

The Transformation and Demise of Minority Cultures: A Case Study of Chi Zijian's *The Right Bank of the Erguna River*

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Abstract:

As the process of digitalization continues to advance, the shadows of traditional society are gradually fading into oblivion. Amid the development and conflict between old and new cultures, the natural environment upon which people depend is also withering, and gradually forgotten are the minority groups on the periphery. In *The Right Bank of the Erguna River*, Chi Zijian portrays the historical development of the Evenki people to highlight the precarious situation of minority cultures amidst social and cultural transformations. This paper uses *The Right Bank of the Erguna River* as a case study to explore the transformation and disappearance of the Evenki culture and ways to preserve its vitality. The study reveals that the Evenki people in the depths of the Greater Khingan Mountains uphold a philosophy of “harmony between man and nature,” living in harmony with the natural world. However, as trees in the deep forests are felled to meet societal construction needs, the Evenki people's soul falls along with them. Yet, the life of the Evenki people should not end in extinction; rather, it should progress and develop alongside the times. This is not only to save the Evenki culture but also to protect the diversity of Chinese culture and to maintain ecological balance.

Keywords: Evenki ethnic group, minority culture, cultural extinction, ecological balance, conflict between old and new cultures

1. Introduction

With the continuous advancement of modernization, technological progress has provided convenience for

life and broadened perspectives. However, it has also led to increasingly severe environmental pollution and cultural assimilation. Initially, people's rational and reasonable enthusiasm for technological inno-

vation and admiration for emerging and foreign cultures seemed justified. But as modern society has developed to a deeper level, individuals have become like mechanized beings, losing their selfhood and soul, discarding traditional advantages, ethnic identity, and diversity. Humanity, driven by societal interests, has been drawn into a mire, sinking ever deeper [1]. Simultaneously, the survival space for traditional cultures and minority cultures has gradually diminished, even to the point of extinction. Throughout historical development, the growth of new elements often occurs to replace old ones, and new and old concepts tend to emerge in conflict with one another. The development of both old and new things should be approached with a dialectical mindset. In *On Contradiction*, Mao Zedong stated: “The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the fundamental law of materialist dialectics [2].” According to the philosophical principle of the unity of opposites, the conflict between new and old cultures is not only an inevitable social phenomenon but also an internal driving force for cultural development—“where the conflict of opposites ceases, there is nirvana”[3].

In Chi Zijian’s *The Right Bank of the Erguna River*, the historical development of the Evenki people, known as the “people of the forest,” reflects the precarious situation faced by ethnic minorities amidst ongoing social and cultural changes. Deep in the Greater Khingan Mountains, the Evenki maintain a philosophy of “harmony between man and nature,” with their unique reindeer culture reflecting a close connection to nature. However, as traditional nomadic and hunting lifestyles are replaced by urban life, their spirit becomes like Daxi’s domesticated falcon, seemingly forgetting its original belonging to this vast world. Additionally, to accommodate modernization, large swaths of forest are being cut down, leading to environmental degradation. Due to the Evenki people’s reverence for nature, as the forest falls, so too do the spirit and life of the Evenki people [4].

This paper takes *The Right Bank of the Erguna River* as an example, analyzing the transformation and extinction of minority cultures, and how to preserve their traditions and identity in the face of modernization. The paper will focus on the inevitability of social development, the destruction of ecological balance, and the path to extinction in the context of conflict, while promoting the unity of new and old cultures.

2. Inevitability of Social Development

In *The Right Bank*, the Evenki people reside in Aoluguya Township, meaning “the place where poplar trees flourish.” Since they entered the vast forests of the Greater Khingan Range three hundred years ago, their way of life

has been inseparable from reindeer, forests, and hunting. Their nomadic lifestyle required them to relocate according to changes in the natural environment, in search of spaces better suited to the coexistence of humans and reindeer, and to obtain more game. Hunting provided food and essential supplies like fur and bones, which could be exchanged for other necessities like bullets and salt. Although they relied on forest wildlife for their livelihood, the Evenki people also maintained a deep reverence for nature, embodying a “harmony between man and nature” philosophy that formed a unique spiritual connection to the natural world and allowed for a higher-dimensional symbiosis with nature [5]. “At that time, everything operated in an impeccably cyclical manner, and the world must have been flawless [6].”

Historically, the Evenki maintained their unique nomadic and hunting culture over the long term. Yet, while they were immersed in this “harmony between man and nature”, a massive transformation was taking shape down in the mountains. This transformation led to the decline of the Evenki way of life, akin to the setting sun in the west; although the sun rises again with a beautiful dawn, for the Evenki, it felt like a plunge into an abyss without return. The transformation began with land reforms, followed by the development of the Greater Khingan Range. “One by one, thick pine trees fell, and logging roads were opened up [4].” Eventually, the Evenki people, who had lived deep in the Greater Khingan Range for generations, were relocated to houses in the towns below, like those fallen pine trees being transported out of the forest. Government policies for resettlement, the spread of modern economic practices, and urban development all pressured them to abandon their “outdated” way of life. Meanwhile, with decreasing forest resources and the introduction of hunting regulations, their traditional hunting culture faced restrictions. For the Evenki, these policies signified the end of their nomadic hunting lifestyle, the conclusion of bartering, and the fading of their spiritual connection to nature. This left the Evenki with no choice but to gradually abandon nomadic life, shifting to a settled, agricultural lifestyle. Thus, they were propelled by this massive transformation out of the forests and into towns, into an entirely new state of life, and a completely unfamiliar living space [7].

