

Analysis on the Feasibility of Work Division in the Wa Culture

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Abstract: Traditional villages are formed in the long-term process of inheriting farming civilization, condensing historical memories and reflecting the progress of civilization. Traditional villages not only have the functions of inheriting history and culture, but also have important value in promoting the construction of ecological civilization. The traditional village of Wa nationality retains the original architectural style and local customs of Wa nationality, and its architecture and lifestyle inherit the characteristics of ancient Wa nationality villages, which is the symbol of the history and culture of the ancient Wa nationality and the home of human spiritual civilization. As a part of Chinese culture, the Wa culture always reveals the shadow of Han culture. This paper will prove the feasibility of this division of labor from three levels: family, village and ethnic community.

1. Introduction

Wa people have a kind of double fire ponds related to gender. In Haidong Wa families in Menglian County, the firehouses are also divided into male firehouses and female firehouses. The social status of men and women is basically equal in the social culture coexisting with this double fire pond. In Wa nationality, the social rights and obligations of men and women are quite different from the natural division of labor between men and women in other nationalities. Because men and women have their own relatively independent rights and obligations, and at the same time the boundaries are very clear, they naturally form a more obvious gender group.

2. The Division of Labor Is Feasible From Three Parts

It was 11:09 a.m, August 5th. After a two-hour drive along the zigzagged mountain road, we arrived at Ai Cong's bungalow. Ai Cong is a celebrity of the Wa ethnicity famous for his musical performance. He welcomed us amiably into the semi-open bungalow-like "living" room and instantly started telling the Wa history when we inquired about it. In his four-hour storytelling, however, a woman in the Wa-style clothes did not say a word and only busied herself making tea for us beside the stove. Later I learned that she was Ai Cong's wife.

As fascinating as Ai Cong's narration of the Wa history and music was, I am more interested in the union between the eloquent husband and the quiet wife, as it reveals an indispensable element in their daily life: work division. Ai Cong and his wife appeared to have an unspoken agreement of this pattern. As we entered the living room, his wife had already stayed on her position, leaving us to talk with her husband. He spoke, she served tea. As a matter of fact, during my two-week field work at the Ximeng county, many other Wa families shared a similar pattern at home, only sometimes with the speaking role belonging to the woman. This collaboration made guests feel both welcomed and comfortable. Interestingly, not only in family, the Wa people also expand this collaboration-oriented work division to villages and even to the whole Wa ethnic community. Based upon the interviews and observations in six Wa villages, in this paper, I would like to address the practicability of this work division on the levels of family, village, and ethnic community. Furthermore, I will examine its potential contribution to our contemporary Eurocentric and urban-based notion of gender equality. As I argue, this pattern, once a practical strategy for the survival of the Wa minority in history, now plays a role in stabilizing the social relations of the Wa

community and preserving the continuity of its culture.

2.1. The Village

The village, the intermediate level of the Wa community, is a perfect starting point for the discussion as it is the earliest extant and recorded site exhibiting this work division. In the 1950s, the newly established communist government of China sent a work team to Yunnan to investigate and improve the “primitive” situations of the Wa territory, to quote their own terms. They made a documentary in 1958, leaving the later generations a precious record of what a Wa village looked like before the Communists took it over. According to the documentary, families within the stockade village worked together to cultivate village-owned farmlands. In this process, men and women paired up, one doing scarification while the other scattered seeds. This working style deeply influenced their spouse criteria. In one of the love lyrics recorded in the research monograph *The Wa nationality in Ximeng*, the girl sang “to plow a field is to be loved” and the boy responded “to seed and transplant is the way for harvest.” Not only in farming, this pattern also took place when they made their ritual instruments. One such instrument is the wooden drums (*mu gu*), the most important piece in their ritual performance. When making it, men mostly took charge of pulling the woods—the most laborious work—and some women assisted them in the middle of the line, while the other women stood aside to serve as a cheer team. This scene may seem uncomplicated at all, but it illustrates the principle of the Wa people’s work division. “We never have a settled work division. All of us can choose their work. To speak of how this custom formed, it depends on whether people can do it well,” said Ai Feng, a Wa musician in his mid-forties. Other people who spoke to us, like Ou Di, a newly-married Wa woman in Banmu village, and Ai Cong, held similar viewpoints. This style is unlike that of the contemporary society which divides the work by right and equality. This work division has its practical considerations. Resources were highly scarce for the Wa minority in history: little technology, obstacles in transportation and communication, wars with other tribes or minorities [1]. The Wa people had to practically develop this work division to improve the efficiency of labor and raise the possibility of survival against the disadvantageous situations.

