

# A CASE STUDY OF THE CULTURAL ECOLOGICAL PROTECTION IN WA ETHNICAL VILLAGE, WENGDING

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## 1. Introduction

The inheritance of minority nationality culture is the continuation of cultural tradition, not a simple repetition of the tradition. It will change along with the changes in the internal and external environment and to varying degrees corresponding to the degree of changes in the environment. In the process of building a culturally rich region, Yunnan province is demonstrating its differential advantages in minority nationality culture rooted in the rich minority nationality culture resources in its cultural industry. Countless facts have proved that the development of the cultural resources in minority nationality minority areas is of great significance in speeding up the pace to get rich while avoiding pitfalls in blind industrialization. But at the same time, under the condition of market economy, some problems come out. Because of the differences in the character of cultural and natural resources, minority nationality culture turns out to be in the category of living and growing resources that will not be reduced or lost due to research or use, but may change or even disappear as a result of the changes in its environment. Facing such a situation, though living protection in the community life of minorities has received increasing attention both practically and theoretically, protecting minority cultures in the market economy has turns out to be more difficult than expected. The author find in research and field study that the initial success of Wongding village in Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County in its recent experience has the potential of shedding further light on the issues discussed above.

### **Part A: Wongding “China’s last aboriginal Wa minority nationality culture village”**

Located on the border of China and Myanmar, Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County has made great achievements in promoting minority nationality culture development. For example, the Wa singing and dancing performances as represented by the aboriginal singing and dancing musical play “Dazzling Color - Wa mountain” has received widespread attention in China’s culture market. Another example is a celebration by the name of “Cangyuan Wa Sigangli Touch You Black Carnival” held every early May since 2004 that has attracted large crowds and has been awarded China’s highest award for exhibition the “Gold Dolphin Award at the Fifth China International Exhibition Culture Festival. From 2008 to 2009, this same festival has become one of China’s top ten charming festivities. By the end of the Tenth Five-Year Plan, income from Cangyuan’s tourism as characterized by its “aboriginal minority nationality culture tourism on

the border” makes up as high as 14.2% of Cangyuan’s GDP. That is why Cangyuan county is ranked among strong county tourism economies in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan of Yunnan Province and has made the list of Yunnan’s ten counties selected for representative cultural promotions.

Wongding is an important window for advertising and branding the Wa culture. It is also positioned as “China’s last aboriginal Wa minority nationality culture village” in the cultural tourism industry. Although some traditional customs have changed or even disappeared over the years, Wa minority nationality’s traditional culture as embodied in such fields as social morality, diet and daily routines, festival activities and religious beliefs have either evolved or been retained, attracting many tourists even before the beginning of tourism in this area. Given the essential value of Wongding Wa Village in the research of Wa minority nationality’s original religion, social economic status, the art of singing and dancing, cultural psychology and the importance in tourism development, it was classified as the aboriginal Wa minority nationality culture village for protection in 2001.

We can assert that if we had not taken any protective measures, many conventions of the Wongding Wa culture would have disappeared in a very short time. In the year of 2004, the villagers’ annual net income only reached 520 Yuan. In order to shake off poverty, more than 100 young adults or a quarter of the population in the village went out to the cities to work all the year round. Young people are very quick to accept modern information but hardly aware of the importance of protecting their traditional culture. Now only a small number of old men in the village know the history, legends and stories of the local WA people and how to perform the unique local Wa etiquette. If we do not save it by guiding the protection in time, this minority nationality culture will very likely disappear. Compared to the inexpensive daily necessities in the market that are used for modern life, minority nationality handicrafts are more costly and labor intensive. That is why the young people in the village do not want to make them. For instance, a set of traditional Wa clothing values over thousands of Yuan, much more expensive and inconvenient to wear than clothes of the Han people. Most of the villagers only wear their minority nationality clothes during festivals. Other traditional crafts are also facing the same problem. Beautiful natural sceneries and traditional residence were once characteristic features of Wongding. But as a result of population growth, some villagers are turning their thatch fields into forests or grain fields to increase production and income thus reducing the amount of thatch needed building original thatch roofed stilted houses. More and more villagers would prefer to spend more money on modern houses because thatched roofs are easy to catch fire. As a result, more than 30% of the houses in the village are now tiled with asbestos shingles and some additional houses covered with asphaltic felt before protection is implemented.

