Cultural Preservation Dilemmas Under Disaster Risk and Modernization – A case study of Chinese traditional villages

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Abstract

For the ethnic villages in China's Guizhou Province, fire hazards have always been a nightmare. Presently, they are at the root of a complex dilemma: should traditional wooden houses be recovered? Or should one, instead, pursue a "safer" dwelling in concrete houses? In light of this, this research aims to uncover the factors that influence people's dynamic decisions in their housing material choices. Moreover, this research presents a contradiction between social-scale heritage preservation and the individual rights for development in the context of disaster risk and modernization. Analyzing 134 surveys and 29 interviews collected during an ethnographic fieldwork, this research raises issues hitherto insufficiently addressed by the predominant indigenous literature. Indigenous societies, as opposed to conventional wisdom, are not always resistant to development: especially since modern architecture and the pursuit of urbanized life are becoming popular in many communities, the popular notion of heritage protection as something unanimously agreed is also challenged. The findings of this research offer advice not only for the post-disaster reconstruction of historical settlements in China but also for the sustainability of vernacular architecture and indigenous societies — a global issue.

Keywords: cultural preservation, development, disaster, modernization, ethnic villages

1. Introduction

Guizhou, a mountainous province in southwestern China, features a kaleidoscopic range of natural beauty and a great variety of ethnic cultures. Natives to this land, these ethnic groups have lived here for generations, building villages nestled among ancient forests and bamboo groves on mountains. These unique local traditional houses are known as Wooden Stilt Houses (“Diao-jiao-lou”), which are completely made of wood, with no nails, and built on stilts high above the ground along the mountain ridge. They feature a wood column-tie structure, a tiled roof, and are surrounded by corridors and railings. The corridors and the eaves are connected between houses, forming a big cluster of households.

This interconnectedness of the village households, distinctive architectural characteristic, not only represents a product of a certain locality as a facet of identity but also demonstrates the harmonious relationships between people and their place, exemplified by the fact that local materials and technology are made from ambient natural and cultural environments. Guizhou currently has roughly 4,000 ethnic villages, of which 22 ethnic-Dong villages and 21 ethnic-Miao villages are on the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The traditional villages represent an idyllic past, and half the population today lives on the land inherited from their ancestors, passing on cherished memories of this past on to the next generations.

However, due to the misuse of fire, gas, high-power electrical appliances, the lack of fire safety awareness among villagers, the wooden structure, and the houses’ proximity to one another, these houses easily catch fire, which can then spread uncontrollably. Moreover, the location of the deep mountain makes rescue processes even harder. Even though the local government has made significant investments in

updating fire facilities in the villages and using fire-proof paint on houses in recent years, fires in this region are still frequent. From 2005 to 2015, fires have ravaged Southeastern Guizhou 716 times, destroying over 3,600 traditional houses and affecting 5,583 households (Hao, 2015). Fire accidents occur approximately 50 times every year at different scales in different villages (Wu & Guo, 2013).

In the face of reconstruction and the risk of fire, there has been an ongoing debate among villagers regarding whether to rebuild traditional wooden houses or to build modern buildings made of brick or concrete. The dispute over reconstruction style makes the subject of cultural protection, disaster prevention, and rural development imminent in the wake of fire accidents. To better understand the dilemma, this study identified 12 factors that may influence people's housing material selection—for example, safety, cost, and inheriting culture. With the survey data and interview data collected and analyzed, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- How important is each factor in affecting residents' housing material selection? Do they care the most about preserving traditional culture?
- What is the statistical relationship between housing material preference with these factors and other variables such as people's demographic and disaster experience?
- How are the conflicting priorities presented in this case, and what challenges and possibilities do these traditional villages have?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Preserving Cultural Heritage is a Universal Value?

The initial international conventions related to heritage protection called for nations across the world to take an obligation to preserve cultural sites during conflicts and wars

(UNESCO, 1954). Later on, the internationalization of the heritage movement led to the drafting of the convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage which encouraged the identification, conservation and transmission of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity (UNESCO, 1972). The emphasis of heritage protection has also moved beyond conflict situations to include environmental threats and urbanization and moved from local concerns to a global issue (Alberts & Hazen, 2010).

Since cultural resources are “finite, scarce and non-renewable,” (Spennemann, 1999, p.780) and an “irreplaceable property” (UNESCO, 1972, p.1), the protection of heritage is considered a shared common good by which everyone benefits (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007). In addition to recording and displaying past history and culture of a nation, heritage sites present magnificent value in archeology, science, ethnology, anthropology, and aesthetics (Carman, 2003; UNESCO, 1972). They are able to shape both personal and community identities, enhance social cohesion, and facilitate intercultural communication and learning (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007).

