

PRESERVATION OF QIĀNG ZÚ MINORITY'S ARCHITECTURE IN SÌ CHUĀN

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ABSTRACT

his paper studies a new concept of restoration in the contemporary world. When we talk about preservation and restoration, we often think in terms of material patrimony of a culture. Unfortunately this mindset overlooks the immense patrimony of knowledge that is the culture in its totality. This paper aims to conduct a case study of ethnic culture in Sichuan, China: ethnic culture of the 羌族 Qiāng Zú minority. The goal is to analyze the local culture from the point of view of the ancestral tradition and point out an appropriate system of preservation of a reality so delicate that it is at risk of extinction. Our idea is to create a global intervention in conformity of strategy able to cope with give the fragility of the place and protect it from the adverse effect of the globalization. In so doing, we intend to illustrate some possible hypotheses on the preservation of the Qiang minority's ability to preserve the value architecture.

Keywords : *Chinese minority / human settlements; restoration of community / low scale approach / Qiang minority / vernacular architecture*

1. “DELICATE, TOO DELICATE!”

Nowadays, there is a widespread belief that the world is a homogeneous place where it is possible everywhere to do similar things, with a similar price and almost similar comfort with a small degree of exotic difference. It is always possible to eat famous food, get connected on the Internet, relish healthy and “ethnic” food, pay with a “non-ethnic” credit card. Everything is well planned and organized, and if something goes wrong, well, the solutions to all your problems are already has been foreseen for you and you have the “freedom” to choose the Options A), or B) or C). Your life is full of comforts and without any risk, even in the most unbelievable situation. Certainly, it’s a little bit expensive, but the best way to spend *your* money is to give yourself an enjoyable life.

We have started our dissertation with a semi-serious metaphor, which nevertheless reflects a reality. Many papers are against globalization, and we join in the chorus. But our experience has some originality that we think could be useful for others. We would like to start with a personal case. My family has a past of great travellers. My grandfather travelled in the mid-twenties of the last century to Japan and China, taking back very interesting photographical documentation with a dramatic realism [Fig. 1, 2, 3]. Less dramatic and more pleasure-loving, my father visited the five continents and from Asia he brought back pieces of art of a very high quality. The pictures that I’ve seen and all the “war chest” today have been lost or remain in some museum, and in my family house. And not only that, our investigation in Asia began just a few years ago. We first arrived in China in 2003, although our experience was relatively brief, we could ascertain during our continuous stay in Asia the progressive losses of identity of human culture in this continent. What we mean by cultural identity is the unique character of a social context that distinguishes it from others and makes it precious, thanks to its differences. [Fig. 4]

The aspect that appears more distressing is that this disaster is very well masked. Apparently, it is still possible to buy local handcrafts in a remote area, to watch extremely impressive cultural performances, to have a holiday in very fascinating places [Fig. 5]. But if we abandon the tourist’s point of view - very often adopted even by the scholars – the real ethnographic discovery it becomes almost impossible. And we discover that the local handcrafts are not local at all, they are made in a remote place¹; and they are not handcrafts but product made in a ramshackle factory. The same is true for the ancestral culture. In ancient times, ritual dances and singing celebrated the harmony between Heaven and Earth, whereas today in improved life conditions the same songs are performed by poorly-paid actors, in fixed working hours, with low-quality costumes. Until few years ago, it was possible to visit 苗族 [miáo zú] village after a day-long trip in places without roads. Today we can go there by car, and pay a 100 RMB² ticket to visit a village perfectly (re)constructed in solid concrete, a perfect imitation of the original one, unfortunately destroyed by the local government because it was not appropriate for the modern massive tourist invasion. The same situation can be seen in the province of 贵州 [guì zhōu] near the city of 贵阳 [guì yáng] [Fig. 6], where a very famous natural park, renowned for its beauty, is celebrated in every tourist guide for its “important relics 苗族 [miáo zú]”, and magnificent bridge completely remade in reinforced concrete to resemble wood [Fig. 7, 8]. When we asked the reason for this absurd situation, the answer was that the original bridge was “delicate, too delicate”!

