

Imagined Communities and Social Stratification in Christians Livelihood Patterns from the Case Study of the Lisu ethnic group in Conggang Village

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Abstract: The Conggang Village in the Gaoligong Mountains of Yunnan Province is a multi-ethnic coexistence village. The phenomenon of harmonious coexistence of multiple ethnic cultures has a complex historical context, which is inextricably linked with the spread of Christianity among the Lisu people. This paper discusses the spontaneously formed community with ethnic characteristics of the Lisu ethnic group and the relationship between the livelihood patterns of local ethnic Christians and ethnic beliefs, as well as the Christian faith of multi-ethnic harmonious coexistence, from the historical changes, production and life, language culture, written culture, ancient legends, and religious mechanisms of the Lisu ethnic group.

1. Introduction

In Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, China, the Lisu, an ancient ethnic group, lives. Their villages are built around the Nu River and located on the Gaoligong Mountains above the Nu River, with the earliest ethnic group being formed on the mountainside; below are the Dai ethnic group, forming ethnic group along the Nu River. After the reform and opening up, the Chinese government required the two ethnic group to merge into one village, so the two ethnic group, along with other incoming ethnic group, came together to form "Conggang Village" on the mountainside of Gaoligong Mountain by the Nu River. Each ethnic group still maintains an independent status after forming. According to the survey, the local population, as of the latest population census at the end of 2022, had as many as 710 households and 2,616 people in the whole village, of which the Lisu accounted for 68%. Most of the Lisu people in Conggang Village believe in Christianity, with believers accounting for about 90%; other ethnic group have relatively mixed religious beliefs^[6]. The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons for the formation of the Lisu and the livelihood patterns of Christians within the ethnic group. Anderson proposed the concept of "imagined community" in 1983. He believed that the nation is an imagined community, its birth has nothing to do with geography, politics and economics. The birth of a nation is due to different people having the same cultural conditions, causing them to conceive themselves as a nation. Max Weber proposed religion and social stratification, he believed that religious affiliation is not the cause of economic activity, on the contrary, the degree of religious devotion is to some extent the result of economic factors. This article introduces the concept of imagination to discuss the construction of the

Lisu community, and on this basis, analyzes the relationship between Lisu religious beliefs and livelihood patterns with the theory of social stratification^[3].

2. Literature Review

Regarding the relationship between religion and the economy, the views in the academic world are as follows:

Rachel M. McCleary and Robbert J. Barro deem that, in accordance with the secularization view, overall economic development—represented by per capita GDP—tends to reduce religiosity. Moreover, instrumental estimates suggest that this link reflects causation from economic development to religiosity, rather than the reverse^[1].

Smith's fundamental contribution to the study of religion was that religious beliefs and activities are rational choices. As in commercial activity, people respond to religious costs and benefits in a predictable, observable manner. People choose a religion and the degree to which they participate and believe (if at all)^[2].

Gao Zhiying argues in her paper that the Christian faith in China and Myanmar has developed over a century, and the cross-border religious flow caused by the cross-border, geographical, and religious origins of the cross-border ethnic group has become one of its cultural traditions, and Christianity has gradually internalized into a strong religious appeal for the belief subject in the process of localization in the cross-border ethnic regions of China and Myanmar^[5].

Guo Shuozhi believes that although the Christian faith of the Lisu ethnic group has faced some challenges in contemporary times, for the Lisu people, the new religion owned by Christianity has replaced their original cultural interpretation system with a more delicate and enhanced ethnic identity, and has built a new cultural background and social structure centered on the "salvation" belief, which makes the basic religious ecology of the Lisu ethnic group not enough to be shaken^[6].

In summary, the above views mainly explain the relationship between income and interest from the perspective of religion and ethnicity, and discuss the role of religion from the perspective of religion and ethnic integration, ignoring the relationship between religion and ethnic livelihood. This article fills the above shortcomings and explores the relationship between ethnicity, religion, and livelihood from the daily livelihood of the ethnic group.