While heritages bring benefits, they can also cause a maintenance dilemma. Many living historical architectures around the world have been exposed to extensive deterioration due to the rapid modernization and staggering social changes as their inhabitants may abandon their vernacular style and turn to concrete buildings with modern amenities to meet current needs. Some opinions suggest that avoiding living in historical buildings is the only way to maintain the original appearance of cultural landscapes because having occupants will inevitably change the landscapes (Daugstad & Grytli, 1999). Opposite opinions, on the contrary, believe that living heritage can only be maintained if inhabitants live there and take care of it (Ghad, 2018).

The idea of meeting contemporary needs has long been seen as a great challenge to the integrity and authenticity of historic buildings due to the action of modifications (Alberts & Hazen, 2010). Historical buildings thus present major preservation disputes whether they are personal assets or social assets. If they are a social asset with historical value, protecting them means protecting human culture. If they are personal assets, do those who live in the buildings have the right to modify, rebuild, or even abandon their home and lifestyle?

2.2 The Cultural Rights of Indigenous People in Development

The term “development,” often associated with economic growth, is commonly constructed to be the one-way roads to the betterment of all societies, particularly the elimination of poverty (Furze et al., 1996). However, not all indigenous people wish to obtain development at the expense of losing their cultural integrity and autonomy. Many cases around the world show indigenous peoples’ rejection and resistance to development that governments push upon them (Kloos, 1977). Evidence across the world have also demonstrated that forcing a transformation of these traditional subsistence economies often leads to failed outcomes (Bodley, 2015). Therefore Keesing (1941, p.84) stated that choices regarding cultural directions “must lie with the indigenous people themselves.” This viewpoint was strengthened at the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which advocated indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination, exercise full sovereignty over natural wealth and resources, and preserve their cultural customs, practices, language, and traditions.

The evidence and declarations, aimed to protect the rights of indigenous people, are presented based on the premise that indigenous people are suffering from inequality and are struggling to withstand external intrusion. In other words, the declarations aim to

protect the rights of indigenous people to be indigenous. While when some indigenous people assert their human rights to maintain their traditional ways of life, others may seek better integration into mainstream culture and greater participation in modernity and national development programs. When human beings are encouraged to “freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (United Nations, 1966, Article 1), do indigenous people are justified to freely obtain a modernized lifestyle at the expense of modifying or abandoning their traditions?

As a key part of the human race and culture, indigenous people have greatly enriched the planet’s ethnic diversity and played a key role in the preservation of cultural heritage, including tangible objects, artifacts, villages, and buildings, as well as the intangible traditions, practices, and knowledge. The practice and transmission of these living heritages contribute to the ongoing vitality, strength, and wellbeing of indigenous communities. However, the past two centuries have witnessed a dramatic decline in the number of indigenous or ethnic minority people from 20 percent of the global population to 5.2 percent (IWGIA, 2018). Specifically, in China, decades of rapid economic growth and urbanization have led to an upward trend in rural people flocking to cities, killing hundreds of thousands of villages and pushing indigenous communities to the brink of extinction (Chen, 2013). From 2002 to 2012, 910,000 villages disappeared in China. According to researchers, traditional villages in China are decreasing by an average of 7.3 percent per year, and 1.6 villages disappear every day (Hu et al., 2015).

The future of indigenous people and their communities is debatable from the perspectives of two competing philosophical camps. The “idealists” are more optimistic about the possibility of indigenous people in maintaining their political and cultural integrity. The prevailing “realists,” however, assert that the indigenous societies will

inevitably be doomed to extinction due to the growing Western culture (Bowler, 1989; Groenfeldt, 2003), the diffusion of superior technology (White, 2016), and the attractiveness of economic interests in the advanced societies (Cannon, 1989). Indigenous societies are in fact unable to get rid of the erosion of mainstream culture. The free choices that indigenous people are declared to own are affected by external social trends as well as significant local events.

2.3 Disaster as an Opportunity for the Betterment

In many cases, the devastation brought by disasters creates a fresh start for the affected communities that may contribute to significant changes by producing physical and societal modifications. The viewpoint that reconstruction provides an opportunity for change is not new. Researchers who focus on the effects of disasters assert that disasters can create a “long-awaited chance” for people to change their status quo, address long-standing problems or draw on pre-existing policy ideas (Oliver-Smith & Goldman, 1988; Nigg & Tierney, 1993). The concept of achieving improvement through reconstruction has been linked to the term “build back better” (BBB) after the Indian Ocean Tsunami, which underlines the need to not just restore the affected communities to pre-disaster conditions but towards a path to development with greater resilience and avoid reproducing the same vulnerabilities (Berke et al., 1993; Kennedy et al., 2008).