¹ We report, as a token, the case of our very good friend in Kathmandu, who is in the area of commerce in between Nepal and China. His business regards the Nepalese handcraft, but made in Tibet. As the situation is ridiculous, is an evident fact.

² This happen to us in 海南 [hǎi nán], in a 苗族 [miáo zú] village, not very far from 海口 [hǎi kǒu].

2. THE REASON FOR THIS PAPER

The world as it existed in the past does not survive anymore. Nowadays, it continues to lose languages, dialects, handicrafts and religions, to be substituted by a standardized system of values and ideology.

The goal that we intend is to denounce the progressive flattening of worldwide culture and their disappearance. To do this, we intend investigate a specific case. We are talking about the 羌族 [qiāng zú] population located mostly in 四川 [sì chuān] [Fig. 9]. We can notice that the complexity of this minority could be of great interest; there exists the necessity for a global approach in the preservation of this community, a topic that we will face in the last part of this paper.

Obviously, the goal of our work is not a ethnic-anthropological description of the 羌族 [qiāng zú] [Fig. 10]. We are especially interested in the topic of the management of the territory in a point of view that can create a large-scale project with the specific objective of sustainability. For sustainability we intend the preservation of knowledge's patrimony of a place, which include the material and immaterial aspects of a culture³.

3. THE “RAM’S CHILD”

The 羌族 [qiāng zú] minority derives their name from 羊 [yāng], the ideogram which forms the upper part of 羌. 羊 [yáng] indicates the sheep, both the ewe (绵羊 [mián yáng]) and the ram (公绵羊 [gōng mián yáng]) or mutton (公羊 [gōng yáng]) [Fig. 11]. The lower part of the ideogram includes 人 [rén], “human being” as indicated in the book “说文解字” [shuō wén jiě zì] by 许慎 [xǔ shèn]. This ethnic group is documented as one of the most ancient in the mainland China has traditionally the duty of the breeding of the sheep traditionally this minority breeds hence its name. According to the ancient records, the 羌族 [qiāng zú] population (from now, just Qiang) has generated many important ethnic groups in China and key figures in the future Chinese state, given birth to heroes with a great warrior's courage. They are believed to be among the most important Chinese ethnic groups because they have generated both the 汉族 [hàn zú] and the 藏族 [zàng zú]. In reality, the situation is much more complex⁴. In fact the Qiang was mixed with other indigenous populations in the Chinese continent, and finally have generated the 汉族 [hàn zú] ethnic group. For the Tibetan issue, the situation is even more complex and can be a subject of discussion for more specific studies on both Chinese and Western languages. Our issue here concerns a mixture of Qiang and other populations living on the Tibetan *plateau*, with an additional influence of Nepalese people⁵. In Chinese history, the Qiang were known as great warriors.

³ For additional detail, Paolo Vincenzo Genovese, Silent farmland. Low Scale Approach for Eco-Village in China, in 香港天津可持续发展建筑技术专业咨询研讨会, Tianjin P. R. of China, 25-27 October 2009.

⁴ For a detailed analysis, 陈蜀玉, 羌族文化 – Culture of Qiang, 西南交通大学出版社, 成都, 2008.

⁵ In detail, analyzing the language of the area, the experts have discovered a series of interesting relationships. Both the Tibetan and the Qiang are branches of the family's language of Tibeto-Burman. A tribe of the ancient Qiang lived together with the native of the Plateau of Tibet during the Tang Dynasty. These two groups generated the Tubo nationality – 吐蕃 [tǔ fān]. Then, the 吐蕃 [tǔ fān] was gradually mixed with many other tribes Qiang, which could be become the actual Tibetan. Something similar could be demonstrated for the Jingpo group – 景颇 [jǐng pō]. This and other information in 陈蜀玉, 羌族文化 – Culture of Qiang, 西南交通大学出版社, 成都, 2008, pp. 23-27.

