

# The Symbiosis of Sacred Space and Secular Experience— Reflecting on Ethnographic Filming\*

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Based on the experience of ethnographic filming, this article outlines the dynamic process of the protection and development of Baima Tibetan traditional villages with the help of iconic descriptions of Baima Tibetans' daily lives and sacrificial activities, and explores how Baima Tibetans inherit their culture while adapting to social development with imagery means during rural revitalization, and how the locals integrate sacred space and secular experience in order to construct their own cultural symbols for the sake of embracing the new era. As far as anthropology-ethnographic descriptions of embodiment are concerned, traditional text research has limitations. In comparison, video graphic anthropology has natural advantages. Its advantages not only lie in the means of images, but also lie in the ability to connect the "sense of things", mind and nature, realizing the interaction between mind and things, and mentality and object. The visual ethnography is an important research method for anthropological research to enter the world of his other. This is also an important way to describe the integration and symbiosis of local subjectivity, local sacred space, and secular experience.

*Keywords:* sacredness, secularity, visual ethnography

## Sacred Space and Secular Experience

Through image album *Baima Tibetan People in the Deep of Minshan Mountains* recording intangible cultural heritage, the author attempts to present: the daily life of the Baima Tibetans in Pingwu County, Sichuan Province, their own demands for development, and attempts to describe the internal details of rural revitalization in ethnic areas under the background of contemporary cultural and tourism integration. The film focuses on the pre- and post-process of a Baima Tibetan village wedding, an unexpected extremely heavy rainstorm and mud rock flow, a process from an idea to realization of a rural homestay assisted by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, a villagers' self-organized cultural learning activity, and a round of local Spring Festival folk activities—a grand carnival "Jumping Chao Gai"; all have different features and outline from different perspectives the game and symbiotic relationship between the local natural environment, ecological wisdom, daily life, and "government, public welfare forces, and villagers" in rural revitalization; and how the sacredness

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and secularity are presented in the current village. Among these three, the “subjectivity” of the local people is fully presented, which is the key focus of the image album: how the local people themselves view the surrounding environment and changes, how the local government can alleviate poverty and provide assistance from multiple sources, how the villagers can spread culture, and how to express their development demands, and so on. In front of the Bao'en Temple gate built in the early Ming Dynasty in Pingwu, and in front of the stone pillar scripture building, Chinese and ancient Tibetan characters are engraved corresponding to each other, indicating the exchange and integration of different cultures.

Iliad (2019, p. 265) proposed that the Holy Land is a microcosm that replicates natural landscapes and reflects the whole. The altars and temples are also the microcosm and the center of the world, forming a microcosm of the world. Mythologist Campbell (2023) believes that “the vision released from the awakening of human nature in the eyes of the soul and spiritual consciousness, and the limitations of local and ethnic perspectives, may open up like the world, or even surpass it” (p. 11). In this sense, he mentions that “anywhere is the center of the world”. In the ritual of the Baima Tibetan people, it was found during the filming process that in today's sacrificial and ritual activities, the center is also determined through the production of auxiliary tools. For example, the Baima Tibetan people believe that the most powerful deity in their system, the “Bai Deng Ba Se Ru”, belongs to the scope of Bon religion. Before death, they must pass on the scriptures to the world and humanity. People in the world wanted to obtain the scriptures, so the Han people ran very fast and arrived first, and the best scriptures were taken away. Then the Tibetans rushed over and took another batch of scriptures, leaving some of the remaining bad ones for the Baima people. The core of this narrative lies in the fact that this story belongs to the center of the secular sense to explain the culture of the Han ethnic group and the culture of the Tibetan ethnic group separately. Spiritually, they believe that the highest mountain is Xuebaoding, and the earliest to see sunlight is the Great God Mountain, which is similar to the rituals of more ethnic groups. What is more obvious is that in the rituals of the Baima Tibetan ethnic group, sacred space and secular experience intertwine and coexist, and are seamlessly integrated.

The interweaving of sacraments and customs in the ceremonial space is reflected in the interweaving of social identities in the “Bai Mo” who preside over the ceremony, rather than being a single clergy. They often work as hairdressers, truck drivers, and even village chiefs, all of whom are engaged in production. This is related to their production methods and social systems, and also indicates that the local beliefs are not religiously systematized and often take on primitive forms. In the process of ritual preparation (“jumping to the front”), it is often necessary to prepare auxiliary tools and various ritual tools while preparing meals and sacrificial offerings for the ceremony. At the same time, secular social life can be carried out normally, and both can be present, allowing one to see the current reality of primitive religion and primitive Bon religion. Whether the people of the tribe have nightmares and seek help from “Bai Mo” or festivals, they fully reflect the duality of sacredness and secularity.

