



Section 1. Cultural studies

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE "JIAZHI" SYSTEM ON THE LIANGSHAN YI ETHNIC GROUP BEFORE AND AFTER THE FOUNDING OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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Abstract

The "Jiazhi" system is a unique kinship-based organizational form of the Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group. Centered around patrilineal kinship, it has long played multiple roles in politics, economy, culture, and law within Yi society in Liangshan. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Liangshan Yi region was under a slave society, where the "Jiazhi" system served as an important pillar for maintaining social order (Bi Qu Mo Tu Zha, Xu Xiao Guang, 2022).

After the PRC was founded in 1949, the state implemented a series of targeted democratic reforms, including land reform and agricultural collectivization, which gradually weakened the dominance of the "Jiazhi" system. Following the reform and opening up, the "Jiazhi" system showed signs of revival, yet its binding force and influence gradually diminished as social changes took place, integrating more into the modern rural governance system. This paper traces the historical development of the "Jiazhi" system and analyzes its profound influence on the Liangshan Yi region before and after the founding of the PRC, exploring its functions and transformations at different stages of society.

Keywords: *Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group; "Jiazhi" system; democratic reforms; social changes; rural governance*

I. Introduction

As an ethnic enclave in southwestern China, the historical development and social changes of the "Jiazhi" system in the Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group are deeply intertwined. The "Jiazhi" system, based on patrilineal kinship, formed a unique social order integrat-

ing production, life, and religious activities. Before the establishment of the PRC, Liangshan was geographically isolated and culturally distinct, remaining under a slave society for a long time. Within the "Jiazhi" system, strict hierarchical structures were implemented within each family branch, dividing

society into the Nuohe, Quno, Aga, and Xiasi levels, thereby maintaining the basic functioning of the Liangshan society.

After the founding of the PRC, due to the unique social system of the Liangshan Yi region, the full implementation of democratic reforms was not immediately introduced under the land reform policy. It was not until the late 1950s that the state took various measures, including technical support, policy tilt, and agricultural collectivization, to push the transformation from a slave society to a socialist society. According to official statistics, more than 200,000 slaves and serfs were liberated in the Liangshan Yi region, reshaping the social structure and economic foundation. After the reform and opening up, with the development of the market economy and the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, the “Jiazhi” system gradually weakened, though it still plays a role in rural governance in a unique form.

II. Rights of the “Jiazhi” System in the Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group Before the Founding of the People’s Republic of China

Formation and Historical Evolution of the “Jiazhi” System

The “Jiazhi” system of the Liangshan Yi people is a political and social structure that developed around patrilineal kinship, originating from the differentiation and evolution of the ancient Yi clan society. Centered on the patriline, the system, known as “Cuoja,” is divided into multiple branches and small family units, with each branch called “Cijie,” eventually forming a hierarchical power structure. In the slave society, the “Jiazhi” system served as both the basic social unit and the main maintainer of the slave production relations in the Liangshan region. Historically, the “Jiazhi” system underwent multiple adjustments (Huan Ping Qing, Wang Ce Ming, 2022). After the Yuan dynasty established the Tusi system, some “Jiazhi” branches became part of the Tusi (local hereditary chieftain) power structure, while others remained relatively independent.

By the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic period, with the decline of the Tusi system, the “Jiazhi” system gradually assumed more direct local governance functions and

continued to reinforce the hierarchical order within the slave society of Liangshan. Due to its internal cohesion and exclusivity, the “Jiazhi” system maintained the bloodline-based political features of Yi society, providing a solid foundation for the slave-owning class to control society.

Hierarchical Division of the “Jiazhi” System and the Rights and Duties of Different Levels

The “Jiazhi” system in Liangshan was strictly divided into five levels: Zimo, Nuohe, Quno, Aga, and Xiasi. Each level had a distinct social status, forming a unique class structure in the Liangshan slave society. Zimo was the highest level, with some Zimo branches historically granted Tusi titles, ruling vast territories, although their power declined by the late Qing Dynasty. Nuohe was the next level, representing the primary ruling class in Liangshan, controlling large amounts of land and slaves. The heads of “Jiazhi” families, represented by Degu, exercised legislative and administrative functions to maintain internal stability.

