

## **The Zhuang in the Province of Guangxi, China: Identity Adaptation and Cultural Identity**

Prasan Kumchornmenakun, Boonsom Yodmalee and Notai Udomboonyanupap  
Research Institute of Northeastern Arts and Culture,  
Mahasarakham University, Muang District, Mahasarakham 44000, Thailand

**Abstract:** The Zhuang's traditional economy has been one of self sufficiency and independent for the past 2,000 years. The change of government, communist society, globalization and the promotion of a modern economic policy have mostly affected the traditional economic structure of the Zhuang's. These influences have made the Zhuang's to adapt, change and improve their technology and local knowledge to keep up with modernization and globalization within the region and to maintain an equilibrium within the Chinese society. Traditional customs couldn't survive in their traditional forms, but the adjustments and adaptation have led to the creation of new ones. Such as new musical instruments, new weaving techniques, textiles and ceramics made by utilizing machinery. The Zhuang still fancy their silver ornaments and continue their customs in their respects to spirits, nature, ancestors and family values. The Zhuang's language has been limited, while traditional dances and songs are only performed during local festivals and celebration. The central government of China have established educational institutions to preserve local ethnic language and customs. The Zhuang's traditional bronze drum is still performed during traditional celebrations and has been elevated as an ethnic symbol and souvenir. The Zhuang house has changed to become 2-3 story buildings. Animals that were once kept under the stilt houses have their own shelter or barns. Black glutinous rice is still a popular staple in rural areas and the tradition of wearing dark or navy blue clothing and traditional styles are still popular throughout Zhuang communities, rural and urban.

**Key words:** Zhuang, Guangxi, China, ethnic, culture, identity, adaptation

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The advancements in modern communication and transportation have rapidly increased the exchange in world culture. Almost every person in every country can communicate with each other. The technological bridge has allowed different cultures to exchange ideas and information. Closed ethnic communities in the past have opened up to modernization and new ideas and technology. The openness of tribal customs to outsiders and the reception of new ideas have led to the adaptation of traditional values and given a chance for people of different ethnic backgrounds to understand others and adjust to changes in race, politics, society, culture, education, economy and the creation of new friends. Understanding others is important in avoiding conflicts and confrontation and adapting to modern trends will help ethnic communities to prosper economically to modern economic policies, while at the same time find ways to preserve their traditional cultural heritage. Countries are made up of many people sharing the same nationality but come from numerous ethnic groups. The

process of politics, social, culture, cultural adaptations and lifestyles is the mechanism in building nations (Wallipodom, 2001).

The aim of this research is to identify, the history and cultural identity of the Zhuang ethnic group in the province of Guangxi in Southern China and to understand the Zhuang's cultural adaptation to modernization and modern economic policies.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The Zhuang in the province of Guangxi, China: identity adaptation and cultural characteristics is a qualitative research conducted by the analysis of documents, interviews, surveys, participation in Zhuang annual festivities, house visits and observations of the cultural lifestyles of the Zhuang ethnic in the province of Guangxi in China. The aim of the research include, to study the history of the Zhuang ethnic group in Southern China. To study the changes and adaptation of the Zhuang's lifestyle and social culture in the province of Guangxi in Southern China.

Field research areas include China; the district of Uming in the city of Nanning in the province of Guangxi, the sub-district of Luming in the district of Uming in the city of Nanning in Guangxi province, the sub-district of Fehngsan in the district of Heuchue in the city of Nanning in Guangxi province, the sub-district of Yuonjiang in the district of Laibin in Guangxi province, Zhuang Uming secondary school in the city of Nanning in Guangxi province, ethnic Tribes museum in Guangxi province, Guangxi international university in the city of Nanning in Guangxi province, Ching Chao college in the city of Guilin in Guangxi province, Thailand; Khong Chue institute (confucius institute) Mahasarakham University in the city of Mahasarakham.

