

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Ethnic groups look to raise living standards, preserve cultures

Leaders of China’s minorities are hoping government support will help save their traditions and languages. **Xu Wei** and **Yang Jun** report from Tongren and Kaili, Guizhou province.

Two decades ago, Hu Zhengyong inherited the prestigious position as head of Qishuping, a “fortress” village of the Qiang ethnic group, from his father.

In his 20-year tenure, Hu’s role has changed beyond recognition. “My father had a say in the affairs of everybody in our ‘big family’, but my main responsibility is to call people back when a gathering is required,” said the 47-year-old, whose village is located in Taoying, a township in Tongren, a prefecture-level city in Guizhou province.

Most young and middle-aged people have left the ancient mountain village, the only Qiang settlement in the southwestern province, leaving just a few seniors to tend the low-quality farmland scattered across the mountainous region.

Hu has many reasons to be concerned that the bonds which keep the “family” together will gradually fade.

“It’s becoming increasingly difficult to call people back. For some, one day spent traveling back to the village means one day that could have been better spent making money,” said Hu, who runs three restaurants in Tongren’s urban area.

The outflow of young people will also make it difficult to preserve the cultural identity of the Qiang people, who are pantheists and worship a number of local gods, according to Hu.

The village is just one of many settlements inhabited by minority groups in Guizhou, and the exodus of the younger generation is presenting challenges for all of them — not least in preserving their centuries-old cultural identities.

The province is home to eight ethnic groups whose populations each number less than 50,000 people. Most of them battle to survive in the harsh natural conditions, and they also struggle in terms of social and economic development, according to the Guizhou Commission for Ethnic and Religious Affairs.

Zhang Yuguang, deputy head of the bureau of ethnic and religious affairs in Kaili, a county-level city, said minority groups with small populations are facing the potential loss of their ethnic languages, which are key aspects of their identity.

As a result of the rising popularity of urban lifestyles and the growing use of the internet, very few members of the Mulao group in Kaili age 60 or younger can speak their own language, according to Zhang.

“From the perspective of the authorities, we cannot



Hu Zhengyong, head of Qishuping village. YANG JUN / CHINA DAILY

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Hu Zhengyong, head of Qishuping village of the Qiang ethnic group

save a language from dying if few people can speak it anymore,” he said, adding that the provincial government should make greater efforts to help preserve the cultural identities of ethnic groups.

“The government should give people from minority groups more encouragement to speak their own languages, such as including their languages in the entrance exams for the civil service,” he said.

Population outflow

With a population of about 31,000 nationwide, the Qiang is one of the smallest of China’s 56 ethnic groups.

Most Qiang live in a mountainous region in the northwest of Sichuan province,

while about 1,600 people live in Guizhou. As mountain dwellers, they have little flat arable farmland, which means conditions are tough.

“I understand people’s decisions to seek opportunities elsewhere. They would have little to do if they stayed in the village,” Hu said.

Until four years ago, Qishuping was mired in poverty. The average annual income was just 1,000 yuan (\$145), and many residents had left to seek work in large cities and towns. Moreover, access was difficult because a dirt road connecting it to the outside world was laid in 2003, but wasn’t sealed with tarmac until last year.

“Before, it was difficult for young men in our village to find wives,” Hu said.

Loss of identity

Qishuping’s migrant workers sent much-needed money to their families in the village, but the residents face a dilemma. The outflow threatens the survival of the group’s traditional culture, and even their identity in the long term.

Hu noted that most young people from the village work as painters and decorators in urban areas, but only a few have started their own busi-

nesses.

He said the inability to speak the Qiang language started with his grandfather’s generation. Most of his contemporaries are unable to play traditional musical instruments, such as the Qiang flute, which has no official name because the group’s language has no written form.

The exodus of younger people is also common in villages settled by the Mulao ethnic group, a traditionally animist people who inhabit a river valley in Guizhou. According to China’s last census, conducted in 2010, the group numbered about 21,600 people.

