

# Contemporary Role of Traditional Ecological Wisdom of Ethnic Groups in China—In the Case of Yi People

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Based on deep realization in relationship between human beings and environment, Yi people gradually formed high level ecological wisdom, which not only protects the environment very well where they are living in, but also maintains their survival and development. Importantly, such traditional ecological wisdom will be very helpful for environmental protection and sustainable development of human beings, especially in the background of modern industrial civilization.

*Keywords:* ethnic groups, ecological wisdom, role

## Introduction

The traditional ecological wisdom and production technology of the Yi ancestors originated from their profound understanding and rational utilization of the natural environment. With the growing prosperity of the so-called modern industrial civilization, this concept of the Yi ancestors and their technologies are increasingly showing their great practical significance to the natural ecological environment and the realization of sustainable development of human beings.

In the conception of the Yi ancestors, man and nature have the same interest in survival. All kinds of natural objects not only have their natural existence value, but also directly or indirectly affect the survival and development of human beings. The Yi ancestors believed that nature does not belong to human beings alone, and human beings can obtain their own interests from it, but the rights of human beings are limited, and human beings cannot possess too much natural resources for their own survival interests—thus harming the interests of other species. All things in nature and the environment exist because of the stability of nature. Maintaining and promoting the diversity of nature is not only a need for the stability of the world, but also a need for human beings to maintain their own survival and development, and it is a responsibility that human beings cannot shirk. The Yi concept of nature is the survival wisdom gradually summarized by the Yi ancestors in their long-term production and living practices, and it is also the ideological basis for the Yi people to realize the harmony between human beings and nature. For thousands of years, this concept of nature has maintained and upheld a favorable ecological environment in the Yi region, effectively guaranteeing the healthy growth and development of the Yi people.

## Traditional Yi Ecological Concepts and the Existence and Development of Forests

In contrast to the traditional western civilization where man and nature are separated and man is regarded as the king of the earth, in the natural concept of the Yi ancestors, “tree” is the source of all things, playing a

fundamental and decisive role, and man and all things are subordinate to trees. As the trees are regarded as the carrier of human life, the Yi people also protect the trees with special protection while utilizing them, especially for those trees with divine and cultural symbolism. This is an important reason for the preservation of a large number of ancient trees and forests in the Yi region—the author’s fieldwork in the Yi settlement area of Shilin confirms this assertion. Trees endowed with divinity are prioritized for protection by the Yi people, and those located on sacred mountains, trees near water sources, and even large trees at the edge of villages are usually regarded as sacred trees and protected by the Yi people. In order to protect the sacred trees, the Yi people will try to protect them from harm. A typical example is: During the Republic of China period, the Yi people in Chuxiong put iron nails into a sacred tree to protect it, and the sacred tree was thus protected and has survived to this day. Based on this concept, many ancient and famous trees have survived in the Yi settlement areas, such as ancient plums, cypresses, pines, and other ancient trees, such as, which highlights the importance of Yi folk ecological concepts and folk beliefs on ecological environmental protection.

Since the trees are regarded as tribal totems or ancestors, the Yi people have great respect for these trees—not only are they not allowed to be cut down, but they are also strictly protected. Covered in the minds of the Yi people, these trees are sacrosanct by the Yi people’s protection and worship. The author also witnessed this phenomenon during a field trip to the Yi settlement in Shilin. In the Yi folk, each ethnic group as tribal totem or ancestor of the sacred tree have very detailed protection regulations. The Yi folk believe that violating these sacred trees will not only jeopardize individuals, but also the whole community. As a result, a large number of ancient and famous trees have survived. For example, in the Wuding Yi settlement area in Yunnan, the red tree is regarded as the totem of the tribal ancestor—and can only be sacrificed and not climbed; the camellia flower is dedicated to the gods—and mortals do not have the chance to enjoy it. In this way, a large number of trees have been protected, which effectively protects the region’s forest resources and the natural ecological environment.

