

## **School Education and the Cultural Inheritance of Ethnic Minority Groups; Taking Blang Ethnic Group in Yunnan Province as an Example**

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### **Abstract**

With the increasing development of globalization, the Blang ethnic group like most of other ethnic minority groups in the world is also facing the impact coming from non-native cultures. How to effectively transmit their traditional culture is increasingly important. This author believes that education is an important way of human cultural heritage. With the development of society, the traditional mode of education and its function has changed in the Blang community; The modern school education is in duty-bound to become an important place for today's national cultural heritage in minority areas, although it is facing some dilemma.

**Keywords:** Education, ethnic groups with less population, cultural inheritance, Blang ethnic group.

### **1. Introduction**

With the rapid change of social culture, there is an increasingly distinct phenomenon in China that traditional Chinese culture is getting more and more weakened and lost. The traditional culture of ethnic minority groups is especially facing a serious crisis of dying off and being lost in modern society. Therefore, how to keep the precious wealth of the ethnic minority culture alive and make it effectively inherited is becoming essentially urgent to us Chinese as well as to the whole world. Generally, education is the most important factor in the inheritance of cultural change. However, on the other hand, the compulsory education choice, with the possible result of cultural discontinuities and disabilities, is also one of the important issues we should not overlook in education. While at the same time, rapid social culture changes will make impact on education, bringing about some problems about the changes of educational modes and functions. This research mainly focuses on firstly, the survival situation of the Blang nationality traditional culture in the context of globalization; secondly, the inheritance field of the local knowledge for Blang nationality community;

and thirdly the dilemma and reflections on the inheritance of Blang nationality traditional culture.

### **2. The traditional culture changes of Blang nationality in the context of globalization**

#### **2.1 The changes of livelihood and basic necessities**

##### **2.1.1 The change of livelihood**

Rich in the natural resources of wild animals and plants, the forest areas are generally the places where most of the Blang people live. The Blang people traditionally take hunting and collecting wild lives as their basic necessities. Every lunar February, March, June and July is the golden time for hunting, when the Blang people will usually go together to look for in the forests wild pigs or wild chickens. What they get by hunting and collecting will be divided evenly among the participants, leaving meat and fur for their private uses and parts of the harvests for sale or exchange. In reality, collecting is performed by women while hunting by men. Living near the north of Tropic of Cancer the Blang people can enjoy the chances of collecting various kinds of wild fruits and vegetables in season, such as bamboo shoots, fiddlehead, mushrooms and loquat. However, with

the deterioration of the ecological environment and the Chinese government strengthened efforts of wildlife conservation, the original way of making a living has changed a lot. Hunting has been fading out because of the protection of the wild animals, while fruit and vegetable collecting has become a way of life of luxury, making the wild fruits and vegetables more and more rare and expensive.

### **2.1.2 The changes of basic necessities**

The life style of Blang nationality distinctly takes on some characteristics in food, clothes, accommodation and transportation. Traditionally, the Blang people prefer to live in groups. They make advantage of sources from the forest they live around to build stilt houses with bamboo or wood material. In spite of the feature of living socially, the style of the Blang people's clothes appears differently according to age, place and sex. The Blang people in Banna and Shuangjiang areas have simple style for men and complicated style for women. While the Blang people in the county of Shidian generally wear colorful and complicatedly decorated clothes, which distinctly highlight the differences of social role function. For example, many elements such as colors, the decoration, how the apron is tied as well as whether the braids are wrapped inside or outside generally take on the function of role identity in society. Besides, because of the hot and humid climate in the areas of the north of Tropic of Cancer, their food mainly pickled or cooked coldly specializes in natural material and the taste of sour and spicy, which to great extent keeps the food as original as possible. Transportation for the Blang nationality in mountainous regions largely depends on carrying by horse and hands. However, with the rapid development of society, influenced by National mainstream culture and globalization around the

world, the basic life necessities of Blang nationality have also made some differences and changes. Firstly, the decoration of clothes has the trend of simplification and integration with the main nationality. The costume with Blang ethnic features has been keeping out of people's eyes day by day. Some of local people even have gown and suit for their wedding ceremony. Secondly, the construction of food has changed into a mixed style increasingly depending on the market instead of on the natural resources. Thirdly, more and more Han-style houses built with reinforced concrete have taken the place of the traditionally wooden stilt houses. Lastly, because of the improvement of the transportation, motors, tractors and agricultural vehicles have gone into local people's life, leaving the original methods by horse and hands away.