Synthesizing academic discussions on this topic, two key concepts constitute the BBB principle: risk reduction and community revitalization. Risk reduction mainly refers to the measures to reduce the vulnerability of the built environment, and community revitalization mainly entails supporting economic and psycho-social recovery (Berke et al., 1993; Palliyaguru & Amaratunga, 2011). Scholars further proposed a set of criteria for assessing the effectiveness of BBB effort as safety, speed, inclusiveness and with

long-term economic potential (Noy et al., 2019). Whilst the BBB principles are being defined as generating positive outcomes and promoting a more resilient and sustainable society, it seems to be an omnipotent term that raises challenging questions that have yet to be answered: better for whom and who defines it?

The controversy over the betterment could lead to subjective viewpoints depending on the definition adopted for “better”, in other words, one better may come into conflict with the other. In Sichuan’s case, the recovery measure by promoting urbanization and tourism-oriented economy in the reconstructed communities has incurred a lot of controversies over the heritagization of disaster ruins and ethnic culture (Zhang, 2012). What is seen as jeopardizing cultural authenticity is stimulating the economy to recover. In the reconstruction of Aceh, external organizations suggested survivors rebuild their pre-tsunami softwood dwellings which experts saw as earthquake-resistant whereas local people preferred hardwood and were being noticed reducing or removing some components from their new houses for cost-saving, extensions or fancy decorations (Kennedy et al., 2008). BBB thus meant that cost-effective aesthetics and affluent appearance dominated safety for Acehnese.

With the BBB has become an increasingly popular catchphrase around the world supporting recovery efforts, the differing expectations regarding the reconstruction and the contradictory “betterment” have received much less attention. Therefore, in this study, the inherent conflict between cultural preservation as the outcome of “social better” and the free choice for development as “individual better” emerges at this critical point.

3. Method

To understand the status of traditional villages, the author visited 14 villages in the

southeast Guizhou province and collected survey and interview data from five of them. The findings of this research not only aim to explore the factors influencing people's selection for different housing materials as a local reconstruction issue but also to present the competing betterment or priorities of achieving modernity, preventing disaster risks, and preserving cultural heritage.

3.1 Questionnaire Design

The study questionnaire contains a set of questions soliciting the demographic information of respondents, history and status of respondents' houses, disaster experience, reconstruction experience, and preference for housing style. It also includes a section asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they think certain factors influence their housing material selection on a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "very important".

The questionnaire was pretested and improved before conducting the actual survey. The pretest was conducted at a regional meeting when 22 representatives from adjacent 15 villages gathered at Mindong, Jianhe County to discuss regional affairs. After getting approval from the local leader, the researcher was allowed to disseminate the questionnaire to the representatives after the meeting. Later, an informal focus group was organized at the village leader's home, where participants provided suggestions to the questionnaire design. The pretest resulted in a significant improvement of the wording of the questions: their formal language was simplified so that even the villagers with minimal education could understand them. The questionnaire also supplemented some questions and factors that were mentioned or of interest to participants.

3.2 A Unique and Challenging Data Collection Process

The survey data were planned to be collected through a door-to-door surveying

method, which would have provided the researcher with the opportunity to observe the living environment and the housing condition of the respondents. However, due to the autumn season, most of the villagers were harvesting rice in the fields. Almost no one stayed at home during the day except illiterate elder women and pre-school children. The data collection time was thus changed to the evening when people were back home from the field. The several narrow pathways, the rugged terrain, and the lack of streetlights at night made data collection extremely challenging, so the researcher resorted to multiple methods to improve the efficiency of data collection, including convening villagers gathered at the village conference room and requesting them to fill out the surveys together, hiring and training local villagers as assistants to distribute and conduct surveys, and offering cash or gifts as incentives for the study participants. However, these attempts were given up since it was found that there were discussions among the villagers during the group surveying; moreover, the villagers' credibility to perform research was unguaranteed, and providing cash attracted unexpected suspicion and criticism from some villagers, who even called the local police to investigate the purpose of the research.

Ultimately, the researcher herself collected the data, through in-person surveys at dusk before nightfall or at the rice paddy fields during the day (which therefore meant the author had to harvest rice together with local people in the daytime and conduct research during the spare time—a real "field" work). Though it was extremely time-consuming, thus leading to a limited sample size, the quality of the data was ensured as the collection process allowed the researcher to illuminate and clarify individual questions to the villagers. After removing the pretest and unqualified questionnaire, the final sample size was 134.

