

# The Cultural Construction And Self-Identity Of Qiang Dance In Post-Disaster Recovery

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## Abstract

This paper narrates: 1. the profound fission of Qiang's ethnic dance after the earthquake; 2. the influence and development of traditional folk music and dance in intangible cultural heritage after the earthquake; 3. the construction and identification of multiple cultures which coexist harmoniously and intermingle in Qiang area. Through an analysis of these three strategies, how cultural subjects inherit the cultural construction and self-identity of Qiang dance consciously, dynamically and selectively under the guidance of natural disasters and outside world is explored.

**Keywords:** post-disaster recovery; Qiang dance; cultural construction; self-identity

## Introduction

At 14:28 on May 12, 2008, a mega earthquake registered 8 on the Richter scale took place in Wenchuan, China, killing 69,227 people, leaving 17,923 missing and more than 15.1 million people affected. Among them, myriads of tangible and intangible cultural heritages were

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seriously damaged. 90% of the houses in Taoping Qiang Village Watchtower, Heihu Watchtower Group, Zhibo Watchtower Group and Radish Village surveyed in the early stage were laid waste, and large quantities of village houses collapsed. Seven intangible cultural heritage conservation projects, such as “Qiang Flute” and “Waarezu” were severely damaged, and many precious physical objects needed for activities were destroyed. Thousands of precious texts, pictures and video materials were ruined and important historical materials were buried. Two inheritors of Shibi and five Qiang artists were killed, and many inheritors of intangible cultural heritage were injured. Most of the inheritors were advanced in age and suffered great trauma mentally. (Zhang,2009)

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How did the traditional society of Qiang nationality play a role in helping villagers overcome difficulties, now that people were faced with such a huge natural disaster and the life crisis that ensued? More than ten years after the earthquake, radical changes have taken place in the material and economy of Qiang society. The social response to these changes in Qiang area, especially the psychological trauma induced by natural disasters to Qiang people, as well as the impact and development of traditional folk music and dance in intangible cultural heritage.

In this paper, the above contents are described in detail with the data of field survey, that is, the daily life of Qiang villages after the earthquake, the search of Qiang culture by Qiang nationality under the influence of outside world, and the conservation of dance culture in post-disaster recovery. Meanwhile, the traditional dance of Qiang nationality was restored, to appease the soul of Qiang nationality and rejuvenate Qiang people’s good mentality and devotion to their wonderful homeland in the new form of Qiang dance. During the reconstruction of the spatial structure of Qiang dance, the public’s sense of identity with Qiang culture was enhanced and the positive ethos and values were spread through traditional dance culture of Qiang nationality.

### **1. The Profound Fission of Qiang folk dance after the Earthquake**

After the Wenchuan earthquake, the Qiang people suffered disastrous losses and the Qiang culture received unprecedented attention accordingly. The post-disaster reconstruction, in particular, caused dramatic changes to the Qiang people by means of external drive. With its strong organization and mobilization abilities, the state has made institutional arrangements in terms of pairing aided construction and the social forces also get involved. Driven by multiple subjects, the Qiang people experienced leapfrog changes in ethnic culture. In this process, what affected the evolution process of Qiang culture was no longer the Qiang people alone, but rather, diversified social subjects, including the government, social forces, and minorities, etc. Different social subjects inherit or reconstruct Qiang culture in part “selectively” from different levels, and each behavioral subject has its own behavioral logic.

Distinct behavioral subjects are mutually related, restricted and interactive, which jointly

promote the leapfrog changes of Qiang culture. The interweaving, collision and synergy of various social forces place Qiang culture in a state where two processes, i.e., inheritance and transmutation, coexist. During the inheritance and transmutation, Qiang folk dance has become an important exhibition and performance symbol of ethnic culture, commonly seen in Qiang area reconstructed after the disaster.

