

# A Reconciliation between Yi Nationality's Religious Beliefs and Modern Political Identities: An Interpretation of Christianity in a Yi Village

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**Abstract.** In order to explore how ethnic minorities in China reshape their perception of themselves today, I conducted field research in K Village in southwest China. In this anthropological research about this village which has a majority of Yi minorities, I did in-depth interviews, discourse analysis, and participatory observance to examine the conflicts between three different identities, the tensions behind the contemporary society, the history of Christianity in this village, and the meaning of different identities to individuals. Based on the analysis of this cultural phenomena in K Village, I interpret the cultural meaning of Christianity there—Yi minorities in this village are using Christianity as a tool to reconcile their modern political identities and cultural or religious identities. This research not only contributes to the understanding of ethnic minorities' bodily practices of negotiating various cultures, but also assists governments in developing better ethnic policies.

**Keywords:** Yi Nationality's Religious Beliefs; Reconciliation; Christianity in a Yi Village; Modern Political Identities.

## 1. Introduction

For many ethnic minorities in China, how to maintain their own rich and colorful customs while adapting to contemporary society has always been a problem. Yi minority is a nationality with long history and colorful customs. They have long been influenced by state policies since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. It was, however, not until then that the Yi nationality became a categorical ethnic identity as played out in the social fabric of the PRC as a “unified, multinational state” (Liu, 2012). Thanks to my parents' interpersonal connections, I was able to conduct field research in a southwest province in China, a place with abundant ethnic minorities. There, I could explore how ethnic minorities attempt to reshape their identities and negotiate different social and cultural actors. Before deciding where to do my fieldwork, I noticed that Torch Festival, the most important traditional festival for the Yi minority, would be held from July 22nd to 24th based on the Yi calendar, during which I could observe some religious rituals and traditional customs. They may show some aspects of Yi culture in an everyday context. As a result, I did my fieldwork in K Village, S Township of L County. My fieldwork lasted for a week, and during the Torch Festival, I left the village and went to the county together with the villagers.

K Village locates in the southern part of S Township. For more than five years, K has been working to get rid of poverty under the Chinese policy of “poverty alleviation.” K is an administrative village consisting of three natural villages, meaning these three villages are regulated by one K Village government. Han people, Yi minority, and Lisu minority live there, and the Yi minority are mostly in Old Village, one of the three natural villages. The most important reason I chose K Village to support my fieldwork was its unique cultural environment: it is highly political, it has maintained a lot of Yi cultural heritage, and it involves many Christians. Christianity may seem a little abrupt in this context, but my research will reveal its essential role in society there.

These Yi minorities in K Village are Nasu clan which speaks the eastern dialect, and they mostly have the family name of Zhang and Yang. My research methods are in-depth interview, participatory observation, and discourse analysis. I interviewed 11 villagers and other 5 relevant people. Most of the villagers are Yi minorities except for two Lisu minorities who provided me with important information.

In this paper, I first define some terms about identity that are discussed, and then present some cultural phenomena that intrigued me a lot during my fieldwork. The conflicting nature of these

phenomena leads to my analysis of different identities and a review of the history of Christianity in this village. I then analyze the role of Christianity today and its meaning to the K Villagers. This paper aims to answer how Yi minorities in K Village reconcile their modern political identity and their cultural or religious beliefs. I argue that they are using Christianity as a buffer to resolve various tensions they are facing and the diverse identities they have established, thus facilitating the process of reconciling.

My research is theorized by Malinowski's functionalism. I examine ritual dynamics focused on ritual as bodily experience (Bell, 1992) and alleviation of social tensions (Turner, 1970). My analysis of religions and cultural beliefs is under the framework of studies done by Yang (1967) that Chinese religion is a diffused religion, inseparable from the existing social structures. I attempt to discover one's perception and understanding of his or her identity through cultural memories inscribed on traditional practices (Connerton, 1989).

## 2. Definitions for Several Identities

A prerequisite for my analysis is to define different identities. Clarification of the boundaries of different identities is necessary since it can determine what each one entails. Based on my observation, I'd like to divide all the Yi minorities in K Village into three kinds—Yi culture “defenders”, Yi-Christians, and what I called “apostates.” They respectively mean people who stick to customs and taboos in Yi culture, people who are Yi minorities but also believe in Christianity, and people who follow neither the strict roles of Yi culture nor the doctrines of Christianity. Such three divisions stem from the overlapping of three unique identities—Yi identity, Christian identity, and modern political identity.