The sample was collected from villagers in five ethnic villages based on a voluntary response through a convenience sampling process: the participants, therefore, were selected based on their availability and willingness to take part. Though this method is believed to be prone to bias, it was the only feasible method, given the challenging research setting and limited availability of resources. This study itself is an exploration specifically targeting hard-to-reach indigenous groups, and the results are valuable as they reached as many people as possible, identifying a range of local interpretations and representing the voices of people.

3.3 Interviews

Considering the limitations of the questionnaire design and the possible bias that may have been caused by the sampling process, a series of interviews was subsequently conducted to provide further insights into some of the critical topics. The interview participants were recruited primarily through the surveying process: whoever indicated an interest in sharing their perspectives or experiences beyond the survey questions. The interviews were semi-structured with a list of prompt questions to be raised on each topic. Going beyond asking people to select the factors that influence their decision, the interviews explored the answers in-depth by asking them why exactly they chose certain factors and encouraging them to share personal stories and interpretations of the issue. Overall, 29 people participated in the interview, including community members, village leaders, and local government officials.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Information

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents and their Housing Preference.

Characteristic	Full Sample (%)	Prefer Wooden Housing (%)	Prefer Concrete Housing (%)
Gender			
Men	60.4	50.6	49.4
Women	39.6	32.1	67.9
Age Group			
18-24	5.2	28.6	71.4
25-34	20.1	40.7	59.3
35-44	24.6	39.4	60.6
45-54	26.1	34.3	65.7
55-64	11.2	66.7	33.3
≥ 65	12.7	58.8	41.2
Education Background			
Elementary School or less	45.5	39.3	60.7
Middle School	31.3	52.4	47.6
High School	10.4	35.7	64.3
Bachelor's degree	11.9	37.5	62.5
Master's degree or more	0.7	100	-
Annual Household Income (in Chinese Yuan)			
< 10,000	40.3	46.3	53.7
10,000 – 30,000	42.5	38.6	61.4
30,000 – 50,000	7.5	70	30
50,000 – 70,000	4.5	16.7	83.3
> 70,000	5.2	42.9	57.1
Total	100	43	57

Notes: Some totals may not add to 100 due to rounding. Prefer wooden houses and prefer concrete house data are percentages within the group.

The survey data were entered and analyzed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The demographic characteristics for the sample (N=134) are shown in Table 1. Male respondents constituted 60.4 percent of the sample, which reflected the local gender imbalance in participating in social activities such as research. Nearly half

of the samples reported elementary school education or less, and four-fifths reported household incomes of less than 30,000 Chinese Yuan (roughly 4,260 United States Dollar) per year. According to the demographic profile of the survey respondents, the residents of these villages are among the poorest and least educated groups in China.

The data provided an in-depth evaluation of local people's preference for housing material, indicating the prevalence of modern housing across the sample as 57 percent (i.e. a preference for housing made of concrete or brick) compared to 43 percent who preferred traditional wooden housing. Specifically, 68 percent of the women sampled reported a preference for concrete housing. The female respondents appeared to be more inclined to concrete houses than the male respondents. Senior respondents in the 55–64 and over 65 age brackets had a higher percentage that prefers wooden houses, whereas younger and middle-aged respondents tended to prefer concrete housing. More than half of the respondents, in all of the four age groups under 54-year-old, favored concrete housing, and the proportion reached the highest of 71.4 percent in the youngest 18–24 age bracket.

In terms of educational background, the results did not indicate a relationship between educational level and housing preferences. Except for the middle-school group, the respondents from other education brackets mostly prefer concrete housing. The relationship between household annual income and housing material preferences is also not obvious. Aside from the 30,000-50,000 bracket, the respondents in other brackets mostly prefer concrete housing.

Table 2. Frequency Analysis and Descriptive Statistics of Likert -Scale Variables with Regards to How Important Each Factor is in Affecting Residents' Housing Material