Jin Yuanxiu, a 31-year-old mother of two in Fuxing, a Mulao village in Guizhou’s Leishan county, is one of the few young people who have opted to stay in the settlement, which is about an hour’s drive along snaking mountain roads from the nearest town.

To support her family, Jin began making traditional tofu using the group’s age-old recipes. Now, her products have made their way onto the shelves of the county’s supermarkets.

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Members of the Qiang ethnic group perform a traditional dance in Qishuping village, Guizhou province. LONG CHAO / FOR CHINA DAILY



A woman from the Mulao ethnic group makes traditional tofu using the group’s age-old recipes.

YANG JUN / CHINA DAILY

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Ten years ago, Jin, who speaks Mandarin fluently,

spent about six months as a migrant worker, but the fact that she had to leave her children and parents eventually prompted her to quit and head home: “I kept worrying about my parents or my children getting sick and wondering who would take care of them.”

are key symbols that help people to maintain their ethnic identities.

He explained that one reason for the loss of traditional culture among many young people from the She and Mulao peoples is their inability to attend gatherings and festivals.

Hu, the Qiang village head, said the key to attracting young people back to their home villages lies in the development of tourism.

Last year, in addition to the tarmac road, Qishuping saw the construction of an exhibition hall and outdoor gallery, where traditional Qiang culture and handicrafts are displayed, in the hope of attracting more tourists.

He hopes an enterprising tourism company will see the potential for development in the village, which would create jobs, raise living standards and bring people back together as in days gone by.

“I keep telling my family that being a migrant worker can improve their lives, but it can’t change their destiny. Some young people have said they want to come back — they just don’t know how,” he said.

Contact the writer at xuwei@chinadaily.com.cn

Development held back by poor education

Like most of his peers, Zhao Jian lives in a wooden home built by his grandfather and maintains a similar lifestyle to his ancestors.

The two-story wooden structure is also home to Zhao’s grandmother and parents, his wife and their two children. They can barely survive by growing rice and chilies on their 0.47 hectare of farmland, so they rely on the money Zhao, 34, earns working part-time jobs in a nearby town in Guizhou province.

Zhao is a member of the She ethnic group in Baiyangping, a village in Kaili, a county-level city in the province.

He said She people have a special fondness for wooden buildings because they are more comfortable in the relatively humid, but sometimes icy, winters in Southwest China.

“But now it’s extremely difficult to find wood in the mountains to build a new home. The forests made way for farmland decades ago,” he said.

Baiyangping, which has more than 50 wooden houses, has been certified as a “village with ethnic characteristics” by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission.

The She people, who once enjoyed a reputation as trailblazers, mostly live in the mountains. The group, scattered across the provinces of Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Guangdong and Guizhou, numbers about 70,800, according to China’s last census, conducted in 2010.

Zhao, whose education ended at junior high school level, is one of the few young people still living and working in the village. Almost all the other members of the younger generation are migrant workers in cities.

According to Zhao, irrespective of their location, most young people return to the village to celebrate important festivals.

He occasionally works as a plasterer in nearby towns.

“I cannot adapt to life in cities, and I can only find low-paid work because of my limited education,” he said.

“I hope my son and daughter can eventually leave the village and make a living elsewhere.”

- XU WEI AND YANG JUN

Guizhou targets villages for greater protection efforts

By XU WEI

A guideline published by the Guizhou provincial government is prioritizing poverty-relief efforts for ethnic groups in a bid to eradicate the problem by 2020.

The government will redouble efforts to raise living

standards through infrastructure development, resettlement projects and the development of industries, in line with the objectives outlined in China’s 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20).

On Thursday, Xu Fei, deputy director of the Guizhou Provincial Commission for Ethnic

and Religious Affairs, told a media briefing that the guideline has set a target of lifting all 77 minority villages out of poverty by the end of the decade.

Areas inhabited by minority groups have many problems, including low levels of economic development, poor

infrastructure, slow urbanization and a lack of cultural and public services, he said.

“The cultures of some ethnic groups are in danger of shrinking or even disappearing altogether,” he said, noting that cultural heritage, folk handicrafts and art forms are also in danger of being lost.

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