3. The Imagined community

3.1. History of the Lisu Community

The Lisu ethnic group on the Gaoligong Mountains in Nujiang Prefecture, as early as the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, there were historical records about their migration. According to the latest records, during the 16th century, the Lisu people, led by the chieftain of the Qiao clan, Wood Pa, crossed the Lancang River, traversed the Biluo Snow Mountain, and began to enter the Nujiang area. In the 19th century, after several uprisings led by Heng Zhabeng, Tang Gui, Ding Honggui, and Gu Lao Si successively failed, a large number of Lisu clans and villages moved westward into the Gaoligong Mountain area. Some crossed the Gaoligong Mountains and entered Myanmar; others stayed here, forming ethnic group on the mountainside of the Gaoligong Mountains and becoming the well-known Lisu of the Gaoligong Mountains.

In the village, we interviewed a household who moved from the mountainside of the Gaoligong Mountains to Conggang Village in 2018. They have 15 children in their family. Due to COVID-19, other members of their clan stayed in the Lisu ethnic group within Myanmar across the Gaoligong Mountain. According to the old people in the family, the Lisu people of Gaoligong Mountain maintained their livelihood mainly by hunting with crossbows and also planting crops from the 19th

century to before China's reform and opening up. Due to the lack of land development capacity in the mountainous area at a higher altitude, the villagers of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group would cross the mountain to the Lisu ethnic group in Myanmar to plant crops. The Lisu ethnic group in Myanmar has a lot of land resources and forest resources. The local villagers can use fewer resources, and there are several very wealthy villagers in the Lisu ethnic group in Myanmar. They call on the villagers of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group to come here to plant crops. Therefore, the villagers of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group can rely on the land shared by the Lisu people in Myanmar to plant crops and cut down trees to do timber business. Although the two places are far apart, they still maintain the view that "we are the same ethnic group."

After the reform and opening up, due to the government's policy reasons (for controlling the minority ethnic group on the Gaoligong Mountain), some of the Lisu people on the Gaoligong Mountain moved to Conggang Village on the Nu River with the Dai people, and many external ethnic group also moved into Conggang Village. At first, there were great ethnic contradictions in Conggang Village, which gradually disappeared after the belief in Christianity. In addition, the government encourages people of these ethnic group to intermarry and integrate ethnic group. However, despite this, each ethnic group still maintains an independent situation, and the villagers have not changed their views on the ethnic group they belong to due to changes in geographical location. Intermarriage is very common, but it does not affect the sense of ethnic identity of these people.

3.1.1. History of Christianity in the Lisu ethnic group

At the end of the 19th century, when Christianity began to spread among the Lisu people of the Gaoligong Mountains, the villagers built the first church that belonged to them on the Gaoligong Mountain. The overall structure is simple, assembled from wooden stakes, the roof is covered with thatch, a cross made of stone is placed inside, and believers come here for worship every Sunday. Although the Lisu Christians could not hold any religious ceremonies or conduct religious propaganda during this period, local Christians still maintained personal beliefs, and most believers consciously educated their children about Christianity. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the government's opening up of local religious freedom allowed the residents of the Gaoligong Mountains, Lisu, to start Christian activities again. In 1957, the villagers jointly mobilized to build a new church, located in Conggang Village, and completed it in 1980. The main building materials of the church are stone and glass. Compared with the first church, the second church is nearly three times larger in volume and is still in use. It can be seen that the government's actions did not significantly affect the modern characteristics of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu people, that is, the belief in Christianity. Although the doctrine of Christianity did not change or disappear due to the participation of the government after the missionaries came here to preach, the church rules were adjusted with the change of government policies due to government intervention^[5].

3.2. Construction of the Lisu Community

In the 19th century, the British missionary J.O.Fraser (Funn Ren) came to the Lisu ethnic group in the Gaoligong Mountains, created a written system for the language system of this ethnic group, preached the gospel for the local people, and brought Christianity here. Local believers base Christianity on the original ancient legends of the Lisu ethnic group to localize Christianity and have a profound impact within the Lisu ethnic group. Therefore, the construction of the Lisu community is inseparable from the language system and religious culture.

