

# Culture Sensitivity Assessment and Culture Protection in Religious Region: A Case from One Project Construction

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**Abstract**—Traditional cultures help to establish harmonious relationship between humans and nature, and are an important wealth of the world. Project construction may have adverse effect on cultures of locals, especially for those who are the religious minorities, resulting in the loss of net benefits of project. Based on one of China's clear-energy projects supported by the World Bank, effort were made on exploring how to identify culture sensitivity, and how to protect or revive those endangered or even extinct cultures. The results show that although there did not exist culture sensitivity by outside characters, such as language, consume, diet custom and its structure, it in fact existed in deep hearts of Tibetans because they were afraid that Gods of mountain and water they have been worshiping may be disturbed by the project, and catastrophe may befall on them. Therefore, local temple should dispatch monks to appease ceremonies before ground breaking. During building or after building, appeasing ceremonies should be held if required by local people. In addition, to rescue these in Tibetan cultures, school upgrading and bilingual education development, temple maintenance, training local/ethnic elites for Tibetan culture renovation, and information promulgating and advertising were needed.

**Keywords**—Project construction; Xishui Tibetan Township; Ethnic culture; Culture sensitivity; Culture protection

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are 56 nationalities in China. Except Han which accounts for 91.5% of the Chinese population, with the population of over 1.2 billion, the rest belong to ethnic minorities. The population of Tibetan nationality ranked sixth in the ethnic minorities, with about 54 millions. In today's scenario, the cultural diversity, which can arise out of various sources such as people from different religion, ethnic origin and languages, has a lot of advantages to global wealth, and to all sorts of difficulties caused by ethnic and religious differences or by governmental policies<sup>[1-3]</sup>. It is well known that indigenous Tibetans believe in Tibetan Buddhism and it strongly influences most aspects of life and the cultural heritages via art, literature and entertainment, as well as via education and medicine<sup>[4]</sup>. This traditional Tibetan culture contains alternative knowledge and perspectives that contribute to the conservation of both wild fauna, and flora, and their habitats and ecosystems, and promotes a harmonious

relationship between humans and nature by respecting and protecting all life beings<sup>[5-7]</sup>. The positive effects of traditional cultures in biodiversity conservation were also found in India, China, Southeast Asia, North America, South America and Africa as summarized by Shen et al. (2012)<sup>[7]</sup>. In addition, the involvement of minority groups and their culture for the purposes of tourism has long been recognized as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and many cases could be found in China<sup>[8-9]</sup>. Furthermore, if religious minorities have long co-existed in a country marked by a strong traditional beliefs in favor of the common good, charity, and solidarity, these groups have often enjoyed a level of public consideration far superior to their numerical importance<sup>[10]</sup>.

With the acceleration of the national harmony reforming and opening-up, as well as the development of the west countries, ethnic cultures have been affected by heterogeneous cultures, and their exclusive characters gradually disappear, such as language, character, clothing, and customs<sup>[11-12]</sup>. Although the importance of traditional culture has been recognized by scholars and NGOs in China, it has been rarely recognized and involved in the conservation planning and implementation in China<sup>[7,13]</sup>. To the best of our knowledge, no culture sensitivity assessment and culture protection were required almost in all projects, and thus some projects had negative effect on ethnic minorities and made part of their culture endangered or disappeared. In order to avoid this, based on one of the projects supported by the World Bank, this paper highlights how to identify the culture sensitivities and to reduce or eliminate the adverse effects on local cultures as much as possible in pre-, middle- and post-projects.

## II. THE PROJECT

Xiaogushan Hydropower is a station at Xishui Tibetan Township, Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, Zhangye City, Gansu Province, People's Republic of China. The function of the project was to sustain the development of west China. The capacity of the station was 98MW. The total investment of the project was 689 million RMB. It was the first clear energy project (substitutes for firewood and coral energy) in Gansu, and the first Prototype Carbon Fund (PCF) supported by World Bank in Asia Pacific area. From 2006 to 2016, the World Bank had paid 4.5\$ per ton, and the total purchasing cost is 135 million US dollars, equaling to 0.11 billion RMB.