In many academic writings, the Qiang are considered to have a matriarchal family structure, which is true. This is in different areas where the Qiang live, in particular in the counties of 汶 [wèn], 理 [lǐ], 茂 [mào] in the prefecture of 阿坝 [ā bà]. For this reason, mentioned the Qiang were also called people of the “Eastern Kingdom of Woman” – 东女国 [dōng nǚ guó]. The most well-known case is the Kingdom of Supi – 苏毗国 [sū pī guó] – probably located in the northern part of the plateau of Tibet, where a Queen 苏毗 [sū pī] reigned for more than twenty years during the Sui dynasty. Men were excluded from every office and their only duty was to be soldiers. The women despise the men, treat them as servants. Every woman could have many male servants, but no man could have a female servant. Also the surname was transmitted following the female line.

The language of Qiang is a part of the Tibeto-Burman branch. We are talking about the spoken language because the Qiang doesn't have any form of written language, except recent form that use the Chinese ideograms to transcribe the Qiang sounds. The Qiang language is not undifferentiated but includes different tribal dialects that over the past centuries progressively disappear; these differences were one of the most important obstacles to the unification of the Qiang population as a stronger and dominant group. Even today, these differences persist, especially in the two main branches of this minority's language, northern and southern. The northern one, for example, has a more complex grammar⁶. This dialect is based on more than 45 consonants. Although the increase in the use of the Chinese mandarin in the communication, the Qiang language is still the basis of communication among local people in their daily life, in the religious and cultural activities, but in school Chinese is prevalent because the Qiang language doesn't have a written form. Obviously, this hasn't prevented the Qiang from creating a huge literary tradition, myths and legends based, mainly, on eight kinds of topics: the creation of the world, the origin of human being, the nature and its transformation, plants and animals, totems and ancestors, natural disasters, the origin of culture, and divinized heroes. The stories are always extremely vivid and packed with symbols that express the ancestral myths. The interest in this kind of cultural production should not be limited a simple ethnic curiosity, but as every ancient culture there should be a real immersion in a “Living-past”. Thanks of some pockets of population living in very remote places, the traditions are still preserved. Stories like the Father 木比塔 [mù bǐ tǎ], 木巴西 [mù bā xī] and 如补西 [rú bǔ xī], could be connected with myths extremely old if analyzed in certain philological perspectives. Likewise the story of 燃比 [rán bǐ] who stole fire from Heaven to give it to humans, follows the myth of Prometheus, but with interesting variations and a happy ending, very much appreciated by the Chinese people⁷. As often the case, in these poems we can find a very precise description of lifestyle and an indication on the spiritual and material culture of the population. In the myth of 木姐珠 [mù jiě zhū] and 斗安珠 [dǒu ān zhū] we can find a precise description of the famous tower of Qiang illustrating with a very elaborated sketch of the structure, the living styles, the function, the technology.

The music of Qiang is extremely interesting. Their folksongs have a seven-syllable structure per line, with some improvisations that depend on the situation and on the specific inspirations. A song called “Of joyful drinking”, in which there is a great emphasis to mark some part of the melody.

⁶ For example, in the northern dialects the imperative form of the verb has eight prefix, but the southern dialects have just one.

⁷ Since the Qiang culture has no writing language, it is impossible connect the name of gods or of the myth with a specific meaning. In fact the transcription that we have reported are in Chinese and therefore there are just transliteration in non-appropriate ideograms of the original legends because the Chinese doesn't have the same background of Qiang. It become impossible to recreate the real meaning of a name, starting from the etymology, completely lost in this case.