Quno was the largest social group, constituting about 50% of the population. Though subjugated, the Quno had relative production independence and were obligated to perform labor and pay tributes. Aga and Xiasi represented the slave class, losing all personal freedom. The Agas primarily provided agricultural labor and performed domestic chores, while the Xiasi were household slaves, regarded as property by their masters, who could buy, sell, or even kill them at will. Marriages between these levels were strictly prohibited, and lower-level individuals had no right to change their social status (An Bing, 2021). This hierarchical system not only ensured the interests of the slave-owning class but also made the “Jiazhi” system a crucial tool in maintaining the stability of the Liangshan slave society.

Stabilizing Role of the “Jiazhi” System in the Liangshan Slave Society

The “Jiazhi” system played a key role in maintaining the stability of the Liangshan slave society. On one hand, as a kinship group, the “Jiazhi” provided powerful cohesion and armed forces. The Yi saying, “Tigers rely on their teeth, and the Yi rely on their Jiazhi,” vividly illustrates the importance

of the “Jiazhi” system in politics and military affairs. The head of the “Jiazhi” (Degu) managed internal affairs through unwritten customary laws and acted as an arbitrator in disputes between family branches.

On the other hand, the hierarchical structure of the “Jiazhi” system reinforced the ruling base of the slave-owning class. The rights and duties allocated to each level within the “Jiazhi” ensured that upper classes like Zimo and Nuohe maintained their monopoly over land, slaves, and productive resources, while lower classes like Quno, Aga, and Xiasi were powerless to resist exploitation, further consolidating the power of the slave-owning class. Even in the event of armed conflict between “Jiazhi” branches, the internal hierarchy remained stable. However, the exclusivity of the “Jiazhi” system and the belief in the superiority of bloodlines also exacerbated internal divisions within Liangshan society, leading to constant feuds between family branches and significant resource depletion. This long-term internal strife eventually provided an opening for the PRC’s democratic reforms, which ultimately abolished the slave system.

III. Changes in the “Jiazhi” System After the Founding of the People’s Republic of China *The Weakened Social Status of the “Jiazhi” System*

Democratic reforms, through the abolition of the “Jiazhi” hierarchical system and the slave economy of the Liangshan Yi people, significantly weakened the social status of the “Jiazhi” system. During the reforms, the political power of the traditional “Jiazhi” was replaced by grassroots administrative units, and economic relations shifted toward individualism. The collective land ownership system based on the “Jiazhi” was completely dismantled, with a large amount of land redistributed to ordinary families, breaking the control of the “Jiazhi” leaders over their members. According to a 1956 survey of Chengnan Township, Buzu Township, and other areas, the Black Yi class once had an average grain income of 2,164 pounds, while ordinary Qu’nuo had only 331 pounds, and the lowest, Xi’xi, had only 10 pounds. After the reforms, this inequality was gradually replaced by more equitable distribution same time (Zhu Wen Xu. 2016).

Meanwhile, the weakening of the “Jiazhi” system’s social functions accelerated the social modernization of the Liangshan region. The mechanisms that had traditionally relied on “Jiazhi” for mediation and customary law to maintain social order were gradually replaced by grassroots government organizations and national laws. The identity of “Jiazhi” members shifted from being rooted in traditional kinship groups to modern national citizenship. This transformation fundamentally changed the social structure of Liangshan, providing new paths for local economic development and social governance.

Strengthening and Transformation of the Family Economic Function

After the completion of land reforms and democratic reforms, the productive and mutual assistance functions of the “Jiazhi” were replaced by family economies, with individual families becoming the basic unit of economic activity. In the early stages of the reforms, land distribution to households in the Liangshan region made production activities more efficient and motivated farmers to work harder. As the market economy gradually penetrated, the traditional collective cooperative production model within the “Jiazhi” was dismantled, and economic ties between members weakened. With the strengthening of family economic functions, members’ economic status no longer depended on the power of the “Jiazhi” but directly reflected the results of individual labor (Wu Tao. 2013).

The transformation also drove changes in the social stratification of Liangshan. With the improvement of individual economic capabilities and the enhanced economic independence of families, members began to focus more on modern production methods and educational investment. This shift helped the Liangshan region gradually escape the past survival difficulties of “wild vegetables in August and grain in April,” moving toward a more efficient economic system. Although the “Jiazhi” retained some influence in maintaining kinship relations and ceremonial activities, the decline of its economic and social roles marked the accelerated development of the region’s transition to a modern society.

