

Mobility of Urban Ethnic Group and Construciton of Ethnic Boundary

——A Case Study on “Buyi Lane”in Kunming

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Abstract: Since the end of 1960s, ethnic boundary has developed into one of the core categories to be discussed by international anthropology. Based on the research object of Buyi ethnic group which migrate from Villages in Guizhou to Kunming and work on garbage collection, this paper analyzes the construction process of ethnic group. From the analysis, it can be learned that the contact between Buyi ethnic group and urban residents has not resulted in cultural assimilation. Instead, it has further highlighted ethnicity and constructed rigid ethnic boundary. Besides, the driving force originates from interaction between ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the urban mainstream groups, who show economic and political strength, play a leading role in social exclusion of the minorities that are marginal population.

1. Introduction

Since the publication of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* in 1969, which was mainly edited by Fredrick Barth, a Norwegian anthropologist, “Ethnic Boundary” has been widely mentioned and employed as an important theory in the process of researching ethnic group within the human educational circles. Based on the theory, “primordialism” [1] with ethnic identity searched from such elements as language, religion, race as well as land is abandoned. Besides, the analytical framework with historism as well as essentialism concerning such theoretical model as ethnic construction searched from imagination, creation as well as memory, etc. is abolished.

Since the 1980s, with the advance of China's economic system reform as well as the acceleration of population mobility and urbanization, the contact and interaction within ethnic groups have become more and more frequent. As a result, rich and complicated differentiation culture change scenery is formed, thus providing abundant empirical facts for the discussion of ethnic group theory as well as ethnic boundary. Here, ethnic boundary of urban minorities can be basically divided into two types, namely net ethnic boundary in dispersing living and relatively dispersing employment. Besides, the latter can also be divided into two types: the original ethnic communities (such as agglomeration of Hui nationality in urban areas) and newly emerged minorities who live together and are occupied in the same profession after entering into the cities. In comparison, the latter is more appropriate for observing and discussing the construction and maintenance process of ethnic boundary in urban areas.

“Buyi Lane”, the community which migrant minorities have developed so as to live together and be engaged in the same profession, is discussed in the dissertation. In Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, Buyi families live on “picking up slags”. With the specialty of taking race relation as the bond, the families mentioned above inhabit together in the “Buyi Lane”. They gather in the urban village with the common living space as well as profession as the carrier, thus forming an obvious ethnic boundary. Several or even dozens of Buyi families would rent and gather in the place which is appropriate for piling up slags with cheap rental. The demolition, along with transformation has not led to the disappearance of Buyi Lane; instead, it exists with a moving state in the corners of cities where the same profession is involved.

With the field investigation data of the three stages as the basis, the formation and evolution process of Buyi Lane are presented as a trial. Besides, for Buyi people, the motivation of

constructing ethnic boundary after migrating in urban areas is elaborated, thereby perfecting the ethnic boundary theory put forward by Barth.

2. Formation and Evolution of Natural Space Boundary for Buyi Lane

Urbanization is a process of “village surrounded by city”. [2] With the expansion of urban areas, more and more villages and agricultural lands are exploited into residential districts or new urban areas. However, among new and old districts, one new district and another as well as one community and another, there are always “urban villages” inhabited by new urban residents whose registered residences are changed from rural one to urban one due to the expropriation of their lands. Such architectural patterns as “facing building” “kissing building” as well as “thin strip of sky” are in great contrast with newly-developed new urban districts and residential districts. As a result, a new urban-rural dual structure has emerged in modern cities. At the edge of the urban-rural structure in Kunming, there are some corners left behind without being brought into urban renewal. In case those forgotten (or temporarily forgotten) areas can offer low rental as well as provide living spaces and recyclables for large number of people, then those areas could become the dwelling districts for Buyi people living on picking up slags in cities.

With the growth of population as well as the regulation and cleaning up of city management, the number of shacks in which people of Buyi ethnic group can live is on the decrease. During the urban sprawl and the new rural construction, as villages choose new sites to build residential quarters, houses are constructed on new homesteads and the original breeding of livestock is suspended, the shabby bungalows built by mud become the new choice of famers live in the urban villages and urban fringe. After the Spring Festival of 2004, six households including WK, WY, WMK, LQW, WXH, as well as WK from Anshun of Guizhou turned to their relatives or friends in Wucun Village. The Buyi Lane they lived in was some terraced and low bungalows on the former sites of Wucun Village. On the roof of their houses were jagged asbestos shingles and there were no windows in the room. As time went on, the mud on the wall surface was ruined and the electric wires were hanging inside and outside the rooms just like spider webs. The living space in the bungalow was much broader than in the shacks along the river with every room divided into hallway and inner room. In the hallway, recycling objects with relatively higher value were piled up while the inner rooms were recognized as the places where they ate and slept. In addition, the story height of the bungalows was relatively higher and an attic was divided off; therefore, the couples and their children could live separately. At the same time, rooms for relatives who came here for shelter or for a temporary stay could also be saved. In the front of the terraced bungalows, a space was often left. This could be a place of classifying garbage or a recreational place for the people of Buyi ethnic group who enjoyed having fun together. In their spare time, women of the Buyi ethnic group often danced together here with people nearby. This activity was known as “square dancing” and many strangers would be attracted by this joyful scene.

