Cultural Landscape, Elites, and Management Forms in Rural Areas of Ethnic Minority Regions in China: A Case Study of Guangxi Province, China

CAI Qun
(School of Tourism and History Culture, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong 526061, China)

Abstract Rural settlements are a geographical unit and a historical process of spatial accumulation. Under the policy of rural revitalization, the development of rural society in China has entered a new historical stage. In order to examine the socio-economic and cultural situation of rural areas in ethnic minority regions of China, multidimensional investigations and analyses have been conducted on the cultural landscape, rural management entities, and rural economic forms of rural society in Guangxi through field research, which has certain reference value for understanding the cultural changes, social subject construction, and endogenous development of rural economy in ethnic minority areas of China under the background of rural revitalization.

Keywords Ethnic regions, Rural society, Rural culture
DOI 10.16785/j.issn 1943-989x.2024.6.014

China is vigorously promoting rural revitalization, injecting new vitality into the socio-economic development of rural areas. In recent years, with the strong promotion of rural revitalization policies, the social situation in rural areas of China, including Guangxi, has undergone tremendous changes. The academic research on Chinese rural society has accumulated rich achievements. From a sociological perspective, research has been conducted on the characteristics of rural society[1], socio-economic factors[2], and culture nexus of power[3], and has undergone a transition from functionalism to cultural studies as a whole. From a historical perspective, Yang Guo'an conducted in-depth research on the grassroots power and its changes in rural society in Hunan Province and Hubei Province in Ming and Qing Dynasties[4], Gao Shengrong focused on the relationship between resources and environment and rural social changes[5], and Xie Shi examined the long-term impact of the land policy and reconstruction of management order implemented by the government in the early Qing Dynasty on the development of rural society in China[6]. In recent years, with the promotion of rural revitalization policies, issues such as the return of rural elements[7], rural cultural IP[8], and rural tourism[9] have gradually become hot topics of academic concern. In order to investigate the historical and cultural heritage of rural areas inhabited by ethnic minorities in China during the period of social change, as well as rural social life, a special research has been conducted on the livelihood methods, village infrastructure, and village governance of more than 120 households in 6 villages in Baise, Nanning, and Chongzuo cities in Guangxi, China, and analysis has been made to the differences in village culture, the formation of local elites and the form of rural management in Guangxi from the historical and practical dimensions. The phenomena and problems discussed in this research report may also present new development trends today, but the texts formed based on field research and observation may still have certain ethnographic significance to some extent, and can serve as a comparative text for observing new phenomena and trends today.

1 Cultural landscape of border villages

1.1 Two local landscapes along the border

The architectural styles in rural areas of China are generally similar if only seen from the perspective of modern rural architecture without looking at the old houses in various places. A visit to a small village on the Sino-Vietnamese border in L County, Chongzuo, Guangxi, accidentally found that many of the carpentry work in the local people's new houses was done by Vietnamese craftsmen. The doors made by Vietnamese craftsmen have intricate and beautiful carvings on them, giving people a unique style that is different from the local area, even though the 2 places are adjacent. From this example of Vietnamese craftsmen working on the Chinese border, 2 phenomena can be seen: social isolation and differentiation under different countries' governance differences, and social interaction among border residents.

According to surveys, decades ago or even earlier, there were not many cultural differences between people on both sides, they spoke the same dialect, had the same way of life, and intermarried frequently. However, the original common cultural areas, located in the hinterland of a karst landform unit in a natural geographical sense, are situated on the edge of political geography. The political divide will accelerate social division, and the Vietnamese people still live in their houses from 20−30 years ago.

