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Governmentality and the Yi

Introduction

In the 20th century, China underwent several shifts in power that today have led to its incredible transformation from a rural subsistence nation into a world-dominating industrial center. Rapid changes have led to economic prosperity for some, but have also left parts of the country behind, especially in the peripheral regions. In these marginal areas, government policies responsible for the economic changes in China, often came at a price to the environment, which the People's Republic of China is now attempting to rectify. The Yi people, one of China's 55 officially recognized minority groups, are now experiencing great hardships due to environmental policies enacted over the past few decades, which do not take traditional beliefs and knowledge into consideration. Overall, these policies have created major losses of subsistence and degraded the livelihoods of the Yi. At ground level in Yi areas, Chinese state policies and the Yi traditions represent two forms of governmentality – defined by Foucault as regimes that regulate human conduct– that constantly clash with one another, exacerbating the aforementioned problems (Inda 2005: 4-5).

Significance

The damage done to the environment in China is severe and needs to be remedied. However, the policies the government has implemented have severely altered the lives of the Yi people. They now face daily hardships that are a direct result of their way of life being turned upside down. Many of these hardships could have been avoided if the Chinese government took traditional knowledge of the Yi into consideration when creating these policies.

Review of Literature

Several pieces of literature are used in the support of my argument. To begin, in his book *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality and Life Politics* (2005), Inda analyzes Foucault's idea of governmentality. This reference is simply used to express the meaning of governmentality to readers unfamiliar with the subject. Two other sources were predominately focused on the environmental aspects and history of the state. "Traditional Forest Knowledge of the Yi People Confronting Policy Reform and Social Changes in Yunnan Province of China", from Liu *et al.* (2012), describes the ways that government implementations have led to the loss of traditional knowledge and explains the lack of communication between the state and local people. Interestingly, this article also mentions the youth of the Yi and how the modernity to which they have become accustomed has caused them to question the beliefs of their society. Urgenson *et al.* (2010) studied a watershed in "Social-Ecological Resilience of a Nuosu Community-Linked Watershed, Southwest Sichuan, China". The article gives great detail to the history surrounding the government policies enacted by the state. The

article also provides arguments for the negligence of the central government towards traditional beliefs and how this impacts the Yi. A third article, “Nuosu Biodiversity and Ethnobotany: A Case Study in Yangjuan Area, Yan Yuan County, Liangshan Autonomous Region”, from Poling *et al.* (2003), is a study of plants in Liangshan and the ways in which the Yi learn about the purpose of plants. The article details how the density of these plants is directly related to livestock herding - another impact of the government policies, which I use to support my critique of the environmental policies.

In “The Contention between Han “Civilizers” and Yi “Civilizees” Over Environmental Governance: A Case Study of Liangshan Prefecture in Sichuan”, Heberer (2014) describes several ways in which the central government has imposed on the lives of the Yi, and argues that their reasoning behind the environmental policies is simply because of desire for control. This article is especially important to my argument in that it exemplifies several instances where the government has enacted programs for modernization that conflicted with the beliefs of the Yi.

Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China, by Liu (2011), is the story of men of the Yi culture that are forced to migrate to cities, because they cannot support their livelihoods, and then contract HIV through continuous heroin use. The author argues that this is a direct result of the people not having any form of income in their village, because the government policies limited what they could do. I use this piece as evidence of unforeseen consequences associated with top-down policies.

“Ethnicity, Local Interests, and the State: Yi Communities in Southwest China”, by Harrell (1990), explains why the three different groups of Yi view themselves as

ethnically different from the others. He considers the state responsible for these divisions, in that they classified the minorities based on simply observations and not actual anthropological evidence. I use this article to exemplify ways in which the government has negatively portrayed the Yi people in order to encourage them to become more modern.

The final two sources explore the preservation of the Yi culture. “Of Canons and Commodities: The Cultural Predicaments of Nuosu-Yi "Bimo Culture"” (2014) explores the ideas surrounding the bimo: the religious and cultural leader of the Yi. Kraef argues that the bimo is so central to the identity of the Yi, that the Yi are described as the “Bimo Culture”. A second source from Harrell, *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China* (2001), is a collection of studies on the Yi on various topics. I use both of these sources to demonstrate the ways in which the Yi are attempting to revive their culture in the middle of modern China.

Combined, all of these sources work together to support the argument that environmental policies have degraded the lives of the Yi, and the conflict between the two governmentalities has interacted negatively, making matters worse.

Discussion

Background

The Yi are one of the largest minority groups in China. They primarily reside in Yunnan Province, home to approximately 4.5 million Yi, and Sichuan Province, with approximately 2 million Yi (Poling *et al.* 2003: Yi Minority para. 1). Until the early 1990's, the Yi primarily used the slash-and-burn method, or swiddening, to grow crops

such as corn, wheat, buckwheat, potato, radish, and tea; and raised pigs, sheep, goats, and cattle from which they survived (Liu *et al.* 2012: 10).