3.2.1. Language and Character System of the Lisu ethnic group

Lisu language is divided into Nujiang and Luquan dialects, with Nujiang dialect further divided

into two local languages. The grammar of various dialects and local languages is not much different, and the vocabulary is basically the same. Although there are many Lisu ethnic groups distributed in Yunnan, and even Lisu ethnic groups within Myanmar, the language usage is not significantly different among them, and each dialect will be collectively referred to as "Lisu language". This shows that the language system to a large extent makes the Lisu language users in various regions have a sense of ethnic identity, and they all recognize that they belong to the "Lisu ethnic group".

In the history of the Lisu ethnic group, the Lisu language has always developed in a way of oral transmission until the arrival of British missionaries to the Lisu ethnic group in the Gaoligong Mountains at the end of the 19th century. J.O. Fraser, a missionary from the China Inland Mission who came to preach to the Lisu ethnic group after being unsuccessful in evangelizing other ethnic groups, known as Funn Ren to the locals. In his autobiography, it can be seen that the Lisu ethnic group was unable to pass on their history and culture due to the oral communication mode, which made it impossible to document for later generations to study and learn. After discovering this situation, he began to study the language culture of the Lisu ethnic group. He discovered that the local people's sleeping habits are for two people to sleep foot to foot and back to back. Therefore, he created the first "Lisu Language Use Manual" in 1922 based on this interesting tribal custom, marking the birth of the Lisu language text. To this day, the villagers of the Gaoligong Mountains Lisu still use this text to record their national culture and history, allowing more villagers to recognize the existence of this nation through the form of text.

3.2.2. Nature Worship of the Lisu ethnic group

According to a coffee merchant we interviewed in the village, the villagers firmly believe in these "Lisu legends". In the ancestral times, all villagers believed that there was a "ni" behind each household that belonged to them. They would enshrine this "ni" for worship and pray for "ni" to protect the safety of their entire family (similar to the concept of "guardian god"); He also explained that although each household has a "ni" that belongs to them, and "ni" will protect them when they are threatened by other "ni", the villagers still believe that "ni" is a kind of "scary ghost" and they despise them. Every time a problem arises within a household, they will attribute the problem to their household's "ni" and scold "ni" with words. He also said that, although the villagers despise "ni", they will not stop worshipping "ni", because the villagers all believe that if they stop worshipping their household's "ni", then their "ni" will "retaliate" against their family (such as possessing a member of their family to make him "mentally collapse"; making their farmland barren in the next year, etc., according to the coffee merchant). And this "Lisu legend", according to the merchant, originated from the Lisu ethnic group in the Nujiang area in the 16th century. After several dispersions and migrations, this myth still remains and was still believed and worshipped by the people before the introduction of Christianity, among the Lisu ethnic group in Myanmar, the Lisu ethnic group in other regions of Yunnan, and the Lisu ethnic group in the Gaoligong Mountains.

It is not difficult to see that the villagers in the ancestral period all have a sense of "identification" and "awe" towards this nature worship. Every villager firmly believes in the truth preached by this nature worship and implements it in practice. Each of them considers this nature worship as "Lisu-specific" and unique to them. For every newborn baby, they also receive the baptism of this nature worship during their growth process, and they will also identify themselves as a member of this ethnic group after growing up due to this nature worship. The reason for these situations is that the members of the ethnic group that dispersed to different regions in the 16th century still believed in the so-called "Lisu-specific legend" after forming a community in a new area. The so-called "Lisu-specific legend" also classified all the believers of this nature worship as the "Lisu ethnic group". Although the different Lisu ethnic groups are all scattered in different regions, the same beliefs make them all recognize that they are Lisu, which is an imagined community.

