

## South-flow Rivers: the Formation of Socio-Cultures in Southwestern China

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**Abstract.** Culture is constituted and affected by triple phenomenon of nature, society and history as well as the interactions among them. The formation of ethnic cultural diversity in southwest China is closely related with the direction of mountains and rivers within the area. According to history migrations of ethnic groups, the south-flow river and canyon area is crucial to the formation of ethnic distribution, as its special geographic and ecologic character: blocked but pass through. It allows different cultures interact under the effects of vertical inheritance, horizontal integration and environment adaptation, which casted the diversity of ethnic cultures in the region. Among vast mountainous area and basins, there are valleys which acted as setters of volleyball games. This paper is aimed at reveal the influence of local geography towards the formation of the socio-cultures. It provided abundant cases of culture diversification, and finally went up to the conclusion that geographic factor is a very important factor which influence local living methods, and their socio-culture patterns eventually.

**Keywords:** Pattern of culture, Ethnic migration, Chinese southwest canyon

### 1. Introduction

When unfolding the map of southwest China, we can find that in the conjunction of Sichuan, Tibet and Yunnan, there is a vast mountainous area. In the area, mountains and rivers are intertwining together. It is quite different from main parts of China, where rivers always go eastwards. Dulong River, Nu River, Lancang River(Mekong River), Jinsha River(Yangzi River), Yalong River, Dadu River, Min River, etc. Rivers and there branches formed a comb like landscape, meander southward neck by neck. These rivers, and mountains alongside, cut different latitude. Because of the weather changes greatly through latitude, together with the influence of alternated altitude by the complicated landscape, the climate, ecological environment, natural environment is extremely diversified.

Corresponding to such the environment, people over here live in quite differentiated lifestyles. Living in such divided surroundings, especially in the ancient times when traffic is less convenient, culture spreads relatively slow, particular beings interacted with particular surroundings, which moulded particular culture patterns. Any specific culture pattern is determined and established by the relevant nature, society, history and the way these elements interact. In the central plain of China, because of the relatively similar natural environment, culture of different groups of people went integrated and converged. The emergence of Han's culture is a good example of such convergence from several kinds of cultures. It is obviously another cast in south-western canyon area, however, divergence and variation conducted the evolution history of culture over there. This consideration could at least partly explain why this area, along with most of Yunnan territory, contains the most Chinese minority ethnics, and the most rich and colourful ethnic culture classes. Indeed, anyone who ever reaches the area would not survive from being attracted and shocked by the abundance of ethnic cultures.

As what we know, the formation of culture diversity in southeast China is largely due to the pattern of the rivers and mountains. The investigation in the migration history of ethnic groups within the great canyons has shown how important the distinctive geography matters.

The geographic and ecologic characters of China south-western canyon area forced these areas isolated from outside world, which shown blockage. Nevertheless it is an essential tunnel and corridor for ethnic migration and culture communication. The 3 ancient ethnic groups of southwest region settled down after a long journey of migration. For instance, ancient Di-Qiang tribe had used living in Northwest part of Gansu province and Qinghai province. About 700s B.C., Qing started to extend its territory westward at the support of its strong military. A great number of people in Di-Qiang tribe as being forced to migrate southward and enter Yunnan province eventually. According to “Historical Records • Southwestern Yi Biography”, Southwestern Yi mostly belong to Di-Qiang people.<sup>1</sup>

There were scholars posted a concept as “Ethnic corridor”, which refers to the route that many ethnic groups or tribes frequently move through. According to regional distribution, Chinese ethnic corridor mainly starts from Gansu, pass by Qinghai, west Sichuan, east Tibet, Yunnan, and lasts until northern Burma and northeast India. This is a narrow but long area, where we can find more than half of Chinese 55 ethnics. In the canyon area, rivers and mountains set the route and tunnel of “Ethnic corridor” naturally. Rivers brought a few flat slopes and basins, which usually become cradle of ethnic integration. Historically, Tibeto-Burman from north and Pu-Yue from south travel and migrate through such tunnels very frequently, their culture crash, communicate, integrate and regenerate within the right area.