Furthermore, according to the survey of the author, the Buyi Lanes with a certain size in Kunming were mainly distributed in the following places: the small and large Gudui Villages in the Loess slope area, Wangjiaqian Community, Puji Village, Changdigeng Village and Boluo Village in the Bailong Temple area, Honglian, Baima and Tudui Communities in the Baima area, Chuanfang Xincun Community, Pingqiao Village in the Pingqiao area and Hanjiawan Village. Up to now, Buyi Lanes are scattering like pieces of mosaics all over the fringes of northwestern, west and north Kunming, forming obvious geographic boundaries.

3. Subjectively Constructed Cultural Boundary of Buyi Lane

The Buyi Lane established by the Buyi ethnic group which depends on garbage collection has not only distinct geographic boundary, but also cultural connotation with subjective construction differences. First of all, garbage collection is the material basis of the construction of Buyi Lane. People of Buyi ethnic group living here create the cultural atmosphere of garbage collection which is apparently different with that of places inhabited other floating population. From an objective

perspective, most of the Buyi ethnic group people receive lower level of education and cannot understand or speak Chinese. Therefore, they are not qualified for the jobs which require the workers to speak Chinese or have a certain skill and many employers are unwilling to hire them.

Secondly, it can be seen from the motivations of their migration that the floating Buyi Lane not only provides spaces for the Buyi ethnic group to make a living, but also becomes the shelter for them to practice their preference for baby boys. People of Buyi ethnic group think that more children will bring more happiness. This kind of fertility culture plays an important role in improving their migration from Guizhou to Kunming. The Buyi ethnic group belongs to the Zhuang-Dai branch of the Tai branch. However, the opinions about reproduction between people of Buyi ethnic group and Dai ethnic group are quite different, despite of the fact that they belong to the same branch. People of the former group pay high attention to fertility and hope to give birth to more children. Meanwhile, they tend to have the preference for boys. Like many other nationalities, dragon-worship has been prevalent among the Buyi ethnic group for a long time. Nevertheless, unlike other nationalities, the dragon in the Buyi ethnic group is endowed with a new function, that is, to symbolize the fertility and bless children's safety. During the dragon dance, the females of the Buyi ethnic group scramble for the "beard of the dragon" so as to pray for giving birth to children. The "beard of the dragon" will also be tied to the children's hands as an amulet. Some villages of the Buyi ethnic group recognize the copper casting sculpture of the dragon as a supernatural being and families without children will prepare some gifts to pray to it for baby boys.

Thirdly, people of the Buyi Lanes, which are formed on the basis of the dependence on blood, geographical and racial relationships, adapt to the city life with a strong sense of ethnic identity. According to the survey, many landlords said that "people of Buyi ethnic group are the most untied". The culture of uniting together formed by the sense of ethnic identity plays an important role in the persistent existence of Buyi Lanes. It provides a place for newcomers and guides them to engage in the job of picking up trash more quickly so as to meet the demands of living in cities. Wucun Village, which was once the largest settlement of Buyi Lanes, almost became the "guesthouse" in Kunming for people of Buyi ethnic group. Based on the reminiscence of the Buyi people who came to live in Wucun Village first, all people of Buyi ethnic group in Guizhou knew the existence of the place named Wucun Village. As long as a person came here, his relatives, friends or fellow villagers would also come here successively and the principle of Buyi Lane was that "all of the fellow villagers are welcomed". Based on the network formed by blood, geographical and racial relationships, more and more families of Buyi ethnic group arrived at Wucun Village. Fellow villagers here provided temporary lodging and information about work for newcomers [3].

4. Objectively Constructed Social Boundary of Buyi Lane

Firstly, as migrant workers, they are marginalized and treated differently in terms of the institutional perspective. Just like other migrant workers, people of Buyi ethnic group coming from Guizhou to Kunming are surely treated discriminately under the different systems between rural and urban areas and they cannot get the social welfare and insurance just like the urban residents. Fellow villagers removing from Wucun Village to Wangcun Village described the reconstruction of Buyi Lane as follows, "we are evicted to leave that place". Under the dual structural systems of urban and rural areas, the identity of migrant workers means that people of Buyi ethnic group who live on garbage collection will not be treated as urban citizens and their housing cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, they have no choice but to live in the urban villages with lower costs. However, the existence of dirty, disorderly and poor urban villages is in conflict with the city development idea proposed by local government, so they are demolished gradually and constantly. In addition, garbage collection in which the Buyi ethnic group is engaged belongs to the informal employment with self-employed feature. It has no employer and lacks the support of social "safety net". Living in the dead zone of laws as well as regulations and areas where the compulsory enforcement subject cannot be determined, residents of Buyi Lanes cannot get the basic social insurance and lack the ability to withstand risks and difficulties [4].

