On the Study of Cultural Connotation in Zhuang Proverbs: 
Religious Belief and Ecological Ethics*

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Zhuang’s proverbs are derived from the long-term experience in the survival and development of nature, and inextricably related to it. Many of Zhuang’s proverbs reflect the folk religious belief’s reverence, prudence, compliance and protection of the ecological environment. The implicit or explicit ecological ethics consciousness in Zhuang proverbs has a subtle influence on Zhuang people’s thoughts and behaviors, and objectively regulates the relationship between man and nature, which helps the Zhuang people consciously keep the balance of natural ecology in their daily life.

Keywords: Zhuang proverbs, religious belief, ecological ethics

As a theory of human development cooperating with nature, ecological ethics studies on the moral principles and standards, behavior norms of the relationship between man and the environment. It can also be looked on as a combination of ecological and ethical thinking under the framework of ecologic (Lin, 2008, p. 3). Proverbs reflect people’s experience in life, containing people’s thoughts and world outlook. The Zhuang, the most population of China’s ethnic, have been rice farmers who has a closer relationship with nature since ancient times, their proverbs originated from agricultural work and are the summary of the practical experience of life, with distinctive features and the most original ecological ethics thoughts of Zhuang people.

1. The Worship of Nature

Nature worship is one of the oldest forms of human worship. Zhuang people depend on rice production which relies closely on the nature for their survival, yet in ancient times, they could not foresee and understand some natural phenomena such as floods, droughts and other natural disasters because of low productivity and poor cognition, which made them helpless but just obey God’s will. As a result, Zhuang people unconsciously worship nature in their life and production, praying for a favorable harvest, which could be obviously seen in their proverbs.

1.1 God Worship

The worship related to rice planting of Zhuang ethnic is the worship of Thunder God (Lei Gong 雷公). Lei Gong, Buluotuo and Muluijia are regarded as the three main gods in Zhuang culture. Zhuang people believe that

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Buluotuo, the God of heaven, created all things in the world, and the God of thunder was the God sent by Buluotuo to take charge of the farming on earth. They believed that Thunder God had the ability to distinguish between good and evil and his ability to call on the wind and rain. Zhou qufei’s “lingwaikaida” recorded, “to worship the God of thunder was to worship the God of heaven, and its sacrifice was called sacrifice to heaven. There were Lei temples in Gailei Island, which were very powerful and respected by people all the way…” (Zhou, 1999, p. 87). It can be seen that the ancestors of Zhuang nationality have worshipped Thunder God for a long time. Therefore, there is a well-known proverb:

(1) gwanz nbwn goengbyaj, laj dieg goengnax
   天上雷公大，地上舅公大
   Most powerful God is Thunder in heaven, likes older Uncle’s seating in family.

   And if anyone did something harmful to the nature or violated the moral standards, he would be punished by “being struck by lightning thunder, and split into two halves”.

1.2 Mountain Worship
Due to the geographical environment, the daily life and work of Zhuang people are closely related to the mountains.

(2) “Dah iq raemxswng dumh din naz, bya hung deng feiz caemh daengx mbanj.
   小河涨水淹田坝，大山着火烧全村。
   Rivers flood fields and dams, and mountains burn the whole village.

   The mystery and power of nature also made them worship the unconquerable mountains. So Zhuang people believe in:

(3) byasaenz mbouj Hai Bak, duzbeuq mbouj haeb ma.
   山神不开口，豹子不咬狗
   The leopard won’t bite the dog without the permission of Mountain God.

(4) Ciengz seiz byaij LOH LAEP, yaek re CAEP doiq fangz.
   经常走山路，需虑撞见鬼
   Be careful the Ghosts while taking mountain road.

   It seems there are “ghosts” beliefs in Zhuang cultures and ghosts are generally divided into “good ghosts” and “evil ghosts”. For Zhuang people, they generally call good ghosts “Gods”, who can protect human beings and bring benefits. Therefore, Zhuang people believe that every village is protected by mountain gods, but at the same time with fearsome ghosts wondering. If villagers want to cut firewood, hunt or graze in the mountains, He/She should worship first and inform the mountain god or ghosts in order to make everything smooth. Otherwise, He/She will be in danger or bad luck, will get lost or injured, or will lose his/her soul in hunting by annoying them. Especially while with a child, parents need chanting the name of the child and calling him back home before leaving the mountain. If not, the child’s soul may be taken away by the ghost in the mountain.

