

GUIZHOU, SOUTHWEST CHINA: CULTURAL CHALLENGES IN ETHNIC VILLAGES

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1. Introduction

The foundation of the traditional Chinese social structure, which is at its heart an agrarian civilization, is largely that of subsistence farming. The resulting indigenous culture is rooted in land that provides for its inhabitants and is strongly dependent on its natural environment and the resources that it provides. Therefore a rural settlement possesses distinct regional traits and once established, it remains relatively stable unless disrupted by extreme circumstances. In the face of drastic social changes and aggressive urbanization in modern China, this stability and cultural continuation are being severely challenged. In 2011, the urban population of China reached an unprecedented 51.27%, meaning that for the first time in its long history, China's rural «majority» officially became a «minority»¹.

In an even more vulnerable position are ethnic minority villages². These villages are often located in relatively remote and economically challenging areas of China, and such factors can at times lead to hasty conclusions about «backwards» cultures, as such places and people are increasingly marginalized by the mainstream Han majority; conversely, however, such contrasts have also in some ways aided in the preservation of the traditional culture and social structure in these villages. According to the «China Traditional Village» listing jointly issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MoHURD), the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), and the Ministry of Finance, out of the 2,555 villages listed to date, ethnic villages located in the southwest of China accounted for 40% of the total nationwide listing³. The high concentration of well-preserved ethnic villages in this region is mainly due to their unique geographical and natural conditions: the plateaus and mountainous

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