In 1956, the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao, launched its social revolution into minority regions. The Great Leap Forward Campaign encouraged rapid economic growth through short-term resource extraction, leading to deforestation throughout most of the country. During this time, many Yi were resettled into villages that differed greatly from their former lives, which were dependent on shifting cultivation (Urgenson *et al.* 2010). After Mao's death in 1976, economic reform marked China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy, paving the way for modernity (Liu 2011: 13).

Environmental Policy and Unintended Consequences

The transition from the Maoist Era to the market economy had a heavy impact on the Yi people. Deforestation throughout the previous two decades coupled with the resettlements caused the Yi to rely heavily on subsidies from the government, which also included healthcare. When the economy changed, the subsidies were taken away and the responsibility to provide for the people fell back on the clan leaders and the programs then collapsed (Harrell 2001: 224). By the 1980's, the government had introduced tobacco as a cash crop to the Yi and encouraged them to grow it to generate income. However, by 1995, the tobacco boom had ended and left the Yi with severe deforestation due to the wood needed for the drying processes of the tobacco (Liu *et al.* 2012: 10). To make matters worse, the state began implementing environmental policies in these areas to curb deforestation, all of which contributed to a loss of sustenance and livelihood degradation in Yi society.

Perhaps the most well-known environmental policy is the Sloping Land Conservation Program (SLCP) enacted in 1999. This restricts farming on land that is steeply inclined and aims to decrease soil erosion. This meant that the Yi could no longer farm on much of the land that surrounded them considering Yunnan and Sichuan are mountainous regions. However, the program fails to provide incentives to ensure the success of the project. Another ubiquitous government program is the Natural Forest Protection Plan (NFPP) that bans logging in state forests. It allows very limited cutting of branches for firewood and quotas for cutting of whole trees. Much of the land on which Yi live is surrounded by these protected forests, limiting where the people can find wood for cooking, heating, construction, and other every day needs (Urgenson et al 2010: Results para. 12).

Many of the policies changed the way people used the land on which they live. The 2003 Forest Tenure Reform dismantled the collective land ownership that the Yi had been accustomed to for generations. It gave individual households pieces of land to allow for income generation, but limited the variety of land with which people could work (Liu *et al.* 2012: 10). Earlier in the 90's, China's National Forest Law had classified trees into the following categories: timber producing, protected, economic, fuelwood, and special purpose (2012: 11). Since 1998, these have been replaced with being categorized as either commercial trees or ecological/public-purpose trees (2012:13). Both of these directly conflict with Yi categories of trees. While each clan has its own categories, generally they include holy/temple, grave, farmland, and family-contracted (2012: 11). It is not hard for conflicts to arise in these situations: imagine if a state-categorized commercial tree was considered a holy tree to the Yi. In 2008, these

policies were replaced with the Collective Forestry Reform Policy which “separates forested lands into ecological reserves and commodity forests and allows collective forest users to manage commodity forests for profit through long-term leases to private contractors” (Urgenson *et al.* 2010: Intro para. 2). As one of the few attempts to take local opinions into consideration, this program tries to give a form of income in the rural area without compromising common pool resources.

While aimed at conserving the environment, many times these programs only led to other negative impacts. In some areas where forms of income are very limited, illegal mining has become a popular method to earn money. While this is prohibited, local-level state officials often tolerate it because it is one of the few things that generates enough income for people to pay taxes (Heberer 2014: 739). Another example is the increase of livestock. The people cannot use forests to get food, so they raise more livestock than previously, and because they are not allowed to graze their livestock in the forests, the land that is not used for agriculture is then converted to pasture, most of which is quickly overgrazed and soon erodes (Poling *et al.* 2003: Yi Minority para. 4, Plant Use Intensity para. 5). In overgrazed areas, shepherds will often slash low branches down for their animals to eat, contributing more to deforestation (Urgenson *et al.* 2010: Results para. 9). Another impact of these policies is the resettlement of many people when forests are put under protection. Many times these people were moved from mountain areas to lower lands, and they have problems adjusting to the new ways of creating livelihoods. For example, many crops they grew in the highlands they cannot grow in the lowlands and thus do not know how to sustain themselves (Heberer 2014: 746). In the case of the Dafengding Nature Reserve, the government relocated people

and closed off part of the forest, from which they collected fuelwood, medicine, food, and other necessities. The people could no longer fulfill traditional functions as forest conservators. For being relocated, they were promised new employment opportunities, which never came (2014: 745).