In order to protect this important tourism attraction, Cangyuan established the Wongding Protection and Development Management Committee. To maintain Wongding’s original features, development plans different from other scenic areas have been designed. For example, some original minority nationality villages in The Valley of Cangyuan Petroglyph have already applied a new look to their houses by using modern building materials such as red tiles while Wongding started their protection by “recovery of thatch-roofed houses”. Due to the denial of the villagers at the beginning of the project, the management committee has to organize a residency team to do the persuasion. With the help of village cadres, the residency team started by chatting with the senior citizens who were local opinion leaders. Then they visited the

villagers from door to door and explained the development ideas of the county using the examples of Lijiang getting rich through tourism. Besides this, local government also provided support in materials and fund for the “recovery of thatch-roofed houses”. Of course, “recovery of thatch-roofed houses” addresses only the exterior protection. In the August of 2005, Wongding was listed on the first directory of county traditional culture protection and “Interim measures for preserving the Wa traditional culture” was issued by the county government. Now work teams could begin a thorough investigation on the traditional culture in Wongding and use it as guide for the scientific protection and management of Wa minority nationality culture in Wongding. By May 2006, Wongding was included in the first group of intangible cultural assets for protection in Yunnan province after years of efforts. In 2007, it was recognized as a renowned historical and cultural village in Yunnan province. In recent years, with the help of the Sigangli Carnival, tourists traveling to Wongding keep increasing each year. Because of their participation in the festivity, the villagers’ material wellbeing has been considerably improved hence manifesting the initial economic benefit of developing tourism.

### **Part B: True Authenticity or Simulation: A Reflection on the Authenticity of the Original Wongding Minority nationality Culture**

Authenticity is the direct statement contained in the living Wa aboriginal minority nationality culture as well as the highlight of Wongding in the cultural market. Hence the following description appears in Cangyuan’s promotion of Wongding to the outside world:

*The Wa people have lived on this wonderful land of Wongding for more than 200 years. Therefore, Wongding is the place in China where the Wa culture and the Wa history are best preserved and the traditional Wa architecture technology remain most intact.*

*Wa Minority Nationality in Wongding lives in traditional stilted houses built with thatches and bamboos. Most of their daily commodities are made from bamboos too. Here you may see village gate, village column, Sara house, worship chamber, dragon pond, ancient banyan and newly constructed wood drum chamber, cow head pile, totem pole, King’s palace of Wa etc. The houses of the village are arranged according to family names. All the residents here are Wa nationalities who keep a tribal chief in the village as it was in the patriarchal society. Here you may encounter unique old marriage customs such as Combing Festival, experience the bustling atmosphere of the Sowing Festival, the New Rice Festival, and the Village Guarding Festival. The Wongding aboriginal village is very rich in history and culture.*

Aboriginality was not a phrase very often used until 2004 when a big aboriginal show “The impression of Yunnan” was staged. After that the use of the phrase has really picked up. If you do a web search on Baidu, you will easily get over thirty million results. The most prominent phenomenon is that aboriginality has turned into a great cultural selling point in the market. There are now the aboriginal travel website and the aboriginal shopping website. More examples would include aboriginal decoration, aboriginal diners, aboriginal clothes, and aboriginal beauty even. Now the use of aboriginality is so indiscriminate that it is not only suspicious of being abused and hyped but scrutinized by many scholars.

From the point of etymology, there is some connection between aboriginality and ecology. Ecology studies the characteristics and principles of organisms and natural objects. It pays special attention to the interdependence among organisms and between organisms and their environment. When watching the world from the view of ecology, we

may gain a unique perspective. On the one hand, what aboriginality shows is the original or even primitive status of things in their particular natural environment not affected by the modern civilization. On the other hand, aboriginality stresses the harmonious interdependence among people, between people and land, and between people and God when social components are not well delineated and man's self-consciousness is not well developed. The fact of the matter is that there is no culture that can exist retaining its unique characteristics while isolated from outside cultures. In Wongding's history of 200 years as a village, it has had a lot of communication with Dai people who live around them. Most of the villagers believe in Saima (which belongs to the Southern Theravada Buddhism). This is most directly reflected in the soul of the village – the village pile which takes on a shape greatly different from the traditional “Y” shape. Because of its location on the edge of A Wa mountain, many customs of the Wa people such as cutting human head, dragging wood drum and poking cattle had already been abolished before the birth of P. R. China. After the adoption of the open door policy and subsequent reforms, the power of cultural inheritance gets so strong that many changes have taken place in the land of aboriginal minority nationality culture thus undermining the base upon which the Wa minority nationality culture depends for its existence.

