

Difficulties and Causes Facing Chinese Minority Culture Communication: A Case Study of Dong Minority

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Abstract: In a contemporary globalized and rapidly developing society, the disappearance of the ethnic minority culture is a problem worth public attention. With technological advancements and a strengthening economy, the living standards of ethnic minority people in China are being increased. People are willing to embrace modern conveniences and get rid of some traditional customs that make their daily lives inconvenient. Since many ethnic minorities in China have assimilated into mainstream Han culture, the younger generation has less interest in preserving their cultural heritage. Currently, this is a huge issue in China. Ethnic minority culture is a rich, multifaceted aspect of China's heritage; it deserves to be protected, preserved, and passed on. This paper investigates the difficulties behind the spread of ethnic minority culture as well as the specific reasons behind them. After a field investigation of Dong culture, it is found that Dong culture mainly faces a dilemma in two aspects, namely the loss of Dong traditional architectural style and the loss of Dong songs and festivals.

Keywords: Dong minority, Dong song, Dong culture, minority culture communication, communication dilemma

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced, globalized society, the preservation of ethnic minority culture is an issue that deserves public attention. Several of the traditional art and cultural expressions of China's ethnic minorities have been gradually forgotten, or have even been dissociated from popular conceptions of national art and culture [1]. While advancements in technology and a strong economy have improved the living standards of ethnic minority communities in China, this has also led to a decline in their traditional customs, which is leading to the disappearance of their unique cultural heritage. In light of this issue, this paper seeks to investigate the challenges facing the preservation and dissemination of ethnic minority culture in China. To find a way to overcome these challenges, the author uses qualitative research methods, including field observations, interviews, and archival research, to analyze the findings. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the ongoing discussions around the importance of preserving and promoting ethnic minority cultures in China. By highlighting the challenges faced by Dong culture, this study serves as a starting point for broader efforts to preserve ethnic minority cultures across the country.

2. Hypothesis

Before conducting the actual investigation and research, the author hypothesized the reasons why it is so difficult to propagate Dong minority culture. In sociology, symbolic interactionism is a social theory that emphasizes how individuals connect with one another and the part symbols play in those interactions, and social order is based on the meaning that each individual assigns to things, happenings, and their interactions with others [2]. According to this theory, individuals' behaviors are related to their perception of objects, events, and relationships with others. Nowadays, technological and economic progress have "sped up" the pace of society; people lead busy lives and embrace new conveniences. This is probably why people are paying less attention to ethnic minority culture, and why this culture is gradually disappearing. Former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping once pointed out, at a meeting convened by the central government on January 16, 1980, that economic construction should be regarded as the core task of the nation. As China focuses more on improving its economy than preserving ethnic minority culture, the disappearance of this traditional culture is now accelerating. In sum, due to technological advancements, people are now beginning to accept the fact that advanced technology leads to social progress instead of the national culture.

However, people's acceptance and recognition of new things affect their behaviors. When people start to ignore their ethnic traditional culture, it runs counter to the high-tech ideas which are mostly based on the national culture itself. In addition, the national policies on economic construction encourage people to focus on economic development, and this, in turn, has made people believe that economic construction is of more significance than the ethnic traditional culture; the latter is now neglected. To sum up, technological progress and economic growth are probably the two main reasons for the disappearance of the ethnic traditional culture based on the theory of symbolic interactionism.

3. Method

Currently, there are very few materials related to the study of the Dong minority and its culture. Therefore, the author conducted a field survey on the Dong minority culture in Yandong Village, Liping County, Guizhou Province. Through interviews with the local government, teachers, and Dong singers (a small group of people who can still sing the Dong traditional songs) in the village, and the collection of audio of singers, this paper aims to find out why the Dong culture is disappearing and how people can better preserve and share it.

4. Result and Analysis

It is concluded that the Dong culture is faced with three kinds of communication barriers: traditional houses, cultural festivals, and Dong songs. These together help explain why the Dong culture is now on the verge of extinction.