People used to call the canyon area of Lancang, Nu, Jinsha, Yalong, upper Dadu, which area among Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet, the core area of “Di-Qiang ethnic corridor”. Since very long ago, this area mainly inhabited ancestors of Di-Qiang. “Qiang people went down the tunnel of Hengduan Mountains Vale southward from Neolithic period.”<sup>2</sup> These Di-Qiang tribes use the languages, which are parts of Tibeto-Burma language branch, Sino-Tibetan language. Nowadays, 13 of 25 different ethnic minorities in a single province of southwest china, like Yunnan, belong to this ethnic system: for example, Yi, Tibetan, Bai, Nu, Naxi, Hani, Lisu, Lahu, Jingpo, Achang, Pumi, Dulong, Jinuo, etc. Driven by war and starvation, they continually move from north to south. Most of them passed through Min River, Dadu River and Yalong River in west Sichuan or east Tibet, and then enter the Hengduan Mountainous area. Mountains and Rivers become natural blocks in eastwards and westward, but natural tunnels in southward and northward. The ethnic corridor is then established alongside the mountains and rivers.

Nowadays, languages of a few ethnic groups belonging to Tibeto-Burman still use some words related to river or mountains to express south or north directions, as they travelled south way in the history. For example, “north” in Yi’s can be translated as the source of rivers, “south” can be translated as the tail of rivers. Naxi’s has similar expressions. Lisu people living in Nujiang where is the upstream of Nu river has been called “Lowupa” by people who lived in Dehong where is downstream, that word means people living in the source of the river. Relevantly, people living in the downstream have been called “Shapapa”, which means people living in the tail of the river, or someone joyful. This is the evidence that river image has deeply infiltrated into the language, emotion and mind of these people.

Follow the flow direction is the historical migration image of Di-Qiang, Pu-Yue went towards the flow direction reciprocally. Pu and Yue are two groups of people living in south part of China in the ancient time. Because their abundant branches, they have been called Bai-yue and Bai-pu (Bai means hundred in Chinese). In the ancient times, Bai-yue’s living area mainly covered Zhejiang, Jiangsu to Guangdong, Guangxi, and lasted to south Yunnan. Proved by Neolithic cultural relics archaeological discovery in Yunnan, there were human race living in vale or lakeside in Yunnan up to 2000BC. Thereafter, other branches of Yue entered Yunnan from Guangxi and Guangdong intermittently. During Warring States Period and Western Han Dynasty, under the military pressure of central empire, when the central empire managed to extend its power to the south of Yangzi River, Yue people who formally living in Lingnan, has been forced to enter Yunnan continuously. A part of them arrived at midstream and downstream area of Lancang River, and then spread to Nu River along with surrounded areas, which formed Dai nowadays. The name of Lancang came from Dai language. “Lancang contains gold sand in the water. Yue makes them gold.” quoted from “Waterways”. It

seems that despite Yue does not live in the nomadic way, like Di-Qiang, but still, they cannot resist against the attraction of the abundant resource of the river. Let alone they had the knowledge of rice plantation much long ago, they cling to the rich plain. So, they seek for the fruitful farmland and precious along the river. One proof is that, there are still many Dai living in the midstream of Lancang River and Nu River till today.

Core area of Bai-pu has distributed in the western of Yue people. They live mixed with Yue, so their culture shares some common points with Yue culture. About 800BC, King Wu of Chu State expanded his territory into Pu's area, "Opened up Pu area and possess it". About 700BC, King Zhuang of Chu continuous its expansion its territory, eventually annihilated the state of Pu. Pu had to migrate from Jiangnan Region to Western Hunan. At the time of King Ping of Chu State, "Chu built ships to conquest Pu", Pu had to move again, most of them retreat to Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan, from then on, Pu's population and culture centre moved to southwestern China.

During about 800BC-600BC, a part of western Pu had already migrated by Lancang River, Yuan River (which was called Pu River in the past) and Lishe River move ahead northward, entered Jinsha Vale and downstream of Anning River. They move down along the river southward after a long time inhabitation. "Huayang • Shuzhi" recorded that: "Crossing Lu (Jinsha River) and then reaches (Tan) Lang county, which was former city of Pu. Now there are Pu residences, need not close their doors...." According to the archaeological research on "Great Tombs" along the area, archaeologists believe they were Pu's remains. "It is quite possible that they are a group of people entered west Yunnan by Lancang Vale, and was a branch of Mon-Khmer originated from south Asia. In the other words, Bud Po Man, recorded in 'Historical Records • Simaxiangru Biographic', as well as 'Pu' recorded in 'Huayang • Shuzhi'. They were ancestors of De'ang, Blang and Wa nowadays." <sup>2</sup>. Of course, the source of Pu is always under debate, many scholars would like to recognise Pu or Bu as integration of two independent part, east and west. Anyway, it doesn't deny the relation between migration and the rivers' flow direction.