This collaboration-oriented work division plays its best part when individual families within the village face crisis. For example, in headhunting, a popular ritual practice of the Wa tradition, Wa people sometimes had to hunt their own village fellows, who were male, young, strong, and with thick beard as the sacrifice. While some families lost the crucial male labor, the whole village would take care of his wife and children with respect for the rest of their lives. This united the Wa village as a big and caring family and every one prioritized, and still does, the village over individuals. “Our houses can be rapidly built, all of us in the stockaded village will come spontaneously to help the host. It is a natural work division between us, not a manager mandating what people should do,” narrated by Ai Feng.

The Wa-style work division is comparably effective in both aspects of individual families and the whole village. In fact, it guarantees a balanced development amongst different families in the same stockade village. Different groups of people are divided based on their quality, in order to function most effectively for the society, not exclusively by their genders. A typical example for this is the selection criterion and obliged duty for *ba cai*, the most authoritative leader. They must be born to speak the specific language that can connect the worlds of human and souls [2]. And when people invite them to proceed the rituals, they will give them presents as revenue, in return, *ba cai* will offer them therapies for illness by calling back the souls of the injured parts [3]. In fact, *Ba cai* are not only respected by people for their special abilities, but also for their integrity. “*Ba cai* won’t speak lies, they won’t and all of us trust them. If they do, we can feel it and they will be punished by souls because they’re supposed to serve justice for the souls.” Ai Cong described in a certain tone. In the Wa people’s point of view, the special status of *ba cai* is not equal to privilege. Instead, it serves to benefit common people.

2.2. The Family

The principle of work division originates in history, but it survives time and extends to the present. Since the 1980s, family has increasingly become the main organizing unit in the Wa community as well as in the rest parts of China. A Wa family typically consists of three generations: grandparents, middle-aged parents, and children. Each generation plays its best to maintain the family. According to some sources and observations, the grandparent generation, if any, does some light family chores like watching the fire and looking after the under-aged grandchildren. Parents take charge of farming, as the father usually plows and loosens the soil, and the mother does the seeding and reaping. Most fathers have some part-time jobs to secure family income, while mothers usually manage some domestic chores such as chopping woods, carrying water, husking rice, cooking and feeding livestock. In one interview with Ai Cong's 15-year-old daughter, this girl tells us how her family looks like from her eyes. "Mom and dad work in farmland with the whole family. Usually mother and I do the cooking. My younger brother and I sometimes wash the dishes in turn. Mother mainly takes charge of sweeping the floor, washing the dishes and cooking. Father doesn't do so, he works in the farmland more. When doing the farm work, father digs the soil for mother to seed, and they pull up weeds together." It is clear that different genders and generations work together to make the family a sweet home in the Wa culture.

As a matter of fact, the line demarcating the work division does not fully depend on gender, but on capacity. "If strong enough, women can also substitute men in some of the work," said Ou Di. Similarly, if a man cannot manage his burdensome work well, or if a woman is more capable than the man, the work division can be reversed without any stigma attached. This is quite different from the common principle in Han Chinese society, where people either strictly stick to the difference-based gender division or dismiss difference to reach equality, in turn causing anxiety and stigma for both genders. In contrast, the flexible work division in Wa community promotes harmony in family and in village. According to some sources, conflicts rarely take place within families and spouses get along with each other very well. The rate of family violence is much lower than that in the Han Chinese society and Wa husbands are more than willing to take their wives' suggestions in regard to domestic problems [4]. Since work division bases primarily on capacity, the responsibility and work for Wa family members are heavy. To maintain this effective work division and ensure that the family will willingly undertake the common responsibility, they have developed an advocate for freedom in marriage to promote domestic satisfaction. When men and women choose their spouses and tell their parents, the parents are often happy and supportive, actively managing the celebrations for their marriages. "It's just fine for a couple to live a good life. It doesn't need to be ornate and extravagant." Ou Di, the above-mentioned newly-wed explained to us with an expression of happiness. Only by this happy union are the husbands and wives more than happy to undertake the responsibility of families altogether [5]. The couples establish an optimal work division to make the best for their life. When we walk into different houses and farmlands to observe, men and women are all busy working together, lending each other a hand. They are either quietly reaping in the farmlands, cooking attentively for their families, or carrying firewood on the paths towards homes with sweat glistening under the burning sun. They work in great efforts as a family and as a group, showing little attention to individualistic interests. "All of us care for the whole." Ai Cong commented with strong affection.