The Qiang religion is of special interest because it is strongly related to the architecture. The Qiang have a great fear of natural and human calamities. Therefore their divinities express in various ways this attitude. They have a prevalent animistic conception of the world. In fact, the spiritual life of the Qiang is extremely rich and vivid because of the co-presence of primitive cults, the worship of nature, spirits in every living and inanimate things, the cult of the ancestors, the role of wizards and the belief in ghosts, indeed a universe where the Gods of nature have a prevalent position⁸. Despite the presence of common gods in the Qiang culture, every village has its own particular spirits. These gods protect the villages from the invaders; these spirits reside on the top of the Qiang's towers—村寨的碉堡 [cūn zhài dí diāo bǎo]. The descriptions of the details require too much space; therefore we have to confine ourselves to a cult of adoration of heroes once really existed and became divinized. In the county of 茂县 [mào xiàn] there is a renowned little village named 黑虎 [hēi hù]. The name refers to a great warrior, General Hei Hu – “Black Tiger” –, who heroically fought against the troops of the Qing dynasty (清代) in order to defend the independence of 茂县 [mào xiàn] county, and finally died in the war. In his honour the village was named after him and the local women wear a white hat to remember his memory, an aspect that distinguishes them from other ladies in the area. Another element that is typical of the religion of the Qiang is the cult of the White Stone 白石崇拜 [bái dàn chóng bài], a quartz stone put on the top of the Qiang towers in memory of the battle between Qiang and 戈基 [gē jī]. From another point of view, the White Stone represents fire, as shown in the proverb: “Where there is white stone, there is fire”. This is connected to the cult of fire and fire's god who resides in the White Stone. At the same time, fire is the symbol of god. Fire is one of the most precious and important elements in the Qiang culture.

4. QIANG ARCHITECTURE

Qiang architecture has some originality that cannot be found among other Chinese minorities. It is radically different from the 汉 [hàn] architecture both from the typological point of view and in the use of the material.

First and foremost the Qiang architecture concerns the organization of the territory⁹. The area of 茂县 [mào xiàn] is located at the end of a series of valleys extremely wild [Fig. 12]. The mountains are waterless. There is little vegetation and the agriculture is almost absent; there exist only a few kinds of mushrooms and grazing. The slope is abrupt and not easily accessible. The Qiang villages are located in valleys extremely narrow and never in a valley bottom. Their access is really arduous, obviously for defensive reasons. What in the past was an advantage, has now become an obstacle and created many problems such as difficulties for the agriculture and the economy, absence of mass of connection, lack of unity among different populations creating weaknesses for other populations geographically speaking, the Qiang villages are always very small. In our study there were no more than one hundred houses, one next to another, these small villages are completely separated from each other because they are located in the middle of wild mountainsides. In between two valleys there

⁸ We can find gods of sky– the most important is the God of the Heaven, in charge of everything on the Earth–, of fire, of mountains, of trees, of ship, etc.

⁹ We have done a very limited investigation on the Qiang territory, visiting some villages in the area of 茂县 [mào xiàn] county. The present observations are related only to this area. Nevertheless the Qiang architecture and its organization in the territory have constant characters, even with some differences.

isn't any connection and the only way to arrive in the village is to cover the bottom of the valley along trails in very bad conditions. Strategically perfect, the settlements are lack of every kind of access.

The villages are located following rules based partially on 風水 [fēng shuǐ]. In fact they are orientated toward the bottom of the valley and “sit” on the mountain that have to be on the back [Fig. 13]. These are common geomantic rules for mountain villages. In fact, the Qiang architecture is much more varied than the 汉 [hàn], which has a typological character much more repetitive depending on areas. The conformation of the Qiang villages is quite narrow [Fig. 14, 15, 16]. Sometimes we can find compacted blocks of building and “clinging”. The distribution happens through small roads that climb up between the buildings, more or less two meters large, sometime become larger sometime smaller. Often we find steps leading to the biggest gradient. We could not make a more precise observation of general organization of the village for lack of any map or picture record of this area.

In these traditional settlements have at least two characteristics regarding the architecture of the buildings. The first is the famous Qiang watchtower, 羌族碉楼 [qiāng zú diāo lóu], and the second is the private houses, a very interesting example of architecture with a very particular structural space. This has numerous variations, although it follows a very precise model.