This study was partly funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (41461109), the Gansu Provincial Sci & Tech. Department (1506RJZA124) and the Key Laboratory of Ecohydrology of Inland River Basin, Chinese Academy of Science (KLERB-ZS-16-01).

Zhangye is a historically multiethnic area where over 20 minority ethnic groups reside. Yugur, Tibetan, Salar, Dongxiang, Bao'an, Mongol, Tu and Manchu are the major ones. Sunan Yugur Autonomous County has over ten indigenous minority ethnic groups. Yugur and Tibetan are the co-dominant ones beside the Han. According to the 2003 statistic data, the Xishui Township has five villages, 296 households and 1,136 people under its administration. There were five ethnic groups in Xishui Tibetan Township, including Tibetan, Yugur, Hui, Mongol and the Han. Tibetans amount to over 90% of the township population. In Sunan County, Yugur culture was dominant, while in Xishui Township, Tibetan culture was dominant.

Although Tibetans from Xishui Township were more open to new things and have been accustomed to getting along well with other nationalities, officers of the World Bank found that the Xishui Tibetans have never given up on certain ideas that distinguish themselves from other ethnics. For this reason, we were requested by the World Bank to assess social impact and find ways to protect local culture.

**III. METHODOLOGY**

Surveys were administered to sample groups of local residents. From the end of February to the beginning of March of 2004, the assessment scheme and outlined the preliminary investigation have been concluded. From March 26 to April 6, focus group discussion, a very useful approach for learning more about people's perspectives and experiences and can be used to explore new areas of research or to examine subjects well-known to the participants<sup>[14-16]</sup>, was held in five different contexts: in the National Religion Bureau of the Education Bureau, in the Culture Bureau of Zhangye City, in the Tibetan temples, with primary school teachers, and in five villages in Xishui Tibetan Township.

Personal interviewing, one of the most useful ways of gaining access to interviewee mindsets, offering much depth, richness and accuracy in the data collected<sup>[17-18]</sup>, was carried out with elders, monks, deputies to the DPC (District People's Congress), members of the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), self-employed individuals, and delegates from the women's federation. By these focus group discussions and personal interviews, information about the maintenance of rights and interests, policies and regulations, risk management, effects of the project, local beliefs and specific gods, and potentially endangered aspects of the local culture was gained.

Then, questionnaires often needed to acquire data from different societies and cultures were designed<sup>[19]</sup>. From April 14 to 26, an in-home survey was conducted in Xishui Township, to ensure a high response rate, to maintain respondent motivation, and to allow the use of graphic supplements<sup>[20]</sup>. A total of 160 Tibetan interviewees were surveyed, and the investigated households were more than 50% of the total households in Xishui, covering each village. The questionnaires explored both the ability to speak Tibetan and attitudes towards education and choice of partner.

Data was analyzed with SPSS 16.0 statistical software. Pearson's Chi Squared analysis showed the relationships that were significant at a level of  $p < 0.05$ .

**IV. RESULTS**

Subgroup characteristics (sample size was 655, which includes the interviewers who were personally interviewed, and the in-home surveys) are described in Table 1. 580 interviewees were male aged from 32 to 75 . Mean age was 43 . Opinions on the necessity of the Xiaogushan project are in Table 2 and reflect the opinions of individuals from two separate generations concerning the project's construction (with questions such as 'is the project thought to be necessary? ') and concerning the investigated aspects of local Tibetan culture. Ninety percent of the interviewees reported to have been educated only through the elementary or junior high school and considered project construction to be either certainly necessary or very necessary.

**TABLE I. SAMPLE CHARACTERS (N=655)**

Item		Number	Proportion (%)
Ethnic	Tibetan	570	87
	Han	54	8
	Hui	7	1
	Others	24	4
Education	No literacy	72	10.9
	Elementary	414	63.2
	Middle school	166	25.3
	High school	42	0.6
	College	33	0.5
Vocation	Herder	532	81
	Other	123	19

**TABLE II. OPINIONS HELD (N=655)**

Item	Selection	Number	Proportion (%)
Project construction	Very necessary	431	66
	Necessary	149	22.6
	No opinion	52	8
	Maybe necessary	10	1.5
	No necessary	13	2.2

Responses concerning the ability to use Tibetan, for respondents of the in-home survey (160 of the questionnaires), are recorded in Table 3, and educational levels and the articulated factors regarding choice of partner are shown in Table 4. Of the 160 interviewees, 150 were male, a reflection of local history where traditionally the social status of women has been low and the concept of male superiority has been prevalent. This statistic is common in all Tibetan areas<sup>[21]</sup>. The average income per household was 30,000 RMB and ranged from 12,000 to 100,000 RMB.