### **2.2 The change of language and customs.**

As a nationality without written language, Blang nationality depends too much on the means of oral language to transmit their traditional culture. Therefore, oral language has significantly contributed to the transmission of the local traditional culture. However, because of the influence by foreign communication, radio and television education there is an increasing crisis that fewer and fewer Blang young people (33% of the Blang young people can speak nothing in Blang language according to our survey.) prefer to use their own ethnic language, which undoubtedly has become a serious problem for the continuity of the Blang ethnic culture.

The traditional belief of Blang nationality includes primitive religion and Buddhism. The primitive religion believes in animism, mainly focusing on natural worship, totem worship, ghosts worship and ancestor worship. In addition, different places have different religion beliefs. For example, the Blang

people in Shuangjiang and Banna areas view Theravada 's Sthavira as their Buddhist belief. Recently, with the changes of time the religion beliefs have changed a lot. Firstly, the sense of sanctity people show to the religion has been weakened. Secondly, there are some changes in faith groups because of the decreasing number of young people believing in the religion. What's more, the frequency of religious activities has greatly been reduced, leading to the fact that some of activities have been gradually vanishing due to the loss of realistic significance of existence.

The traditional festivals for Blang nationality are comparatively different according to where they exactly live. The grandest festival for the Blang people in Bannan area is called "Sangkan Festival", in Shidian county "The Spring Festival", while in Shuangjiang county the local ethnic people regard "Flower Arrangement Festival", "Open-Farm Day" and "Close-Farm Day as the most important festivals in tradition. The rituals and activities of the festival in the history used to be the best fields for cultural display and inheritance. Unfortunately, these festivals and rituals have witnessed some changes in recent years. On the one hand, the rituals and activities have been largely simplified or cancelled since a lot of young participants turn to flock into big cities. On the other hand, improper government involvement in the ethnic culture has made the traditional festivals themselves appear strong sense of commercial display because of active national cultural industrialization.

### **3. The inheritance field of local ethnic culture for Blang nationality community under the background of globalization**

#### **3.1 The inheritance field for traditional Blang nationality culture**

The inheritance of traditional Blang nationality culture is a dynamically historical process, which actually depends on some social organizations and social fields as the carriers for the transmission of ethnic culture. In other words, the process of cultural transmission is in fact the process of educational implementation and the field of education for ethnic people is usually regarded as the environment to transmit local traditional culture.

##### **3.1.1 Family**

Family environment, as the important field for cultural inheritance, has played a significant role especially in the transmission of ethnic culture. Family education is the starting point for children to inherit traditional culture, which will inevitably affect the degree of the inheritance of traditional culture. In the family of Blang nationality, through production activities, daily social interaction and the education around the open fire pit for cooking, elders usually pass on their ethnic heritage to the younger generation, including the historic origin of their nationality, the lifestyle, survival skill, value faith, code of ethics as well as traditional customs. By participating in the family affairs the younger generation naturally learns etiquette knowledge, moral rules, the ritual of wedding and funeral and basic life necessities. For example, many cultural techniques such as the textile weaving and tea-making are traditionally transmitted by the family member's self inheritance.

### **3.1.2 The public spaces for the community**

The public spaces for the community mainly refer to the ones different from private life space, including central plaza, temple and market. Since ethnic festival and religious ritual are important medium to inherit culture, public spaces for festival activities and ceremony are consequently great fields for ethnic culture transmission. Temple education is the most complete and advanced way of cultural inheritance before school education is taken. In the temple, which is a relatively fixed place, the culture transmitter such as witches, priests and monks can conduct preaching and education based on classic transmission system and the doctrine of unity. Therefore, the place of temple has extremely brought great impact on ethnic culture especially on the common psychological quality. With the market changing along with the society, the cultural transmission field made by the advancement of modernization has become the grand stage for cultural inheritance, cultural transmission, cultural shock and cultural integration. In cultural inheritance, both of family and community present the characteristics of enlightenment and permanence when carrying on ethnic culture from generation to generation. Benedict once pointed that the individual life history is first to get used to the mode and the standard passed down by his community from generation to generation. From the time of his birth, the customs he was born in shape his experience and behavior. When he begins to talk he becomes a little creation of his own culture. After growing up and having the ability to participate in this kind of cultural activities, the habit of culture is his habit, the faith of culture is his beliefs, and the impossibility of culture is also the one of his own.<sup>[1]</sup>