Because of the divine nature of trees and their role in regulating nature, the ancestors of the Yi people, while utilizing trees in their production and life, also paid attention to the cultivation and restoration of trees, avoiding their over-utilization. Sometimes these taboos on the use of trees are also safeguarded through village rules and regulations. The Yi ancestors not only put the taboo against indiscriminate cutting into trees in the text, but also carved in stone in order to let their descendants never forget. To this day, red river state luxi county realm east mountain village of Yi village of stone monument is still clearly visible; violators will be materially punished. Similar village rules and regulations in Yunnan Honghe, Chuxiong, and other Yi areas can be seen everywhere. This is also a clear indication of the importance of the concept of nature and folk beliefs of the Yi ancestors to the protection of the natural environment. Under the protection of trees and forests by the Yi ancestors, the mountainous areas inhabited by the Yi people have long possessed a vast sea of forests. For example, Liangshan Yi area is extremely rich in natural forest resources, and some fertile dams such as Zhaojue, Sikai, Sanwanhe, etc., have not been reclaimed until the early 19th century. Yunnan Yi settlement of Dayao, Yaoan area, the Ming and Qing Dynasties forests are quite said to be flourishing, although in the Republic of China due to war, public construction, etc., part of the forests near the county were cut down, but the forests of the water source forests, clans, temples, and other forests of the public mountain are still well protected. Although deforestation intensified during the Republic of China and after liberation, according to the survey statistics in 1990, the forest coverage rate in Yaoan, Yunnan is still as high as 62%—this is a forest coverage rate and ecological environment that is envied by modern industrial civilization. Due to the rich forest resources, before the founding of New China,

there were still a large number of wildlife resources in the Yi region of Yunnan, and many rare and large wild animals were relatively common. This shows once again the importance of the Yi traditional concept of nature to the maintenance of the natural ecological environment, and also proves once again that the Yi ancestors had a unique and profound understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature.

### **Yi Traditional Ecological Concepts and the Protection of the Natural Environment**

In the western traditional rationalist view of nature, the natural world is divided into two categories: One is inorganic matter—which is lifeless and can be disposed of or slaughtered by human beings; the other is organic matter which is alive but also subordinate to human beings, and human beings can dispose of and slaughter it as well. With the western tradition of rationalism very different, in the view of the Yi ancestors, every kind of material in the natural world has its own consciousness; different things through the combination of mind and body together constitute the perfection and harmony of the world. All these things are not created by human will and are not transferred by human will, but are formed through the interdependence and interaction between things. Therefore, in the conception of the Yi ancestors, the natural world in which human beings live, including the environment, plants, animals, and all other objects, is indispensable. These things are the basis and conditions on which human beings rely for their survival and development. Therefore, the Yi ancestors believe that, except for trees, which need to be protected, the utilization of all other natural resources, such as land development, animal use and water intake, which are not divine, must be restrained in order to ensure their survival, reproduction, and prosperous development. Based on this concept, the Yi people have effectively protected the natural ecological environment in their region, thus realizing the sustainable development of man and nature. This is undoubtedly a wake-up call for the development of human civilization in the context of industrial civilization.

In the view of the Yi ancestors, all natural objects have souls like human beings and dominate the movement of the natural world. Therefore, all natural objects should be honored and worshipped. The sky, the earth, the sun, the moon, the wind, the rain, the thunder, the electricity, the mountains, the rivers, and other natural objects or phenomena are closely related to human production and life. Covering these objects or phenomena by the God control, people do not have the power to control these things. Therefore, in order to pray for blessings and avoid disasters, in order to seek their own reproduction and development, human beings must please the gods and these objects. As a result, various kinds of sacrifices to the gods had to be held, and no offending behaviors were allowed—taboos arose from this. In order to overcome the desire of human beings to obtain natural resources, and to restrain human behavior, in daily production and life, in order to make the land, plants and animals and other natural resources have their time and space for reproduction, the Yi people have many taboos on production and hunting which fully reflects the ecological wisdom and ecological concepts of the Yi forefathers.