Variables	Not important at all	Not very important	Not sure/ don't know	Important	Very important	Mean	SD
Safety, avoiding potential fire	7%	23%	1%	22%	48%	3.83	1.41
Cost of material	12%	23%	2%	29%	33%	3.48	1.45
Financial incentives provided by government (e.g. subsidies)	21%	47%	3%	23%	6%	2.45	1.22
Potential economic incentives (e.g. developing ethnic tourism)	26%	35%	8%	20%	11%	2.56	1.37
Housing comfort	9%	26%	2%	27%	36%	3.56	1.43
Modern and urbanized lifestyle	12%	39%	3%	24%	22%	3.05	1.41
Durability of house	3%	22%	2%	41%	32%	3.77	1.20
Emotional attachment to house	15%	31%	1%	24%	29%	3.22	1.51
Inheriting traditional culture	20%	31%	17%	17%	14%	2.74	1.35
Consistent and uniform style of the houses in the entire village	29%	32%	5%	19%	16%	2.61	1.47
Opinions of neighbors/relatives/friends	15%	37%	1%	20%	27%	3.08	1.51
Suggestions from government	16%	52%	7%	17%	8%	2.50	1.19

Table 2 displays the 12 factors that were used in this survey to elicit the respondents' attitudes towards housing material selection with the respective distribution of Likert-scale responses. Across the sample, 70 percent of respondents rated safety (M=3.83, SD=1.41) as very important (48%) and important (22%) factors they consider while building a house. Other factors with a similar percentage rating were found to be the cost of material (M=3.48, SD=1.45), housing comfort (M=3.56, SD=1.43), and

durability of the house (M=3.77, SD=1.20).

On the contrary, financial incentives provided by the government (M=2.45, SD=1.22) and suggestions from the government (M=2.50, SD=1.10) were the factors most people (68%) rated “not very important” and “not important at all.” The factors that are also considered less important included potential economic incentives (M=2.56, SD=1.37), consistent and uniform style of the houses in the entire village (M=2.61, SD=1.47), and inheriting traditional culture (M=2.74, SD=1.35). These results challenge the conventional wisdom that everyone endorses cultural preservation. In this case, more than half of the respondents (51%) thought that inheriting tradition is not an important factor influencing their decision. What is more, 17 percent of respondents are “not sure” or “don’t know” about the meaning of traditional culture.

4.2 Logit Regression

A logit regression analysis was subsequently undertaken to explore the statistical relationship between housing material preference and the 18 variables summarized in Table 3. The findings revealed a positive and significant association between “housing comfort”, “emotional attachment to traditional house”, “inheriting traditional culture” and choosing wooden housing, while a negative correlation was found between “modern and urbanized lifestyle” and choosing wooden housing. None of the coefficients in the demographics and disaster experience were not statistically significant, indicating that age, gender, educational background, household income and whether or not an individual and his or her community have suffered a fire do not have significant effects on their housing material selection.

Table 3. Logit Regression of Housing Material Preference Among Respondents.

Dependent variables	SE	Coefficient β
Demographics		
Age (in years)	(0.263)	-.016
Gender (ref. male)	(0.673)	.440
Education background	(0.471)	-.243
Household income	(0.346)	.049
Disaster Experience		
My community had suffered fire	(1.112)	-.987
My house had suffered fire	(0.691)	-.281
Other Variables		
Safety, avoiding potential fire	(0.243)	-.178
Cost of material	(0.230)	-.184
Financial incentives provided by the government (e.g., aids, subsidies)	(0.233)	-.325
Potential economic incentives (e.g. developing ethnic tourism)	(0.248)	201
Housing comfort	(0.286)	.529 *
Modern and urbanized lifestyle	(0.227)	-.420 *
Durability of house	(0.261)	-.247
Emotional attachment to house	(0.232)	.771 ***
Inheriting traditional culture	(0.286)	.584 **
Consistent and uniform style of the houses in the entire village	(0.229)	.113
Opinions of neighbors/relatives/friends	(0.201)	-.116
Suggestions from government	(0.266)	-.007
Constant	(2.448)	-1.301
Observations	133	
Log Likelihood	-47.479	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	132.959	

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

5. Discussion

5.1. Desire for Modernity

The result of logit regression in terms of safety and cost factors does not seem consistent with the finding from the descriptive analysis. This may indicate that though

the majority of respondents across the sample rated safety and cost as important with respect to the factors influencing their housing material selection, safety and cost are not statistically significant factors that actually influence people when they decide. Only those who are attached to old houses, want to preserve traditional culture or care about the housing comfort will build the traditional style. The negative correlation implied that people's infatuation with modernized and urbanized lifestyle is the root cause of constructing concrete housing, more than all the other reasons.

What is worth noting is that people have different opinions on whether wooden or brick housing is expensive. Even many local experts and scholars who have been inquired held opposite opinions. Through conducting fieldwork and interviews, it was found that the cost of building a house is determined by the location of the village, the cost of transportation of building materials, whether the villager has his own woodland, and whether there are young laborers in the family to help. Therefore, the situation in each village and in each family is different. The housing cost issue, thus, cannot be generalized.