### **3.1.3 School**

The main function of education is to inherit culture, accordingly school becomes one of important fields for inheritance. Bruner pointed that education is not an island, but a part of the culture. School is not an isolated institution, but the special social institution to impart cultural knowledge to the younger generation. Since every society has its own special school education goals, the school teaching goal comes from their social cultural viewpoint. The central task of the school is to impart the cultural norms of the society to the younger generation so that they can develop their potential ability effectively to undertake the social role in the future.[2] School education is essentially important to inherit ethnic culture. In other words, the inheritance and development of minority culture have to depend on school education. In the field of school education for ethnic minority area, students are regarded as not only the carrier of ethnic minority culture but also the hard core to develop minority ethnic culture.

### **3.2 The change of traditional culture inheritance field under the background of globalization**

With the impact of modernization, the cultural inheritance function of traditional education mode is increasingly weakened day by day. There are several aspects concerned as follows:

#### **3.2.1 Family education function is weakened.**

There are three elements accounting for it. The change of residential layout and the way of amateur pastime to a certain extent have weakened the function of the traditional family education. Besides, with the intensification of foreign exchange, more and more empty-nest families and rising number of left-behind children year by year make the children's early family education amputated because of the absence of the parents. At the same time, because of

lowering-age trend of migrant teenager worker more and more teenagers have broadened their horizon. As a result, traditional parents' authority has been challenged, which means what parents say and do has no longer the absolute authority in the heart of children, rendering the traditional family education function weak and deteriorated. What's more, with the strong implementation of the compulsory education the time for children staying at home has largely been reduced since children in the boarding rural schools have to spend at least five and half days at school within a week. Due to the reduced time together with parents it is difficult for family education to play its proper function.

### **3.2.2 Community education has been increasingly weakened.**

With the intervention of modernization, the way of people's leisure life has been changed because of the spread of mainstream culture through a variety of media. Instead of the recreation in the community public spaces, people right now more often entertain themselves by watching television and DVD disks. In addition, due to a large number of young migrant workers it is getting more and more difficult to undertake traditional festivals and ceremonies, which to some extent increasingly weakens community education.

### **3.2.3 Temple education is gradually collapsing.**

Originally temple education was effective mechanism for social stratification and mobility of Blang nationality. According to the canon, every male parishioner who reach the age of seven or eight years old must go into the Buddhist temple as a monk, reading texts, accepting doctrine and law education, otherwise it is rather hard for him in the future to establish a foothold in the society. However, with the impact of modernization the function of temple

education has begun collapsing. To begin with, its original function of social stratification and mobility has basically no longer existed. The social stratification and mobility can only be realized by mainstream school education. Secondly, with the strong implementation of the compulsory education school-age children must enter school otherwise the parents are to violate *The Compulsory Education Law*. Under such circumstances it is hard for school-age children to balance school education and temple education. As a result, both the number of boy monks and time in temple is greatly decreasing. Consequently, traditional function of monastic education is getting weaker and weaker, accordingly making its due impact shrinking.

### **3.3 School education is the most important field to inherit and transmit the traditional culture of Blang nationality**

Along with increasingly weakened traditional education function of cultural inheritance, the mission that modern school education should shoulder will be more decisively important. Nowadays in Blang nationality community, school plays an extremely important role in education. They should not only bear their own mission but also at the same time be responsible for the mission originally shouldered by family and community. School tends to be the place to spread mainstream culture in a village. Through school education villagers can have a chance to look at the society outside (especially in the absence of mass media such as TV), understand the mainstream value orientation and learn mainstream social knowledge, which greatly helps them a lot to follow and catch up with the modern society. Consequently, the role that school education plays in a national community development is undoubtedly much greater than expected. It would be