3.2.3. Christian Belief of the Lisu ethnic group

As it has a unified and complete religious system with clear ritual forms, some of its advocated commandments and creeds coincide with the traditional beliefs of the Lisu ethnic group (i.e., ancient legends), and some of the contents can perfectly explain the birth of the ancient legends of the Lisu ethnic group, so Christianity began to spread widely in the Nujiang Lisu region, specifically Conggang Village, gradually becoming one of the beliefs of the local minorities. After three generations of propagation and inheritance, Christianity has now become the main belief of the villagers of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group, with nearly 96% of the Lisu people believing in Christianity. Christianity has shown extremely strong localization characteristics in the baptism of time and ethnic customs. The main localization characteristics that can reflect why Christianity can be accepted and believed by the Lisu ethnic group are: to fade the existence of "devil", emphasize the existence of "ni" to replace the "devil", and believe that "ni" is essentially the devil disguised as "god" (ghost) in the Bible, deceiving the world and letting people worship them. And "God" as the main feature of Christianity, is regarded as a "gospel" by the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group, and can be achieved by believing in God to expel "ni" and punish "ni".

In the Christian system of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group, according to the local church elders, local Christianity has a very complete and rigorous Christian system. The local Christian church system includes worship leaders, deacons, and clergy. The clergy includes pastors, elders, and missionaries. Worship leaders and deacons serve for 5-6 years due to political reasons and new incumbents are elected after each National People's Congress. However, the clergy implements a lifelong system, and the incumbents are replaced only after the death of the designated person. The internal members of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu Christian church also have very clear job differentiation: missionaries mainly preach the Bible to believers; elders are responsible for all aspects of work, including but not limited to handling family affairs, religious affairs, and communicating with the government; the job of the deacon is to assist the elder's work, the general role is to help deal with some minor disputes and minor affairs in daily life (such as purchasing church goods, buying food needed for communion, daily church cleaning, etc.); the duty of the worship leader is relatively single, his job is to gather various believers to participate in the weekly worship.

Christianity, based on a complete system, has had a huge social impact on the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group, including but not limited to marriage concepts, educational concepts, funeral concepts, birth concepts, and production concepts. In terms of marriage concepts, the Bible stipulates that in marriage, husbands and wives should maintain a good relationship and should not divorce. In the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group, according to the elder, the elders and women's directors (a type of deacon) will do family mediation and psychological counseling for families with conflicts, ensuring family happiness and harmony, which also makes the divorce rate of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group decrease year by year since the introduction of Christianity. In terms of educational concepts, as soon as the Lisu ethnic group child's birth ceremony is over, the family will begin to require the child's behavior based on Christian commandments, and will let the child participate in various religious activities and personal religious ceremonies related to children. These educations have a great impact on the growth of children, making children identify themselves as Christian believers after reaching a certain age. In terms of funeral concepts, the villagers of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group will set up Lisu tombstones next to the church, and the funeral procedures will be carried out according to the most traditional Christian funeral procedures: annunciation, singing, brief biography, scripture, message, singing, blessing, prayer, family thanks. In terms of birth concepts, the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group will adhere to the Christian concept, that is, life needs to be born. According to the old man in the family with 15 children, because all the members of the family are Christians, every time a woman in the family is pregnant, they will

choose to give birth to the baby. In terms of production concepts, the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group Christianity advocates "Wealth is a reward from God, so you should receive it with a heart of gratitude. But those who have wealth also have the responsibility to redistribute the wealth and help the poor." "Human effort is also a key factor in the process of acquiring wealth. Therefore, cultivate the correct work habits and attitudes." "Don't rely on uncertain wealth, don't fix your eyes on money, and don't covet profits" these three commandments. According to a merchant who sells timber in the village, whenever someone in the village gets sick and cannot afford medical expenses, he will directly subsidize their medical expenses to tide them over the difficulties. It can be repaid or not afterwards. In the Christian religious activities that believers need to participate in every year, the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group also has a clear list. First, the church requires believers to worship on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays each week, but it is not compulsory. Since most people do not have production activities on Sundays, Sunday is the day when the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu Christians have the most people attending worship every week. Secondly, the church will hold communion on the first Sunday of each month, and most believers will participate, and the church requires believers to donate 1/10 of their income each year (for example, if the income is 10,000 yuan a year, 1,000 yuan should be donated to the church), which is usually done on this day. But for communion and donations, it is not mandatory to participate and donate. Finally, the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group celebrates traditional Christian holidays (such as Christmas, Easter) every year. Although it needs to be approved by the government every year, the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group still includes these festivals in its traditional festivals. It can be seen that the Lisu ethnic group has a very strong religious identity.