In the Yi folklore, during the period of sacrificing dragons or mountain gods and during the autumn harvest, there are customs that forbid working, such as the taboo on agricultural work from the first day to the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar of the Yi ethnic group in northwestern Guizhou. Dayao Yi in the autumn harvest festival, taboo to work in the mountains; sacrifices during the mountain god, taboo production, cooking pig food, feeding chickens, cutting firewood, cutting grass, etc., otherwise food failure; sacrifices to the fire day, not erect columns, cover grass, or will be caught in a fire. Another example is the Liangshan Yi people on the first day of October in the lunar calendar and the first day of the first month of the year in the taboo plowing, because the cattle year-round labor, but also to have a festival and rest. These production taboos vividly reflect the protection and care of the Yi ancestors for the land and all other life and natural resources on which they

depend for survival. The Yi ancestors believed that the land, plants and animals, and all natural resources have the same life as human beings, and need to rest and recuperate as well. This reflects the high level of ecological wisdom and development philosophy of the Yi ancestors, based on their deep understanding of the relationship between man and nature.

Same as the plant worship, the Yi ancestors also have many totems with animals as the originator, such as tiger, bee, cow, wolf, monkey, rat, and so on. Surprisingly, there are also Yi tribes with stones and snow as their ancestor totems. As these animals are regarded as their ancestors, the totem worship ceremony held by the Yi people is very solemn and sacred, and they consciously and voluntarily protect these animals and the environment which are regarded as the ancestors of the tribe.

The taboo of the Yi ancestors on animals is also manifested in their utilization of various animals. For example, the Yi folk taboo on eating monkeys, tigers, bears, leopards, and other types of animals. Cover the Yi ancestors that: monkeys, tigers, bears, and other animals and human ancestors have a relationship. Yi folk custom: forbidden to hunt any female animals, which reflects Yi people's sober understanding of the relationship between man and nature.

Based on traditional ecological concepts and measures taken, the Yi people still have abundant wildlife resources in the areas where they live, even though they hunt year after year. According to relevant research data, before the liberation, there were still a large number of wildlife resources in the Yi area of Yunnan, and there were also clouded leopards, money leopards, South China tigers, and other rare animals in some of the deep mountains and dense forests. This shows once again the importance of the Yi traditional ecological concepts for the protection of the natural ecological environment, and also proves once again that the Yi ancestors gradually formed a high degree of ecological wisdom during the long production and living practices.

### **Yi Traditional Ecological Concepts and Modern Economic Development**

In their protection of trees and animals, the Yi ancestors did not prohibit the utilization of all plant and animal resources, but these utilizations were based on the sustainable development of natural plants and animals. In the traditional agricultural production of the Yi people, there is both forestry production and crop cultivation and animal husbandry. These agricultural production activities are not only the utilization of natural resources by the Yi people, but also promote the reproduction and development of natural resources. By complying with the law of material circulation in nature, the production life of the Yi people reduces conflicts with nature, and their gathering and hunting follow the growth laws of plants and animals, promoting the metabolism of wild plant and animal resources while acquiring natural plant and animal resources.

The author's fieldwork found that in the Yi settlement area in Yunnan, the Yi people's crop cultivation and animal husbandry are compatible with the natural environment in which they live. Their agricultural production activities not only do not damage the natural environment, but also promote the growth of crops and the development of livestock breeding. Based on the concept of ecological cycle, although the yield of Yi people's crops and livestock breeding is not high, its value and significance to human health is far from the products of modern industrial civilization—pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Therefore, the author thinks: Compared with modern industrial civilization, the traditional Yi agricultural production method is really a sustainable production method—because its human health and natural ecological environment has a hundred benefits rather than one harm, which should become the first choice of human beings to seek their own health and sustainable development.