The watchtower is the most famous element of Qiang architecture [Fig. 17]. It has a double function. The first one is military, as the Chinese character demonstrates – 碉楼 [diāo lóu] – literally 碉 [diāo] is “fort, block-house”, but also “stone chamber”, and together with with 楼 [lóu] (traditional 樓), it indicates “multi-story building, tower”. Its second use is related to religion. Both of these deserve a precise description. The Qiang watchtowers are amazing in terms of technology, as it is a symbol for the territorial organization and for traditional meaning. Almost all the counties of the prefecture of 阿坝 [ā bà] and Qiang have a tower, except for three of them. The county of 茂县 [mào xiàn] contains the most watchtowers [Fig. 18]. Hundreds of this kind of buildings were disseminated in the area; becoming an invincible system for sighting the enemy. Sometimes, they rise individually in the mountain, but we can often find them beside houses or in the centre of the villages. We didn't find any rule that fixed their number and their position inside a given place or village, but we presume this is related to the importance of the village, the strategic position of the settlements, and the importance (and richness) of the family who built it. In fact, incontrovertibly related to a military function, the Qiang watchtower also served other purposes. In fact, the Qiang villages are a failure tactical point of view: there aren't any defensive walls, they are not connected to each other, they lack methods for supplying food and water, the structure of the village was conceived without taking into consideration a defensive system, and as such it can be conquered by a small number of people. The only element that can be helpful in case of attack is the impervious geography and the fact that attack could be launched from only one direction that is from the entrance of the valley. In addition, in some cases the number of the watchtowers is not militarily justified. In 黑虎 [hēi hù], for example a group of three towers located, betrays the strictly military economy [Fig. 19]. It should be noted that the tower of this place face a very special valley, a secondary gorge, extremely wild and impervious, no more lived. The towers rise on a horrible ravine and the view of the complex is a striking by beautiful and gives a sense of dramatic uneasiness. The interesting aspect is that in the small valley we still can see numerous caves inhabited since time immemorial, which are places, of the cult of ancestors until today. Since the watchtowers are always places of homage paid to the ancestors, they serve therefore a second function. In fact, there is on the top of this high building with an altar. We can find at least two different kinds of crown: the first one, used

into traditional rites is flat, the second one, a throne-like is for the god. Here, it is decorated with quartz white-stone that we have discussed previously. This confirms the hypothesis that it served religious function [Fig. 20]. It should be noted that the white stone on the top of the high construction implies the idea of *crowning*. The white stone is in fact *horns*, symbolic elements that can be found on the lintel of every portal and in the centre of the rood of every building and are represented by a mutton skull. Horns are a solar symbol which consequently, denote a regal, aspect very significant in every traditional culture.

Since the tower is strictly related to the figure of 释比 [shì bǐ], the spiritual leader of Qiang and also the supreme authority for the conception, project and construction of every building. In their conception, the tower represents the Heaven and the God of white stone is a key element. The construction took place together with rites that include sacrifices and the placement of the white stone that symbolizes five guardian deities – of Heaven, Earth, mountains, Trees (forest) and Villages (the human world).