Yi identity is common to all three kinds. It describes the villagers' ethnic origin and compliance with traditional customs. Simply acknowledging cultural citizenship cannot indicate Yi identity, as such cultural citizenship is not related to the degree of engagement in Yi culture. To determine whether and to what extent one possesses Yi identity, I look into one's daily practice of Yi traditions and various customs, including traditional costumes, weddings or funerals (*hongbaixishi*), festivals, taboos, etc. These customs involve rich symbolic meanings and certain behavioral norms, which will be the embodiment of their cultural identity.

I will list two cases to illustrate my point. The first case is about a temple on a hill, which is a very important location for villagers. The contour of the mountain where the temple is built looks like a giant tortoise, and this temple locates right on the head of the tortoise. It is only a small room, with one statue and two steles inside. According to villagers, the temple is the place to worship the “common ancestor” of Yi—Apudumu. During New Year's Day in the Yi calendar, villagers will come to worship *Apudumu* together and offer tributes. Outside this temple are some broken tree branches. Villagers told me they should not move these branches. All the grass, debris of stones, and moss should also be untouched, because Yi ancestors once celebrated Yi New Year here, at this very location where the temple was built. It is taboo in this village.

The second case is about *Fengshui*, which also plays an important role in the practices that Yi identity entails. On a bridge that connects the township with the village, there are three stone lions. A villager told me that there were two lines of lions on the bridge, but a car crash damaged some. However, I only found two in the entrance, and one in its tail. The landform of S Township looks like a tiger, which annoyed nearby towns because they thought S Township had “bitten” (damaged) their fortune. They then built lions on the bridge to “oppress” S Township's fortune. S Township's response was to build a tower on a nearby mountain to protect itself. Another story is about the former head of the county who was born in K Village. I was led to the house where he grew up and saw two pine trees. Villagers believe that the two trees have good *Fengshui* reflected in their shapes, directions, and locations, which led to the birth of a brilliant man. *Fengshui* entails some cultural beliefs and taboos.

From the two cases, we can see what Yi identity in this paper means: the practice of Yi traditions, recognition of Yi cultural values, and an acknowledgment of Yi origin. The taboos and cultural beliefs are vital ingredients subsumed within this realm. One must realize that the micro-society, the village, that he or she lives in has a foundation of Yi culture in order to own a Yi identity.

The second kind of identity is Yi-Christian. Some Yi minorities are Christians at the same time. The way to identify one's Yi-Christian identity I used is to see whether one obeys the Christian canons and has faith in God. Once a villager acknowledges that he or she believes in God and follows canons, no matter whether he or she still has faith in ancestors and follows ethnic traditions, the village is said to have some degree of Yi-Christian identity. For some people, this identity has a strong repercussion on behaviors, while it is not very compulsory on others.

The third kind of identity is vaguer than the two above. It entails elements of contemporary Chinese society. K Village has no village annals, so I checked all its paper documents in its archive. All the recorded events are connected with state policy, like poverty alleviation, dilapidated house transformation, etc. This reveals that K Village is highly political, with politics permeated into it. The modern political identity I am trying to illustrate here is a combination of the consequences of different ethnic policies. Liu Jiaying (2012) has described the political changes that caused the reshaping of Yi minorities' political identity carefully in her paper about the Torch Festival:

At the same time, a state-initiated minority work towards the integration of groups. People with different ethnic origins into a socialist project, greatly influenced by Marxist ethnology of projecting historical stages of human society, has generated a "civilizing process" by projecting the ideal of Han as advanced, while portraying ethnic minorities as having a lack of "culture" or as backward. It is in this context that I came to be aware that "ethnic identity" as an emerging concern of Chinese modern history often reveals the powerful influence of state control and discursive ideology such as the "rescue the backward" policy promoted by Mao Zedong.

Therefore, Yi people attempt to pursue a more modern identity, mainly represented by working in urbanized places, joining the party to get involved in politics, marrying a Han person, or getting a better education. This political identity is highly consistent with state policies. It mainly influences the lives of a younger generation who attempt to leave the village and escape from the fate of being a farmer. To determine such identity, I look into villagers' choice of festivals and attitudes toward some policies.

### **3. Conflicts between Different Identities**

The three identities I have discussed are Yi identity, Yi-Christian identity, and modern political identity. In this section, I will present some conflicts between these three identities. The turbulent relationship between these identities that I observed during my fieldwork led me to think about the meaning of those identities to Yi minorities.