1.3 Animal Worship
The worship of nature is not only the worship of heaven and mountains, but also the worship of animals. For Zhuang people, frogs are closely related and important animals in the production and life. Zhuang people believe that frogs served as the messengers to the God, they were regarded as genies who dominated the weather and
harvest, because of people’s lacking of ability to predict the complicated weather changes in ancient times, they could only observe the natural phenomena through the activities of frogs. For example,

(5) “Aekez ngoenzngoenz heuh,fwn mbouj gvaq sam haet.”

蛤蚧天天叫，雨不过三朝。

Frogs cry every day, but it rains three days.

(6) Goepsou doek daemz, cingqndei ndaem gyaj.

蟾蜍落墈，正好插秧。

The toad fell into the pond, just in time for rice transplanting.

Zhuang people regarded frogs as the God of crop protection, and believed that the more frogs have, the greater the strength to resist the invasion from nature. “The ancestors of the Zhuang nationality believed that the worship of frogs would help them communicate with heaven, achieve harmonious coexistence with nature and finally fulfill their own reproduction and development. Hence the ancestors of the Zhuang nationality casted frogs on bronze drums to achieve the purpose of connecting with gods in heaven” (Huang, 2009, pp. 2-3) Ultimately, for Zhuang’s primitive belief, the worship of life and respect for nature were a part of the people’s spontaneous religious consciousness. At this stage, The relationship between man and nature—as “subject” and “object” was a kind of “submissive” relationship, which man is more affected and restricted by the natural environment. The nature worship in Zhuang proverbs reflects people’s awe and respect for nature and their subjective desire of getting along with it harmoniously.

2. Obedience to Nature

Since human beings had no ability to compete with the forces of nature ancient times, they could only beg for the mercy of nature by devout worshipship in order to obtain favorable weather to survive and develop. Not disobeying but conforming to nature had become the only choice for Zhuang people in their labor and life. Yet with industrious and intelligent, they gradually transferred from complete “obedience” to conform to nature in the long-term experience of farming life, and progressively mastered some laws of nature and made use of it. For example, they took use of the occurrence and development of various natural phenomena such as thunder, lightning, rain and solar term to guide their own labor and life, which showed the real way of “depending on the nature” and embodied Zhuang’s original ecological ethics of respecting nature and harmonious development. There are many proverbs of Zhuang’s understanding to the laws of meteorological change shuch as some short-term weather prediction:

(7) Acag dap rongz sang, bineix fwnraemx lai.

喜鹊搭高窝，今年雨水多。

Magpies build high nests, it will has rich rain a year.

(8) Banhaet dauqcawq mok, banngoenz dak lauxbaeg.

早晨遍地雾，白天晒萝卜。

If it’s foggy in the morning, radish can be sunny drying.

(9) Bi’neix deih cw sam cik nae, bi’moq naz reih mbouj yungh bwnh.

今年地盖三尺雪，明年田地不用肥。

The snow is three Chi deep this year, the fields do not need fertilizer next year.
(10) Bet cib haj ndwen laep, bi laeng nanz miz sou.
中秋月色暗，来年歉收成。
Dark mid autumn moon means poor harvest next.
All above showed how Zhuang people understood the law of meteorological changes to forecast the weather and decide the agricultural work.
Further more, timely farming is very important for rice production. That is to say, planting, transplanting, harvesting and other rice planting laws should be carried out in a timely manner for obtaining a good harvest. So it was very important for Zhuang people to care and master the seasons, and arrange farming reasonably by following the natural laws.
(11) Byaij loh yawj bei loh, ndaem naz yawj geiqciet.
走路看路碑，种田看节气。
When walking you look at the road signs, when farming you check the solar calendar.
(12) Bekloh caeux, hanzloh ceiz, coufaen ndaem meg ceiq hab seiz.
白露早，寒露迟，秋分种麦最适时。
White Dew is too early, Cold Dew is too late, the best time to plant wheat is in autumn equinox.
(13) Caet coeng bet suenq gouj gyiudeuz, mbouj ciuq seiz lingh couh fouz sou.
七葱八蒜九荞头，不按时令无得收。
Planting spring onion in July, garlic in August, buckwheat in September, not on time to make no harvest.
(14) Ceng ndaej it cin caeux, ndaej rom sam bi haeux.
争得一春早，能积三年粮。
An early spring brings three years of rice (storage).
Such basic experience and law of rice planting could help people better plant and management of rice and achieve good harvest.
From proverbs above, it is not difficult to see that the Zhuang nationality’s relationship with nature still belonged to the subject’s obedience to the object, but has learned to master and use the laws of nature, which was the stage of “depending on nature” in Zhuang’s farming history. Agricultural activities conforming to the nature fullfilled Zhuang people’s needs of food and clothes, supported their survival from nature, and constructed an interaction and harmony relationship with nature in the process of working. These proverbs reflect the labor and living rules of people in primitive agricultural society, and show the survival and ecological wisdom of the Zhuang people in ancient times (Ling, 2010).

