Traditional Villages Conservation of Ganzi Tibetan Area: A Study in Perspective of Cultural Consciousness

Zhao Jin

Department of Anthropology and Ethnology, Xiamen University; Xiamen, Fujian 361005, China
Zhaojin95@gmail.com

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Abstract. As a new form of cultural heritages, traditional villages are the carrier of Khampa Tibetan culture. This article takes Ganzi Tibetan Area as an example, points out that protecting and taking good advantage of traditional villages is basically the process to gradually achieve “cultural consciousness” in the whole society. On the basis of cultural consciousness, it should establish the system and mechanism for the traditional villages’ inheritance of value and the sustainable development. As the three cultural subjects, the government, the society, and the villagers should play different roles in this process. The long-term mechanism for the traditional villages conservation of “government-led, society-participated, villagers-dominated” should be established and developed.

1. Introduction

Traditional villages refer to the villages that were established in earlier time with abundant traditional resources as well as some historical, cultural, scientific, artistic, social and economic value. In recent years, with the increasingly rapid disappearance of traditional villages, based on the local governments’ and individuals’ voluntary efforts, the protection of traditional villages has been promoted as the target of the country.

Since 2012, Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People’s Republic of China together with the relevant departments has listed 4153 villages with important value of protection in the Chinese Traditional Villages Catalog through four times, covering 43 nationalities throughout the country.

As the core area of Khampa Tibetan areas, Ganzi historically was a place that Khampa Tibetan and other minority nations living together, each nation created a splendid ethnic culture here. By 2016, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Region of Sichuan Province has altogether 31 villages rated as “Chinese Traditional Village”. At the same time, some other villages are listed as traditional villages by the Sichuan provincial government. These villages are mainly distributed in the eastern and southern rural areas of Ganzi in canyons and the plateau pastoral areas where people with inhabited pasturage life style.

The unique environment and mode of life of the Tibetan area form the unique style of living in a compact community and residential buildings. Carrying out the strict protection on the traditional villages with distinctive ethnic characteristics helps to preserve the original cultural ecology of the Tibetan people. Most of these ancient villages remain in the underdeveloped regions because of less exploitation. However, due to the increasing development of the modernization, affected by the development of tourism, immigration and other policies, the protection of the traditional villages in this area is also facing new challenges. It’s extremely urgent to pay attention to protection the traditional villages.

2. Traditional Village As Another Kind of Culture Heritage

Nowadays, the historical and cultural heritages can be divided into two parts internationally that are tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. As the combination of the above two
cultural heritages, the traditional villages belong to a new form of cultural heritages. Rich in cultural heritage, the traditional villages are considered the root of Chinese culture and the soul of the Chinese nation, but the alarming reality is that they are vanishing at a faster pace than ever before.

First, it contains the characteristics of both the tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. In addition, the two heritages integrate with each other and depend on each other, forming one integral whole. In the past, we once just included some traditional villages into the category of tangible cultural heritage without full consideration. As a result, we only paid attention to protecting vernacular architecture and historical landscape and ignored the spiritual and cultural connotation of villages. The protection of traditional villages’ heritage should be the overall protection.

Second, the buildings in traditional villages are different from ancient buildings. Ancient buildings were in the past but vernacular buildings belong to the current times. People dwell in and live in those buildings so they need repairing and updating. Therefore, the villages would not be the ancient buildings with the consistent style of a certain era, and reflect their dynamic and changing course of history. The history is not unaltered and flat, but dynamic and three-dimensional.

Third, the traditional villages are not “historical and cultural sites under government protection” but the base for production and life as well as the most fundamental units of the society. They are faced with the protection and development, which is directly related to the improvement of people’s life quality in the villages. The protection must be combined with development. This problem does not clearly arise in another two kinds of cultural heritages, namely tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage.

Fourth, the spiritual heritages of the traditional villages involves not only all kinds of intangible cultural heritages, but large quantities of unique historical memory, slang and dialects, village regulations, modes of production and so on. They exist with the villages as a unique spiritual and cultural connotation, and at the same time make the traditions profound and vivid. Besides, they also made the various “intangible cultural heritages” unable to be separated from the “soil of life”.

To sum up, the traditional villages are another heritage from the perspective of cultural heritage. They are not only the heritage in the living and production, but contain the traditional living and production.

3. The Dilemma of the Traditional Villages Conservation in Ganzi Tibetan Area

During the transformation from the traditional agricultural society and the pastoral society to the modern society, the modes of living and production have changed rapidly and the traditional buildings have disappeared quickly, so the changes of the villages’ patterns are normal. Nevertheless, the spiritual civilization of the villages should be known, preserved and protected, so that the cultural tradition and its inheritances can be protected from destroying and harm.

Furthermore, the disappearance of traditional villages not only brings away the colorful cultural landscape, vernacular architecture as well as the physical witnesses of the agrarian age and the nomadic age, but also makes a great deal of folk culture belonging to villages—intangible cultural heritage, vanish with it. According to the standard of United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization（UNESCO）for evaluating intangible cultural heritage, it should be “rooted in the tradition and culture of the community”. If the village is gone, the intangible cultural heritage would be like the tree without the soil on which it grows. As the gene bank of Khampa Tibetan culture, the traditional villages in the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Region have irreplaceable important value.