The process of festival ceremonies once again reflects the integration and inseparableness of holiness and secularity. Before a villager sacrifices mountain deity, another villager imitated various animals with dancing, which reflects the holiness and secularity of festivals intertwine and coexist.

In terms of building their own cultural symbols, local people have a clear awareness, in addition to the awareness of developing villages and requiring the preservation of old villages; they have the ability to survive in modern society, and they will also consciously promote it. For example, villagers will inform people who come to make Baidu Maps that we are called “Cloud Tribes”, please write it down for us.

### Cultural Respect and Local Practice

The film *The Baima Tibetan in the Deep of Minshan Mountains* was filmed from May 2018 to November 2019, with a field work period of about one and a half years. It also presents the cultural transformation process of the Baima Tibetans in Pingwu, Sichuan during the rural revitalization process. The video shows the wedding process held in the village. One night before the wedding (local statement: *xiaoye*, the day before wedding), the villagers set up a stage, sang, and danced together to assist the wedding company host, and are dressed in ethnic costumes, and the father held his daughter on the red carpet to drink wine one by one after acceptance. This combination of ethnic culture and western style weddings reflects the seamless integration of tradition and modernity. During the construction process of the homestay, the imagery reflects the demands and expressions of the local people, and how they are put into practice. For physical practice and ritual performances, the presentation of sacredness and secularity is achieved through the “Jumping Towards the Cover” activity in two different villages. How can knowledge production and academic concerns be conveyed through film and television anthropology? The author believes that academic personnel should enter the community from an anthropological perspective, adhere to academic ethics at all times, and adhere to basic work principles as cultural respect. On this basis, through the description of phenomena, theoretical reflection and knowledge production are presented. Such visual works themselves need to have a profound understanding of life and deep decryption of life. The ability to describe deeply and possess interpretive deconstruction completes knowledge production in the construction of public processes, and endows the work with an inherent character and logical context of “speaking one thing and meaning another”.

In the Ethical Code of the American Anthropological Association, it is proposed that the generation of anthropological knowledge is a dynamic process involving many different and constantly evolving methods. For moral and practical reasons, the generation and application of knowledge should be obtained in an ethical manner. Article 2 of the “Law” clearly states that:

anthropological researchers must ensure that they do not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of individuals who may be affected by their research, conduct research or other professional activities, or even be reasonably inferred to be affected by their research, when conducting and disclosing their research or publishing their research results.

A certain writer who went to Baima Village to collect materials and write before, mentioned that an old man had revealed to the writer a story about obtaining a marriage certificate with someone several years ago while drinking. However, the person involved clearly stated, “He later gave me the book without my permission”. This kind of matter of public publication privacy without the consent of the parties involved needs to be particularly avoided in anthropological research. This is reflected in the process of anthropological research in film and television, where a large amount of content can be concealed according to the needs of the parties involved. According to anthropological research ethics, “researchers must explain the possible consequences of different choices to research participants and declare that although they will make their best efforts, their anonymity may also be discerned, or the rewards may be difficult to present.” (Ding & Wang, 2011, p. 89). In the study of film and television anthropology, which directly speaks through the lens, starting from several years of field experience, with a cultural respect attitude, all are hidden. This is often presented unexpectedly in field work. In November 2019, the author unexpectedly heard about the death of an old Baima Tibetan and a provincial-level inheritor of intangible cultural heritage. When the author rushed to prepare for the funeral event, the county television station requested to move to shoot, and after discussion, the tribe asked the author to politely express the refusal. The

author discussed the deceased's eulogy with the clan members on site and personally witnessed the funeral scene, but due to ethical considerations, this part of the image was not included in the video material. It is worth mentioning here, the ethical principles determine whether the content of the screen is presented first, rather than the dramatic nature of the image itself.

### **Ethnic Identity and Embodiment Exercises**

Physical practice is an important means of maintaining ethnic identity. When it comes to the question of "What are the characteristics of an ethnic group?", Lucens' answer is: "Genealogical dimension, where family metaphors are always intertwined with those of kinship and family, and these 'family metaphors' and 'boundaries' are combined to become the main foundation of ethnic identity." (Zhang, 2015, pp. 59-60). "Jumping Chaogai" is conducted based on a village and a blood-related family based on the village. For example, when eating at home, it is organized by the oldest person, and whoever speaks or sings first is organized by the elderly.