The first kind of conflict is between Yi identity and Yi-Christian identity. An important ingredient of Yi culture is "the culture of wine." However, Christianity forbids drinking alcohol. The village secretary told me that many Christians in the village drink wine furtively. I met Mr. L after he finished performing at a wedding. He was drunk. However, he told me he was also a Christian. The village secretary and Mr. L explained the violation of a Christian rule by viewing drinking wine as "Yi tradition" and "love." Moreover, Mr. Y has given up alcohol for about five years, but he has become a Christian for longer.

Another example will be costumes. Yi minorities wear Yi costumes to show their Yi identity. Although there is no Christian rule that believers should not wear Yi costumes, I still consider wearing Yi costumes a way to reinforce a self-recognition of Yi identity. Among all the villagers I have seen, only very few people wear costumes. They told me Yi costumes are not convenient when they are

farming, so they wear modern clothes like T-shirts. But whenever they are engaged in some traditional activities, like weddings and funerals, they wear Yi costumes. During the Torch festivals (not celebrated with many activities in K Village, which will be discussed later), only a few old Yi minorities wore traditional costumes. In comparison, almost all the Yi people I met in L county during the Torch festival were wearing delicate Yi costumes. It is proper to speculate that Christian identity has a certain degree of influence on the villagers through the lens of costumes, but it does not fully prevail over their Yi identity.

A third example is the hymn. Yi minority is famous for its Yi tunes, which I heard at a family feast during the Torch festival. In all kinds of traditional activities, Yi minorities sing these tunes to express their hospitable attitudes. According to Ms. Z, Christians should not sing Yi tunes; instead, they must sing hymns. This can be regarded as a kind of taboo. However, this taboo is not strictly obeyed by all. Mr. L doesn't seem to be a good Christian, for he not only drinks but also sings Yi tunes. His job is to sing tunes at weddings and funerals to lift the audience's spirit and express blessings for the subjects.

The three examples above have revealed some contradictions, or vague boundaries, between the two identities. For many villagers who claim to be Christians, practicing Yi cultural traditions seems to be acceptable, which, to some extent, violates the Christian doctrine.

The second kind of conflict exists between modern political identity and Yi identity. Here, Yi identity focuses on villagers' insistence on practicing traditions. As I have mentioned, villagers tend to wear convenient clothes when working and wear Yi costumes when participating in some cultural activities. Also, one villager told me that the government has prohibited the practice of some sacrificial rituals in recent years, and they are quite upset about it. However, villagers still appreciate the government's work in promoting poverty alleviation. At the same time, the Village secretary told me more and more young people have left the village and gone to urban areas to pursue jobs.

These facts indicate that villagers tend to pursue the modern political identity, but are unsatisfied with the government's treatment of their cultures. They love their own cultural identity but believe they belong to the "backward" group. Their contradicted attitudes toward both their traditions and modern politics lead to the emergence of this conflict.

#### 4. The Meaning of Different Identities

When conflicts happen, people must seek ways to resolve such conflicts—that is the process of negotiation and reshaping. However, before I talk about how people reconcile unique identities, I must address the meaning of these identities to the people. Their entertainment of one identity must have been based on the function of this identity. It must serve some purpose in society. Before positioning different identities in the network of the whole society, I will show their meaning to individuals.

The purpose of Yi identity seems something obvious to the villagers. My interview with *Lao Zhang* reveals its meaning best. *Lao Zhang* is a businessman living and working in the county. He talked about how the legends are passed down through generations, how they sacrifice their ancestors, and how they send the dead people to "the world of ancestors" (*Zujie*). He and his family showed strong resistance to Christianity because it violates the "long-lasting Yi tradition about worship for ancestors."

By interpreting his words, I conclude that Yi identity means historical and cultural recognition. All the villagers remember the stories of their heroes and participated in some Yi traditional activities, like the sacrificial ritual for the ancestor of their clan, *Chabu*. They realize a sense of history when taking the aura of this identity, and understand the purposes, values, and practices undergirding the consensus of their culture.

The meaning of modern political identity is also at the surface. According to statistical data (He and Li, 2017) and information provided by village government, the population of K Village has grown since 2016, but villagers told me fewer people were in the village. The loss of people living in the village is due to the departure of a younger generation. Zi told me he stayed in the village because he

needed to take care of his old parents. He believed most people would leave if they didn't take the responsibility to care for the old. Yan's children all live in the county, due to the tempting contemporary urban life and a higher income. Village Secretary also works hard to get more funds from the township government.

