

THE CONNECTION AND COINCIDENCE OF YOGA  
CULTURE WITH THE TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL  
CONCEPT OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN SOUTHWEST  
CHINA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE OF DALI

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ISSN 2277-7733

Volume 11 Issue 1,

June 2022

Abstract

*Yoga culture and the traditional ecological concept of Bai nationality in Dali have many connections in terms of basic cognition of natural things, the handling of the relationship between man and nature, and the philosophical thinking about the relationship between man and nature. Exploring the correlation between the two is conducive to finding cultural commonalities, promoting intercultural exchanges, and at the same time providing reference for human physical and mental health and healthy social development in the post-epidemic era.*

**Keywords:** *yoga culture; ecological concept; ethnic minorities; southwest China*

The spread of yoga culture in Dali, Yunnan

The exchanges between Dali, Yunnan and Indian civilizations have existed since ancient times. As early as before Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions in the Han Dynasty, there was already a land route in southwest China from Chengdu, Sichuan, through Dali to Burma and India. This transportation line between China and the West was historically known as the "Shu-Hindu Road", and was also called the "Southern Silk Road" in academic circles.<sup>1</sup> In the interaction of regional civilizations, yoga is an important cultural symbol. Yoga, which originated in ancient India, was originally a practice technique and entered China with the spread of Buddhist culture during the Han Dynasty. In the early Tang Dynasty, Buddhist tantra was introduced to the Erhai region of Dali, Yunnan along the Sichuan-Yunnan- Indian- Burma Ancient Road (also known as the Overland Southern Silk Road).<sup>2</sup> The Yoga is not only a component of Yunnan Tantra, but also the main component of Yunnan Tantra.<sup>3</sup> The Ming Dynasty's "Dali Honggui Zhao Gong Epitaph" once recorded:

“曾祖惠升，祖升海，率皆奉瑜伽，精秘密”

"great-grandfather Huisheng and the grandfather Shenghai all worship  
yoga, proficient in Tantra"

With the development of the times, the connotation of yoga has been continuously broadened and evolved into a complex life science. At present, there are various types of yoga studios and yoga studios in Dali.

<sup>1</sup> 段 渝：《古代中印交通与中国丝绸西传》，《天府新论》，2014 年第 1 期，第144页。

<sup>2</sup> 张锡禄：《大理白族佛教密宗》，昆明，云南民族出版社，1999年版，第45页。

<sup>3</sup> 张锡禄：《大理白族佛教密宗的特点及其在国际佛学界的影响》，载林超民等《南诏大理历史文化国际学术讨论会论文集》，北京：民族出版社，2006 年，第 341~342 页。

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The types of yoga experience have developed from traditional sections such as asana teaching and meditation to a series of new projects such as yoga travel, yoga culture, and yoga management. The spread and influence of yoga in the southwest China, in addition to its own cultural attraction, its cultural connotation and the relevance of the traditional ecological outlook of the ethnic minorities in the southwest region also provide a fertile cultural soil for its development.

Yoga Culture and the Traditional Ecological Concept of the Bai Nationality in Dali

The traditional ecological concept of ethnic minorities originated from the thinking of the ancient human ancestors on the relationship between man and nature, and is a valuable cultural wealth formed through continuous practice and summary. The Bai people are the main ethnic group in Dali, Yunnan. During the historical development of the Bai people, through the exploration and cognition of their own environment, the Bai people have formed a complete set of traditional ecological concepts with systematic and connotation. Although the form and connotation of yoga are constantly changing in the process of development, it always contains the Indian people's thinking and answer to the relationship between man and nature. Yoga culture and Bai's traditional ecological concept have great similarity in the basic cognition of natural things, the handling of the relationship between man and nature, and the philosophical thinking of the relationship between man and nature.

Basic understanding of natural things

The concept of "equality of all things" in the creation myth: The creation myth is the explanation of the origin of species by various nations, and it reflects the most primitive thinking of human beings on the relationship between man and nature. Both the Bai people's creation myth and yoga creation myth embody the idea of "equality of all things". In the ancient Indian Manu Dharma, it is said that the invisible master of the universe first created water from his own body, and then put his own seeds into the water. The seed became a golden egg, and he appeared in the form of Brahma, who then created people, animals, plants, etc. It can be seen that in the logic of the Indian creation myth, people, animals, non-animals, etc. are all created by Brahma and have equal characteristics. In the Bai people's creation literature Lao Gu and Lao Tai, the heaven, the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars were all born in the vast sea. A golden dragon at the bottom of the sea explodes because it swallows the blazing sun, and its flesh is transformed into humans, animals, and plants. In the creation myth of the Bai nationality, human beings, animals and plants are all created in the same subject and method, which reflects the simple and natural concept of "equality of all things" of the ancestors of the Bai nationality.