When making further inquiries on “aboriginality”, we encounter two aspects of the problem, namely, original authenticity and simulation. When it comes to the much discussed concept of original authenticity, it is very important to point out that we are referring to the living culture as being lived by the aboriginal minority nationality in their native community. From our field work we know that the villagers of Wongding preserve their tradition very well in their daily life. Minority nationality culture still plays a very important role in enhancing the bandage among minority nationality members by providing meaning for existence as a minority nationality. Second, original authenticity is also embodied in the harmonious relationship among people as well as between people and land. Cangyuan County is embraced by Mount Woken, the highest mountain in the county, Mount Wenghei, and Mount Gonglao. It is foggy all the year round on the tops of these mountains. At the foot of the mountains, there is a river named Xinya and a reservoir by the name of Xinya River Reservoir or Baiyun Lake. The land here is fertile, with an annual average temperature of 24 °C and 900-1000 mm rainfall, suitable for a variety of animals and plants to live and grow. Here, vegetation coverage is over 90%, and the natural ecological status is good. It is a harmonious picture of man and nature specifically composed of rich minority nationality customs and beautiful natural sceneries.

From the perspective of tourism development, aboriginality is also a selling point for Wongding to target city citizens in modern times. The rural culture tourism market is mainly composed of people from the cities. They afford to travel a long distance to satisfy their desire of getting back to nature and to experience original culture. They could visit the aboriginal village, God's forest, village pile and King's palace of the Wa and experience ancient and primitive Wa customs in person by joining in all kinds of activities. During Sigangli Carnival, dragging wood drum, poking cattle, dage dance, arrow shooting, ritual name giving, beating spinning top, getting new fire and parade in the village will be hosted in the village. Though most of the activities come from the villagers' lives, visitors decide when the activities will take place. Activities like dragging wood drum and poking cattle have been turned into complete commercial performances. And things like King's Palace of the Wa and stakes for hanging human head are also added simulations.

In modern tourism industry, especially the rural culture tourism market, seeking authenticity is an appeal common among tourists. As a result, a large number of simula-

tions are constructed to meet the imagination and demands of tourists. That is why the marketing of minority nationality culture is often criticized by many people.

In the tourism market, the most popular practice in featuring minority cultures is the attempt to strengthen formal characteristics and emphasize their cultural heterogeneity so as to cater to the curiosity of most culture consumers and maximize profits. Simulated performances, excessive package have already led to the creation of quite a number of fake tourist attractions designed for the sole purpose of catching tourists' imagination completely neglecting the original intent to promote minority culture. In promoting the development of the culture industry based on minority nationality culture resources, the gravest danger lies in the market assimilation of the industry as dominated by economic interests to the degree that it will eventually sink into appendage of popular culture and even turn into cultural trash. Moreover, under the influence of the market, the modified so-called minority nationality culture will in turn affect the protection of the aboriginality culture.

### **Part C: Multiple functions served by the protection of minority nationality cultures**

Through the above analysis, it can be seen that due to the increasing openness of the society, traditional values and behaviors among minority nationality members are losing ground. Together economic forces and powerful external cultures have produced and are still producing a strong simulation impact on traditional minority nationality cultures. The result is that a large number of the minority culture forms have been utilized while their meaning are alienated and being discarded. Even in their native community, aboriginality is rare to see. Now given a more flexible internal and external environment in the modernization process and the more complicated involvement of combined multiple forces facing minority nationality cultures, how to ensure the survival and inheritance of true and authentic minority nationality cultures has become an inevitable question.

No culture can survive without a dynamic mechanism. The same is true of the protection of aboriginality in Wongding village that has involved various forces including the many levels of governments, the market and cultural experts. In modern society, the "use" of minority nationality cultures has become increasingly diversified. For instance, minority nationality cultures are gradually evolving into an exploitable resource whose exchange values or role in enabling minority regions to get rid of poverty and become rich are starting to show more obviously. So has the practical value of minority nationality cultures. The first such value is to the minority nationality cultural entity. Minority nationality is an entity of common cultural values. In the process of long historical development, an minority nationality group develops its own group character, a value system and ethical practices as accepted by all its members which will help stabilize and guide the development of this particular minority nationality group. Second, as the carrier of the traditional culture, minority nationality culture is the cultural root for its cultural experts from which minority nationality artists obtain nutriments and theorists renovate cultural concepts by the dialogue between different cultures in order to meet the spiritual need of human beings. Third, getting tired of the boring life in the city and plagued by the conflicts of modern ideology, people from the city find their dreamland of nostalgia on the land of living aboriginality. Furthermore, in order for a modern nation to enhance the soft power of culture, resist the impact of foreign cultures, reduce the influence of cultural homogeneity, and promote the harmonious development of a holistic and diverse Chinese culture, the protection of minority national cultures is now incorporated into the development plan of the government at all levels.