In contrast to modern industrialization in the West, which generates a lot of garbage and seriously pollutes the environment, traditional Yi agriculture, which pursues “matching” and “balance”, not only produces no garbage (its so-called “garbage” naturally enters the natural ecosystem), but also produces a lot of waste. The so-called “garbage” naturally enters the natural ecological cycle system and becomes the fertilizer needed for the growth of other plants and animals, but effectively maintains the natural ecological environment. Therefore, the author thinks: This kind of agricultural production based on ecological cycle can not only significantly reduce the cost of agricultural production, but also effectively maintain the natural ecological environment, and more importantly, it can ensure the health and sustainable development of human beings. For human beings, what else is more important than their own health and survival? I think: Compared with the western industrialized production, Yi traditional agriculture is a kind of green, environmental protection, efficient agriculture, its environmental and social benefits are far from pesticides and fertilizers as the representative of the western industrial civilization can be compared. However, we regret to see that, driven by economic interests, agricultural production methods represented by pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and the so-called genetically modified products still dominate human agricultural production. This situation is particularly serious in China. Although many people who are concerned about human health and future destiny, including the western insightful people, have woken up to see these drawbacks of modern western technology and have taken positive measures, the author thinks that, at least in the country, people seem to have a long way to go in order to completely change this situation.

The traditional ecological concept of the Yi people is that: Since everything in nature is connected through matching, a diversified environment requires diversified organisms. Based on the concept of diversified and balanced ecosystems, human beings should maintain the balance and sustainable development of natural ecosystems—in fact, it is also a way to maintain the survival and development of human beings themselves. Based on this concept, the traditional production life of the Yi people has realized the mutual tolerance and sustainable development of human and nature, and the biodiversity of the area where they live has also been effectively maintained. The protection of the natural ecological environment and the survival and development of human beings have achieved organic unity rather than opposition.

As many scholars have pointed out, there is a strong utilitarianism in the primitive religion of the Yi people, and people’s reverence for the gods is for the sake of seeking the peace and happiness of human beings themselves, while all kinds of sacrificial rituals are mainly based on the form of physical objects, i.e., physical objects are offered to the gods, and physical objects are used as a bridge to communicate with the gods. The Yi folk believe that: The more valuable the tribute contributed to the god, the more reward from the god—this is extremely similar to the traditional Han culture. In order to seek the blessing of the gods and their return, the Yi folk attach great importance to the worship of the gods—at any cost. In this way, the harmonious coexistence of man and nature and mutual benefit are realized.

The Yi ancestors believe that: Not only do people need to balance the interests of man and nature, people also need to balance the interests of things, and this balance of interests is ultimately to maintain the interests of people for the purpose. The traditional ecological philosophy of the Yi people is that all creatures have the right to survive and develop. Based on the reverence for nature and natural laws, the biodiversity and natural ecological environment in the Yi settlement area in Yunnan Province have been effectively protected, thus creating extremely favorable natural conditions and foundations for the sustainable and healthy development of the Yi

people who have been living in this area for generations. Based on traditional ecological concepts, the Yi people in Yunnan have effectively resisted the promotion of chemical herbicides, fertilizers, pesticides, and so-called hybrid varieties, which were once prevalent at the end of the 20th century, and were regarded as the fruits of advanced human science and technology at that time. This choice of the Yi people has proved to be a wise one. It has effectively protected the physical and mental health of the Yi people as well as the natural ecological environment of the region in which they live, thus creating the conditions for sustainable development in the future.

A strong evidence is: Based on the traditional ecological concept, Yunnan Chuxiong Yi settlement area is extremely rich in plant and animal resources, which can be said to be agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, vice, fishery, and its natural ecological environment has been better protected, so as to provide a rare basis for the development of green, ecological, environmentally friendly agriculture in this area and conditions. I believe that: After people taste the bitter fruits of western industrial civilization, Yi traditional agriculture will usher in a bright and brilliant tomorrow.

