

# *Case Study in Danba County of the Effect of Rural Hollowing on Tibetan Culture Preservation*

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**Abstract:** Rural hollowing, a recently heated topic, has received significant attention from both the public and the China government. Experiencing a rapid phase of modernization, rural areas suffer from hollowing in many dimensions, encompassing geographically and culturally. Lacking essential technologies, many young adults in villages choose to leave their homes and seek for opportunities in towns or cities, eventually leading to ultimate abandonment of rural dwellings. Damaged dwellings, acting as a result of labor hollowing, have different degrees of destruction from moderate to severe. As a team doing field research, we meticulously discover those damages and actively investigate practical solutions. By interviewing the local people, our team is able to analyze hollowing from agriculture, technology, economy, transportation and population perspective, each with its disabilities. Furthermore, critically judging its influence, we directly point out both the benefits and shortcomings of rural hollowing, providing an impersonal reflection of current situation. As a whole, combining with the policy of counties revitalization, largely pushing counties and towns to absorb each benefit may be a feasible solution in the future.

## **1. Introduction**

Proposed by Chinese government recently, the central task across the whole nation is to insist on the strategy to revitalize counties' wealth. Seeing from this perspective, cultural hollowing has been a heavy burden for counties to revive. To successfully achieve this goal, rural hollowing has long been one of the key factors. It not only contains agricultural disadvantages but also encompasses technological deficiencies, which further damage the preservation of traditional cultures. Some efforts have indeed been made regarding this problem such as the restoration of country roads and construction of local guesthouses but there is still room to improve. Our research, based on current situations of Zhonglu village, evaluates various obstacles today's villages meet and, at the same time, analyses both sides of cultural hollowing. Discovering the disadvantages outweighing its

advantages, it is obvious that the prevention of cultural hollowing is crucial for counties to further develop.

## **2. Rural Hollowing**

This section mainly explains three definitions of rural hollowing: geographical rural hollowing, economical rural hollowing, and integrated rural hollowing. Moreover, this part illustrates the current rural hollowing situation in Danba county from agricultural and transportation perspectives. Furthermore, the main factors for rural hollowing are also illustrated in this chapter, including rural migration, dualistic system, and cultural awareness.

### **2.1 Definition of Rural Hollowing**

Although the term rural hollowing has been coined for several years since 1998 by Zhang, it had only become known and well-elaborated by Chinese and foreign scholars after The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, proposing rural revitalization strategies.

Rural Hollowing has many definitions with multiple areas to focus on. One definition refers to vacant and abandoned farms and buildings in rural areas [1]. This definition can also be coined as geographical rural hollowing. Besides this definition, from a population perspective, rural hollowing also indicates a lack of labor caused by urban migration. To be more specific, many teenagers and adults, especially men, will search for better work and education opportunities in the cities, leaving the young, elderly, and sometimes women behind in rural areas. Those who are left behind in the villages usually have limited abilities to handle the harsh agricultural and industrial workload to provide sufficient income for the family, not even mentioning other brainwork. In other words, those who are in the village are not physically and mentally capable of keeping the village's prosperity. As a consequence of this case, a gap is created in industrial, educational, and sanitary positions [2]. This phenomenon is coined as economic rural hollowing. Despite these two, other scholars such as Dai Youzheng constructed an integrated definition, stating that rural hollowing means an all-aspect lagging and diminishing development of the rural area. Notably, this definition not only includes the lack of hard power such as industrial and agricultural development, but also soft power such as governmental, social, and cultural development.

In a nutshell, the term has evolved into many ideas over the years. However, it still mainly focus on economic and geological fields. Rural hollowing is not only one crucial factor of rural development but also one of the main issues to encounter to revitalize the rural areas.

### **2.2 Current Rural Hollowing Situation in Danba County**

As a relatively remote county in China, Danba experiences various types of hollowing ranging from geological to economical.

According to our interviews with local education departments, For students here, almost all of them have to leave their village to seek for better education; similarly, for adults in Danba, hoping to obtain a better life constantly motivates them to look for opportunities in larger cities with higher salaries. It is the Spring Festival that all of them return to their home villages and celebrate together, which in contrast reflects shortages of labor in Danba in usual times.