People's attitudes toward these two types of housing are also studied through the word clouds (Figure 1; Figure 2), where survey participants were asked to use three words to describe concrete housing and wooden housing, respectively. The font size corresponds to the frequency in which a certain word was mentioned. According to the word clouds of concrete housing (Figure 1), the words with the largest size—the most frequently mentioned words— "fireproof" and "rich." This indicates that the majority of people associate concrete houses with safety and consider them a demonstration of wealth and the owners' "status" in the community. In contrast, concrete housing, according to many others, is very "uncomfortable;" the characteristics of this material

leads to “humidity” and “wet” under local climate conditions. However, despite this issue, concrete housing brings a “change” — a change to a “convenient,” “urban-like” lifestyle. Interestingly, driven by community psychology, the construction of concrete-brick houses has acquired a competitive nature, their construction a means to “show off” people’s status and wealth before others and fill them with “envy.”

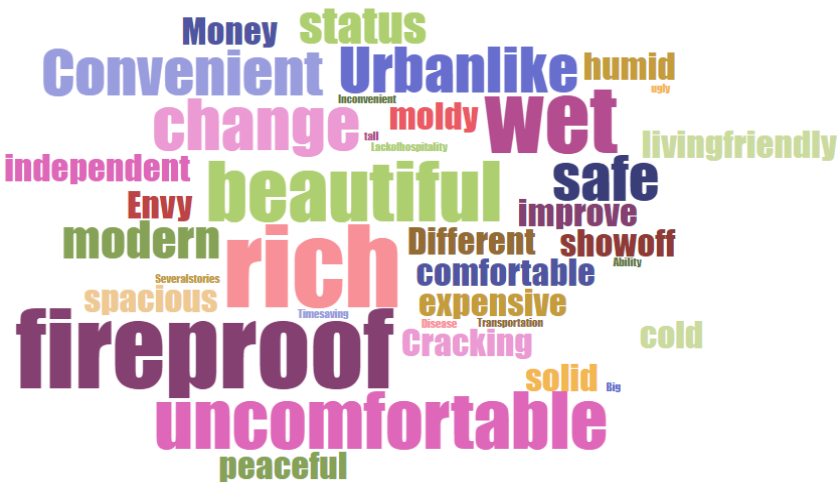

Figure 1. *Word Cloud for Concrete/Brick Housing.*

Figure 2. *Word Cloud for Wooden Housing.*

On the other hand, the most-mentioned term in describing wooden housing (Figure 2) is “comfortable.” The existence of wooden stilt buildings in this region has its rationality. They are an age-old practice rooted in centuries of experience based on local resource availability, terrain, and climate conditions. According to locals, these wooden housings are “cool” in summer and warm in winter. The drawbacks of the wooden structure are also very clear; it is “combustible,” “non-soundproof,” and “time-consuming” due to the complex traditional techniques and the amount of labor involved. While wooden housing can represent “tradition,” it also indicates a “poor” lifestyle. Concrete housing and wooden housing thus represent polar concepts, one symbolizing advancement and wealth, the other backwardness, and poverty.

Previous literature had, more or less, assumed that indigenous people instinctively resist the mainstream culture and voluntarily enjoy a “leave me alone” lifestyle (Berke et al., 1993). This study found that, on the contrary, achieving modernity and the desire to integrate into the dominant society has become a fashion in these indigenous communities. Not only did the survey result indicate that more participants prefer modern housing now, several interviewees also hold the same opinion. As one of them stated:

> *“If you ask me which (house) I like, I will tell you it must be a wooden house. But if you ask me which one I will build, I will tell you it must be a concrete one* [giggle]. *Now that everyone’s living standards have improved, why not improve our lifestyle.”*

Similarly, another villager asked the author:

> *“You live happily in the city and you come to see my life, but I also yearn for a better life. Why don’t we exchange? You live here and I go to your home.”*

The ‘better’ was identified by locals as being more affluent or appearing to be modern and urban-like. There is no clear answer about whether indigenous people are justified in abandoning their traditional ways of life and embracing modernization, or if they must be bound to their traditions to comply with their underlying specialty— to defend the authenticity and integrity of culture. Even if such a duty does not exist, at least there is a social expectation on them to resist development, to live indigenously, and to safeguard their societies as a branch of the human race and proof of cultural diversity. Thereby, the lifestyles of indigenous people, or the lives they are expected to live in, are very much decided by outsiders in the name of cultural preservation and for the sake of human benefits. Viewing indigenous people and their culture as merely research targets, exotic tourist attractions, and symbols of national identity, in fact,

furthers their exploitation and is akin to treating them as belonging to a living museum or a human zoo.