In the rituals observed by the author, by mobilizing, organizing, and visiting each family, individual physical practices are effectively connected with family and social memories. Festival activities have become an important means of identification for the Baima Tibetan ethnic group. Connerton (2000, p. 117) mentioned in *How Society Remembers* that there is a progressive logical connection between individual level physical practice and collective level commemorative rituals, as well as social memory, commemorative rituals, and physical practice. The group activities of embodied performances are an important way to express and spread social memories. For the ritual life of the Baima Tibetans, as a form of physical practice, physical practice is divided into two categories: engraving and embodiment. Among them, embodiment practice utilizes the formation of habits and physical experiences to assist in the memory process. Here, memory is closely related to physical experience, such as the "Song Collecting Hall" of the Dong ethnic group, the "Drum Tibetan Festival" of the Miao ethnic group, the "Munao Zongge" of the Jingpo ethnic group, etc. Through extensive organizational mobilization, the ethnic group gathers according to prescribed rituals, either sings, slaughters animals, or dances, all of which possess the social function of "using physical practice to assist the memory process", relying on the same "habit formation and physical experience", and practice social memory together.

The film showcases the "Jump Chao Gai" activity of the Baima Tibetan people during the 2019 Spring Festival. As an important component of the Spring Festival celebration, it is the current presentation of the "National Intangible Cultural Heritage". It is a sacrificial activity held by blood-related families, which is not only a comprehensive religious ritual dance and cultural entertainment activity of the Baima people, to worship and invite gods, drive away ghosts and exorcism, to invite the gods to bless the prosperity of the population and the safety of the livestock.

The community activities observed by the author have shifted from blood-related families as a unit to villages as a unit, with village committees participating in the organization, clergy (i.e., Bai Gai) playing a core role in the ceremony, and official and civil forces participating together.

The content of "Jump Chao Gai" is about the achievements and stories of the ancestors of the tribe—demonstrating the ethnic history of the Baima people themselves, and even more specifically the history of tribes and families. And these actions themselves are historical memories transmitted through "physical exercises". Memory of the past can be reconstructed through oral songs, myths, and legends, as well as through ritual performances.

In *How Society Remembers*, Connerton (2000, p. 70) explicitly states that "in order to be completed correctly,

any physical practice requires a complete set of continuous actions”. He specifically mentions that “embodied practice provides an extremely effective memory system” (p. 13). The special memory effect of embodied practice relies on two distinctive features: their way of existence and way of acquisition. They will not exist objectively independent of their performances. For thousands of years, the gymnastics performance of jumping nests and covers has been lively and vivid in the depths of Minshan Mountains through “physical practice”, creating a grand celebration for the people themselves, reflecting distinct national characteristics and unique ways of memory. This, along with the Baima people in Wen County, the border of Shanxi and Gansu, has created a unique Baima memory. In February 2019, Pingwu County, Wenxian County, and Nanping County declared the “Big Baima Cultural Ecological Reserve” across the province, breaking the administrative boundary and jointly inheriting culture, which is the collective effort of relevant administrative departments in the new era for inheriting the memory of ethnic groups.

It is the day for jumping Caogai from the fifth day of the first lunar month to the 16th day of the first lunar month typically. However, various regions, tribes, villages, and families have their own time for jumping Chaogai, which is the “sacred time” mentioned by Connerton. The specific time is a clock synchronization (i.e., 24 hours), which means starting from sunset on the first day and ending at sunset on the next day. The jumping Cao Gai program includes these components: preparation stage, chanting scriptures to invite gods, expelling evil spirits, and sharing happiness with gods and humans. For Bai Mo, who recites scriptures, he believes that the singing and dancing behind it are not as important as this chanting, “the most important part is this chanting part”. Usually, the village where the event is held invites three Bai Mo. If there is no one in this village, you need to go to another village to invite them. Usually, as the ceremony is held in different villages, Bai Mo is invited to different occasions, and the rush to the venue is usually busy. In the temporary tent built for them to recite scriptures, once they start reciting scriptures, they do not stop, the necessary food is delivered on time, and women are prohibited from entering the field.

Connerton (2000, p. 70) mentioned in *How Society Remembers*: “Wearing masks is to immediately have direct contact with the ghosts of the underworld; during this direct contact, the personality of the person involved and the personality of the deity he represents become one”. In his view, the people wearing masks are not only representatives of the deceased, but also become the ancestors represented by these masks—at this moment, they “become” the deceased and the ancestors they represent. Dancing the Chaogai is also known as the “Ghost Face Shell Dance”; people wear ferocious masks and become Chaogai, starting ritual exercises, demonstrating ancestors, and communicating between ancient and modern people. Firecrackers set off on time at midnight belong to the category of “sacred time”, and this process is a specific exercise of “sacred events”.