From the construction of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu community, it can be seen that the reason why their community has developed into the current state is inseparable from the language culture and belief culture. First, starting from the identification of the same language users to their own language user group, to the later appearance of the text to strengthen the identification of their own language user group, the concept of "Lisu language" has been emphasized twice. Through these two emphases, the concept of "people who speak this language (Lisu language) are all Lisu people" has taken root deeply in the hearts of these language users, and they have begun to identify other "Lisu language" users, promoting the self-identification of the entire language user group as a nation, that is, "Lisu ethnic group". Secondly, the "constraint" of ancient myths (not worshipping "ni" will be punished) makes the entire Lisu group and newborns in the Lisu ethnic group continue to choose to believe in this "myth", and identify other myth believers, gradually identify each other and form a "nation". Later, the appearance of Christianity in the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group is similar, it provides a reasonable explanation for the ancient myth believers. The result is that these ancient myth believers are converted into Christian believers, and on this basis, a lot of commandments and religious activities are added (such as commandments in marriage, commandments in wealth, daily religious activities, etc.) to let the converted believers identify other believers, and also help villagers imagine the believer community as a "nation". In general, this nation is an imagined community formed by the same language users and the same believers (ancient myth believers and later Christians)^[3].

It is worth mentioning that an interesting phenomenon has appeared in Conggang Village. Due to the majority of the Lisu ethnic group, and Christians account for the majority of the Lisu ethnic group, gradually more and more Han, Dai and Bai people began to believe in Christianity. And these believers began to intermarry from the previous generation, leading to the gradual mixing of ethnicities. The result is that in this village, concepts such as "Lisu", "Han", "Dai", "Bai" and other ethnic group are gradually fading, and it is no longer a situation where a certain ethnic group lives together. Instead, villagers with the same religious beliefs live together. According to the village chief, among the youngest generation, most of them first state to outsiders that they believe in Christianity,

rather than first mentioning that they belong to the "Lisu", "Dai", "Han" and other ethnic group. It can be seen from this that this region may experience a situation where the concept of ethnicity is faded in the future, and the benchmark for the new community imagined by the new generation is "whether it is the same religious belief".

4. Social Stratification in the Livelihood Patterns of the Lisu ethnic group

The main livelihood of the Lisu people in Conggang Village is farming, since they live on the hillside, the main crops are corn, olives, sugarcane, and coffee, with corn planting accounting for 67% and coffee accounting for 43%. Some farmers raise pigs, chickens, and cows. In the community, those who plant coffee have a considerable economic income.

After the Lisu people on the Gaoligong Mountain migrated to the Nujiang area, they have always lived on farming as the main food source. Because the Lisu people did not know how to build flood-resistant pile dwellings in the 16th century, their main agricultural activity area has always been on the mountainside, around the Gaoligong Mountain, and the village is built on the sunny side. The early main crops of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu ethnic group were corn, olives, and walnuts. Among them, corn planting accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 55% annually; followed by walnuts, which could reach 30% annually; and finally olives, only 15% annually. Early crops were mainly used for food supply for the villagers themselves, or for trading with the Dai ethnic group who built around the Nujiang River at the foot of the mountain for woven fabrics and more delicate handicrafts. After British and French missionaries came here to preach at the end of the 19th century, they brought coffee beans to the Lisu ethnic group on the Gaoligong Mountain, but the Lisu ethnic group did not know how to take advantage of their unique conditions to grow high-quality coffee beans. According to the village chief, it was not until after the liberation of China that the planting of coffee beans in the Gaoligong Mountain area gradually increased.