Secondly, as ethnic minority, Buyi people are marginalized in terms of the distinctions between different groups. Since the 1950s, the institutional discrimination and seclusion against the minorities have been eliminated. However, people of common mainstream ethnic groups, especially the urban mainstream ethnic groups still recognize the minorities as “other groups” or “the weird groups” so as to distinguish them with their own groups.

Thirdly, as scavengers, Buyi people are marginalized in terms of people’s opinions. In Kunming, Buyi people who rely on picking up slags also suffer from social seclusion due to their source of livelihood which is garbage. Garbage is the result of people classifying things. “The so-called classification refers to the process that people group objects, events and facts about the world into different kinds and species so that everything has its owner and the inclusion relation as well as the exclusion relation between them can be determined.” Taking objects’ value and whether their owner will keep or abandon them as the standard, objects can be divided into 2 kinds, namely, those with value and those with no value and will be abandoned. The later is the so-called “garbage”. From the perspective of environmental sciences, garbage can be classified into recyclable non-living garbage, non-recyclable garbage as well as poisonous and harmful garbage. Separating and recycling such garbage as paper products, plastic products, metal products as well as glass products from other garbage can reduce the pollution caused by burying and burning rubbish in urban areas, which is beneficial for the protection of environment and the sustainable development of cities. Therefore, it is an environment-friendly and circular economic activity that needs to be advocated and improved vigorously. As Emile Durkheim has said, “the classification of objects is the reappearance of the classification of human beings.” “In fact, the aim of classifying objects is to arrange them into several groups, which are different with each other. Moreover, there is a clear boundary that can distinguish them correctly [5].”

5. Discussion and Analysis

Buyi ethnic group migrated from villages in Guizhou to Kunming, and was blended into the economic industry, living patters as well as the social relations in the city. As a result, “Buyi Lane”, featured by social network with the same industry, living in a compact community as well as inter-ethnic group interaction is formed. “Buyi Land” has provided fresh materials for the discussion of such questions as urban anthropology, ethnic group flow, culture acculturation as well as culture change.

In addition, importance has been attached to the forming process and maintenance condition of ethnic boundary. Current examples are quoted in response to relevant questions put forward in “*Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*” by Fredrick Barth (Norwegian anthropologist) et al.

First, migrating culture contact does not necessarily result in the disappearance of cultural difference or culture assimilation. Population flow formed by urbanization does not mean the vagueness or disappearance of ethnic boundaries: the means of Buyi Lane has developed ethnic boundary with others.” Previous cultural anthropology theory always treats the relation between culture contact and culture acculturation or culture assimilation as a causal relationship. Population mobility, along with cultural transmission as well as urbanization is employed in ethnic study in China habitually so as to explain the cause of disappearance for ethnic cultural diversity as well as the crisis source for traditional national culture inheritance. Buyi people migrate from villages in Guizhou to Kunming, along with which their means of livelihood changes from rural farming to garbage collection. Living requirement renders intimate contact and dependency relationship with urban inhabitants and other social groups. However, cultural difference does not disappear therewith. National language, convention and social network with ethnic group as the core are inherited and lengthened by the first migrants who were born in the 1950s to early 1980s. Besides, the features have also been inherited by the second generation born after the mid-1980s or even the new generation born in cities. “Buyi Lane” serves as verification for Barth’s viewpoint that “maintenance of obvious race features, by no means, relies on permanent residence, no mutual contact and no interaction [6].” Mutual contact, along with mutual dependency as well as interaction does not necessarily result in the disappearance of ethnic difference.

Second, ethnic boundaries are not developed by a single and isolated ethnic group; they are resulted through the interaction between the ethnic group and the neighboring groups. The reasons for developing ethnic boundaries by Buyi people are mainly introduced as the following aspects. One is the power from themselves. They are going to their fellow-townsmen for shelter and accept the ethnic belonging consciousness, ethnic identity consciousness of unconditional adopting their fellow-townsmen” as well as the occupational value orientation that “pick up slags” is not taken as a shame. Two, it is the driving power from the urban residents with discriminatory concept and social exclusion. Those people see the slag pickers as filthy people or even thieves. They treat garbage collection as the opposite side of urban order maintenance. Strong belonging and identity consciousness of Buyi people serves as the endogenous power for ethnic boundary construction. On the other hand, prejudice, repel and refusing renting house have rendered the construction of social isolation barrier relating to social integration. Buyi people are driven into “Buyi Lane”, thus leading to the exogenous power. Powers of belonging and exclusiveness are mixed together on Buyi people in urban areas, thus forming a homodromous power and completing the process of ethnic boundary reconstruction there. Hence, “Buyi Lane” is the interaction result of mainstream population and marginal population in cities, in which the attitude and behaviors of the former population towards the latter serve as the leading force for ethnic boundary construction.

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