Accordingly, different value considerations call for different approaches to protection. Those who first get involved in this field are those cultural elites. Back in 1993, composer Tian Feng established his Culture Heritage House in an abandoned farm in the suburb of Kunming. He gathered some seniors and young people gifted in singing and dancing from remote areas for the teaching of endangered minority nationality songs and dances. In 1994, musician Chen Zhe, launched a project as part of the "Plan of Chinese Music Going West" to save the traditional Pu Mi culture. After that, governments of different levels have introduced a series of policies on minority nationality culture protection. In 2007, a learning class of traditional culture was launched in Cangyuan's neighbor county Ximeng by the county government. Two cultural masters were invited to teach dozens of young people recruited from villages in the county. On the Fourth Session of the Music Council of UN, these young people presented their learning in the aboriginality art module. In the year 2008, the government of Yunnan province stipulated explicitly in "The Implementation Suggestions for Building A Province of Strong Minority Nationality Cultures" that to enhance the protection of minority nationality cultures, Yunnan province should establish minority nationality culture protection zone for the systematic protection of cultural heritage and the maintenance of integrated nature and minority nationality culture ecology. The plan aims to establish sixteen minority nationality culture zones, nine distinctive culture protection zones, fifty homes of folk arts, and cultivate 100 masters to spread non-material culture.

In more than ten years, the protection of minority nationality culture has switched from culture protection only to both culture and culture inheritor protection as well as from closed protection to living protection. Take the example of Tian Feng whose goal was to save original art forms from extinction. For the purpose of reducing the influence of the commercial community, he selected a site in the remote area for his Culture Heritage House which was run with the donation from society. Television, broadcast and popular music were forbidden for the kids there. As their influence spread, market forces stepped in. Tempted by economic interests, those kids broke in an extreme way with Tian Feng after seven years. The Culture Heritage House fell victim to the commercial community. As a contrast, Chen Zhe preferred to protect minority nationality culture in a living way. In his opinion, the protection in the past is static. But if we want minority nationality arts to last a long time, we must not only preserve the environment but also protect and guide the culture inheritor pumping fresh blood into traditional culture. What we need to do is to help all minority nationality members build their confidence in their own culture through communication with other cultures and by getting the minority nationality members to know the mainstream society. They should not be complacent nor nihilistic about the mainstream culture.

Though it is of great practical significance that Chen Zhe has attempted to address the inheritance of minority nationality culture in an open and dynamic environment, coordinated support from the government, cultural elites, minority nationalities and even the market are necessary. In reality, shocks caused by external cultures can be defused by diverse forces representing the government, society and individuals by way of enforcing confidence of minority nationality members and saving cultural heritages by investment. Although these measures are proved to be effective, the influence of the needs of minority nationality members and the role the market plays will be even more revealing as theoretical research continues and more effective protection measures are enforced. For the tragedy of Tian Feng to be avoided, great attention should be paid to both of these forces.

In August 2008, I did a questionnaire survey in Wongding village. This survey focused on the existence of Wa traditional culture and the value orientation of villagers.

Judging from the result of the survey, the inheritance of minority nationality culture has been undermined by the invasion of external cultures. A lot of their traditional behaviors and values have been changed. Different from ten years ago, out of thirty-eight interviewees, eight of them think they do very well in maintaining their traditional Wa lifestyle and four of them think that there are not many changes in their lives while twenty-six think there are great changes. In terms of living conditions, only ten people like conventional house while twenty-four like the flat-roofed brick houses of the Han people. Four elementary school students prefer to live in tall buildings seen in television. All the interviewees like modern household appliances. Twenty-three of them would rather live a modern life and half of the interviewees like Han clothes. A look at the daily recreation and entertainment activities of the villagers shows that the young generation of Wa likes watching videos, playing internet games in addition to minority nationality dancing, chatting and dinking tea. Mass media like broadcast or television have a great influence on the life of the villagers. Though there are still many differences regarding the extent of pursuits between the young people in the city and young people in the village, there are more and more similarities in the content.