### **Modern Value of Traditional Yi Agricultural Production**

As the saying goes, “the loss of etiquette seeks the wild”, after entering the 21st century, when mankind is facing unprecedented ecological crisis and survival crisis, mankind has realized that the folk beliefs or religions of ethnic minorities, which had been ridiculed as “primitive” and “backward”, actually contain profound philosophies. It is only after entering the 21st century, when mankind is facing an unprecedented ecological and survival crisis, that mankind realizes that the folk beliefs or religions of ethnic minorities, which were once ridiculed as “primitive” and “backward”, in fact contain profound philosophy. The ecological wisdom of the ancestors of ethnic minorities is in fact far more profound than that of western scientists. People are gradually realizing that, in order to solve the ecological and existential crises currently facing humanity, it is extremely important to seek wisdom and solutions from the ancestors of ethnic minorities.

### **Protection of Mountain Environment by Traditional Yi Agricultural Production Methods**

The Yi traditional concept of nature is not only a spiritual resource for modern western industrial civilization to learn from, but also its agricultural production methods and technologies can play a positive role in modern agricultural production and economic development. The traditional agriculture of the Yi people based on “trees” requires that the production and life of human beings be harmonized with the natural environment, whether it is collecting and hunting, slash-and-burn farming or animal husbandry, all of which need to be utilized in accordance with the law of tree growth, and the restoration of trees and forests is the prerequisite for the restoration of tree and forest resources. In recent years, ecological research on agricultural production of ethnic minorities has shown that slash-and-burn agriculture is in fact a kind of sustainable green, environmentally friendly, ecological agriculture: It does not rely on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and the so-called genetically modified technology. This method of production can effectively protect the natural ecological environment, and is one of the best choices for the development of modern agriculture.

In addition, slash-and-burn farming is conducive to the protection and restoration of natural germplasm resources, thus making it an environmentally friendly mode of agricultural production. From a broader spatial and longer-term perspective, it has obvious and positive effects on the conservation of ecosystems. The research of Yin Shaoting et al. shows that under the condition of small-scale forest utilization and preservation of primary

forests, traditional slash-and-burn farming can approach the recovery rate of undisturbed forests during the fallow period. The traditional forest utilization of the Yi people has better maintained the regenerative power of forest resources. Although traditional Yi agriculture uses tree felling as a means, since this farming method is based on the fact that trees can be restored and cultivated; the traditional Yi agricultural production methods do not cause serious damage to the natural environment compared to modern industrialized felling. This can be reflected in the ecological environment of Yi settlements: In Yanhua Township, Dayao County, Chuxiong Prefecture, the hometown of “Meiguo”, with a total population of more than 20,000, the Yi ethnic group accounted for 52% of the total population, and the entire area of 58 square kilometers, with a 68% forest coverage; in Guihua Township, with a total population of more than 30,000, and the Yi ethnic group population accounted for 48% of the total area, with a forest coverage of 69 square kilometers, the total area of 58 square kilometers, with a forest coverage of 68%. In Guihua Township, with a total population of more than 30,000 and a Yi population of 48%, the forest coverage rate is also 52% in the total area of 69 square kilometers—an extremely good natural ecological environment.

Soil erosion is a serious ecological problem commonly faced by modern agriculture. Over-exploitation of land, as well as wind and water candles brought about by inappropriate cultivation of arable land and water irrigation, is important causes of soil erosion, as well as soil salinization, degradation of soil fertility, and decline in land productivity, often leading to natural disasters such as mudslides, flash floods, and droughts. Since traditional Yi slash-and-burn farming does not remove tree stumps and is based on the rotation of the land, grass seeds are also spread during the rotation, which can effectively increase the land vegetation cover. In addition, the use of plant branches and leaves and animal manure as fertilizers is an effective measure to increase soil fertility in traditional Yi agriculture. Compared with the use of chemical fertilizers (commonly known as “chemical fertilizers”, which is particularly harmful to human health), which extracts limited nutrients, and causes soil stagnation and decreased soil fertility, the use of organic fertilizers is undoubtedly more conducive to human health and natural health. The use of natural organic fertilizers is undoubtedly more conducive to human health and natural ecological environment protection.