This differentiation can be seen from two aspects: one is economically. In recent years, China's economy has developed rapidly, and various regions have taken the fast track, even in border towns. Such development speed is highlighted by the differences with the overseas "local speciality" on the other side of the border. The second is culturally. Decades ago, the architectural style along both sides of the border was the same, with strong local characteristics, and all were the stilt houses built using local stones and wood. And now the architectural style on the side of the border belonging to China is similar to that of the mainland. On the contrary, the work done by Vietnamese craftsmen on the other side of the border will give people a sense of exotic visual impact. This indicates that cultural segregation has led to different paths of development, exacerbating cultural differences. Before the presence of the state government, the interaction between the 2 places was more of a homogeneous communicative interaction, similar to the exchanges between townships within a county, and they may both belong to the scope

Received: October 20, 2024 Accepted: November 23, 2024
Sponsored by Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project in Guangdong Province (GD23XZL11); Youth Innovation Talent Project for Colleges and Universities of the Department of Education of Guangdong Province (2023WQNCX075); Scientific Research Project of Zhaoqing University (FW202302).

of grassroots market services. After political isolation, differences were created, which in turn created conditions for the current differential interaction between the 2 places.

Although under unified cultural integration, various regions exhibit convergent characteristics, it does not mean that all regions are exactly the same. The unified cultural integration can only be regarded as an element of individualized village reflection or regional temperament, which can be regarded as a common feature. The formation of a regional culture actually carries various factors, both historical and practical. It is the random combination of different elements that forms the individualized features of these different regions. From the above analysis, it can be seen that the border town is located on the edge of a political geography, and under the explicit influence of the state, it is separated from the "local speciality" outside the country in 2 different cultural systems. The 2 "locals" are also integrated into different cultural systems, thus shaping the "local speciality" with clear geographical boundaries (national political geography), economic boundaries, and cultural boundaries.

1.2 Regional differences in population mobility

Guangxi is a region mainly inhabited by the Zhuang ethnic group. Due to ethnic cultural reasons, compared to the mainland, there is a significant number of middle-aged people stayed in the rural villages. The younger generation born in the 1980s and 1990s are not limited by traditional concepts and still experience a large overflow.

People in economically disadvantaged areas are more prone to outflow. Due to its harsh geographical environment, N Town in Tianyang County, Baise City features a small amount of flat land, large numbers of mountainous slopes, and poor irrigation infrastructure. Relying on contracted responsibility farmland can only provide for the livelihood of the family, but makes it difficult to produce surplus and prevent reproduction, which limits personal development. Chinese farmers are hardworking and willing to work hard. Despite the unequal input-output ratio caused by "economic involution", they are able to continuously invest labor, engage in intensive cultivation, and increase production on limited land, thus accommodating China's huge population base. However, when the surrounding economic and cultural climate shifts, on the one hand, the contracted land does not require more labor for cultivation, and since labor is hard, there is no room for development; on the other hand, there are more development opportunities outside, and personnel turnover has become inevitable. Among the 6 investigated locations, Tianyang County has the most severe population outflow. In addition to external opportunities, the harsh natural environment in the area that prevents people from living with dignity becomes a stimulating factor that leads to population outflow, making even the labor outflow in Tianyang County, which is mainly inhabited by Zhuang ethnic groups, more obvious than elsewhere.

New economic opportunities will also stimulate young people to return. In recent years, there has been a phenomenon of young people returning to L County, Chongzuo on the Sino Vietnamese border, which is due to the increasing prevalence of border smuggling activities. Many young people return to their hometowns in large numbers to engage in economic activities related to smuggling in order to seek wealth. That is to say, the unique geographical location of the hometown has provided special opportunities for the border population to become wealthy under new historical conditions, which has prompted young people to return home. In X Village, Long'an County, Nanning City, there is a interviewee who returns home seasonally. Originally working as a contract worker in the urban area of Nanning, he has contracted over 100 hm^2 of land through land transfer and used his spare time as a contract worker to plant a new type of economic crop in the countryside. In the investigation of Y Village in Wuming County, it has found that there is a large number of young people retained here, and I came up with the same reason from 2 interviewees, which is to take care of children at home. In order to provide better education for their children, they would rather stay at home and give up opportunities for development outside. From a geographical perspective, this place has a flat terrain and favorable production conditions, which is also an important factor affecting the population retention of this village.