"Animism" in the belief system: In primitive society, due to the limited cognition of natural things by human beings, many natural phenomena are

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attributed to mysterious forces. As a result, faith and worship of the alien force of nature emerged, and then the nature and natural forces were personified as gods and worshipped, thus forming the earliest religion with nature worship as the core.<sup>4</sup> In the Bai belief system, the concept of "animism" is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and presented through a series of belief activities. In addition to the historical figures, the Bai people's unique Benzhu worship also includes natural gods such as mountain gods, river gods, wind gods, rain gods, and sun gods. These abstract natural elements have specific personalities such as images, titles, birth dates, etc. in the Bai belief system. For example, the ninth day of the tenth month of the lunar calendar is considered the birthday of the sun, and the sixth day of the first month is the birthday of the moon. In yoga culture, the idea of "animism" is also reflected. First of all, in the creation myth, the saying that "all things are sentient" is clarified. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad said: "He (the Lord) transformed Himself in accordance with each form and each form of His was for the sake of making Him known."<sup>5</sup>

Manu Dharma specifically mentions when expounding the characteristics of all things, "These [plants] which are enveloped by Tamas, the result of their acts [in former existences], possess internal consciousness and experience pleasure and pain." At the same time, in the construction of a series of mythological systems derived from this, the "non-animal" is also fully given its due position. The personification of the main god is an important feature in the Indian mythology system, which has the following characteristics: a specific image is drawn for the god; the god uses the same name as the objective existence it represents in reality. For example, the yoga asana "सूर्यनमस्कार" (Suryanamaskar). Here, "सूर्य" (Surya) means the sun, and the name of the sun god in Hindu mythology is also called "सूर्य". He is depicted as a god who travels through the universe in a carriage. There are also a series of animal-shaped gods in yoga mythology, such as Ganesh, the elephant-trunk god, Hanuman, the monkey god, and Shesha, the snake god. These explanations in the beliefs of the Bai people and the myth of yoga all express their worship and reverence for all things in nature. Although this emotion has a great religious color, it is indeed conducive to ecological protection in reality.

The concept of "ecological balance" in the myth of animal salvation: In ancient times, natural disasters occurred frequently, which caused great losses to the people's production and life. There are myths related to natural disasters in both yoga myths and Bai nationality myths. Although the types of disasters are different, these stories have a similar ending, that is, the

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<sup>4</sup> 朱西周:《论宗教产生和发展的根源》,《长春师范学院学报》,2004年9月,第23卷第5期,第32页。

<sup>5</sup> *The Upanishads - A New Translation*, Swami Nikhilananda.  
[www.vedantaiova.org/Upanishads\\_PDF/BrihadaranyakaUp.pdf](http://www.vedantaiova.org/Upanishads_PDF/BrihadaranyakaUp.pdf).

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gods incarnated by animals saved the human beings in disasters. For example, the legend of the most famous golden-winged Dapeng bird in Dali area. Dali was called Zeguo in ancient times, and it was inhabited by the dragon tribe. Suddenly one day, a golden-winged Dapeng bird fell from the sky, feeding on the dragon clan, and after several fights with the dragon clan, the flood receded, and the people regained peace. In Indian mythology, whenever the universe encounters difficulties, Vishnu, the god of protection, will appear in the form of an incarnation to save the people from water and fire. Among his ten incarnations, there are four animal images: Matsya, the spiritual fish, Kurma, the spiritual turtle, Varah, the wild boar, and Narsinh, the human lion. The stories of animals saving human beings in Bai mythology and Indian mythology actually reflect the use of nature to prevent and control disasters, and contain the ecological wisdom that biological balance can lead to a happy life for human beings.

Dealing with the relationship between man and nature: After forming a basic understanding of the nature of the universe, the ancient ancestors began to explore and explain the relationship between man and nature. In this process, the content of the traditional view of nature has been further enriched. The handling of the relationship between man and nature in Bai culture and yoga culture has been better reflected and inherited through customs, customary laws and classic laws.