**TABLE III. LANGUAGE ABILITY (N=160)**

Item	Selection	Tibetan language (%)	Chinese language (%)
Level	Fluency	11	92.6
	Some fluency	29	5.9
	Little ability	24.5	1.5
	Inability	35.5	0

**TABLE IV. EDUCATION AND CHOICE OF PARTNER (N=160)**

Item	Selection	Proportion (%)
Quality of education	Very satisfied	12.7
	Satisfied	45.6
	No opinion	22.8
	Dissatisfied	13.4
	Very dissatisfied	5.5
Teaching language	Mainly Tibetan assisted by Chinese	4
	Main Chinese assisted by Tibetan	24.5
	Bilingual Teaching	49
	Only Tibetan	10
	Only Chinese	12.5
Partner choice	Income	1.8
	Nationality	22.3
	Education	10.7
	Vocation	2.5
	Moral quality	57.8
	Others	8.7

Only 11% of interviewees were fluent speakers of the Tibetan language and 55% could speak it only a little. Fifty eight percent were satisfied with the quality of education received; 20% were either not satisfied or very dissatisfied. Fifty percent supported bilingual teaching, and only 4% supported primarily Tibetan accompanied by secondarily Chinese teaching, while the number of those who supported solely Tibetan teaching and those who supported solely Chinese teaching were 10% and 12.5%, respectively. The remaining 23.5% supported primarily Chinese and secondarily Tibetan teaching. 23% of interviewees believed that nationality should be the main factor in mating choice, and 58% believed that morality was the main factor, while 11%, 2% and 3% selected income, education and vocation as the main factor, respectively.

Statistical analysis indicated that age was significantly related to the ability to speak Tibetan ( $p < 0.01$ ), and to the choice of education language ( $p < 0.01$ ), and significant differences were found between those who were over 50 years old and those who were under 50, but gender and income had no effect on these differences. Age, gender, and income did not influence the attitudes of interviewees regarding the quality of education and regarding mate choice.

#### V. CULTURE SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

Every project in the developing world has unique sensitivities and socially related business risks<sup>[22]</sup>. Xishui Township is overlooking the Silk Road, and it has been the interface for the Tibetan and the Han to communicate historically. At present, every local Tibetan could say that both the Chinese and Tibetan languages were spoken only by the elders. For a long time, there was no school teaching in Tibet language, and children have to go to Zhangye and other place for studying. In 1986, bilingual teaching was carried out at the local primary school, but stopped late because there were not enough post for those who have been taught in bilingual (on one hand, they were in inferior position compared to those who were taught only in Chinese. On the other hand, the demands for bilingual students were very limited). Therefore, the Tibetan language lost gradually in recent decades. In the elders' memories, their ancestors all spoke in Tibetan language, and only a few can speak Chinese but nobody can write it. Citing

an interview's word: 'I am so afraid of Chinesization of the Tibetan that around here. I have no idea of how to stop it and hope that the government can take some measures to let their children speak Tibetan language'.

In addition, affected by the Han, the customs and traditions of local people have changed vastly. For example, Nationality garments were no longer their necessities except monks, and religious activities were only held every a year, and diet habits and structure were similar to that of the Hans. Furthermore, based on the marriage registration date of the Xishui government, from 1994 to 2003, about 32 pairs of Tibetan had intermarriage with the Han, 6 pairs with Yugu, and 6 pairs with the Hui. Compared with the marriage of the Tibetan (92 pairs), about 50% were intermarriages, suggesting that international marriage was very universal, and that mixed ethnic partnering overcomes ethnic barriers, which indicates that ethnic differences in the society are becoming less important<sup>[23]</sup> and driving social and economic harmonization<sup>[24]</sup>. About 23% of interviewees who selected nationalities as the main factor of mating choice were also confirmed this trend (Table 4). Due to these reasons, the Tibetans of here are different to those who hail from other Tibetan regions, such as Maqu, which is located on eastern Qinghai Tibetan Plateau, Gansu province, China. For example, based on our previous study in 2008, of 525 interviewees who came from Maqu, about 58% of them were illiteracies, and 36% of them were at the elementary level<sup>[21]</sup>. In addition, almost all of them cannot speak Chinese, we therefore had to employ translators during investigation and no matter what they do or where they are, and they dressed their own national costume. Until now, there are no changes in these aspects even if we did field survey in 2015.