On March 23, 2010, Qiang Soul positioned as a “large primitive song and dance of Qiang nationality” launched by Mao County, debuted in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, and kicked off its national tour. Today, “Qiang Flute<sup>3</sup>”, “Rrmea Salengw<sup>4</sup>”, “Sheepskin Drum Dance<sup>5</sup>” and “Qiang Multi-voice Folk Song”, etc. have been included in the State-level Non-material Cultural Heritage List and the “Qiang Year”<sup>6</sup> has also been incorporated in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding by the UNESCO. The cast of Qiang Soul is composed of about 120 professional actors of Qiang nationality and ordinary people. 15 programs are presented on the stage, including sacrificial ceremony, wedding custom, putter, folk song and Qiang flute. The whole performance not only introduces a “preface”, that is, that Qiang ancestors in ancient times created brilliant history and culture, but also encompasses four major aspects: 1. “sacrifice” that expressed the activities of Qiang people, such as advocating nature, worshiping mountains and praying to gods, and offering sacrifices to ancestors with long poems, etc.; 2. “tillage” that represented the production and life of the Qiang people, and displayed production and harvest scenes like “two bulls dueled”, “digging hole and sowing seeds” “striking foodstuff” “sipping wine and opening the wine jar” etc.”; 3. “verve” that reproduced the spiritual culture and recreational activities of Qiang people, i.e., “sing and dance”, including “Qiang Flute” “Rrmea Salengw” “shoulder bell dance” “waistband dance” “Flower Naji” “Emuyaoyao”. As a performing art in minority area, the folk songs and dances of Qiang nationality were favored by contemporary people. Qiang Soul and Great Beichuan, etc. on today’s stage, as art cases created by investing a host of manpower, material resources and financial resources after the “May 12” earthquake, with a focus on displaying Qiang songs and dances in a centralized way with the posture of post-disaster reconstruction.

After the earthquake, the local government has expanded the scale and scope of the traditional festivals of Qiang nationality. In 2013, the Sharon dance performance by 10,000 people initiated by the Government of Beichuan Qiang Autonomous County generated enormous publicity in the society, which was a representative event that displayed Qiang dance to the outside world on a large scale after the earthquake. “Qiang Calendar Year” was the most solemn day of Qiang nationality throughout the year. In 2014, the local Qiang Autonomous County hosted a large-scale bonfire party, to celebrate this festival with a series of activities,

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<sup>3</sup> Qiang Flute is an ancient single-reed pneumatic instrument with a history of more than 2,000 years, prevalent in Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in northern Sichuan, where the Qiang people live.

<sup>4</sup> Rrmea Salengw, which means “sing and dance,” is an important means by which the local Qiang people entertain themselves and gods.

<sup>5</sup> The main dance form in the sacrificial activities of the Qiang people and distinct cultural characteristics of the Qiang people.

<sup>6</sup> Qiang Year is a traditional festival in Qiang settlement and one of the national intangible cultural heritages.

for example, an overwhelming sheepskin drum dance by 10,000 people. Launching such a large event to promote traditional Qiang culture can not only better exhibit the customs of Qiang culture, but also attract more people who are interested in traditional Qiang culture to launch such participatory activities, which was of certain help for the inheritance and development of the traditional music and dance culture of Qiang nationality, and also beneficial to local economy.

## **2. Influence and Development of Traditional Folk Music and Dance in Intangible Cultural Heritage after Earthquake**

The “May 12” Wenchuan Earthquake is a disaster for the whole nation and also a catastrophe for Qiang nationality, with an almost devastating impact on the dance culture of Qiang nationality. Having been buffeted by geological disasters, the economy and culture in Qiang area have been seriously damaged. Intangible cultural heritages like that of Qiang are faced with serious challenges from possible fracture. Meanwhile, the geographical location where Qiang people live have been hit by natural disasters such as landslides and mudslides all the year round. The ecological environment itself is largely affected and the vegetation is also fragile. In such a special and concrete realistic context, we should not only restore and rebuild Qiang area actively, but also be watchful over the protection and inheritance of cultural heritage from time to time. (Wu,2016)