Due to its unique ethnic culture, the minority group of Guangxi generally has a stronger sense of settling down and relocating compared to the Han people, and is more willing to live in their hometown. So, the common characteristic of the the minority group in Guangxi is that the middle-aged generation is more localized, while the young people born in the 1980s have weak traditional concepts and show a strong drive for outflow. Although Guangxi is adjacent to developed areas in the east, even if there is population outflow, the areas of population outflow are mainly near provincial capitals, county towns, etc. Even if there is outflow outside the province, it is mainly from the nearest Guangdong. This characteristic of nearby outflow reflects that they do not want to be too far away from home, but have to make a choice for their livelihood. They are a passive outflow, which also indirectly reflects the characteristic of Guangxi people not liking to go out. Most areas with obvious characteristics of population outflow have poor land conditions, lack of irrigation facilities, and poor production conditions. Once there are development opportunities in the area, there will be a population backflow.

1.3 Decline of village culture

After the reform and opening up, under the influence of the economic wave, economic rationality logic has become the main focus of life, and traditional culture has been neglected. Although the government has emphasized the construction of new rural areas and started to create rural culture, the results seem to be unsatisfactory. In recent years, under the promotion of national policies, basketball courts and fitness facilities have been built in rural areas across the country, but they seem to be just toys for children and have not played a role in organizing farmers.

From the 6 surveyed villages in Guangxi, 3 of them have cultural activities. Y Village in Wuming County has a cultural arts team freely organized by cultural enthusiasts. There are some paid cultural and artistic performances, and the income from the performances is used to cover the daily expenses of the cultural and artistic team. In fact, there is not much interaction with the village. G Village in Chongzuo City, after the establishment of the cooperative, began to organize cooperative members to wear traditional costumes and perform some cultural and artistic activities. The content of the performances is not inherited from tradition, but it can effectively organize some villagers to participate in cultural activities. X Village in Long'an County has preserved the cultural customs of the Chinese New Year, during which activities such as basketball games and tug of war competitions are held.

Regular cultural activities include square dancing. According to interviews, it is evident that many women have a passion for square dancing, but only a few places can organize it, thanks to the compact layout of villages. Because the effective organization of square dancing requires a certain population size. Overall, Guangxi is a province with a wide range of

mountains and hills. Many administrative villages have scattered settlements, and only villages with flat terrain and relatively concentrated populations can ensure a certain population density and effectively carry out square dancing.

The rural cultural life in the research area is scarce, especially in terms of daily and organized collective activities. The occurrence of this situation may be mainly due to the following factors: firstly, the serious loss of rural population, and the hollowing out of rural areas has become the norm; secondly, people are deeply immersed in economic logic and do not want to spend too much time on these "leisure activities"; thirdly, there has been a gap in the inheritance of traditional social and cultural skills among individuals; fourthly, traditional social culture has lost its original soil. On the one hand, the number of people engaged in agricultural cultivation has decreased, and on the other hand, agricultural cultivation is only a rational production behavior, without any faith or ceremony in agriculture. Therefore, the prayer ceremony for "good harvest" and "good weather" during special festivals has become a "redundant" activity. Coupled with the disintegration of families and the atomization of villages, traditional collective rituals are difficult to organize again.

This article describes village culture from the perspectives of the shaping of differences between domestic and foreign villages along the border, population mobility, and village culture. It then discusses the mechanisms of difference shaping, characteristics of population mobility, and problems in village cultural construction. From the analysis above, one can deeply feel the profound impact of geographical differences on village culture. Different geographical environments create different economic production conditions and development opportunities in different regions, thus forming an interactive mechanism with population mobility. Geographical environments can also affect the development and organizational forms of village culture, all of which have specific and subtle connections with the specific geographical environment.

2 Village group differentiation and "village elites"

After the implementation of the joint production contract responsibility system, the population mobility policy has further loosened, and village groups have begun to differentiate. Families with similar economic conditions in the same village will change under different opportunities. Even in villages with poor production conditions, some people can rely on their own resources to overcome economic difficulties, obtain more wealth than others, and become "elites" in the village. They may have relied on political resources as village cadres to seize the initiative, or they may have been diligent and hardworking, constantly accumulating capital, expanding reproduction, or other opportunities.