It is safe to say that if this trend continues, the traditional culture of Wogding will soon disappear. For example, the eventual successful implementation of the “recovery of thatch roofed houses” mentioned above has a lot to do with the wills of the villagers to enjoy modern life and shake off poverty. Wa people is an typical minority nationality group who have directly stepped into modern society from the tribal society. When the People’s Republic of China was founded, the central area of A Wa mountain was still at the last stage of primitive communes. Since the thorough transformation of the Wa society after the founding of P. R. China, traditional culture kept losing grounds essential for its existence. After the adoption of the open door policy and reforms, the powerful consumer culture has produced strong assimilation impact on the minority nationality culture. Shock caused by external cultures is only the external reason; the transformation of minority nationality culture in the modern time is the root cause for this change. And appeals to minority nationality members are the direct cause.

Though the support from all levels of governments and the guidance of cultural elites is very important in the protection of minority nationality culture, two more points should be emphasized. First, minority nationality groups are the subjects of development and protection. No matter what we do, we should never break away from those who really live the culture unless we want the culture to be shown only in the museum. That is to say culture cannot be protected just by the forces coming from the external world. Sustainable development will be out of the question in this case. Second, by the use of minority nationality culture, we mean the multiple values in the modern society and the exchange values of minority nationality culture. In the market economy, the principle of the more minority nationality you are, the more you earn applies not only to merchants seeking exchange values but to different levels of governments. Now for promoting economic development, poverty alleviation by culture has been incorporated into the planning of all levels of governments. Because of their participation in the culture market, many minority nationality people have greatly improved their material lives. The practical function mentioned above is not only the basis of living protection but also an important means to facilitate the sustainable development of minority nationality culture.

Clearly, there are problems in building the Wogding aboriginal village especially when there is conflict between use value and exchange value, or in other words between protection and development. Staying away from the market forces may seem to be a solution to

steer clear of the above mentioned conflicts. Now there are some cultures that have been sealed up only to declare the death of these cultures leaving behind only specimen for later generations to ponder. The lesson learnt from Wongding lies in the living protection participated by governments, cultural elites and above all minority nationality members. To be specific, the leading role played by all levels of governments, respect shown in the selection of minority nationality participants, the organization of cultural elites to do the collection and saving, financial support from the governments and the market platform built by the government all devoted to the living protection and the multiple use of minority nationality culture. As a unit of non-material culture, the simulation effort at Wongding values the recovery of aboriginal culture. In its plan for the future, workshops of aboriginal art and crafts, exhibition of folk tradition and folk customs, minority nationality sports facilities and minority nationality museum will greatly enrich the content of Wongding culture. It will lay a solid foundation for the development of Wa culture. To gain exchange value is the basic law of the cultural market. However, the key to success in the market is to satisfy the needs of consumers. After the improvement of education comes the differentiation in consumer needs. In addition to the visual or physical entertainment, tourists are demonstrating increasing interest in the cultural value of tourism products. For precisely the same reason, those cultural products whose sole purpose is to satisfy the cultural curiosity of tourists will be short lived. Only those products which embody the most real and beautiful emotions of human beings can survive the test of time and the market.

In everyday life at Wongding, tradition and modernity keep evolving or get intertwined. For example, most villagers prefer to dress in simple, convenient Han clothes. But on important occasions like celebrations, they are fully dressed in their traditional clothes. It is not unusual in this remote area to hear people talk fluently in mandarin Chinese, Dai and even English in addition to their mother tongue of Wa. The head master of the primitive religion in Wongding, Damoba Xiaonibule, told us, "Wongding means the place where two rivers join in the Wa language. It foretells the fact that Wongding is to grow in the process of continuous selection. "

### **Biographical notes**

**Fan Hua** is a professor in the School of Literature in Yunnan Normal University. This paper is a progress report for the project "Technical Research in the Protection and Inheritance of Wa Culture and Its Demonstration" (2013BAJO7B02) sponsored by the National Science and Technology Department.

### **Summary**

How to survive in the context of new developments is a major problem confronting minority nationality cultures in the process of modernization. This paper is a case study of Wongding, an aboriginal Wa minority nationality culture village listed among the first group of intangible culture units in China's Yunnan Province. The research emphasizes giving balanced attention to both protection and development, focusing on the living inheritance of culture in community life and the development of cultural tourism by utilizing the market platform and diverse forces to promote the development of minority nationality cultures.