In brief, direction of rivers and vales is crucial to the pattern formation of ethnic groups nowadays. Steepness of canyon area, on one hand, provided nomadic land for live and flow channel; on the other hand, "could hear the crying but almost impossible to meet", which largely blocked people from communication. "Different tones across the river, difference languages ten mile away" is then appeared. Consequently, the nature and historical situation where block and passage both exists, has laid deep stamps to ethnic culture in southwestern China, and casted a notable trinity characteristic of ethnic cultures in southwestern canyon: vertically inheritance, horizontally integration and environmental adaptation.

Vertically inheritance indicates the cultural heritage within its hosting ethnic group. When some members of a certain ethnic group left their homeland, despite the reason they left, they always take an important thing with them: traditions and culture. These traditions pass through their decedents, wherever they went and whatever their life changes. As long as the group exists, as long as they still acknowledge their ancestors, the core of the culture will be the base of recognition to compatriots, and which will also become the cohesion of the ethnic group.

Horizontally integration means the communication and fusion between ethnic groups. After various ethnic groups migrated here and there, a situation that different ethnic groups staggered and mixed eventually formed. That is, in the canyon area of Yunnan, ethnic groups distributed dispersed in the macro level while gathered in micro level. In a certain area, internal links within one ethnic group has been restrained, but inter-communication between neighbouring ethnic groups became relatively convenient. In this way, residents of the canyon area inherit their own culture within their own community. Meanwhile, communicate with neighbouring communities about producing and living methods. Different ethnic groups sometimes even learn the language and customs of the partners. It shows the status that "I am you, you are me", as well as "new contains old while old contains new". This kind of situation will finally affect their culture evolutionary process.

Environmental adaptation refers to the adjustment of their own culture according to the living environment and social spacial circumstances. In order to be adapted in the new surroundings, emigrants have to adjust and vary their traditions of lifestyle when they arrived at any new settlement. As time goes by, these emigrants became less similar to the people of the same ethnic groups who still living in the old

settlement. Gaps between their language, culture, customs is widened, and may even become completely different ethnic groups. Within a certain culture circles, if they can't frequently contact with outside world, and their living environment doesn't made any major change, their culture pattern will only make slightly change to match the environment better. Take a look at Tibetan, Yi, Naxi, Bai, Lisu or Dai who live in the bottomland near the river. When we compare them with the people of the same ethnic groups but live in the mountainous area or basin area, it will be easy to see the mythology, festival, worship and any other cultural events has more relationship to rivers. This is obviously distinct from any people live in mountainous or basin area.

Actually, view from the historical cultural origination, people who live in mountainous or basin area, once lived in valley area. They were migrated from the vale tunnel and spread out. The culture of which located in the migration tunnel might be much more native. That is, southwestern valley preserved more native culture for its relatively blocked environment during historical spreading. The native ethnic culture is much remarkable, because it preserved more unique culture identities.

Furthermore, among the vast mountain and basin, ethnic cultures worked like "setters of volleyball" in valley areas. For instance, in the land of Yunnan province, separated basins and maintain ranges constitute a separated but connected "mountain-basin network". This network had crucial influence to the formation process of ethnic cultures in southwest China. Yunnan Basin areas only covered 6% territory of the whole province, but they usually act as the centre of regional politics, economy, and culture. Larger basins are centre of larger area, while smaller basins are centre of smaller area. The most closely connected areas are the rivers and valley areas which provide water for the basin, as well as the hills around the basins where are relatively flatter. Natives call these hills "half-mountain areas". Half mountain areas occupied about 10% of provincial territory, where productivity is lower than basin areas, still, there are some flat cropland, fertile soil and good irrigation condition. These areas connected with basins. Through the convenient traffic system, the people there have political, economic or cultural communication with people of the basins very frequently. On the other hand, these valley areas acted as setters: it is because of the existence of these areas transit culture, the rest of mountainous area of Yunnan (occupied more than 84% territory and 60% population of the province) can stick on a unified geographic and cultural network. Thanks to it, mountainous areas can be connected to basin areas, and the cultures among them have chance to interact and communicate. Meanwhile, in the course of history, culture of valley areas also absorb nutrition from mountainous or basin area, enrich themselves, which led ethnic cultures of valley area more and more abundant and solid.<sup>3</sup>

Due to natural and historical reason above, ethnic cultures in southwest canyon area became the most richness and diversified all over China. Historical research along with reality can prove it. It is for sure if we measure whether it is "advanced or backward" by economic ruler, ethnic societies of southwest canyon are difficult to match with inland of China, however, if we measure it by the angle of culture, the culture abundance, diversity and uniqueness of southwest canyon will be irreplaceable by any other regions. Among culture patterns in China, southwest canyon area has an important position and special value.

## 2. References

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