In sum, Tibetans from Xishui Township were more open to new things, and has been accustomed to get along with other nationalities. In this case, it seemed that there were no culture sensitivity risks during project building. This could also be confirmed by that 89% of interviewees regarded project as necessary (Table 2). However, these outside characters alone could not confirm that there was no culture sensitivity. In fact, based on our survey, deep in their hearts, they have never given up distinguishing them from other ethnics. For example, most of them believed in Tibetan Buddhism and worshipped Buddhist Images, and used the hot air power of energy-saving stove to push Jinlun (a device that substitutes for religious people to pater) rotation. Furthermore, most local Tibetan believed that the nature is a living organism and everything has its own right to exist, survive, and should be protected by humans. With these beliefs, many mountains and water resources were treasured in this area, and there were some very primitive measures to protect life. For example, an abandoned bottle with open mouth will be covered by soil in order to keep insects entering it. Natives were afraid that mountain god and water god would be disturbed by the use of explosives and road construction during project, and thus spell catastrophe. This made them very uncomfortable and may raise outraged behaviors such as trying to stop the project. In this view, culture sensitivity was serious. The project could accelerate the process of Channelization and indigenous culture lost by social mixing, which reduce the level of social cohesion within this area, and add to the negative consequences for the social

networks for those who are forced to leave due to project construction<sup>[25]</sup>. Only when this adverse effect was eliminated can we say that project brings benefits to the local really. Otherwise, comparing the gains of the economic and environmental benefits with the losses of the spirit wealth, no net benefits they could get at all.

## VI. MEASURES TO PROTECT LOCAL CULTURE

Minority culture is the soul of minorities and has intrinsic value<sup>[26]</sup>. To some degree, protection of ethnic culture maintains their living style and the ethnic minorities themselves<sup>[27]</sup>, and revives the cultural traditions, thus it should be considered as a primary conservation goal<sup>[7]</sup>. Flanagan and Laituri (2004)<sup>[28]</sup> have depicted the importance of incorporating culturally specific information into resource management decisions, and regarded that the indigenous people around the world should play the equal roles in resource management decisions to ensure fairness in contentious resource arenas to provide for better management practices and to guarantee legal standing. The importance of indigenous culture in better resource management would also be confirmed by our previous studies on Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. Before the year of 1995, herders in this region have been engaged in nomadic collective pastoral activities and are referred to as the “the nationality on horseback”. The long-term, collective nomadic style has created a strong sense of team consciousness and good neighborhood relations that can effectively help resolve a variety of problems. With the traditional pattern of “livestock mobility” and “grass immobility,” healthy growth of livestock and rehabilitation of grassland can be achieved together. After 1995, a grassland contract system was implemented by governments, but many herders were unwilling to separate from others because of their feelings of collective nomadism and their dependence on the collective lifestyle, and thus formed two grassland management patterns, that is, multi-household and single-household grassland management pattern. In the former, grassland is jointly managed by two or more households without fences between individual household pastures, while in the later, grassland is separately managed with fences. Based on a lot of survey, it is found that herders with multi-household grassland management maintained their traditional culture relatively better than those who adopted single-household grassland management pattern, and due to this the former generally had more social, economic and ecological benefits than the later. For example, herders with multi-household grassland management had more chances to practice folk activities, such as singing, dancing, painting, and horse racing, which are important for local herders to strengthen their interpersonal contacts; they could balance the relationship between livestock numbers and grassland capacity by the strict regulations, and thus their grassland quality was better; they maintained good relationships among neighbors by reducing numbers of fences, and could promote the wise use of resources and strengthen the capacity to reduce risk. Overall, with better traditional culture herders can use local resources more equally and sustainably<sup>[21,29]</sup>. In addition, the knowledge of culture and experiences are meaningfully incorporated into the assessment process. When these same populations have a chance to frame the characterization discourse, environmental

justice may be possible<sup>[30]</sup>. Therefore, environmental protection and cultural protection must be carried out simultaneously. To protect ethnic culture is to protect environment.