5.2 Culture is all about Life

From the perspective of human society, preserving cultural heritage through generations keeps the memories of civilization and our integrity as people. Though these ethnic people love almost everything about their culture, their attachment to the culture may not influence their actual decision. They do not see the continuation of wooden housing as the preservation of culture, and hence they will not take the so-called social responsibility. When asked a villager if she was willing to protect the traditional wooden house, she said:

"What is culture? I don't know, I don't care, I just want to take care of myself first."

There are many people who hold the same idea. A total of 17 percent of the survey respondents had no idea about what culture is, and more than half of the respondents thought that inheriting culture is not an important factor affecting their decision in reconstruction. The results of this study thus directly challenge the firmly-held assumptions by many scholars that most indigenous people strive to retain their culture and consider themselves victims of progress (Bodley, 2015; Kloos, 1977). Those who glibly demand the preservation of indigenous societies do not seem to realize the fact that culture might be a definition given by the non-local actors from society. However, for people living in that small traditional society, culture is all about daily life.

Thus, conflicts emerge over issues of cultural property rights and land ownership, or between the minorities and dominant majorities disputing the right to define and manage the heritage of the minority. The questions are: who defines cultural heritage? Who should control stewardship and the benefits of cultural heritage? Heritage might not be

an inherently positive thing; rather, it is a neutral concept that represents the history and identity of a group; its bond to the past, to the present, and the future. Yet, it can also be a tool for oppression. Cultural heritage may be positive and pleasant or negative and painful.

5.3 The Role of Disasters in the Change

Though the logit regression result does not indicate a significant correlation between disaster experience with the preference for concrete housing, the observations, and interviews conducted during the fieldwork imply the existence of the relation. The following photos show the pre- and post-fire scenes of two villages—Malong and Jiuji—that suffered major fires in the last five years.

Figure 3. *Malong Village in 2003, Photography by Xi,Su.(a); Malong Village in 2018, Photography by the Author (b)*

Figure 4. *Jiuji Village Prior to the Fire, retrieved from baike.baidu.com. (a); Jiuji Village in 2018, Photography by the Author (b)*

Reconstruction has changed the landscape of the villages dramatically. Modern

brick, concrete and multi-story buildings have sprung up and replaced the pre-fire wooden structures. For instance, as one of the few traditional villages nominated for the UNESCO tentative heritage sites, Jiuji's eligibility was canceled subsequently after this reconstruction due to the appearance change. The tragic memories brought by disasters deeply influence people's attitudes towards their houses. As described by a fire victim,

> *"I'm afraid. I'm afraid. I rebuilt the house twice, but both were destroyed by fire. I only want to build a brick house this time."*

It is not difficult to see in the fieldwork observations and interviews the impact of disasters on people's changing preferences for the housing materials. Interestingly, the opportunity for change provided by the disasters may not only be obtained passively but can also be actively created. A villager also mentioned a rumor spreading in the village after a fire:

> *"I heard that someone whose house can be saved (from the fire), but he did not try hard. Because he saw himself can be benefited from the opportunity…Well, of course, this is not common. Most people wanted to save their houses, why not? That situation…I just heard someone did it. After all, the insurance compensation and the government subsidies for a completed damaged house will far exceed those of a partially damaged house, which is enough to build a brick house."*

Regardless of whether this situation is fraudulent, moral, or even true, at least it revealed the great appeal of the opportunity to some locals. Why spend the money to repair traditional wooden homes when you have the money to build new houses? Disasters certainly create an opportunity for rebuilding new houses, especially the modern ones, but does that mean that there are no concrete houses in villages that do not have a history of fire? The answer, obviously, is no.

The most common appearance of ethnic villages in Guizhou, which is the coexistence of wooden and concrete houses. The fundamental reason for this is the prevalent pursuit of modern and urbanized life by the locals. Instead of blaming

disasters as the main cause of the appearance change of traditional villages, they are more likely to be the catalysts, accelerating the social change that has already taken place. If the traditional societies have been constantly eroding by the expansion of modernization activities, have all the villages in Guizhou changed their appearance? The answer is also no. There are villages that have kept all the houses in wooden structures, and one of their common characteristics, more or less, is the demand for tourism.

5.4 Tourism as the Tool for Development

As mentioned by Oakes (2016), tourism has, for long, been considered a "technology of government" for alleviating poverty, stimulating the economy and preserving cultural heritage in China's ethnic regions. With the rising of village-based ethnic heritage as a product of tourism, a dramatic increase in local fiscal revenue has witnessed and, in turn led to a growing acceptance in the way the government and the public sector perceive their heritage sources as a public commodity with economic value.