Customs: Water, as the source of all things, has customs related to it in yoga culture and Bai traditional culture. Both the Bai people's creation myth and the Indian creation myth have the expression that life is born in water. Whether in Bai traditional culture or yoga culture, water represents life and cleanliness, and is an indispensable element for the survival of all things. The Bai people around Erhai Lake have always had the custom of offering sacrifices to the god of water. The ancestors of the Bai people around Erhai Lake have believed that rivers, lakes and seas are as indispensable as sunlight and air since ancient times. Water is the source of life and happiness. This thirst for water leads to the worship of water, which is linked with ancestor worship and deity worship. This coercive or binding force is greatly strengthened or even deified. Water played an important role in nurturing Indian civilization. The oldest yogic artefacts have been unearthed in the Mohenjo Daro area of the Indus Valley. With the migration of Indian ancestors, Indian civilization developed more rapidly in the Ganges Basin. The Ganges has also been gradually absorbed into the mythological system from an important natural resource for production and life, and has become a sacred river that falls from the sky. The custom of bathing in the Ganges has existed since the Vedic period. Today, bathing in the Ganges in the holy city of yoga, Rishikesh, is still an important part of yoga practitioners. In the Hindu holy city of Varanasi, Ganges rituals are still held every day. In addition, Bai traditional culture and yoga culture have customs and habits for animal protection. For example, in Zhoucheng, Dali, there is a release

festival held every year on the 23rd of the seventh lunar month. People puts loach back in the Erhai Lake, and they should not eat loach on this day. Yoga culture advocates non-killing and respects vegetarianism. On the one hand, vegetarian food is considered to be more beneficial to human health. Another important reason is that there are norms and requirements for non-killing in the The Eight-Limbs of yoga. As a recognized classic of modern yoga, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra refers to yama is not killing, honesty, not stealing, holy life and non-attachment. The book on the harm of killing and the benefits of not killing are also discussed in detail. The customs and habits related to the natural ecology formed through cultural interpretation not only help people to cultivate themselves, but also form an ecological model of harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

Customary Laws and classical laws: In addition to the customs and habits passed down from generation to generation, the Bai people and the Indian people have recorded a series of laws and regulations in the form of text, which fully reflects the traditional view of nature. A large number of ancient inscriptions have been preserved in the Bai area of Dali, covering water source protection, tree protection, land protection and so on. The inscription on the forty-eighth year of Emperor Qianlong's reign in Jinhua Mountain in Jianchuan records:

“禁岩场出水源头处砍伐活树”<sup>6</sup>

"it is forbidden to cut down living trees at rock fields and water sources". As a classic work of Hindu ethics, Manu Dharma not only expounds the creation of all things in the universe, but more importantly, it explains and regulates the laws of natural society. Among them, Articles 131 to 137 of Chapter 11 clearly stipulate the punishment for killing animals. For example: If you kill a wild boar, you should donate a jar of ghee; if you kill a partridge, you should donate a Derona sesame seed; if you kill a parrot, you should donate a two-year-old calf; if you kill a crane, you should donate a two-year-old calf. A calf. Similarly, destroying plants should be punished accordingly. If fruit trees, shrubs, vines, branches or flowering plants are cut down, one hundred hymns should be recited. It is worth noting that the punishment methods for killing in Manu Dharma are basically non-violent almsgiving or chanting hymns. This profoundly reflects the respect for life in traditional Indian culture.

Philosophical thinking on the relationship between man and nature: After the simple cognitive stage, both the yoga culture and the Bai culture's view of nature have achieved a higher level of philosophical thinking. There are still similarities and correlations in the philosophical level and content of the natural views of the two cultures. The philosophical thinking in Bai's traditional view of nature can be divided into three progressive realms: the

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<sup>6</sup> 孙菁亚, 张锡禄: 《从大理古代碑刻看白族传统的环境保护意识》, 《云南环境科学》, 第24卷, 2005年5月。

harmony between nature and human, the Identity about the Matter and human, Tian Ren He Yi (天人合一, the unity of man and nature) . The three progressive states of the relationship between man and nature embodied in yoga culture are the harmony between nature and human, the Identity about the Matter and human, and Moksha. The first two realms in the two cultures are basically similar in content, while the understanding of the last level differs between the two cultures.

The harmony between nature and human: The first-level philosophical thinking about the relationship between man and nature in Bai's culture and yoga culture is based on the clear division of things and people, and takes harmony as its goal. The personification of natural objects presented in the Bai people and the mythological system of yoga, the folk customs, customary laws and classic expressions for the protection of animals and plants emphasize the coexistence of both human and nature, and the ultimate goal is to seek harmony between human and nature get along.