Besides, technological deficiencies also incur serious results in Danba county. In the Summer, Danba county occasionally suffers from rainstorms that can cause mountain landslides. If such an issue occurs, roads will be damaged and blocked. Since the government constructed all the transportation systems, local institutions cannot refine and rebuild the damaged roads, leaving security threats to dwellers and visitors living in Danba. Being aware of such severe problems,

visitors seldom insist on continuing their journeys, which further leads to economic loss and regression locally. Meanwhile, technological hollowing also shed light on crop growing in Danba. Without many modern techniques, farmers have no choice but to complete all the harsh agricultural tasks by themselves. “Farmers cannot sell their products and earn a living. Our small land is not capable of using mass growing technologies. We also do not understand how to use fertilizers,” one of our interviewees Qie Wong said. Possessing no aid from technology, farmers' productivity and efficiency are inevitably restricted.

Furthermore, because of the poor transportation in Danba, local people nearly have no access to effective marketing; so as a result, some agricultural products of high quality are unable to be sold. Without a stable income, Danba County's economy has long been in a stage of stagnation and hollowing.

### 2.3 Explanations for Rural Hollowing

The main factors for rural hollowing are rural migration, dualistic system, and cultural awareness.

To start with, rural migrant workers are the direct cause of rural hollowing in Danba. The root cause of migration is the difference in wages between urban and rural areas [2]. Ethnic minorities usually locate in remote highlands, where land and natural resources are scarce. Furthermore, these minorities obtain little to none cutting-edge agricultural or industrial technology; therefore, they have low efficiency in producing products, leading to no solution from poverty. On the other hand, the industry in cities is relatively developed, with more job opportunities and higher wages; thus, farmers tend to abandon agricultural production and work in cities to provide for their family and improve living standards. In this case, rural hollowing is created.

With Chinese reformation and reopen policy, farmers who used to live isolated obtain more ways to get in touch with urban culture. Gradually, more farmers are fascinated by distinctive and diversified urban cultures. Besides, some farmers mistakenly believe that the urban culture is fashionable, advanced, and scientific, while the rural culture is conservative, backward, and biased; this false belief encourages them to rush and embrace the urban culture and neglect rural cultures.

Besides, the dualistic system of urban and rural areas contributes to the institutional factor for rural hollowing. China's dualistic system means the policy that ranks urban areas first and rural areas second in developing to ensure the rapid expansion of the country. However, such a social system, with drastic urban and rural division, hinders the process of citizenization of farmers, weakens farmers' sense of belonging and identity to the city, and leads to the emergence of “hollow villages”[2].

First, China's rural and urban dualistic system bounded people's household registration into two sections: rural household registration and urban household registration. The registration matters considerably since rural and urban household registration does not share the same welfare policy. Urban registration brings higher medical assurance, education opportunities, work opportunities, and living conditions. Therefore, many urban residents who have rural registration swarm into the city and thrive for an urban registration that provides better welfares.

Moreover, the rural population has barriers to sell their land. In China, the right of land is divided into three parts: ownership right, contracting right, and management right. According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the state possesses the ownership right and distributes the contracting and management right to the farmers. Although the farmers obtain the contracting and management right, the policy for exchanging land rights into cash is extremely complicated, even impossible in some cases. They are allowed to sell their land rights only under the circumstance of two-third of the voting from the local village committee. After this, they also have to surpass the investigation and earn the certification from the county government. In China's

political environment, all these processes need sufficient social capital and relations with the upper level, which is exactly what rural farmers lack. In this case, rural residents have a restricted number of ways to sell their vacant lands. Furthermore, farmers who possess lands usually do not wish to sell their lands, a stable way to earn a profit. Urban migration usually ends with rural residents finding a short term to mid-term labor position in cities. Hence, such works are not stable and extremely vulnerable to economic fluctuation; thus, most rural residents wish to hold on to their lands for emergency use. With little possibility and minor willingness to sell, many vacant lands appear in rural areas [2].

## 2.4 Rural Hollowing's Common Effects

Since the term rural hollowing has become popular in the academic field after 2017, many economists and policymakers have linked this phenomenon with multiple issues. One of the most commonly discussed and associated issues is poverty alleviation.