Xishui Township is located at the transition zone between The Tibetan and the Han. Like other junction areas of Tibet, their dwellers’ religious idea was weak, and utilitarian of religious was increasing, and the investment to religious activities was reducing<sup>[31-32]</sup>. As religious idea weaken and religious activities reduced, local development may be affected negatively, because religion is a component of culture, informal institutions and social capital, and is a spirit of sacrifice, spirit of helping each other and other noble traditions, and thus it enhances shared norms that promote the incentive compatibility of non-contractual or legally enforceable exchange, and that enable individuals to function better in a trading network and earn higher incomes than they would otherwise do; religious activities reducing limits information exchange, because in the Tibetan context, temples provide meeting places for herders to promote the spread of information about markets and pastures via this complementary channels<sup>[4,33]</sup>. With these reduced activities, which can mark out most important moments of religion, culturally accepted by non-believers may also be declined<sup>[10]</sup>. The only temple (named Zhuanlunsi) in Xishui Township has remained to be repaired for a long time, so in order to play its role effectively, temple maintenance must be achieved because temple is not only a place where believers to participate in religious activities, but also a place that they can exchange information. Meanwhile, demonstrating confidence in the capabilities of local minority leaders may help channel the frustration of non-dominant minority groups into electing less risky alternatives and stimulate perceived self-efficacy of minority groups<sup>[34-35]</sup>, and encouraging local children to learn and get lessons from ancestors who keep cultural traditions is highly helpful in the lives of children<sup>[36-37]</sup>.

Local language is also a very important aspect of culture, because it gives local people a sense of belonging and a sense of identity, as found in Nigeria<sup>[38]</sup>. When the language is in danger of disappearing and a community collectively decides to continue using the language or languages it has traditionally used, measures should be taken deliberately to revitalize and consequently maintain it as did in New Zealand and Malaysia<sup>[39]</sup>, because each mother language has its own values and culture which contribute to the civilization of humanity<sup>[40]</sup>. The main aim of bilingual education is to enable learners to acquire basic language skills for communicative purposes, to acquire knowledge, and to cultivate pride in the culture. The objectives of bilingual education are to enhance comprehension of everyday conversation; to enhance fluency, to generate ideas and use appropriate language in various contexts; to read, understand and appreciate different kinds of suitable texts, and to communicate well orally and in written form in various situations, as did the Semai language program of Peninsular Malaysia, because this program was able to help the indigenous community develop their rights and resuscitate their language and culture<sup>[39]</sup>. Enhancing indigenous language may intensify the psychological perception of the individual’s position in society, and this may be more important in influencing health than actual employment, income and

education<sup>[41]</sup>. Furthermore, as to the development of minority languages, resisting the influence of majority languages on minority languages, the preservation of identities, and finding any possible ways to keep native languages alive are the actual trends all over the world<sup>[42]</sup>.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Tibetan culture is kind not only to human, but also to other creatures and nature. Its disappearance is a loss of the world civilization at any scale. Therefore, the developer should be liable for the payment of costs regarding the rescue of the local unique culture, and for the reducing of the adverse social impact caused by project.

Outside characteristics as language, consumption and diet alone could not express explicitly the impact of the project and the spiritual values of locals should be focused on more, such as religions and customs. In addition, when assessing the impact of the project on local culture and society, qualitative methods may not be very accurate, and we should have set up a series of Quantitative Indexes, as did Fisher and Waldrup (2003), which includes parameters describing language, clothing, religious concern, numbers of holy mountains and holy waters, frequency of religious activities, costs of religious activities, and the number of monks and temples, to measure the degree of impact regarding a project. In practice, this Quantitative Index should be framed on the elder's opinions because they are more sensitive to culture changes than others, as found in this study. Furthermore, recommended measures regarding cultural protection and adverse impact alleviation should be more concrete, and a monitoring system should be established to examine the effectiveness of measures taken.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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