However, profits come coupled with the destruction of traditional societies. Many tourist-oriented villages only keep the appearance of the built environment, leaving the traditional lifestyle and livelihood significantly changed or even eliminated. Take Xijiang Qianhu ethnic-Miao Village as an example: the economic interests led to a rapid renovation of all the buildings in the communities catering to the tastes of tourists. According to locals, a large proportion of the residents are immigrants from outside, operating restaurants, shops, and guesthouses in this famous tourist destination. In addition to the business opportunities, residents receive an 18 percent share of the US $16 ticket fee to enter the village. The considerable revenue brought by

tourism has inspired other villages to emulate. Several places featuring ethnic-themed tourism began to emerge in this region, including places where traditional buildings were demolished or invisible previously. The local governments of these places rack their brains to recreate tradition by using a variety of methods to cover the concrete façade, hoping to transform the community from a sleepy backwater to a tourist magnet (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Brick buildings are pasted with yellow wood cardboard in Wenquan village(a); The entire street in Datang town is under construction with all the concrete buildings being covered with wood planks (b); A concrete building is painted with wood-like brown color (c); A concrete housing is decorated with wood railing (d); All photos were taken by the author.

These measures to renovate the places with vernacular architectural characteristics to attract tourists are not only a “staged authenticity” that falsely represents the culture and tradition but also a detriment to the local landscape as modernized communities. The balance between commercial exploitation of traditional villages and the preservation of tradition is always hard to find. During the fieldwork, few good examples have been found with well-preserved traditional buildings as well as tourism development, such as the Wudong Village and Getou Village. According to the interviews with the local leaders and members of the communities, the secret of their success lies in the strict community regulations and public education on heritage preservation, and modest tourism

development with just several guesthouses established. The Wudong Village also links residents' credits with the protection of their wooden houses and Getou Village seeks economic transformation through developing e-commerce of the honey industry.

Chinese scholars often say that protecting traditional villages is more difficult than protecting the Forbidden City—the world's largest imperial palace. There is only one Forbidden City, but there are countless ancient villages. The current protection guideline from the central government is to give the priority of protection efforts to the villages that have historic, artistic, scientific and social significance with financial and technical support, hoping to slow and stop the pace of destruction of these villages in their drive toward development. Though the future of these villages remains unclear, the exploration of the issue and the struggle between people's free choice with the state's promotion of urbanization and modernization could be a crucial step toward designing a culturally and economically sustainable society.

6. Conclusion

Through conducting fieldwork observations and collecting survey and interview data, this study explored the status of traditional villages as well as how people perceive the competing betterment of cultural preservation, modernization, and disaster risks in Southeast Guizhou. The survey results indicated that more people refer concrete or brick houses to traditional wooden houses. The main factors that influence people's decisions, as they stated, include safety, cost, and comfort. The result suggested that those who care about culture and comfort build wooden houses, and those who build concrete houses build them out of the desire for a modernized and urbanized life—not for safety, cost, or any other reason. The result, moreover, challenges the conventional wisdom that cultural preservation is endorsed by everyone.

In the current Southeast region of Guizhou, many historically significant villages are in perilous situations, and the encroaching modernization has changed the landscape of most of them. Disasters indeed provide villagers a long-awaited opportunity for change. However, as modernization and urbanization have already taken place, disasters are more likely to be a catalyst that accelerates this social change rather than the trigger. Besides, this study presents an interesting case that demonstrates the conflict between the social benefits of heritage preservation and an individual's or local's rights for development. Its results suggest that people tend to pursue personal development in terms of achieving modernization rather than contribute to the social betterment by maintaining traditional buildings.

This study does not consider the indigenous societies being overtaken by the expanding commercial world as inevitable. Nor does it deny the rights of indigenous to an independent existence. Instead, it hopes to draw the public's attention to the status of traditional villages and the indigenous rights' struggle to call for development of more feasible guidelines to sustain the vitality of indigenous culture. It also puts forward to the idea that social encouragement or expectation of indigenous people to be indigenous might be a continuation of historical injustices and exploitation perpetrated against them. After all, the basic law of cultural evolution is accumulation and change. Each generation inherits the culture from their predecessors and, based on the needs of their time, adds new interpretations. The solution for the survival and development of indigenous societies could be a brave embrace of social changes, seeking sustainable development from a cultural transformation, adaptation, and innovation. Therefore, the path to indigenous development should not be in the tradition, but in modernism—not in the past, but in the future.

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