4.1. Traditional House

Traditional Dong houses are made of wood with unique architectural characteristics. However, due to the poor thermal insulation and because they are prone to fire hazards, the Dong villagers began to employ bricks and tile materials to build their own houses, the same as the Han majority. Because the Dong ethnic minority tribe traditionally used indoor fire pits for cooking, heating, and lighting, fire disasters are frequent. Chan, Lam, and Chung suggested that the Dong community is made particularly vulnerable to broad mountain fire events due to the Ganlan-style wooden dwellings that are constructed in close proximity without fire compartmentalization in the hilly regions [3]. The hidden danger of fire has forced Dong villagers to abandon wooden materials, which means

abandoning traditional architectural styles. Zhang suggested that throughout Chinese history, numerous minority groups have been either forced fully or freely assimilated into or influenced by the Han [4]. Unfortunately, this has impacted the Dong songs: in the process of the gradual disappearance of Dong traditional buildings, Dong songs, which are meant to be sung and shared in traditional houses, and Dong traditional costumes are also gradually lost under the assimilation of Han culture. Lin and Jackson mentioned that, as a result, many minorities today, particularly the younger generations, lead "typical" absorbed Chinese lives: they do not frequently sing or dance or wear clothing specific to their ethnic group [5]. This also indirectly reveals the fact that the Dong culture has already blended in with the Han majority and so it has lost its cultural root/basis for development.

4.2. Dong Songs and Dong Cultural Festivals

A decrease in the number of people who can sing and pass on Dong songs is the main reason for the loss of Dong songs and the Dong Cultural Festival. During the field investigation in 2022, the research team not only interviewed local villagers, but also counted the number and age of singers in each stockaded village of Yandong Village. The statistical table shows that the age of villagers who can sing Dong songs in stockaded villages, including "Gao Ji Ba", "Deng Wu", "Shang Zhao", "Xia Zhao", and "Sha Tao", is concentrated between 30 to 60. However, the age range of the statistical data is quite different from that of the data collected in 2008. Data from 2008 shows that the villagers who can sing Dong songs in the stockaded villages mentioned above were concentrated between 10 to 25 [6]. In other words, between 2008 and 2022, fewer and fewer new-generation villagers learned to sing Dong songs and joined the singing teams.

The decrease in the number of people learning Dong songs inevitably leads to difficulties in the dissemination of Dong songs and culture for several reasons. The attitude of young people's family members, for example, and their willingness to teach Dong songs, is the main factor determining whether the new generation will learn them or not. Parents of new generations in Dong villages are becoming increasingly unwilling to invest in teaching the Dong songs to their children, because they believe that academic excellence predominates all over the other aspects of their children's lives.

In addition, according to the field investigation in 2022, it is found that high-tech products, including mobile phones and TVs, have become the factors that affect the new generation's interest in learning Dong songs. With the promotion of electronic products such as cell phones, children in the villages are now prone to recording Dong songs sung by singers and self-studying those songs at home. Self-studying may indirectly lead to incorrect singing methods because the Dong songs need to be sung using sophisticated throat techniques. Eventually, this results in people being unable to enjoy the original flavor of the Dong songs.

Moreover, more job opportunities and higher incomes drive villagers to migrate to urban areas, which is also the reason for the decline in the number of people learning Dong songs. There are more job opportunities in the cities, thus most of the young Dong people have chosen to work outside of the Dong villages. Qin, Fukamachi, and Shibata suggested due to this tendency, cropland in rural areas has declined, and young ethnic minority children who were born in cities have lost their cultural identity [7]. As Dong villagers continue to migrate out of their villages in search of work opportunities, it is difficult for Dong people who start new families in urban cities to reconnect with Dong culture. Zhang, Wang, and Wang mentioned that migrant ethnic minority families would find it challenging to connect with their traditional values and beliefs due to the lack of ethnic communities in the urban city [8]. As a result, the number of people present and willing to inherit Dong cultural legacy has decreased significantly.

It is also difficult for Dong singers to make a living. The Dong singers charge no fees for teaching villagers the Dong songs. However, these Dong singers need economic support/income through

teaching the songs to support their families. Most of them have to give up their jobs in order to teach the songs. Nonetheless, if there is no way for them to earn money through teaching songs, they must give up teaching and look for a paid job instead.

Furthermore, Dong scripts are not widely used, making it difficult for Dong songs to be handed down. Shan suggested that there are no written scripts from before 1949 and only spoken language among the Dong minority population [9]. Although the Dong script has begun to be established as a writing system, it is currently not widely used by the Dong people. Thus, old Dong songs, which are only remembered by older generations who can not speak Mandarin or do not write Dong, cannot be recorded on paper. Therefore, the Dong songs can only be passed on by oral teaching, namely, the older generation imparting the songs to the younger generation, which greatly limits the wider dissemination of the Dong songs.