2.1 Resource utilization and village group differentiation

In every village, one can see cases of people emerging from economic mediocrity. S Village in Tianyang County is a village with poor agricultural production conditions, not only with poor land conditions, but also with almost no irrigation capacity. The main crops planted are corn and sugarcane, and the average household land occupation is small, with an average of 0.20–0.26 hm^2 or even less. The former village head here should have good social relationships, and after not becoming a village head, he worked as a contractor in the county town. He came back to take care of farm work during busy farming seasons, and now he has cleared 3.3 hm^2 of land on the mountain himself for planting mangoes. He learned the techniques while working from other large-scale mango growers. Planting mangoes requires solving irrigation problems, for which he has submitted an application plan to the poverty alleviation office and is seeking a poverty alleviation project to help him build irrigation facilities. The former village branch secretary has asymmetric information channels compared to ordinary farmers in the village. He used to have frequent dealings with the government, so he knew what support projects the government had for rural and impoverished counties. Therefore, in production and life, he knows how to use his previous social network and channels to obtain these resources.

The different attitudes of people towards loans also indicate the differences in the ability of villagers to utilize external resources. During the visit, we have found that some farmers take out loans only when they have to spend money. In order to avoid generating more interest, they will immediately repay the loans once they have money. At the same time, it can also be seen that some farmers are in a cycle of loan - repayment - loan process, even without loan qualifications, they still strive to create conditions to borrow for the operation of funds for reproduction. They are trying their best to maximize the utilization rate of external resources such as loans.

2.2 Capital accumulation and village group differentiation

The accumulation of capital and the expansion of reproduction are not only a "rational" ability, but also a "rational" mentality. There was such a case in X Village, Long'an County as follows: LCQ, the person concerned, had nothing left after graduating from university, first made money by mixing explosives and blasting stones up the mountain, and then used the initial funds obtained from blasting stones to purchase a cart; later, he engaged in the business of a distributor, gradually accumulating funds and becoming a local banana grower and distributor of a farm supplies store. He continuously invested the funds he earned into reproduction and flexibly utilized various resources to obtain more operating funds. He purchased a piece of land in the county town and built his own house, vividly calling this property a "reservoir" of funds, which could be used for rent or as collateral to obtain loans. The rolling pattern of capital interlocking allowed him to roll the disposable "fund ball" bigger and bigger, and reinvested it into new economic activities that matched his disposable funds. It is his understanding of capital that drives him to constantly transform his business projects and models.

Overall, the reason why this group of people can stand out in villages with the same conditions is mainly based on the following opportunities. Firstly, be adept at utilizing their own resources, such as political resources, social networks, and external policies, which can all be sought after; secondly, be adept at breaking away from habitual and mass production structures, and be able to boldly adjust economic structures in production activities, developing economic activities that are compatible with their accumulated capital, and seeking more development opportunities; thirdly, the most important thing is to be diligent and hardworking. From the example of the former village head in T County, it can be seen that in addition to utilizing external resources, he is also very hardworking and constantly seeking development opportunities.

3 Capitalization and organization of rural management

There are two forces in current rural construction, one is folk rural construction, and the other is national rural construction. Generally speaking, rural construction is folk rural construction, and the model of folk rural builders is basically piloted with a modern rural construction concept. The policy that can have a profound impact on rural areas nationwide is still the national policy, and for now, the

policy behavior of building rural areas by the state is temporarily referred to as national rural construction.

3.1 Land transfer under the background of capitals going to rural areas

Under the system of contract responsibility for collective production, small-scale farming on a household by household basis does not have much economic potential. As a result, with increasing external opportunities, a large number of young and middle-aged people from rural areas have migrated to cities, leading to a large amount of abandoned rural land. Currently, the main body of rural cultivation is mainly elderly people, except for a few localized young and middle-aged farmers. In the foreseeable future, when this generation of localized farmers is unable to cultivate the land anymore, who will cultivate the land will become a problem. So, it has become an inevitable choice to accelerate land transfer, promote capitals to go to the countryside, and realize company operation. However, a large number of rural population have flowed into cities and become migrant workers, but cities cannot provide stable resettlement for them. Under the condition of economic downturn, if farmers still own land, even if there is an economic crisis, some of them can still return home and rely on their hometown land to survive, easing urban pressure. On the one hand, the aging of rural farming entities has led to problems in the reproduction of farmers, and the efficiency of farming is very low; on the other hand, rural areas also play the role of China's economic reservoir and stabilizer. From the current policies of China, it seems that there is a greater emphasis on the efficiency of land cultivation, thus promoting land transfer in large-scale to encourage capital to go to the countryside. It is precisely under such circumstances that many enterprises take advantage of the opportunity to go to the countryside, and capital going to the countryside has become a trend.