3. Challenge to Nature

With progress of society and the development of productivity on farming, human beings have been transferred their role from original “obedience to nature” to “transforming nature”. Although it was comparatively low labor forces in Zhuang society, with the growth of the ethnic group, the improvement of labor tools and practice, Zhuang people were gradually on the way to compete with nature and inevitably changes the relationship with nature (Ling, 2010). Such consciousness was also reflected in Zhuang proverbs like:
(15) Bingzseiz lai vat mboq, mbwn rengx mbouj gouz saenz.
平时多打井，天旱不求神。
Dig more wells at other times and there is no praying to the god in dry weather.

(16) Byagungq daengz ndaw dah dwk, haëux faiq coh ndaw reih aeu.

鱼虾到江河打，粮棉向土地要。
Demand fish and shrimp from the river, grain and cotton from the land.

(17) Boux sug raemx mbouj lau raemx laeg, boux dwk nyaen mbouj lau bya sang.

会水人不怕水深，打猎人不怕山高。
The swimmer does not fear deep water, the hunter does not fear high mountains.

(18) Fanh go ndaw namh seng, cienz baengh song fwngz gaenx.

万物土中生，全靠两手勤。
Diligent hands make everything from the soil.

Unfortunately, with fast development of productivity and technology, human beings gradually regarded
themselves as masters of nature, plunder natural resources at will, or even believe that human beings were rather
more power to challenge and conquer nature. In this period, it is undeniable that the relationship between man and
nature has reversed to the subject (human) centered theory, which eventually led to the destruction and crisis of
natural ecology. Therefore, it is very necessary to question and reflect on the relationship between man and nature
anew.

4. Protection of nature

In fact, in the Zhuang epic Mojing Buluotuo, the creator God Buluotuo requires people not to disobey but
respect and conform to the law of nature, thus to establish a friendly relationship between man and nature. Additionally, Zhuang’s religion was deeply influenced by Taoism. Taoism believes that the harmony between
man and the world is the basis of human survival and development and the theory that man is an integral part of
nature is not only the theoretical foundation of Taoism, but also the highest realm of its ecological ethics. Lao Tzu,
the founder of Taoism, advocated that “Tao follows nature” and “enough is enough” (Cheng & Fu, 2014) that
means to conform to nature, the demand and utilization of nature should be limited, and the ecological balance
should be maintained. The integration of Taoism, Zhuang people’s primitive nature worship and Mo religion (摩
教) belief better interprets the relationship between man and nature—respecting and protecting nature, living in
peace and developing harmoniously with nature. Such wisdom of ecological philosophy could be seen from a lot
of Zhuang’s proverbs, such as:

(19) Baengh bya gwn bya aeu ciengx bya, hoh bwnh hoh namh senq hoh raemx.

靠山吃山要养山，保肥保土先保水。
Relying on mountain should conserve mountains first, keeping the soil and fertilizer should keep the
water first.

(20) Bauj raemx couh dwg bauj canghaeux, rom raemx couh dwg rom hae uxgw.

保水就是保谷仓，积水就是积米粮。
To protect water is to protect the barn, to keep water is to keep rice.

(21) Ganq faex lumj ganq vunz.

育树如育人。
Planting a tree is like bringing up a child.
A large number of proverbs express Zhuang people’s introspection in the face of nature which is closely related to their lives, and their awareness that people should love nature just as they love their own lives, protect nature, maintain the natural ecological environment, and establish a symbiotic model with nature, so as to bring happiness rather than disaster to human survival.

**Conclusion**

Zhuang proverbs come from the long-term experience in the survival and development of nature, which reflects the reverence, prudence, adaptation and protection of the ecological environment of Zhuang’s religious beliefs. From the analysis of Zhuang proverbs, we realize that Zhuang’s ecological ethics has changed from respecting to conforming to nature, challenging nature, and then to protecting nature and advocating harmony and order. It was a transformation of the relationship from dependence to competition to symbiosis. Though it is not systematic, the kind of implicit or explicit ecological ethics consciousness in Zhuang proverbs has a subtle influence on Zhuang people’s thoughts and behaviors, and objectively regulates the relationship between man and nature (Zhao, 2013). It makes the Zhuang people consciously keep the balance of natural ecology in their daily life and forms a good situation of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, man and man, man and society. This is not only conducive to addressing the ecological crisis and establishing a better ecological environment, but also has practical significance for consolidating a harmonious ecological society.

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