Due to the very good relationship between China and the Soviet Union just after the liberation of China, and the Soviet people's great love for drinking coffee beans, the Chinese government at that time designated a research team to find the most suitable location in China for cultivating high-quality coffee beans to sell to the Soviet Union. As a result, this research team found that the Gaoligong Mountain area was suitable for coffee cultivation and notified the government, which then started to vigorously support the Lisu villagers in Gaoligong Mountain in growing coffee beans. During this period, missionaries from Taiwan and South Korea who came to the Gaoligong Mountain area taught the Lisu villagers how to cultivate coffee beans, and subsequently, the coffee bean cultivation of the Lisu villagers in Gaoligong Mountain replaced 30% of the walnut cultivation, while walnuts and olives shared the remaining 15% of the cultivation. After the deterioration of China-Soviet relations, the coffee beans grown by the Lisu people in Gaoligong Mountain could only be sold in this area, and the production gradually decreased. However, with the reform and opening up in China, the government relocated the original Lisu tribes of Gaoligong Mountain down the mountainside to integrate with other ethnic group in Conggang Village. Coupled with government economic support and coffee bean promotion, the coffee bean production in the area returned to 30% and is increasing annually. The farmers selling coffee beans are the highest income earners in the region.

After the liberation of China, when the hunting in Gaoligong Mountain area was regulated, the villagers who mainly lived on hunting turned to animal husbandry, starting to breed pigs, chickens, cows, and other economic animals. They generally have a medium income and usually engage in some side businesses (such as small shop management, transportation).

A portion of the farmers, because they did not move down the mountain with the majority of the Gaoligong Mountain Lisu tribe during the liberation until 2018, did not receive land and, influenced by Christianity, have more children in the family, resulting in higher expenses due to the number of

family members, while having little income. At the same time, they retained the old habit of not saving money from when they lived halfway up the mountain, spending whatever they earn. For them, the only way to increase income is to share land and engage in production activities in Myanmar. In summary, this group of farmers has the lowest income among the entire Lisu community of Gaoligong Mountain.

According to a relatively wealthy coffee bean farmer we found, he started selling coffee beans in 1988 but only began to follow Christianity around 2000. He emphasized that he does not donate a tenth of his income to the church every year as required, but has a fixed donation amount of 10,000 yuan and does not donate more even if his income exceeds 100,000 yuan in a year. He also said that because he has business to do, he cannot attend church three times a week as required, but chooses to go once on his rest day, Sunday. In terms of childbirth, he did not follow the rule of 'no abortion' and only has one son. Many wealthier farmers in the village are in the same situation, not limiting their desire to earn money because of their Christian faith. According to the village chief and several wealthy businessmen we interviewed, most do not donate regularly to the church and do not attend all three services a week.

According to a relocated family with 15 children (belonging to the group that moved down in 2018), despite their large family and modest annual income, they still adhere to Christianity and strictly follow the requirement to donate a tenth of their income to the church every year, calculating the amount carefully and praying for God's 'grace' after donating. This family attends services every Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday, with a strict rule against absence. Their view on childbirth is also very conservative, choosing to give birth to every baby. According to the village chief, most of the relocated families are in this situation; due to their poor economic situation, they become more devout in their faith in Christianity and God.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it can be seen that for most of the Lisu people of Gaoligong Mountain, it is not their level of faith that causes their different social strata (in terms of economic income), but rather their economic situation that changes their devotion to the Christian faith. This is in line with Max Weber's theory: 'Religious affiliation does not seem to be the cause of economic activities, on the contrary, the differences in religious beliefs seem to be, to some extent, a consequence of economic factors'^[4]. Due to economic differences, people with greater productive capacity choose to earn more money and become less 'devout'; while those with weaker productive capacity become more devout, praying to God for a better life.

In conclusion, whether it is the national history of the Lisu ethnic group or the multi-ethnic integration formed with surrounding ethnic group, it is inseparable from the role of religion and even more inseparable from the main factors of ethnic action. We believe that the worship behavior and livelihood and donation behavior of the subject of belief will reflect the devotion of religion. The Lisu ethnic group in Conggang Village in the Gaoligong Mountains is a good example, which helps reflect the relationship between cost, benefit, and religion from the interaction of multiple factors (history, culture, religion, ethnicity) and subject action.

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