The Identity about the Matter and human: At the stage of the Identity about the Matter and human, people observe nature and summarize its characteristics, without describing differences and boundaries, emphasizing the connection between nature's attributes and human attributes, and pursuing the integration of the two. Through a series of aesthetic practices, the Bai people convey the idea of " the Identity about the Matter and human " in their traditional concept of nature. In clothing culture, Bai women's headdresses are embroidered with flowers. The top of the headgear is a layer of white lace, symbolizing snow of Cangshan mountain. On one side of the headgear is a long white fringe, which can visualize the presence of wind. The headdress is rounded as a whole, representing the moon. The whole headgear gathers the most representative natural scenery of Dali, wind-flower-snow-moon. In the clothing of Bai girls and children around Erhai Lake, there are also fishtail hats sewed in the shape of fish. In ancient times, some Bai people used fish as their totems, and they took "yu" (鱼, fish) as their surname (called "Wu Ci" in Bai language). Later, in frequent interaction with Han people, Bai people learned Han surnames, like Zhang, Wang, Li, Zhao, etc. So they changed "yu" (鱼, fish) to "Yu" (余). The clothing design and the evolution of surnames in Bai culture fully reflect the integration of man and nature in Bai's traditional ecological concept. As an important part of yoga culture, yoga asanas are based on the observation and imitation of nature and are named after natural things, such as Tadasana (Mountain Pose), Padmasana (Lotus Pose), Ustrasana (Camel Pose) and so on. These asanas imitate both animals and non-animals, both the observation of the static state of the object, and the dynamic observation of the object. Yoga combines pranayama, meditation and other methods in asana practice to guide people to realize the connection with the space and things outside the body.

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"Tian Ren He Yi" and "Moksha": The difference between "The unity of man and nature", "Moksha" and "The Identity about the Matter and human" is that the former two embody a more comprehensive concept of the universe and the whole. But "The Identity about the Matter and human" only needs to satisfy a single connection between human beings and a certain thing in nature. As the ultimate philosophical thinking in Bai's traditional ecological view and yoga culture, "The unity of nature and man" and "Moksha" have different connotations in the philosophical sense, but there are still many correlations between the two in terms of ecological view.

Both "Tian" and "Brahma" can be understood as nature, that is, the unity of man and nature, and Brahma and I are one. Both believe that man and nature can and should be one. The unity of man and nature includes the unity of space and time. From the perspective of space analysis, the Bai people and yoga practitioners have similarities in the choice of living environment. Bai people grow flowers at home and paint all kinds of flowers, plants and animals on the outer walls of their courtyards. There are trees and rivers near the Benzhu temple of the Bai people. Yoga practitioners in India mostly choose to practice in a natural environment far from the city and surrounded by trees. Both pursue the harmony and unity of human beings and the overall natural environment in the space. From the perspective of time, Bai's farming culture attaches great importance to the astronomical calendar, and production and life strictly follow the characteristics of time and season. And yoga culture still emphasizes this kind of coordinated movement between human and natural time. For example, practice sun salutation at sunrise and moon salutation at night. Ashtanga yoga is not recommended to be practiced during the new moon and full moon.

The integration of yoga culture and Dali ecological culture: At present, there are various types of yoga studios and yoga workshops in Dali City. In investigations, it was found that Dali's natural environment and good ecological protection are the primary reasons for yoga practitioners and practitioners to choose Dali. At the same time, Dali culture is extremely inclusive, and its own historical and cultural connotations are profound, which echoes the heavy feeling of yoga culture. The traditional ecological view of the Bai people in Dali is strongly related to yoga culture, which provides a cultural gene for the promotion of yoga in Dali. In addition, in the continuous development, yoga has become a life science covering philosophy, art, medicine, psychology and other elements. Experience projects in the yoga industry have also developed from simple asanas and meditation to more cultural sectors such as yoga philosophy, yoga travel, and yoga health care. As a famous historical tourism and cultural city, Dali fully meets the new development requirements of the yoga industry.

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Inspiration from the integration of yoga culture and the traditional ecological concept of the Bai people

Ecological development and human physical and mental development complement each other: The national traditional ecological concept originated in the primitive society with low social development level, but the cognition and processing of the relationship between man and nature still have advanced ecological value today. With the rapid development of science and technology, human beings are less dependent on nature, and their perception of nature has declined. At the same time as environmental pollution is increasing, people have various physical and mental problems. In the context of the era of new crown pneumonia sweeping the world, human beings have once again carried out a profound reflection on their own health problems and the relationship between man and nature. In the post-epidemic era, the wisdom-filled yoga culture and the traditional ecological view of the Bai people in Dali have richer value of the times for the physical fitness of people, the solution of psychological problems, and the pursuit of a higher spiritual life.

The combination of ecological protection and health care projects should become the trend of future development: In the background of the post-epidemic era, the social attention and demand for the health care industry are increasing. Southwest China is rich in ecological resources and has an excellent ecological environment. At the same time, the ethnic minorities in the southwest have profound cultural heritage, and each ethnic group has formed its own unique traditional ecological view in the process of historical development. In the future, the organic integration of yoga, Tai Chi and other health-care cultures with the health-care industry and the effective use of natural resources will make more contributions to human well-being.