2.3. The Ethnicity Minority

When it comes to the process of ritual sacrifice in the Wa minority, this work division is also evident. Since the Wa people believe in animism, they have created various forms of sacrifice to show respect to souls in nature; in return, the souls promise them healthy livings and fruitful harvest in the next year. The sacrifice includes diverse activities, making it flexible to pass on from generation to generation. It can take place in families, villages and the whole ethnic minority group, and the practitioners apply the same collaboration-oriented work division in the ritual. Societal heads (wo lang) and ritual leaders (ba cai) help organize the activity and incant to connect the human world with the nature. Other men prepare for the ritual and participate in the whole process of sacrifice, including beating the wooden drum and killing buffalos, chickens and pigs, while the

women watch the ritual process and perform local songs and dance after the ritual ends. “Women are not allowed to watch and join, especially pregnant women. We have to give protection for them to ensure the next generation won’t be affected.” Ai Cong explained for this division. From a modern feminist perspective, people may consider this division as an indicator of inequality, but in my interviews, the Wa people never even mentioned the word inequality; instead, what motivated them was to protect women. It challenges the modern ideology of gender equality, but it is reasonable for the Wa people since they do not maintain the rights-based work division. They never use the words “inferior” and “superior”. When they forbid women to see some parts of the ritual, such as killing chicken and buffalos, they see this as one of the procedures to protect women. Similarly, the Wa people also develop several principles for the protection in A Wa Li, a detailed system of principles utilized in the Wa people’s daily life, such as not permitting omen to see wounds of the male, climb blooming trees, and enter farmlands planted peppers. This is largely due to the fact that the Wa people highly cherish women’s reproductive capacity for continuing their ethnic genealogy. “Long ago, we almost didn’t care how many children we had born, it would be a good fortune if only one of them lived,” said Yezi, a middle-aged Wa woman who works as a tour guide in the Longtan Temple Park. Tracing back to the original condition of the Wa people, we could see their difficulty in raising descendants. This led to the worship of reproduction. Subsequently, the Wa people began to practice some principles of protecting women, especially for pregnant women.

Apart from practicality, the gender complementarity is extremely clear when Wa people symbolize it into their traditional instrument, the wooden drum. The drum consists of two major parts: the drum and a pair of drumsticks—respectively representing the genitals of women and men. In ancient times, the Wa people considered birth as a result from interaction between women and natural souls; as the society developed, they recognized the primary cause was actually the interaction between different genders’ genitals. Thus, the respect for nature extends to the worship for reproduction. The wooden drum mimics women’s genitals and the drumsticks men’s genitals, stressing the importance of both genders for reproduction. In reality or in symbolism, it is clear that the Wa people mostly apply the collaboration-oriented work division. “We all obey to the traditions. As a matter of fact, I’ve never heard of anyone resisting these principles. Our elders always tell us it’s reasonable and can benefit us greatly,” said a middle-aged Wa woman who had two children in Yangluo village.

This provides some contrast with the notion of gender equality in Han Chinese society. People of both genders especially like to address this notion as the embodiment of modernity. While equality has greatly transformed people’s lifestyle and way of thinking, it also causes anxiety, especially about women’s role in society. Nowadays people often hold stigma for women standing at the two extremes of the public and private spheres, the businesswoman and the housewife. Measured by the notion of equality, these two kinds of women were considered by public opinion either too aggressive or too irresponsible for family. But if we apply the principle of the work division in the Wa community, it is likely we are able to reduce the anxiety. People of different capacities can have their freedom to choose whatever suitable for them. Businesswomen and housewives can both take their positions under their own practical circumstances; we can’t judge them simply from our point of views.

3. Conclusion

The Wa ethnicity minority develops their own style of life from their history, culture, and society. One of its crucial values is the work division, as revealed in this essay through their family structure, stockade village’s activity and the whole minority’s sacrifice practice. This division is greatly different from the urban-based Han Chinese notion of equality. In the Wa society, work division is for practical use, leading in the ideology of freedom in marriage, respect for both genders. Seeing from a marginalized society to our own Han-Chinese society in the center, we can embrace different ways of thinking, which can be supplementary solutions to some of our social

problems.

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