The political connections between the city and the state are continuously strengthened since K is gradually becoming more political. Its archives reflect my point. The political identity somehow secures a better future career path or better job opportunities and good living conditions. Parents wish their children can get a better education, so the primary school in the village is nearly empty—students went to some better schools in the township or county. This identity helps people meet the standards of contemporary society.

The last identity is the Yi-Christian identity. The first Presbyterian and the third Presbyterian of K Christian Church told me the meaning of Christianity is “teaching people to do kind things.” Through the worship of some Yi women, I realized Christianity has served to teach virtues like kindness and love in K Village. Still, all the evidence I gained cannot convince me why Christianity is accepted. It seems very strange in this context. As a result, I decided to do historical research about how Christianity is rooted here.

## 5. The History of Christianity in K Village

Yi society is a society that lacks writing. Stories, taboos, and legends come down for centuries orally. Old people share these stories with young people, and young people pass them down to the next generation. In such a society, written things must have special purposes. To explore the history of Christianity here, I gained evidence from the paper sources and, particularly, an oral history narrated by those experienced.

The early stage of Christianity in K can be traced back to the late 19th century and the early 20th century. In 1916, British Australian missionary *Zhang Erchang* came to S Village, a village about 11 kilometers east of K village, and built a Church in 1918. They created the Black Yi script, a script only used in this area for translating the Bible and hymns. It can only be understood by Yi-Christians. In 1947, Southwest Theological Seminary was established. In 1976 (or 1978), the first group of K villagers went to study in S Village and brought Christianity back. There was no church until 1984. K Villagers applied for building a church to the government, who believed that a Christian Church's doctrines about “doing good” and “serving the society” could help them regulate this area and then approved the lands for building. Villagers donated money or building materials and together built the church, with a total cost of around 3000 yuan. Later, in 2004, villagers applied for funds to renovate the church, which was approved and funded by the government.

The question important for me here is why was Christianity accepted by K villagers in the first place. According to *Lao Zhang*, the reason for acceptance is the lack of *Wenhua* (knowledge or culture). *Xiao Zhang* told me this county has poor education, and the salary of teachers was once very low. People don't have much culture and knowledge about the modern world, this is what *Wenhua* here means, making it easy for an extraneous religion to gain popularity here.

However, I believe the lack of *Wenhua* is a constrained idea. *Wenhua* indeed includes knowledge and culture in a Han context, but it means a deep and comprehensive understanding of traditional Yi cultures. *Bimo*, those who practiced rituals and magic, are said to “have *Wenhua*.” (Bai, 2017) I met some *Bimo*, men with *Wenhua*, during the Torch Festival ceremony in L County. These *Bimo* wore costumes with carefully designed patterns and figures on them, representing special meanings. They followed certain procedures when uttering the spelling with the power of blessing. Also, Yi culture defenders like *Lao Zhang* and *Xiao Zhang* showed a comprehensive understanding of Yi traditions, and many Yi-Christians knew a lot about Yi culture—but they were not willing to sing the tunes or tell the stories. As a result, people here have *Wenhua* in a Yi context. The reality is that modern Han culture has permeated into people's understanding of culture and knowledge, so they believed the

Han things were the standards for being cultured. Their grasp of *Wenhua* is based on Han ideology, and they consequently categorized themselves as “lacking *Wenhua*” and “backward.”

Another inquiry I used was about the changing relationship between Church and the government. A villager told me their relationship with government has always been “peaceful,” for the doctrines facilitate governmental regulation here. However, some ingredients I found may suggest a different story. The Old Christian told me they “don’t fight against the government according to the Bible, but be led by the government, with Bible acting as their only belief.” Today, foreign missionaries are forbidden to preach here except they are guaranteed by someone here. The churches in L county were oppressed during the Cultural Revolution, and the village church was approved rather late without governmental funding.

Maybe today’s peaceful relationship doesn’t necessarily reflect an age-old affinity between the two. The government gradually realized approving Church can promote their ruling here, so they seek for a peaceful relationship. The Church here has tried to build an invisible wall between religion and government to satisfy their needs. It also gradually realized the importance of a good relationship, which enables the renovation of the church. The dynamic process is a dual compromise.