specially mentioned that because of the strong implementation of boarding schools in all ethnic areas schools obviously play more significant role in the transmission of traditional minority culture. The time for children staying at home has largely been reduced since children in the boarding rural schools have to spend at least five and half days at school within a week, which directly reduce the contact between children and families, inevitably weakening the function of family and community in transmitting traditional culture. Schools, as the main habitat for students within a week, have to partly bear the responsibility of the mission originally shouldered by family and community in addition to their own mission of spreading culture and knowledge. It is true that nowadays the school in ethnic areas is the main and important field of transmitting local traditional culture. School education obviously has a long way to go to focus on teaching modern mainstream cultural knowledge as well as excellent traditional culture. Education anthropologist Spindler once said that if the school is to establish a community rather than destroy a community, it must put the community culture into the teaching content, and this must be whole.<sup>[3]</sup> A multi-ethnic country education, when bearing the function of passing down common human culture achievements, should not only focus on inheriting its outstanding main ethnic traditional culture but also on its excellent minor ethnic traditional culture.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### **4. The dilemmas of school education in inheritance of national culture**

Through the empirical research this study thinks that although the school education of Blang nationality community has taken traditional culture into the campus and undertaken some relative measures in

recent years, generally speaking these initiatives appear to be too weak and lack strong enforcement. The followings are the dilemmas in inheriting the national culture for the school education of Blang nationality community

##### **4.1 The lack of adequate attention paid by the government**

The government lacks adequate attention to the inheritance of non-material cultural heritage by school education. Recently the government has done a lot of work in promoting Blang nationality traditional culture. However in our research survey we find that the government puts more emphasis on the protection and remedy of the Blang nationality cultural heritage, neglecting the way of transmitting and developing by school education. In the case of the strong promotion of current school education, the school-age students of the Blang nationality community spend most of the time in school. School education in a large part has more important influence on the new generation of Blang nationality compared with family education and community education. The active inheritance of national culture should be conducted initially from kids. The school is the most important and one of the best places to inherit the national intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the government should attach more importance and support to school for the inheritance of the national intangible cultural heritage.

##### **4.2 The lack of indigenous teachers**

There are two aspects revealing the lack of indigenous teachers in teacher structure. On the one hand, the native teachers of Blang nationality cover relatively fewer with the only proportion of 5.9% in the teacher group of local school. On the other hand, the schools teachers graduated from and the majors they are in are comparatively unrelated with the

traditional culture of Blang nationality. Our investigation shows that most teachers graduated from comprehensive universities and normal universities such as Yunnan University or Yunnan Normal University, majoring in nothing connected with ethnic minority culture and knowing little about the history and culture of Blang nationality. Additionally, classroom language in the universities is completely covered by Chinese language and the courses taught also have no connection with indigenous minority culture.

#### **4.3 The detached teaching contents from reality**

The school curriculums in the schools of Blang nationality community are generally same as the ones in other none-ethnic areas, basically representing no ethnic characteristics. The courses at schools in Blang nationality community include Chinese, mathematics, painting, music, physical education, health, moral education, society, the animal kingdom, Chinese tutoring and math tutoring. Opening extracurricular activities include young pioneer activities and field work, which obviously lacks the characteristics of local culture. The book knowledge in fact detaches itself from the reality that local students mostly come from the ethnic minority frontier areas. Therefore, the students' interest in learning has been largely on the decrease. School education content has always been keeping up with the mainstream culture without considering the adaptation to local condition and the idea of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The modern school education should have more influence on the national cultural inheritance. Nowadays with the guidance of multicultural education concept it is necessary and essential to

involve the non-mainstream culture into the mainstream culture education, which on the one hand benefits the inheritance of ethnic excellent culture, on the other hand improve the sense of national cultural confidence and identity, consequently promoting the active development of society in the region. In fact, any reform can not be carried out smoothly without government positive attention and support. In the protection of national culture, the government should attach more importance to the development of school education function and provide more support to the school, exactly including formulating relevant policies and regulations, increasing the capital investment, cultivating the teachers familiar with ethnic language and culture and keeping close ties between school and minority ethnic community. Specifically speaking, we should make the curriculum diversified, appoint the national cultural elite school counselor, offer some national history and culture courses that local residents are interested in, expand the students' knowledge on the history of Blang nationality culture, run the contest of folk song and dance and folk artistic skills and invite professional community elders to offer training for school children. Besides, the government should involve itself in the activities of national tradition. School holidays should be set in accordance with the traditional festivals of Blang nationality in order to organize the students to participate in the activities of the traditional festivals. Only by taking these measures, the school can truly fulfill its responsibility and become a really important field for the inheritance of national culture.

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