3. The Destruction of Ecological Balance

3.1 Aoluguya, “Where Poplar Trees Do Not Flourish”

The Evenki people, full of natural divinity, have always

used firewood that naturally fell off or lost vitality. Even the grieving Jinde chose to end his life by hanging himself above a tree that had completely lost vitality. Their respect and worship for nature are undeniable and even admirable. It is precisely because of their respect and worship of nature that they are always in a virtuous circle with nature. However, "now the summer rain is thinning, and the winter snow is thinning year by year... I am like a hunter in an alkali field, but instead of the deer with their beautiful horns, I wait for the wind with its dust [4]." The beginning of the article directly reflects the current very harsh natural environment. Since 1957, the demand for wood has increased, and many forest workers have moved into the mountains, cutting down the lives of individual trees and transporting them down the mountain, some to build houses, some directly to make firewood. At the beginning, people may still have some awe for the development of nature, but gradually, the exploitation of forests went out of control, and human beings showed an unprecedented desire to conquer and control the development of nature [8]. But natural ecosystems are interconnected. Excessive deforestation has destroyed ecological balance such as the water cycle and biodiversity, and the entire ecosystem of the Evenki ethnic group has been destroyed. As described in the article, "At that time, the forest on the right bank of the Erguna River not only had trees that covered the sky and the sun, but also rivers were everywhere." ... Now these rivers are shooting stars across the sky, and most of them have disappeared [4]."

Compared with the current harsh natural environment, people born in nature, due to the destruction of forests led to the continuous shrinking of living space, prey is less and less, and the natural granaries of reindeer have lost fresh and delicious moss, so they must find quiet and food places, but even so death is still like hyenas smell rotten meat step by step. The deterioration of the natural environment is not only the sorrow of the Evenki people, but also the sorrow of all mankind. As Chi Zijian said, "Having a native land is like a tree having roots; And with nature, the tree will sprout [9]." But if the roots are rotten, how will the branches and leaves grow?

3.2 When All Things No Longer Have Spirits

The Evenki people are a nature-worshipping ethnic group who believe that "everything has a spirit." This belief runs deep in their bones and is sacred, and inviolable. They attribute spirituality to animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and more [10]. This includes mountain gods like "Baina Cha," the fire god, the Maru god, and the reindeer. Each of these reflects their profound reverence for nature. The Evenki people use only dead wood, as their revered mountain god, Baina Cha, is carved onto trees. This mountain

god, who governs all wild animals, is believed to bless them with abundant game, extending their respect for trees as well. Bears and reindeer are similarly endowed with an inner spirit. "Reindeer must be a gift from the gods; without them, we would not exist [4]." In the forest, reindeer forage for food on their own and are careful not to damage plants as they eat. When they migrate, reindeer carry heavy loads and provide rides for the elderly, women, and children. The fire they worship is also carried on the backs of reindeer. Their existence is in a state of positive balance with nature, continuously preserving their ethnic soul through a philosophy of "harmony between man and nature."

However, as more and more trees in the mountains and forests fall, so too does the developer's sense of reason. They stand as outsiders, numb to the destruction of the natural environment, as if they do not come from nature or depend on it for life. The development of the world has indeed brought convenience to those who live within it. But have they ever considered the Evenki people, who see nature as their lifeblood [7]? As nature disappears day by day, everything in the forest loses its vitality, be it plants, animals, or people. The forced disruption of their balanced cycle directly leads to nature's demise; when they go hunting, they return empty-handed. Even their revered mountain god, Baina Cha, can no longer bless them with game. The God-given reindeer have also lost the flowers and butterflies that used to accompany them while grazing. The disappearance of nature subsequently leads to the decline of nature worship. Their souls, like tender shoots scorched under the summer noon sun, have completely lost their vitality. "Modern people are like stubborn gardeners, pruning every tree into the same shape. The result is that some trees wither and die from excessive trimming [9]." The Evenki people are wrapped in endless sadness, swept away by the current of social change, sinking into an abyss with no means to resist.