Through the maintenance of trees, the use of animal organic fertilizers, and planting techniques such as mixed cropping, intercropping and set cropping for biodiversity, Yi traditional agriculture—slash-and-burn farming—not only effectively solves the problem of human survival, but also protects the natural ecological environment more effectively, and more importantly—it ensures the health of human beings, thus making sustainable development of human beings possible.

### **Conservation of Plant and Animal Germplasm Resources by Yi Traditional Farming**

In the context of industrial civilization, the importance of biogenetic resources lies in its ability to provide more perfect species resources for human survival and development. In harmony with the natural environment, Yi traditional agriculture pays more attention to the overall benefits of the environment: arranging rotation, crop rotation and replanting according to the natural climatic and fertility conditions of the mountainous areas, as well as planting dry-farming and rice crops according to the precipitation conditions, and utilizing animal breeding to assist the growth of crops. This traditional agricultural production technique not only harmonizes with the natural environment, but also effectively maintains the diversity of agricultural production, so that most of the germplasm resources suitable for local growth are preserved in the Yi villages, thus effectively maintaining the biodiversity and natural ecological environment in the region.

Because most of the Yi area is mountainous, the natural environment is complex, so not only the structure of agricultural production is diverse, but crop varieties are also numerous. Mixed grains are a category of more varieties; these varieties, although low yield, but can make good use of the mountainous environment, and have the role of fertilization of the ground, but also an important feed for livestock production is really one of the best choices for the development of modern green, ecological, environmentally friendly agriculture.

Yi traditional crop planting depends on rainfall, water storage more or less depending on: rainfall, water storage of the year, more planting rice, less planting cereal. On the contrary, there are many kinds of buns and less rice. The Yi people figuratively call it “taking the dry road when the water road is impassable”, reflecting the distinctive characteristics of “rain-fed agriculture” and mountain civilization.

### **Safeguarding the Comprehensive Benefits of Yi Traditional Farming**

Compared with the increase in food production brought about by modern agricultural technology, Yi traditional agriculture was once considered to be inefficient, but studies of modern agricultural production around the world have shown that although the application of modern technology such as fossil energy has increased agricultural production in a short period of time, in terms of long-term ecological impacts and environmental protection inputs, Yi traditional agriculture has obvious advantages.

By following the biological cycle of nature, Yi traditional agriculture does not actually damage the natural ecosystem, but rather promotes, renews, and enriches it. From the perspective of long-term ecological effects and comprehensive inputs, Yi traditional agriculture has not only good economic benefits, but more importantly, it ensures the health and sustainable development of human beings—this is ignored by the western industrial civilization. Practice has proved that: With chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and the so-called genetically modified technology as the representative of the West’s modern agricultural science and technology, although increased food production, but to the detriment of human health as the price of which is contrary to the original intention of improving food production, the development of green, ecological, and environmentally friendly agriculture is the best choice for human beings to solve their own survival and health problems and to realize their own sustainable development. Yi traditional agriculture provides valuable experience for this purpose.

Diversified planting and breeding is the result of the adaptation of traditional Yi agricultural production to the natural environment. By matching crop production with the natural environment, Yi traditional agriculture has gained high comprehensive benefits. Through matching animal production with the natural environment, matching plant production with animal production, and matching different ratios of males and females among animals, the natural ecological environment protection and agricultural production have realized mutual benefits and common development in mutual coordination. This mutual coordination is also the key to the comprehensive benefits of Yi traditional agricultural production. In addition, the Yi traditional livestock production has wide adaptability and strong resistance to adversity, and due to the nomadic method, it relies on the natural ecological balance, which ensures the stability of production. Diversified Yi farming not only provides power and fertilizer for agricultural production, but is also compatible with the natural ecological environment, thus creating conditions for sustainable human development.

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