VI. The Impact of the “Jiazhi” System After the Reform and Opening-Up The Revival of “Jiazhi” Activities and Their Role in Modern Society

After the reform and opening-up, the “Jiazhi” system began to gradually revive in the Liangshan region, demonstrating new functions in cultural inheritance and social governance. The “Jiazhi” system played a key role in the protection of intangible cultural heritage, passing down the Yi language, clothing, and handicraft skills through family gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and customs education. This reinforced the continuity of Yi culture and strengthened ethnic identity. In terms of social governance, the “Jiazhi” system remains an important force for grassroots mediation, especially in resolving internal disputes within villages and promoting community coordination with high efficiency. Furthermore, the emotional bonds within the “Jiazhi” system helped build stable connections between migrant workers and their families left behind, offering spiritual support and emotional belonging. However, the revival of the “Jiazhi” system is limited, focusing more on cultural and emotional domains, while its role in social management has gradually diminished.

The Positive Role of the “Jiazhi” System in Drug Control

The “Jiazhi” system has played a unique and positive role in drug control in the Liangshan region, primarily in social mobilization and individual assistance. As a symbol of traditional authority, the heads of the “Jiazhi” and Degu have organized meetings, promoted anti-drug policies, and set examples to mobilize family members to resist drug trafficking and cultivation. In addition recovery efforts, the “Jiazhi” system has supported individuals through collective funding and moral encouragement, helping them reintegrate into their families and communities. The emotional bonds between members of the “Jiazhi” system have made this process more humane and sustainable, providing grassroots support for drug control. Nevertheless, in some areas, the “Jiazhi” system has been implicated in drug trafficking due to economic interests, revealing its dual nature in drug control and necessitating further legal and policy regulation.

Changes in the Coercive Power, Cohesion, and Integration of the “Jiazhi” System in Modern Society

Under modernization, the coercive power, cohesion, and integration of the “Jiazhi” system have undergone significant changes. The traditional behavioral norms of the “Jiazhi” system have gradually been replaced by modern laws and market rules, with members enjoying greater freedom in decisions related to marriage and employment. As a result, the coercive power of the “Jiazhi” system has significantly weakened. However, the system still demonstrates strong cohesion in cultural inheritance and major ceremonies, especially in maintaining group identity and emotional ties. At the same time, the integration of the “Jiazhi” system has transformed from a closed kinship unit into a part of modern social governance. It now cooperates with grassroots organizations such as village committees to help address gaps in public services, showcasing its adaptive regenerative capacity.

The Role of the “Jiazhi” System in Rural Revitalization and Its Limitations

In the strategy of rural revitalization, the “Jiazhi” system has played an active role in social mobilization and cultural preservation. Through traditional mutual assistance mechanisms and emotional cohesion, the “Jiazhi” system has promoted villagers’ active participation in rural construction and supported infrastructure development and poverty alleviation policies. At the same time, cultural activities within the “Jiazhi” system have become an important vehicle for rural cultural revitalization, injecting energy into grassroots communities by combining tradition with modernity. However, in some areas, the family-centered nature of the “Jiazhi” system has led to resource allocation imbalances or increased conflicts. Additionally, the traditional operational methods of the “Jiazhi” system have difficulty meeting the demands of modernization, and its efficiency and innovative capacity still need improvement. Rural revitalization requires guiding the transformation of the “Jiazhi” system’s functions, converting its limitations into driving forces for rural development.

V. Conclusion

The “Jiazhi” system in the Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group has undergone a historical evolution from a leading to an auxiliary role. In the traditional slave society, the “Jiazhi” system was a multi-functional social organization centered on kinship, responsible for production, governance, and cultural inheritance. After the founding of New China, land and democratic reforms weakened the economic and political functions of the “Jiazhi” system, leading the Liangshan society toward modernization. After the reform and opening-up, “Jiazhi” activities revived in cultural and social governance but increasingly focused on cultural inheritance and emotional connections, gradually integrating with the needs of modern society.

The decline of the “Jiazhi” system has had a positive significance for the modernization of the Liangshan Yi Ethnic Group. The strong coercive power and hierarchical views of the traditional “Jiazhi” have been gradually replaced by legal and market rules, liberating individual freedom of choice and promoting the equalization and diversification of social relationships. Meanwhile, the weakening of the “Jiazhi” system’s functions has provided space for the development of modern administrative organizations and the construction of the rule of law, helping the Liangshan society better integrate into the national modernization process while preserving cultural traditions.

Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



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