Qiang dance culture, as an intangible cultural heritage in China, has been highly valued and protected by the government. Especially with the gradual recovery of post-disaster reconstruction, the accompanying social and cultural construction requires us to carry forward the recovery and development of minority culture. For this reason, the government vigorously supports the inheritance and innovation of Qiang dance culture. With that being said, we can still see the defects in the development of Qiang dance. The Qiang dance lacks modern and advanced transmission route and is very limited in the transmission in colleges and universities and communication on advanced media. In addition, there are very scarce Qiang dance books and Qiang dance videos available on the market. So a necessary way for Qiang dance to rise is to vigorously promote the cultural dissemination of Qiang dance. We must learn to make use of the rich scientific technologies, theoretical resources and massive faculties in colleges and universities across the country, select and assign a group of scholars specializing in Qiang culture from colleges and universities with a galaxy of talents to dedicate to the protection and rescue of Qiang cultural heritage, which will be a substantial help to Qiang culture and Qiang dance. We can easily find that it is not enough to rebuild and inherit culture only in local Qiang and Tibetan areas. We should let Qiang culture and dance walk out and spread across the country and even the whole world, and let this flower of ethnic art bloom everywhere. This is the very way to truly pull out the endangered Qiang culture and art.

## **3.The Construction and Identification of Multiple Cultures which Coexist**

## **Harmoniously and Intermingle in Qiang Area**

### **Subject and Object of Cultural Inheritance**

The existing Qiang culture is led by the government's administrative planning, and the government is mobilizing the Qiang people to protect and inherit its ethnic culture, in a top-down, mobilizing and selective manner, with an emphasis on its economic value, theatricality and demonstrability. The populace is in a state of passive participation.

### **Selective Protection and Inheritance by the Government**

Over the last few years, as the government lays increasing emphasis on the conservation of minority cultures, it protects minority cultures from the perspectives of policy making and system implementation under administrative planning. In terms of the protection of Qiang culture, the government has shown selective protection and inheritance. However, the government's inheritance of Qiang culture is often logical, selective and conscious. In the post-disaster reconstruction, Qiang people are not only participants in post-disaster reconstruction, as well as the protection and inheritance of Qiang culture, but also direct demanders and ultimate beneficiaries. However, the independent selection ability of Qiang culture subjects can hardly adapt to powerful natural disasters immediately after the disaster, because of their vision and other reasons. It takes time to rebuild the homeland with their own strength, and the supplies are scanty. The intervention of exogenous force has given Qiang people a solid support.

The development of ethnic culture cannot be realized unless the enterprises see that the local area has the potential to exploit tourism, and the ability to bring economic benefits through exploitation. Enterprises seldom interact with villagers. After the government secures a policy license, it often has more interaction with the government.

### **Survival Rationality of Qiang People**

With respect to the attitude towards their own ethnic culture, whether to inherit the tradition or to borrow the elements of other cultures, the inheritors of minority cultures, as elites of ethnic culture and ordinary people at the grass-roots level, often select and filter from the perspective of survival rationality. This is the unconscious or unconscious choice by creative subjects of culture and even subjects of protection of ethnic cultures. For Qiang people, they often realize their cultural evolution unconsciously from the perspective of "pragmatism" in actual and concrete production and life. Qiang people per se show unconscious sublation in cultural evolution. More often than not, they follow the tradition. They borrow and assimilate advanced culture. Qiang people are the creators and subjects of Qiang culture, and the inheritance is "unconscious inheritance", that is, unconscious choice made by people dominated by survival rationality.