Although in form, village land is concentrated in the hands of a few operating entities through circulation, the productivity of capital operation is often lower than that of local farmers due to the unrestricted input of labor force for intensive farming. Some land is even subcontracted, which fails to achieve the expected "intensive, specialized, organized, and industrialized large-scale production". However, a large amount of agricultural investment from the country has been "captured" by these corporate capital through project subsidies, agricultural subsidies, and other means, thereby diluting the financial investment in household business entities from the government and causing a significant waste of financial resources.

Although there are many policies to stimulate grain cultivation, few enterprises directly put their efforts into rice planting due to the excessive investment in rice manpower and management difficulties. So the main body of grain cultivation, especially rice cultivation, is still small-scale farmers, and they mainly grow it for themselves to eat. Generally, only a small piece of land can produce the rice supply for a family for the whole year. And once these rice fields are circulated, they can only purchase food, which not only increases their living costs, but also is not conducive to the food security of the country.

On the other hand, it is worth pondering whether the wishes of farmers are fully respected in the large-scale promotion of land transfer under the principle of prioritizing interests. It has found that, in general, if the enterprise capital and local government negotiate to implement collective transfer of land in a certain area, then the farmers who cultivate on this land basically have no choice but to transfer. For those farmers who no longer want to farm or those whose land quality is poor after being transferred, land transfer may be good news for them temporarily. However, for those farmers who still want to farm, they generally face two choices: one is forced transfer, and the other is that the village committee will redistribute a piece of land, which will be poor in quality. Due to strong support from local governments for corporate capital, many farmers ultimately choose land transfer.

The farmers who still want to cultivate land are usually in their fifties or sixties, and their children who usually work or engage in non-agricultural economy in other places have become the main source of household income. And they have lived on the land all their lives, with nothing else to do besides farming. In their later years, they just want to cultivate some land to enrich their lives and support themselves.

3.2 Capital and Local Government

The forms of capital identified in the survey can be classified into two categories: state-owned capital and private capital. The common problem they face is high land rent and high production costs. Under the circumstances of overall low prices of agricultural products, their profit margins have been greatly compressed, even resulting in losses. Especially for state-owned capital, burdened with certain political tasks, its investment behavior has certain poverty alleviation characteristics, so the land rent paid is higher and the pressure is greater. One of the investigated place is of state-owned capital, where the implemented land transfer investing agriculture is a supplementary industry. The land rent they gave to farmers was initially 2,800 yuan, later 1,800 yuan, and now they want to stabilize the land rent at around 1,500 yuan, which is still very high in the local area. Due to the low prices of agricultural products and land rents higher than market prices, the actual income of enterprises from farming is not good, which is basically in a state of loss. Now they are trying to grow fruits with high values and agricultural products that can be mechanically cultivated, in order to reduce labor costs.

There are not many cases nationwide where capital farming can achieve profits, and most of the capital sent to rural areas cannot directly benefit from the planting industry. In the absence of making money, corporate capital still goes to the countryside, many of which are because they can obtain considerable financial subsidies for large-scale operations in rural areas, as well as obtain some subsidy projects that can indirectly benefit from these projects. Local governments are also well aware of this, but because of the central government's great emphasis on land scale transfer, developing large-scale agriculture has become a political task for local governments. On the other hand, the long-standing governance model of "government - farmers" has been a complex and high cost governance model. By promoting capital to rural areas and realizing land transfer, a governance structure of "government - management subject" has been formed, which not only simplifies the governance objects but also achieves standardization, in fact saving governance costs. It is based on the political and governance logic mentioned above that local governments actively promote capital to rural areas[10].

3.3 Farmers and Cooperatives

A new type of economic organization, namely agricultural professional cooperatives, has emerged in rural areas. From the investigation of several cases, it can be seen that most of them are in name only, either a cooperative organization established in the form of enterprise capital, or a cooperative formed by several people in the village committee. The interaction between the cooperative and the villagers is insufficient, and farmers cannot be effectively organized.