Population hollowing means a vacant gap of the labor force in rural areas. After 2013 proposed by President Xi, "targeted poverty alleviation" has become the main theme of poverty alleviation policies. "Targeted poverty alleviation" has four crucial steps: targeted identification, targeted assist, targeted administration, targeted evaluation. To start with, Targeted identification means identifying the poverty population to the family unit, making sure that the poverty population is those who benefit. Second, targeted assist determines that all poverty alleviation plans, policies, and projects need to suit the actual situation. The last two targeted poverty alleviation section means to fairly administrate and judge whether poverty is extinguished.

Rural hollowing has been seen as one of the biggest enemies of targeted poverty alleviation. The reason is simple. All these steps need labor and knowledgeable people. Since most laborers and educated population are outside the village, the policies and projects are unable to initiate and finish. Nobody is capable of administrating the projects and no labor is seen to successfully finish the work. Thus, rural hollowing, especially population hollowing, harms the poverty alleviation plans our country sets.

Furthermore, our field study identified more problems of poverty alleviation. As we interviewed locals, we found out that the county government was forced by superiors to name one village as a poverty village, a spot that must be filled. Therefore, one of the villages down the mountains was identified as a poverty village, even though all their indexes were above the poverty line. The village is delighted to be named as a poverty village since beneficial poverty projects and welfares are provided. This phenomenon is caused by China's top-down distribution system instead of a bottom-up declaration system.

In this case, Danba's rural hollowing situation will be a severe barrier to poverty alleviation plans. If the government wants to successfully extinguish poverty by 2020, such a barrier must be crossed. Besides, the flawed system needs to be refined, given the current conditions of not only Danba but also the whole country.

## 3. Culture Preservation

This chapter mainly explains the traditional Jiarong Tibetan Culture in Danba County from linguistic, architectural and habilitory perspectives. Moreover, this section states the similarities and differences of culture between traditional Jiarong Tibetan and other Tibetan branches to illustrate the distinctiveness of Jiarong Tibetan culture. Therefore, in order to reverse the trend of culture losses resulted from Rural Hollowing, local institutions as well as the government need to take steps in technological and transportation dimensions.

### 3.1 Traditional Jiarong Tibetan Culture in Danba County

Jiarong Tibetan is one branch of the Tibetan (Zang) Nationality in China. Other branches include Gongbu, Baima, Muya, Huarui, Zhuocang, and Xiaerba Tibetan. Among all these branches, Jiarong Tibetan is a relatively small branch, living in the mountains around Danba and Kangding county. The name Jiarong came from the interpretation of their famous Mount Merdo, the magical mountain in Jiarong culture.

Even though Jiarong belongs to the Tibetan family, it still has its own distinctive cultures compared with other branches. One of these traits is language. Jiarong Tibetan has its Jiarong language, despite using the universal Tibetan characters. Tibetans from other branches will not be able to comprehend the Jiarong Tibetan language. For example, as Jiarong people say goodbye using the word “De Zu O”, most Tibetan use “Dai Mao Xi”. This is only one example of the great contrast between Jiarong language and the traditional Tibetan language used by other Tibetan branches.

Besides the language, Jiarong Tibetan also has its special buildings considering its peculiar landscape. Since most Jiarong Tibetan settles around Mount Merdo, they need buildings to protect them from enemies in ancient times. Such a building is called “Danba Watchtower”, dating back to 3000 BCE. These watchtowers are usually built around military strategic places and are connected with the local residential buildings. Each watchtower is about 25 meters, symbolizing a high cylinder. Every watchtower differs in height and edges; some have four edges, some five, and some thirteen. These watchtowers are the most omnipresent traditional buildings among Danba Jiarong Tibetans.

Furthermore, Jiarong Tibetan embroiders their traditional Jiarong costumes. On Jiarong women's heads, they wear thick black or white cloth with various color sections including red, white, yellow, blue, and orange. Usually, the cloth is folded several times and attached to the hair. However, when in the night, as the temperature drops significantly, the cloth is unfolded and spread to cover up the head, keeping the wearer warm. Above the folded cloth is a hat with a fake pigtail twined around it. On the top of the hat are cotton fringes painted pink. The shirt and dress of Jiarong women resemble other Tibetan branches', with embroidery of flowers and geometric figures.