The height of the recent tower varies according to its age and it can be dated back to between the 17th Century and today. Nevertheless the typology and the technique are much older. The Qiang watchtowers are well-known since 后汉书·西南夷传 [Hòu hàn shū. Xī nán yí chuán], the book which contains records that “they [the Qiang] live in the mountain and build stone houses 10 丈 [zhàng]¹⁰ high”. The interesting point is that even today the technology of the construction is not lost and the people of those areas are able to make the same building in the same way as in the past. The heights are variable, and can be between 20 to 50 meters. The width is less variable. Generally speaking, it is 4 meters (seldom 5 meters) wide. Surprisingly these towers are able to resist very strong earthquakes. Most of the watchtower in the area of 茂县 [mào xiàn] resisted the earthquake of May 2008. The towers are definitely spectacular but their construction technology is even more admirable. To be so resistant, the Qiang people had elaborated a series of really incredible solutions. The first one concerns the general form of the building. The tapering tower rises up on the top, and forms a convex parabolic shape outside. This solution has the advantage of radically reducing the weight at the centre of gravity, giving more stability to the building. In addition, this curve generates a kind of “foot” that permit the tower to have a much larger and stable base. Another additional advantage is that the tower can support higher weight thanks of the larger base. It becomes progressively more tapering as it rises, and this is the reason why the Qiang tower can be so high and do not collapse under its own weight. Another characteristic, concerns the *stellar* shape, called 乾棱子 [qián léng zǐ], “celestial edge”¹¹. The tower has many kinds of shape-plans. It has at least four corners in hexagonal and octagonal forms¹². The sides of the building are not rectilinear but convex, mainly for structural and aesthetic reasons. This ensures a better stability for the lateral thrust. Increasing the number of the edges, the tower can resist the earthquake everywhere it is generated. The number of the edges depended on spiritual reasons, the rank of the family, and the cost.

¹⁰ 1 丈 [zhàng] is an ancient measure unit that corresponds more or less to 3 and 1/3 meters. Even at that time, the towers were taller than 30 meters. Today we have some examples 50 meters high.

¹¹ In fact the translation is much more complex. 棱 [léng] can be translated as “edge”, but also as “awe-inspiring air”, 乾 [qián] is much more indicative because it indicates the first of the Eight Diagrams (八卦) of 易经 [yì jīng], “the creative, the Heaven”. It is related to “Heaven, male, father”.

¹² In the traditional science, every one of these forms has a very specific meaning, but the description of it could take a very long analysis and for this we have to avoid this task. What we can say now is that we believe in the incorrect justification of certain sources that indicate these forms connect with a nomadic tradition. The real reference is on an ancestral philosophy with an enormous complexity. In other writings we have touched on these topics.

An earthquake is known to generate two kinds of wave; horizontal and vertical. The stellar form of the tower absorbs the first one for the subsultory movement. The materials used for the construction provide the solution. The houses were mainly built with stone with variable dimensions¹³, joined together with clay¹⁴. The clay became solid and compact in this climate, keeping its plastic nature which make it a shock-absorber in case of vibration of the earth.

Also the construction process is very interesting. The tower is built floor by floor. This means that after it rose up a level, the builders elevated a wall to a certain height and after that they posed the main girder of the upper level and then built the next floor. This permits the lower wall to become dry and compact in a homogeneous way. Before that the heavy stone-wall was erected in the upper part. As a result, the construction of a single tower took many years.

The houses are not very different from the towers from the constructive point of view, except that they are less spectacular [Fig. 21, 22]. The building materials are similar. Stones were binded together linked with adobe, with interesting additions of wood (like windows and beam) well preserved by the dry climate of the area over a long period of time. Their structure is very interesting and unique compared with that of other areas. However, a common characteristic resides in the use of the boundary-wall that divided the inner part of the house from the public area. Both kinds of houses, in this sense, are *set back*. In Qiang houses do not have any courtyard and the structure of the space is not based on pavilions but on a single-block building that encloses all the living space of the family clan. The Qiang houses are very big. They have many rooms on at least two levels, and a terrace on the top. The main entrance is through a little door. As is the case in the 汉 [hàn] architecture, it is located on the sideways in the middle of the wall. Behind the door, rises an undecorated wall. The house is a single-block. The building looks relatively severe and its form quite repetitive. From outside it appears without too many variations: we can see big walls of the same depth, with few small windows, all solution that allows the maintenance of the inner temperature in winter and summer. The profile of the building, from the outside, shows two levels; the one behind is higher than the one in front. Interesting enough, it is quite common in the villages of our study, is a crown as a decorative element one meter below the top of the wall.