The ingredients of the earliest stage of Christianity in K village include some political elements. The prevailing of Han culture over Yi culture is threatening the Yi identity, and the dynamic relationship between Church and government has moved in and out of its association with both modern political identity and Yi identity. Christianity seems to be a bridge that could cover those conflicts at first. Christian identity makes the other two identities not important, and it becomes a tool good for both villagers and the government.

## 6. An Interpretation of the Function of Christianity

Finally, in this section, I will discuss the meaning of Christianity in contemporary society. I have discussed why Christianity could be accepted at first, but why is it still believed by so many villagers (about 70%-80%) remains unresolved. As I have said, Christianity must play a certain role in this village currently, which incorporates itself into the whole dynamic network of this village. Its historical purpose insinuates to me that it might act as reconciliation to some social tensions. I’d like to begin my exploration from this point.

The social tensions are explicit in this village. 1) The Yi culture defenders dislike Christianity. They told me Christianity has made Yi traditions fade. At the same time, Yi-Christians show little feeling towards Yi’s identity. They insisted that there is no conflict between Yi culture and Christianity. The two groups are actually in conflict. 2) The government’s regulations about religious rituals have made some Yi cultural defenders unhappy. There is tension between politics and Yi culture. 3) A statue of Buddha is put in a temple on the mountain while no one believes in Buddhism here. Villagers told me a “propaganda minister” built this temple because in the back of the temple was a relic of war between the Red Army and its enemies. This relic is a “red education spot” and many communists are required to visit here and worship every year. This is also a tension between political faith and the indigenous faith.

The Christians use this identity to resolve such tensions. For example, they ignore National Day but celebrate Christmas and Torch festivals instead; they follow the Yi and Christian taboos but refrain from “participating in political life.” By believing in Christianity, they don’t have to suffer from the contradicting aspects of Yi identity and modern political identity, which are both vital for their survival since they are regulated by the Chinese government, but can migrate these conflicts to a gray zone created by Christianity. The seemingly conflicts between Yi and Christianity are actually the conflicts between Yi and politics. Christianity has made both politics and Yi culture fade, therefore enabling individuals to live in a rather balanced state.

Let me compare the Yi-Christians with Yi culture defenders who participate in a government-organized celebration activity. They have different jobs and live normal and contemporary lives. However, during the Torch festivals, they all wore Yi costumes, enjoyed the goat feast (*yangguoyan*),

watched the ritual, and sang or danced together. They injected all their cultural things into an imagined space and let the space mingle with modern life. They know the space will open and they will enter it during certain festivals. This is how they maintain their Yi identities and adapt to contemporary society. However, Yi Christians are different. They haven't created such a space that makes owning dual identities possible; rather, they are eliminating and replacing their existing dual identities with a new identity. Christianity is used to negotiate their identities and reshape their life.

## 7. Conclusion

My argument that Christianity is used to balance Yi identity and modern political identities can successfully explain what I have observed in K Village. In history, it helped villagers eschew the permeation of Han ideology and acted as a tool for separating themselves from the government and seeking governmental corporations; now, it helps villagers to address the social tensions created by having different identities.

Malinowski's functionalism works well in this context. An identity is accepted is because of its usage during that historical period, and it's maintained because of its function in contemporary society. Christianity's meaning to villagers provides me with the lens to look through the complex social network of this society.

Even if I have grabbed an insight into the dynamic interactions of different identities, I still cannot get a definitive conclusion about the future destiny of K Villagers. The political identity and Yi identity can never be fully eliminated, and Christianity will give birth to some new tensions, and therefore new identities. Being positioned in this ever-changing network mingled with numerous social factors, Yi minorities will constantly adapt to the society and, perhaps, finally reach balance between their multiple identities.

## 8. Notes

1. To protect the privacy of villagers, the names in this paper will not be real names. I also prevent showing the name of any location. I will use K village, S township, L county to represent various locations.

2. I have received the permission from Village Secretary to look up documents in the archive on July 22nd, 2022.

3. Politics is a highly sensitive issue in China, so some villagers ask me not to note their names. Respecting their choices, I won't note the origin of the text when it is related to politics and government.

4. I have incorporated information provided by the first Presbyter, the third Presbyter, and Xiao Zhang with Chen Wenxiao's research (2014) about S Village to form the historical overview in my paper.

5. The percentage of Christians in the village population comes from Village Secretary.

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