Despite these particular cultures, Jiarong also shares many cultures with Tibetan Nationality. As Tibetans go up to the mountains, they are obliged to bring Prayer Flags for good fortune, healthy life, and protection from the Buddha. Besides, the residential buildings are all about four to six floors tall, and the roof is used for occasionally praying. Furthermore, Jiarong people give white Hada to people who they revere and wish good fortune.

Colors play an important role in all Tibetan cultures. White symbolizes the clouds, meaning pure, fortune, and prosperity; blue symbolizes the sky, meaning beauty and fertile; red symbolizes fire, meaning eternal, stateliness, and unworldliness; yellow symbolizes the earth, meaning good moral; green symbolizes river, meaning popular, maternal and agricultural[3]. In this case, Jiarong Tibetan around Danba county indeed shares similar characteristics. Nevertheless, because of the special geographical location of the Jiarong Tibetans, there still exist many differences between them and other branches, making them one of the most interesting ethnic groups to study.

### 3.2 Efforts Made to Preserve Tibetan Culture

Specifically, Tibetan cultures can be protected in multiple dimensions.

On the agricultural level, promoting advanced farming techniques can help local Tibetan farmers to increase products' qualities and enhance their efficiency; therefore, they can obtain more funds through sales, which can further be utilized to buy and run more efficient agricultural facilities. Repeating this cycle, Tibetan farmers can constantly enlarge the scales of traditional plants to

maintain agricultural cultures[2].

What's more, in some Tibetan counties, people recently build countless cultural hotels to treat tourists. These hotels largely retain most of the traditional styles like their unique wooden structures. Living in such hotels, visitors can easily get a rough outlook of the whole county and can closely observe local dwellers' living styles. To be more specific, visitors approach local people and communicate with them more conveniently. In this way, some relatively secret cultures can be revealed and spread out. For example, in Zhonglu village, there is an inheritor of local folk songs called Juejue. Juejue lives high in the mountains, with little people outside the village ever seeing her; however, in recent years, more and more local hotels have been constructed so that the number of tourist skyrockets. With more visits, this inheritor has more chances to sing out local folk songs to people outside [4]. As a result, more and more people across the nation hear about this style, meaning that local cultures are effectively promoted.

Last but not least, modern constructions of country roads also make it easy for travelers to get access to Tibetan villages, further allowing people to carry local cultures around. With the development of transportation, more Tibetans can also travel around or move out of their rural homes. Having the interaction between Tibetan villages and urban areas, local citizens and urban travelers can exchange their cultures. Moreover, this exchange renders villagers to acquire a more comprehensive view of cities, helping them to prevent merely adoring urban cultures or blindly despising rural cultures[5]. With a more sophisticated viewpoint, the locals can better respect their own cultures. An old saying goes 'people can only win others' respect if they respect themselves'. In most Tibetan areas, people are proud of their lives, their beliefs, and their customs. As a result, it is not surprising that Tibetan cultures can be well-preserved.

To sum up, not only the development of technology but also transportation endeavors to preserve the traditional Tibetan cultures. However, even though protections have been done in many aspects, there is still room for improvement.

#### **4. Connection between Rural Hollowing and Culture Preservation**

This chapter will explain the connection and effect of rural hollowing and culture preservation. According to our investigation around Zhonglu village, the effect of rural hollowing may have both positive and negative effects. Qiewong, our interviewee, concluded that “the culture people like are more prosperous while those that serve no important purpose are left to die.” This is the very case we witness in Zhonglu village: some cultures pass on thanks to the economic boost and technology advance, but some are slowly diminishing for multiple reasons.

##### **4.1 Positive Effect of Rural Hollowing on Culture Preservation**

Although urban migration causes rural hollowing, it also brings a significant economic boost in rural areas. Such a boost can liberate the rural population from hard agricultural work, securing more leisure time for them to enjoy; thus, they have more time to focus and study Tibetan cultures. Juejue, the official Tibetan folk song inheritor, told us that there are now social media, WeChat groups in particular, that allows people from other villages to learn the folk song from her through the internet [6].