4. The Path to Extinction in the Context of Conflict

"In the era of the Lena River, we had twelve clans, but by the time of the right bank of the Erguna River, only six clans remained. Many clans dispersed with the flow of time and the winds [4]." Today, the life of this nation is nearing its end. Even the Kazakh people of Xinjiang's Altai region, located thousands of miles away but still, a traditional nomadic tribe, share similar ways of living with nature. Despite the vast distance between them, they are strikingly alike, coexisting with nature in their unique ways. Episode 3 of the TV series *My Altay Zhang Fengxia* describes the Kazakh way of life: "They have their own

lifestyle, their own way of interacting with the world. You may not agree with them, but you should not try to change them from a position of superiority.” Although cultural assimilation is severe today, people live in an era of strong cultural inclusiveness, and people should embrace the concept of “seeking common ground while reserving differences” rather than discarding these cultures as obsolete. However, the idea of cultural inclusiveness has not peacefully coexisted with economic values. Like the Evenki people, there are “non-spiritual” reformers who try to manipulate the “spirits” of the mountains like “sages,” even showing disdain for the Evenki people’s souls, stripping them of their voice to speak for their nation. Not even the collapse of nature has shaken their innate spiritual connection to the natural world, which remains central to their way of thinking [11]. When they are told they must move down from the mountains, their first concern is for their reindeer: “What will happen to them?” The response they receive is, “What’s the difference between your reindeer and cattle, horses, or pigs?” The sacred reindeer, given to them by the gods, are reduced to mere animals with no spiritual significance. “Luni said that the reindeer eat hundreds of different plants in the mountains, but if you only feed them grass and branches, they lose their spirit and will die [4]!” This is precisely the problem the Evenki people face. Not long after descending, they returned to the mountains with their reindeer, and their large migration failed.

If they are struggling to adapt to this new era, the death of Elena symbolizes the result of their efforts. Elena, the first university student from her tribe, had a deep love for painting and was accepted into an art academy in Beijing. However, the tension between her natural spiritual identity and city life created a huge sense of disconnection. “She painted two types of landscapes: one with houses and streets of a bustling town, and the other with bonfires, rivers, and mountains.” Elena yearned for both urban life and a return to the mountains. She would tire of the mountains and return to the city, only to go back again. The inner conflict and pain she faced likely stemmed from the vast gap between the spiritual world and the physical world, the emptiness of urban life, and the soul’s confinement in a cold, mechanical world devoid of spirit. This is a source of suffering for many in modern society, where a once-free soul is trapped by the demands of daily life. The spirit becomes lost in the fast-paced world, creating a deep sense of alienation, unable to reconcile, and drifting into nothingness. Ultimately, she chose to return to the mountains, saying, “I’ve completely understood. It’s only the reindeer, trees, rivers, moon, and fresh wind that get tiresome [4].”

However, the conflict between spirit and reality didn’t end

there but intensified, leading her to take her own life, thus concluding her struggle. Elena’s death is symbolic of the gradual extinction of her people. Meanwhile, in Episode 8 of the TV series *My Altay*, the Kazakh herder Sulitan is also being left behind by the rapid development of society. He says, “The life I loved is disappearing. I can no longer raise eagles, I can’t hunt anymore, they’ve taken my gun away, and we no longer move our herds along the old paths to Fairy Bay, now we drive on highways. Does the world really have to develop this way? I can’t understand it.” A herder who inherited and wanted to continue the traditions of his people is abandoned by the progress of the times. The new era does not reach back to pull him forward, even though his experience is profound. However, the culture and civilization of ethnic minorities should not end in death. The development of new and old cultures should not mean the complete abandonment of the old, but rather a shared development, seeking unity while respecting differences. What people should do is understand and respect the diversity of this world and the variety of ethnicities, avoiding further intensification of conflicts. Instead of demanding that they abandon their spirit, beliefs, and live a lifeless life as “outsiders,” people should embrace them as they are [12].

5. Conclusion

The Right Bank of the Erguna River deeply portrays the social changes and cultural impacts experienced by the Evenki people, depicting in detail the helplessness and struggle of a minority culture gradually fading away in the process of modernization. The article not only showcases the unique lifestyle and spiritual world of the minority but also subtly evokes a sense of sorrow, prompting people to cherish and reflect on cultural diversity. With the advancement of technology, people seem to be becoming more mechanical as well. The hustle and bustle of city life, the nine-to-five routine, the monotonous repetition — it’s as if society is no longer a place for humans to experience life, and everything is losing its spirit. Minority groups, full of unique characteristics, are seen as “uncivilized” in the face of modern society. The new era drags them along without asking what they want. They are gradually assimilated, forced to abandon tradition, and left behind by the times. Perhaps true inheritance isn’t just about preserving the original form but respecting and preserving the cultural foundations of minority groups, allowing them to shine with new brilliance within modern civilization. The lifestyle of ethnic minorities is simply accustomed to the principles of “harmony between humanity and nature” and the “Tao following nature” in the operation of all things. This is not only about preserving the culture of ethnic minorities but also about inheriting Chinese culture. More-

over, it contributes to maintaining the diversity of human culture, which is a shared responsibility of all humankind. However, when facing cultural assimilation in the development of a new era, people must not be “The riot of flowers gradually dazzles the eyes,” but instead view the issue dialectically and approach this new era with the mindset of “engaging with things without being swayed by them.”

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