The structure of the house is very complex. The block is compact and rectangular. The ground level has two blocks close to each other on both sides of the entrance which is located in the middle of the facade, inside a kind of “covered court” [Fig. 23]. The U-formed building is built in stone, except the central court flanked by the two blocks the second floor of which is completely made of wood. At the ground level there are rooms for the animals, extremely dark. The family life takes place on the second floor. The access is through stairs extremely steep and dark, which start from the inner court and end in the heart of the house, which is relatively spacious. Its size probably is around 8x6 meters. In the middle there is a fireplace [Fig. 24]; where members of the family gather. This room has only a very small one with doors open on three sides connecting to the bedrooms. It is the room that overtop above the entrance of the ground floor, is what can be described a loft. It is built on an enormous wood beam. Because this is completely made of wood, its microclimate is very different compared to the main room. It also serve as a summer-room, as opposed to a winter-room, more protected and located at the back of the building. This “veranda” connects the two bedrooms on the two lateral sides of the building.

¹³ An average size could be more or less 20 centimetres each side.

¹⁴ We have not yet found it possible to realize a chemical analysis of this material and we have not able to find any precise data about it.

The third floor, accessible through stairs, is as steep and as dangerous as the second one with a big terrace covering the whole surface of the building. It is divided in two parts: one is completely open and used for drying wheat, corn, wood; the other part is roofed to give protection in case of rain. And then, another little staircase leading to the top of this roof, a solution that increases the surface for the handling of the agricultural products [Fig. 25].

In conclusion, the architecture of the Qiang has a remarkable quality, both from the technological and symbolic point of view. It represents an interesting example of balance between the environment and the landscape, where every single detail is a part of an economic and spiritual system extremely complex [Fig. 26, 27].

5. PROBLEMS AND (IM)POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Our conclusive paragraph concerns the safeguard of an extremely delicate ethnic minority. Economic, cultural and geographical context as well as other external factors often go against the tradition. This fact is palpable, sensitive, ancient and especially, low-scale and it cannot resist the pressure of globalization. For this reason the safeguarding of the material patrimony must consider a multiplicity of factors which, usually, are left out. By safeguard we mean the preservation of material patrimony, but in this case it is much more difficult because it concerns the intangible heritage and not only buildings and handicrafts, but the whole culture

Every form of action has to be non-invasive. This means that massive investment and radical rethinking of the structure of the Qiang society will result in a complete destruction of the local character, especially at the village level. Our proposal follows a very well-defined pattern of thinking present in the international discussion and it concerns a “decision making” strategy. The lifestyle and the rhythm of certain communities unfolds in a different modality when compared to the rest of the world. The modern decision system does not guarantee success. The variables and, especially, the unforeseen are too many and do not adapt well to a traditional environment.

In the past the goal of preservation overlooks the time factor and the material benefits which were considered secondary elements. The conception of the time factor was different from the contemporary one. In the traditional society, time was not quantifiable and it was a part of a wider system; human time was just a portion. The community was living in the continuity of the time and the presence of an individual person was not important because the spiritual universe ensure the perpetuation of a reality much more stable than the material world. The present system of financing is also dangerously contradictory in itself. Every small community has its own equilibrium created through the centuries. In the past there certainly was a connection between the different components, but it was based on mutual independence. In other words, these components were almost self-sufficient, and exchanges, if any, happen in a surrounding that can be called “Bio-region”, a place with homogeneous cultural, geographical, economical characteristics. Whenever extraneous elements come to be a part of this system, they necessarily break up its stability. It is clear that this is not always negative. The improvements are often good in which case the original system is radically changed.