Besides, since rural hollowing means an external flow of labor, it also somehow spreads the Tibetan culture into urban cities. Many citizens do not know about the existence of these exotic cultures. Therefore, they are thrilled to have a taste of this culture. Chances are good that they might come to the place where these cultures originate and see for themselves. In this circumstance, Tibetan culture is popularized among more people.

Moreover, in bigger cities, Tibetan culture products can face a bigger market with more people

willing to pay a proper price. With this profit, teenagers are lured to study and inherit this culture. For example, in Danba county, we interviewed a master in painting Thangka, the traditional Tibetan painting using precious stones as pigments. “My paintings can sell 8000 RMB (1200 USD) here. If it is in Chengdu, the price may triple,” said the Thangka master. This huge profit drove many teenagers to become Thangka apprentice. Hence, the Thangka culture is inherited to the next generation.

#### 4.2 Negative Effect of Rural Hollowing on Culture Preservation

Instead of positive influence, there are many negative aspects as well. These negative effects impose threats to the preservation of local cultures. Based on the descriptions of local people of different vocations, the negative effects have been continuous and enormous.

Firstly, cultural customs disappear rapidly because of the effect of population hollowing. Since everyone wants to obtain a better life, young adults all set out to nearby counties or cities whose jobs' salaries are higher than in rural areas. Having only kids and the elderly in the village, many traditional festivals can hardly be held as there is nearly nobody to handle all the laborious manual works. Also, to ensure the principle of convenience, migrant workers seldom wear their heavy conventional clothes, which cause ignorance and loss in local cultures.

Secondly, some ancient workmanships have also been in danger. When our team interviews a Tibetan doctor, he points out that people who are in favor of studying traditional medication have been decreasing all the time. Moreover, many experienced masters merely impart the most artful and complicated treatments to their descendants; however, most of their descendants refuse to inherit the precious treasure from their ancestors. As a result of this case, many effective and secretive treatments get lost in this repetitive process.

Finally, from an educational viewpoint, specific linguistic traditions have been lost as a result of cultural assimilation. Communicating with local teachers, we know that many Tibetan children grow up in cities and have completely embraced major trends of cultures. According our interviews with local education departments, some Tibetan children can only speak very few Tibetan. Besides, when Tibetan kids take school courses, they can hardly gain education and knowledge of their nationality. In most schools, Tibetan courses only serve as an interest in students; therefore, most linguistic forms are inevitably lost.

#### 5. Conclusion

Clearly, our investigation around Danba county shows a severe condition of rural hollowing, mostly economical hollowing. In most families, teenagers have to study out of their home village and later find work in bigger cities such as Chengdu and Chongqing. Explanations for this rural hollowing phenomenon in Danba county include rural migration, dualistic system, and cultural awareness. Fortunately, in recent years, scholars and the government are working to resolve rural hollowing by tackling each factor. For instance, a novel and convenient policy, the Confirmation of Land Right and Shareholding Reform, for the rural population to sell or rent their vacant land has recently passed by the government. This policy will counter react with the negative effect our dualistic system brings. If such a plan appears in Danba, land usage efficiency will rise, and geographical hollowing may be solved. Other examples include enhancing education opportunities and work opportunities in rural areas, building advanced transportation systems into the villages, etc.

On the other hand, traditional Jiarong Tibetan culture is also worth noticing in Danba. Although sharing some similar characteristics with other Tibetan branches, the Jiarong ethnic group has many special traditions we document in this paper.

We also found that urban migration, the root cause of rural hollowing, has both positive and

negative effects on Tibetan culture preservation. Some, such as Thangka and folk song, spread among people all around the country varying in ages and purposes. However, other cultures, such as watchtowers, costumes, and languages, that do not draw much attention are abandoned.

Thus, Danba is in a critical transformation period, from provider of labor for cities to a receiver of the benefits cities provide. Urban areas nourishing the rural areas and industry supporting agriculture is the new goal of China since 2012. This process will restrict rural hollowing by controlling urban migration, which also contributes to preserving the local culture. In this case, as long as Danba county follows the lead of the government, a bright future of the absence of rural hollowing and preservation of Tibetan culture is ensured.

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