It is forbidden to deforestation. Any violation will result in punishment of 10.00 RMB for each tree, reseedling 10 saplings and punishment of 5.00 RMB for a bunch of wet firewood. The person, who needs wood to build a house below 5, must get the permission of village committee, and approval of the township government beyond 5.

3. It is forbidden to damage forests to reclaim land. Any violation will result in

taking back the exploited wasteland, punish 20.00 RMB per mu and reseed twice saplings.

4. The person who deliberately cuts trees in the sides of river banks, will be punished 50.00 RMB for each plant, and reseeds 10 saplings. The person who steals or damages the wire netting of the river bank, will be punished 50.00 RMB each one. The person who damages the river banks by fishing with explosive in the river, will be punished 100.00 RMB, except for compensating for the loss.

5. The livestock must not be grazed without controlling. Any violation will be punished 10 RMB per head. Pasturing cattle in the forest will be punished 100 RMB, and 30 RMB for a few losses. ...

In view of the rules above, the forest source protection takes the most important proportion, which involves poultry raising, wood cutting, forest destroying forest and opening up for farmland, trees protection at riverbanks, exploding fish in river. All of the rules are given in detail on environment protection.

In 1980s' the forests in Puti village are subcontracted to each household for individual management. However, private cutting and chopping are found and there is no corresponding management rule on this phenomenon. Thus since 1993, village committee take the management of forest back and enact the measure to conserve forest according to the instruction from county government. To strengthen management, village committee employ 4 forest ranger per year to guard the forest, which lessen the damage to the forest, to some extent. The measures states not permitting poultry raised in forest, the cutting without finding debtor will be contributed to forest guardian, 20-30 Yuan for each small tree, 50-60 for each large tree.

The rules above have been strictly conducted by villagers and a good village behavior and living environment are kept and presented. This enactment and rules embodied by villager behaviors takes low maintenance cost and will be in good cooperation with country law if applied properly.

In conclusion, the Yi people's ethics reflect their view of nature. In the long-term production practice, these thoughts are presented in various customs and taboos, and

even become the conventions abided by all the people. They are always displayed by village's rules. This proves that the traditional culture of each nationality in China contains abundant ecological wisdom and technique, which stimulates and adjusts the relationship between man and nature. As long as we exploit the knowledge in the ecological construction, it will have an optimistic effect on ecological resource protection and optimizing ecological environment.