For this reason, every solution that is intended to respect the nature of the traditional society, or in our case the mountain community of Qiang, is bound to consider carefully the system of intervention and aspects which involve different dimensions: decisional, financial,

architectural, food provisioning, etc. Our proposal is not a form of autonomy as this is contradicting to the concept of governance of the territory, especially in the Chinese reality. Nevertheless we would like to propose the following strategies:

- a. Intervention to safeguard the material and immaterial aspects of the place;
- b. Decisional strategy of the central government related to this intervention that should be *local* but considered from a global perspective;
- c. Decrease the financial model “from the top” and strengthen the capability of self-sustainment;
- d. Increase the cultural identity of a different reality;
- e. Avoid the invasion of mass tourism. Tourism has the immediate advantage of generating huge financial incomes, but in the long run, such a policy has its short comings and, the adverse potential to the territory;
- f. Creation of a “museum of the territory” where the whole ecosystem becomes the object of preservation. The concept of a diffuse museum is related to the territory in its integrity and to the preservation of its natural environment, of the ecosystem, material and immaterial culture of the inhabitants.
- g. “No-tax policy” from the local government;
- h. Action to stop the abandoning of the mountain by the younger generation, to promote, for instance, financial support and non-profit investment for anyone who intends to continue the agricultural activities of the family;
- i. To promote the safeguard of the territory thanks to the intervention “from inside”, based on the work of the local people, if possible financed by the central government and always focusing on the preservation and maintenance of the local identity;
- j. To promote the study and investigation of the Qiang culture at the national and international level from the historical-ethnographic point of view;
- k. To limit the influx of financing and lifestyle extraneous to the local culture;
- l. To generate a policy of transportation based on net *appropriate* at the culture and at the nature of the place. A radical decrease in the use of the private systems of transportation (cars and motorbike) should be provided, along with an increase in the use of the pedestrian street and animal mobility. Although this solution could appear paradoxical, in some areas this ancient system is the most convenient;
- m. To create a network of connections to give access to the top of the Qiang valley to encourage cultural exchanges and to enhance the ethnic identity.
- n. Study of the local tradition and creation of books, films, TV series (if possible, using the local network) to strengthen a sense of tradition;
- o. To build in a diffuse pattern schools and hospitals, the construction of which is financed by the local government;
- p. To build “art and craft” school with the goal to preserve the ancient technology related to manufacturing, materials, buildings, and local handcrafts.

The list is obviously not exhaustive and much more could be discussed to enhance the safeguard of the local culture. Our aim is to suggest some strategies that could be included in a plan for large-scale preservation of the territory which is useful for the government of the territory in a large scale. The case of Sichuan is of special interest when studying ethnic minorities and marginal cultures everywhere [Fig. 28].

REFERENCE PICTURE



Figure 1: Paolo Genovese in China, the grandfather of the writer, about 1928.



Figure 2: The city of Tsingdao, about 1928.



Figure 3: Shanghai's bridge, about 1928.



Figure 4: Character who describe the transformation of China "throw down".



Figure 5: A dancer in Thailand, in a show.



Figure 6: The village of Zhen Shan in the province of Guangzhou.



Figure 7: A reconstruction of a Miao Bridge in Guangzhou.



Figure 8: A reconstruction of a Miao Bridge in Guangzhou.



Figure 9: Landscape in Sichuan.



Figure 10: Village in Sichuan.



Figure 11: The symbol of the Qiang Minority



Figure 12: Landscape in the area of Mao Xian in Sichuan.



Figure 13: The village of He Xin Ba.



Figure 14: The narrow valley of Mao Xian.



Figure 15: Road in the village of He Xin Ba.



Figure 16: The structure of the city in He Xin Ba.



Figure 17: House and tower Qiang



Figure 18: System of the human settlements in Qiang territory.



Figure 19: The Qiang tower of Hei Hu.



Figure 20: The quartz crown of the Qiang tower.



Figure 21: Typical house of Qiang in the village of He Xin Ba.



Figure 22: Typical house of Qiang in the village of He Xin Ba.



Figure 23: Typical house of Qiang in the village of He Xin Ba.



Figure 24: Interior of a Qiang's house.



Figure 25: The structure of the upper terrace.



Figure 26: The foundation and the technology of the houses.



Figure 27: The concave form of the tower in Qiang culture.



Figure 28: The simple life of Qiang minority.

* All the picture, except the number 09 (internet source) is personal propriety of Paolo Vincenzo Genovese

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