Perhaps the most detrimental consequence of these policies was the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that stemmed from the loss of livelihood. Many young men began to migrate to large cities when their villages had no other options for income. Their low-quality work did not pay much and they resorted to theft and eventually heroin dealing. The process of migrating to the cities and back became a rite of passage of sorts. Soon, more and more people were addicts. This migration and activities associated with it led to diminished morals, and the clan leaders became very concerned. They first attempted to stop people from going to the cities, but the desire for the drugs was too strong. The state then got involved and attempted to intervene in the spread of HIV, but again, simply tried to change the people and not the circumstances. In 1994, elders took control and used kin to form teams that would keep them all in the village and prohibit the use of heroin. If any person in the team escaped or was caught using, the whole team was punished (Liu 2011: 51-130). This was the most effective way of suppression, however, there were still nearly 6,000 reported HIV cases in Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture by 2007 (2011: 10).

Disregard of Traditional Knowledge

The Yi culture has always followed the leadership of their ritual leaders, called bimo. Their lives revolved around the bimo and the advice given to them from him

(Kraef 2014: 172). Most importantly to the current topic, the Bimo designated which areas were sacred and/or taboo within the clan and village (Heberer 2014: 752). The Yi believe that everything, heaven, earth, sun, mountain, tree, bird, rain, river, etc., has its own god and that they should be respected and worshiped (Liu *et al.* 2012: 14). With that belief in mind, they do not believe that they are responsible for the deforestation because “cutting down trees disrupts spirits” (Heberer 2014: 752).

There is some question as to why the government has disregarded the traditional knowledge of the Yi people in the implementation of their policies. Since these people have been living in harmony with the environment for so long, they might have insights as to how the government should proceed. In “Han ‘Civilizers’ and Yi ‘Civilizees’”, Heberer makes that argument that these environmental policies are the central government’s way of civilizing these peripheral people (2014: 740). He writes, “The central state attempts to ensure implementations of its modernizing concept by steering the behavior of local cadres with the help of specific political technologies and incentive mechanisms” (2014: 737). He describes the urban areas as needing the state in order to repair environmental damage, but their presence in the rural areas is simply for control (2014: 739). It is very apparent that the top-down system ignores the voice of the Yi. In a modernization attempt, the government gave residents of a village money to upgrade their houses, but they had to follow the construction plans of the state. From the outside, the houses looked very similar to their tradition huts, but they did not include a fire place, which is very important to the cultural beliefs of the Yi (Heberer 2014: 744).

The state has also used the idea of the modernized world against the Yi, causing them to view themselves in a negative light, and in turn succeeding in modernizing them. Several reputations have been given to the Yi from the state. In several cases, they are called troublemakers, barbarians, and backwards, and have been stigmatized for previously being a slave-owning society and for the HIV epidemic (Heberer 2014: 740, 746; Liu 2011: 51, 56; Kraef 2014: 146). In earlier stages of the People's Republic of China, the Yi were referred to as Lo Lo, meaning pejorative, or Yiren, meaning barbarians, and the characters for these names included the symbol for "dog", which the Yi take as an insult (Harrell 2001: 201, 218). The government uses these negative ideas to instill in the Yi that they must change to fit into the modern world (Heberer 2014: 737). One group of Yi disagree with their classification of being Yi because they see themselves as modern and closer to Han than to the "barbarians that eat raw meat" (Harrell 1990: 523). The government refutes this claim.

After being hit from all directions by the government, the Yi people have realized that they need to come together to revive their culture. One way of doing this is to strengthen the Yi language. The standard for the Yi language was finished in the 1980's and was made into a computer script in 1997 (Harrell 2001: 208). The language is being taught in schools as a second language where Han is the primary language (2001: 242). Their struggle was also represented above in their efforts to rid their people of drug addiction. The most important aspect, however, is the restoration of traditional ecological knowledge that was formerly passed through the generations. With this

knowledge, the Yi have lived in nature and sustained their livelihoods, while at the same time preserved the natural environment. This knowledge has been lost in recent decades because the people have not had a need for it (Urgenson *et al.* 2010: Results para. 9). One clan is making an attempt at this by fencing off the flood plains in their area to keep animals from grazing there and causing erosion (2010: Discussion para. 3). In addition, clan elders still retain large amounts of traditional knowledge and are still respected as leaders. The younger generations, who sometimes question the beliefs of their ancestors, are now embracing this opportunity and learning from the elders (2010: Discussion para. 4).

Conclusions

China's economic success has led to a demand for modernization across the whole country. The aftermath of the progress left huge environmental impacts that limited the livelihoods of the Yi people. When dealing with these issues, the Chinese government focused on its own national-level goals and did not take the Yi people into consideration. The traditional beliefs of the Yi clashed with the environmental policies of the state because the policies continued to limit the lives of the Yi. These limits have caused several negative impacts that they still face today.

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