In the investigation, there is a cooperative which actually has a transactional interaction with farmers. The cooperative provides agricultural materials to its members and purchases fruits

from farmers, but it is not a contract based purchase and sale. This cooperative is equivalent to an "agricultural supply and marketing cooperative". Only one cooperative in Chongzuo City attempts to organize farmers, and the entire system is contractual. They sign contracts with farmers, and the members who sign the contracts are required to carry out standardized planting according to the requirements of the cooperative. Finally, the cooperative recovers the agricultural products at the price agreed upon in the previous contract. Overall, this cooperative is doing better than other cooperatives, and now it can basically operate with an increasing number of members.

There are two problems in its specific practice: first, cooperatives do not have planting bases and rely entirely on farmers for planting, while individual farmers do not have much land, so planting is scattered and organizing is difficult. This raises another question, which is how to supervise the implementation of standardized farming. If we follow the cooperative concept of doing ecological agriculture without using pesticides or fertilizers, the yield will be affected. So some farmers will privately use pesticides and fertilizers. The communication with the local authorities has found that they are using the familiar relationships in the village to encourage mutual supervision among the villagers. Objectively speaking, this kind of supervision is subjective and cannot completely eliminate such phenomenon. Moreover, if there is "collusion" among members and neighboring farmers all use fertilizers and secretly cover up each other, it will be difficult to supervise in practical operation. Despite these shortcomings, this cooperative is still the best and most promising one discovered in the research. Some people are still trying to change the current situation in rural areas through their own efforts, despite being squeezed by both the government and capital.

4 Conclusion

Based on field survey data, analysis has been made to the rural cultural landscape, the formation of management entities, and management methods from multiple dimensions. From the perspective of cultural landscape, factors such as politics, population mobility, and natural geographical environment have significant impacts on it. From the perspective of business entities, individual differences in resource utilization are important factors in the differentiation of village groups, and village elites often have outstanding advantages in policy resource acquisition and capital accumulation. From the perspective of business models, small-scale agricultural economy is gradually disintegrating, and whether it is commercial capital or cooperative models, organized management will become the main mode of rural operation.

With the increasingly rapid urbanization, more and more people are beginning to reminisce about their memories of the countryside. This "nostalgia" has become a hot topic of concern, reflecting the situation of the countryside under the threat of modernization logic. It is hoped that the countryside will become better and better, with its own profound and weathered memories, as well as its own new vitality and new farmers, becoming a place different from the city.

References

[1] Fei, X. T. (2006). *Rural China*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House.

[2] Huang, Z. Z. (2000). *Small scale peasant economy and social changes in North China*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

[3] Du, Z. Q. (2004). *Culture, power, and the state: rural North China from 1900−1942*. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.

[4] Yang, G. A. (2004). *Research on grassroots organizations and rural society in Hunan Province and Hubei Province in Ming and Qing Dynasties*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press.

[5] Gao, S. R. (2017). *Changes in water resources and environment and rural society in Guanzhong Region during the Ming and Qing Dynasties*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.

[6] Xie, S. (2018). The reconstruction of the rural society in South China in the early Qing Dynasty. *Journal of Peking University* (*Philosophy and Social Sciences*), *55*(5), 129-140.

[7] Pan, J. E., Wu, D. & Liu, K. (2022). How to boost factors flowing back into rural: Experience and inspiration of promoting rural vitalization by cultural innovation in Pingnan County, Fujian Province. *Journal of China Agricultural University* (*Social Sciences*), 39(1), 75-90.

[8] Wu, Y. E. (2024). Practice and improvement path of promoting the integration of rural culture and tourism through rural cultural brand IP. *Journal of Northeast Agricultural University* (*Social Sciences Edition*), *22*(3), 52-60.

[9] Ma, X. L., Zhao, Q. H. (2024). The inner logic of integrating culture and tourism to empower rural revitalization. *Tourism Tribune*, *39*(11), 1-3.

[10] Wang, H. J. (2015). The political and governance logic of capital to the countryside. *Journal of Southwest University* (*Social Sciences Edition*), *41*(4), 47-54.