Therefore, it is a huge problem to protect the traditional villages. On the one hand, traditional villages are of large size and rich connotation. Besides, they are dynamic and complex. Hence, the protection of traditional villages is contradicted with the development. On the other hand, the traditional villages are under the administrative jurisdiction of the local governments. If the protection is to be carried out, it needs the cooperation of all relevant departments of the government as well as the cultural consciousness of the managers. What is more, since the traditional villages are
the space where the villagers live, their cognitive level decides the result of the protection of traditional villages.

4. Three Dimensions for the Cultural Consciousness in the Traditional Villages Conservation

4.1 The importance of the cultural consciousness

Cultural consciousness means that people who live in a certain area with culture and history should have some knowledge about its culture and have full understanding of the development history and future. In other word, it is the self-awareness, self-examination and self-creation of culture.

The protection of any traditional village is for the purpose of building a beautiful home and carrying forward a good deal of traditional culture. The key to protect traditional villages is to continue the dynamic humanist tradition, which means preventing the traditional villages from being the “empty village”. It should also make people’s actual lives, daily-use tools, production, farming, the change of seasons and solar terms, folk customs, beliefs and so on become the rich contents of the traditional villages’ culture. The protection of traditional village should be combined with the reality, and the long-term mechanism for the protection of traditional villages of “government-led, people-participated, villagers-dominated” should be established and developed.

Protecting the Tibetan traditional buildings that have gone through different historical periods as well as the traditional culture coexisting with the buildings is the key to protect the traditional villages. When exploring the ways of protecting the traditional villages’ culture, it is especially important to arouse the culture self-examination and cultural consciousness of the whole society.

4.2 At the national level

The country should have culture awareness. Traditional villages embody the Chinese national spirit and are the bond that keeps the culture identity of the descendants of the Chinese nation. China should conduct researches on the villages and make the list of traditional villages completed as well as establish the systematic Chinese Traditional Villages catalog.

At the same time, it should make clear the overall thinking and goal for the protection of traditional villages, and perfect the laws and regulations. Besides, China should also develop culture creativity, science popularization education, leisure tourism and other development patterns. If the traditional villages can be used reasonably, scientifically and moderately under the protection, the cultural value contained in the traditional village can be enjoyed forever by both the contemporary people and the future generations, and the traditional villages really become the cultural “homeland” of the whole country and nation. They also become the carrier of culture by which the citizens living in the cities can change their pace of life and obtain spiritual consolation.

4.3 The common participation and common action of the whole society

The strong support and active participation of all sectors of our society are the basis of the Traditional Villages Conservation. It is a complex system engineering, and need to mobilize all social forces to participate in. The local governments should have full culture awareness and take the initiative to protect the spiritual prop of the nation. They should give full play to guiding the society, educating people and promoting development, and also establish a good relationship between the protection and development so that the traditional villages can be protected and would not be over-developed.

As the first persons responsible for the protection of the traditional villages, the grass-roots government should practically fulfill their duties and coordinate the development, poverty relief as well as the infrastructure construction with the protection of traditional villages. They should make the villagers willing to stay in the villages through the institutional innovation and the incentive mechanism, and develop ancient-village tourism reasonably, making the popular ancient villages full of vitality. In the meanwhile, all members of society such as enterprises, social organizations, and so on are needed to play different roles in this systematic project.
4.4 Arouses the cultural consciousness of the villagers

Public participation, and engaging the community as well, should be a key link of the chain of urban/rural planning or sustainable development, especially for a “Living Heritage” such as traditional villages. It should change from “I am needed for the protection” to “I want to protect”. The protection of traditional villages is to the beneficial of improving the villagers’ cultural consciousness and the cultural consciousness can in turn promote the protection of traditional villages and decide the efficiency of practice as well as the value dimension. The protection of traditional villages should not be limited to the responsibility of the governments and the experts, but should be the volunteer actions of the villagers.

The cultural consciousness of anybody is less important than the awareness of the master of culture. Although the protection of traditional villages contradicts the villagers’ requirement of improving the living conditions, it can be totally resolved through scientific planning and moderate exploitation. The cultural popularization should be carried out on the villagers to make them realize the value of traditional villages. If the villagers do not know the value of the villages they live in and do not recognize or love the villages, they would in no way protect the traditional villages voluntarily. They may even destroy the traditional villages consciously or unconsciously in the increasing changing lives. Only when the understanding of the villagers is totally changed, can the opinion of “I am needed for the protection” be changed into the attitude of “I want to protect”, to form the internal motive force of the villages’ development and promote its perfect match with the external government intervention and the social force.

5. Summary

Protecting and taking good advantage of traditional villages is basically the process to gradually achieve “cultural consciousness” in the whole society, namely the self-examination on the changes of the vernacular culture and the traditional culture. As the three subjects for the traditional villages conservation in Ganzi Tibetan area, the government should change the single economic development into the dynamic protection and development in the rural construction, the society should find out and explore the value of villages again, the Tibetan villagers should change from “I am needed for the protection” to “I want to protect” during the participation and sharing. On the basis of cultural consciousness, it should establish the system and mechanism for the traditional villages’ inheritance of value and the sustainable development.

References