Last but not least, through interviews with the local troupe leaders and employees dedicated to the dissemination of the Dong songs, the research team found that the troupe has also struggled to publicize songs and events. The daily work of the troupe normally includes performing Dong songs and dances, promoting them, training local tour guides, and operating specialty tourist shops. Ghahramani, McArdle, and Fatorić suggested that effective strategies for historical preservation and boosting community resilience are more likely to be those that involve minority or marginalized populations for shared duties and decision-making and have full ownership of local institutions, such as tourism [10]. However, the troupe has hardly received support funds from the local government to develop tourism, and because of their low salaries and uncertain income, fewer people are willing to work in the troupe, which makes it more difficult to hold and publicize performances.

Historically, the Dong villagers held regular singing competitions. These competitions would be divided into two parts, one performed by the young men and the other by the young women, in the form of a battle. Events like these were used to promote this cultural tradition. However, as more and more young people choose to work in the cities, very few people attend these competitions.

5. Discussion

The communication-related problems Dong culture is facing can be determined by examining the gathered data. By sorting out the interview materials, the author proposed several approaches that can help address these issues. Theoretically, the factors that hinder the dissemination of the Dong culture can be reasonably resolved. First, the traditional Dong houses can only be preserved if they can meet the living needs of the Dong people. If wood materials with strong thermal insulation were developed, new technologies would not only meet the needs of modern Dong people, but also help preserve their traditional architecture. Second, the Dong songs could be composed and recorded with the introduction of professional composers and singers in the village; this would tackle the root of the issue. Thirdly, people can use the power of media to integrate Dong elements into short video platforms such as TikTok, thereby expanding their popularity. In the networked information age, traditional art philosophy dissemination channels are updated and expanded as information technology rapidly advances [1]. Finally, although the younger generation of Dong people are mostly working in urban areas, and cannot celebrate events like singing competitions, they could potentially be rallied to create social platforms that spread Dong songs in the cities they are working, thus expanding their influence. This would also indirectly enhance people's interest in and awareness of the Dong people, which serves as one of the most important factors in spreading Dong songs and culture. Although the Dong people no longer celebrate their traditional festivals, their cultural traditions will always be remembered. In addition, through interviews with Professor Deng Minwen of Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, it is learned that establishing more local businesses in Dong villages could also foster a new generation of singers. Indeed, the main reason behind the loss of Dong culture is related to the loss of the Dong population itself. Developing local

enterprises would help retain more young people in the villages; they would not have to pursue job opportunities in urban areas. If investors are willing to build local enterprises, villagers are more likely to stay and work locally, thus promoting Dong culture.

Professor Deng Minwen also pointed out that the Dong culture must adapt to social changes and technological developments so that it could appeal to a wider audience. For example, Dong songs could be adapted to piano and orchestral pieces, preferably in a multilingual setting. “Although the inheritance of the Dong songs is currently in a relatively difficult state, as the Dong songs adapt to changing social environments, the Dong culture will not become extinct, but will rather be continually renewed and developed,” Professor Deng said.

6. Conclusion

In general, the Dong culture’s communication dilemmas are closely related to technological progress, economic improvements, and an emphasis on academic work. These are also the main reasons for the loss of other ethnic minority cultures. Society’s rapid developments have introduced many conveniences to people’s daily lives, which unfortunately can also hinder the preservation of traditional culture. However, people should embrace technological development rather than shun it. As a treasured component of Chinese culture, the ethnic minority culture should be preserved and developed by using every tool at its disposal. Overall, people must pay more attention to these minority cultures, finding ways to preserve and inherit them while meeting the living and social needs of ethnic minority members. As for limitations, one limitation of this research about Dong culture is the small sample size, which may not be representative enough of the broader Dong community. Additionally, the research only focused on two specific aspects of Dong culture, traditional architectural style and Dong songs and festivals, leaving other aspects of Dong culture unexplored. Moreover, the research was limited to one ethnic minority group in China, and the findings may not be generalizable to other ethnic minority groups or other regions in China. For future research, there are several promising avenues to explore. Firstly, a more extensive field investigation of Dong culture can be conducted, which involves a larger sample size and covers a broader range of aspects of Dong culture. Secondly, the role of government policies and initiatives in preserving and promoting ethnic minority cultures in China can be investigated. Finally, challenges and solutions to preserving ethnic minority cultures in China can be compared and contrasted with other countries that face similar issues, such as India, Indonesia, and Thailand. By addressing these research prospects, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and prospects of preserving ethnic minority cultures in China and beyond.

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