In the process of cultural evolution, whether spiritual culture at the core layer of culture, or the material culture at the outer layer of culture, and the final result of evolution will exert

an impact on the whole cultural system. The government occupies a dominant position in ethnic culture, while the subject of ethnic culture is ethnic minorities, and they are the very creators and inheritors of ethnic culture. The gems of wisdom of ethnic minorities in their production and life would not have vital force once they broke away from the culture of the general public. Ethnic culture is a process of dynamic development, which requires continuous innovation and development, and the biggest driving force of innovation and development is ethnic minorities proper. “Great tradition” and “little tradition” are often in a process of mutual transformation, contact and collision. If the two were severed, the source of culture would be exhausted. Nevertheless, it is difficult to sustain for long simply by means of “blood transfusion”. In the future development planning, we should rely more on the ability of Qiang people, and the protection and inheritance of Qiang culture should also be established in Qiang people per se.

### **Importance of the Inheritance Field of Traditional Culture Heritage**

The generation and inheritance of ethnic culture is especially specific to the ecological environment and social environment. When the ecological environment changes, ethnic culture will lose the ecological foundation on which it survives and sustains. If a child is surrounded by an old man day to day, he will perceive his humbleness and dependence on the old man, hold every word and deed of the old man in reverence, and naturally show respect to all kinds of objects handed down by the old man. In so doing, the authority in age becomes the authority of tradition. More than that, any force that can extend the above influence beyond childhood will further strengthen this traditional belief and traditional practice. (Emile,2000)

But as far as the current socialization mode is concerned, the socialization agencies of the newly-grown youngsters are increasingly completed by school education. Their influence on the primitive ethnic villages gradually has waned. The collective occasions on which ethnic culture is inherited by major etiquettes of the group have also decreased. The inheritance mode of Qiang culture gradually declines. “Groups are supported by tradition, and ‘condensed by time’, and there is every reason to call it an organic whole. (Xu,2006)

School inheritance is systematic. Traditionally, the occasions on which inheritance is completed by family edification, family inheritance and collective activities of villages have decreased. In addition, these primitive environments have also changed, without influence on what one constantly sees and hears. The inheritance of ethnic culture by schools is also “conscious” selection, and those that contradict the educational idea of school are often screened out, while those that coincide with the educational idea are popularized.

### **Integration and Development between Tibetan and Qiang Nationalities in the Region**

Tibetan and Qiang nationalities living in Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China, are two time-honored and closely-united ethnic groups. They are inextricably linked by mountains, rivers or just only one road. They have similarities in many aspects. Both Tibetan Guozhuang and Qiang Rrmea Salengw are ethnic styles worth knowing.

Qiang and Tibetan nationalities are often collectively called Qiang and Tibetan, precisely because of their similar geographical environments, political histories, religious beliefs and folk customs, which form identical ethnic and local characteristics.

The folk dances of Tibetan and Qiang nationalities have the same roots but different approaches. They blend with each other. This is attributed to common living customs, close geographical environment and similar ethnic beliefs formed by historical accumulation. The splendid folk dance culture burst forth is its biggest highlight. Since the two ethnic groups have a profound historical origin, live in the same region and have the same climate, Tibetan and Qiang nationalities create roughly the same but slightly different dance culture in the long course of history. Tibetan and Qiang nationalities adhere to their own unique culture, and create concurrently to generate beautiful dance culture that is mutually friendly and complementary.

### **Conclusion**

After the earthquake, the ethnic identity that takes the traditional culture in Qiang area as the soil for its survival will inevitably be affected by it. Ethnic identity is variable to a certain extent, which reflects the implicit and explicit characteristics of ethnic identity and belongs to a kind of social identity. The viewpoint it proposes is based on the theory of social identity and can be divided into “the theory of evolution” and “the theory of constructivism” at the theoretical level of ethnic group. The research on the construction and self-identity of Qiang dance culture in post-disaster recovery is about the profound fission after the earthquake, the harmonious coexistence and intermingling of diversified culture in Qiang area and how to inherit the cultural construction and self-identity of Qiang dance culture consciously, dynamically and selectively under the guidance of natural disasters and outside world.

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