During the 2019 Spring Festival, through the observation of the national intangible cultural heritage of the Baima Tibetan ethnic group, “Jumping Chaogai” in two villages, the author found that there is a huge difference in the actual presentation effect between villages without tourism development and villages with deep development. This also indicates that while maintaining stability, traditional flexibility and culture have different aspects in production capacity as well as actual differences in village production and life, while ritual performances have emerged in daily life practices. In the Ivadai village without tourism development, the author observed that:

On the morning of the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, after a long recitation of scriptures, Bai Mo began to jump towards the building, and people gathered in the courtyard. They waved various colorful prayer flags in the wind, shouting in unison, and responding to each other. After that, people flocked to worship the mountain

god. At the shrine, the girls stopped outside the wooden door and could not approach. The boys marched forward to worship, singing and returning in line. After sacrificing to the divine mountain, it did not come to an end, but instead continued to enter households one by one. This activity gathered all the men, women, old and young in the village, and all participated in it. Every time they arrived at a house, they saw Chaogai and Baimo leading villagers dressed up in groups to enter. The sound of firecrackers kept coming one after another, shouting loudly while dancing and waving their wooden swords. Every time they arrived, they pounded the wooden door with force, aiming to dispel evil and welcome the New Year. Boys lined up in front and girls behind. After entering the house, they circled the stove three times and continued to sing and dance. Bai Mo say the words of blessing to this family under the Paper Cuttings. Each family has different blessings. Every household should prepare alcohol (or cola) for everyone to drink. Chao Gai and Bai Mo entered the door, and the girls lined up on both sides of the door to greet them. While reciting words, they continued to sing, drink, throw people into the sky, and bless each other after Bai Mo finished the ritual and left. After walking through every household in the village, one person carrying a basket of leaves headed towards the village entrance and dumped it at the foot of the mountain, with the sound of firecrackers rising again. People continued to line up and dance, imitating various animals such as frogs and bears in their dance steps. The elements of holiness and secularity, solemnity and liveliness, reverence and blessings, sacrifice and revelry are all strangely mixed together, reflected in the external form of life, which is strong and fresh, simple and naive, and linked to a system of heaven, earth, man, and god in the scriptures. The people here have been using this method for thousands of years. To bid farewell to the old and welcome the new, people who have worshipped the mountain gods, ancestors, family gods, and kitchen gods naturally feel a burst of joy.

In the ritual process presented in the image, people unconsciously connect individual level physical practices with collective level social memory through a series of prescribed actions such as shouting, dancing, “wielding a wooden sword to beat a wooden door”, “circling the fire pond three times”, then “throwing a basket of leaves down the valley”, and “simulating frog, male and other animal dance steps”. History repeats itself once again. The leaves in the basket symbolize life, and they need to be poured into the lower ground. The scene of leaves being dumped into the valley from this basket was captured and recorded, and this set of dynamic images with metaphors and synaesthesia showed that visual media provided experience for the transformation of anthropology. It is worth mentioning that

film anthropology focuses not on the film itself, but on a series of cultural relationships that permeate and encode in film. Just as anthropology can interpret these relationships in film and television, anthropologist can also use film to construct works that explain how culture permeates and shapes social experiences with a richer sense. (McDowell, 2003, p. 13)

By paying attention to the physical practice, social organization, specific performances, and nonverbal details of the ceremony, the public activities of the village were constructed through the disciplinary path of film and television anthropology, in which the sacredness was conveyed and the individual was mobilized, and the spontaneous physical exercises of the tribe were truly depicted, grasping the relationship with the village from a holistic perspective.

In the mature tourism development villages of Yazhezaozu Group, the activities are held on the seventh and eighth days of the lunar calendar, and the entertainment nature of the activities is more obvious. In addition to attracting tourists, self-entertainment, spontaneous organization of sheep killing, organization, and greeting of the village, the village invests, and various households raise funds and work. Young people not only dance traditional ethnic dances, but also play various games, and there are also online anchors and tourists who live

broadcast the activities by the campfire, selling local specialties in mountainous areas. Traditionally, the activity of jumping towards the cover requires three consecutive years of jumping once it begins. The film also presents the folk practice of “jumping towards the building” in two different villages. By comparing villages that have not undergone tourism development with those that have undergone deep development, the fixed and variable nature of physical practice and ritual exercises is presented: The latter, in the context of cultural tourism integration, restores tradition for tourism purposes and serves as a landscape to attract tourists. This also reflects the correlation between community traditions and current market demands, evolving into interdependent reality, which is also the manifestation of sacredness and secularity in the current Baima Village. Imagery also attempts to answer the question of how to inherit memory through ritual performances.

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