Individuals included in the sampling group include 7 key informants who are professionals in Chinese history, 11 casual informants who are credited with knowledge associated with history, administrative governance, social, culture and traditions. Thirty-two general informants from the general public who were interviewed and documented during Zhuang festivals, cultural rituals and traditions in rural and urban communities within the research areas in China and Thailand.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**History of the Zhuang:** The Zhuang's ethnic minority is China's largest minority group. Most of the Zhuang's live in Southwest China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, which is nearly the size of New Zealand. The rest have settled in Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou and Hunan provinces (Anonymous, 2009a). The Zhuang ethnic are inhabitants of Southern China since the Chinese song dynasty (960-1279). The word Zhuang or Zhuangzu is a Chinese given name used to identify this unique ethnic group. The Zhuang in the past identified themselves by many names such as Pu Yeh (elder person), Pu Noh (younger person) and Pu Tai. The name Zhuang or Zhuangzu have only been widely used after 1949 after the Chinese reference to the ethnic group. Currently, the name Pu Zhuang has been widely adopted in China and is used to refer to the many names that the Zhuang's call themselves in the province of Guangxi.

China has an estimated population of 1.3 billion people with 56 minority groups. The Zhuang are the largest minority group and number about 22 million people or about 20% of the total minority population. The Zhuang's origin is still under debate and is different according to each source and studies. Several studies are based on the oral history of Zhuang families, which theorize the ethnic group as foreigner's who migrated into

China. Other studies based on archaeological and historical evidence theorize that the Zhuang are original habitants of the fertile valleys of the Soh Kieng, Li Kieng and Yong Kieng river basins in the province of Guangxi for the past 3,000 years.

**Identity:** The Zhuang are a unique ethnic group and have cultural identities categorized similar to other ethnic tribes in neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Korea. Cultural identities include language, arts, culture, lifestyles and beliefs.

**Language:** The Zhuang's language is very similar in tone with Manchu and Chinese Han, where the local language is still preserved by daily communication between members of the tribe. There are many Zhuang dialects but are mainly divided into two groups. The first, Zhuang dialect is referred to as Northern Zhuang, which is spoken mostly in the province of Guangxi and in several communities such as the communities in the district O'Siewbeh, Suejong and Guangnan in the city of Wern Sang in the province of Yunnan. Southern Zhuang dialect is popular in the Southwest of Guangxi province and in the Southern cities in the province of Yunnan. Both dialects are still commonly used in both written and spoken form.

**Zhuang lifestyle:** The Zhuang ethnic main occupation evolves around agriculture. Farming is the traditional and main occupation of all Zhuang families. The Zhuang's most popular diet is black sticky rice or glutinous rice.

**Zhuang architecture:** The Zhuang house was traditionally wooden house on pillars, which has two storied, with the upper story serving as living quarters and the lower as stables and storerooms (Anonymous, 2009b). Currently, modern Zhuang houses are constructed from concrete, but is still elevated to include a lower level or basement that has a dirt floor. Other modern house variants include a mix of wood, cement and clay. The Zhuang's call their houses or homes Huan.

**Religion and beliefs:** The Zhuangs respect and worship spirits and the Sue Gong religion, which is a mix of Buddhism and Taoism. Animals that are revered are frogs. Sacred ceremonial necessity include the bronze drum used in traditional activities, festivals and ceremonies. Cultural dances accompany festivals, where the Zhuang dress themselves in dark or navy blue clothing and wear silver ornaments such as necklaces, earrings and laces. Zhuangs also perform offerings rituals to ghosts and spiritual deities, ancestral worshipping, respect natural gods and spirits dwelling in nature such as large trees, mountains and nature.

**Marriage and funeral traditions:** In marriage, the Zhuang's have the freedom to choose their mate. After marriage, it is custom that the groom move in the bride's family. Funeral traditions must follow restrictions or what the Zhaung Calle Kalum.

Original Zhuang traditions regarding marriage especially in plains is that both the groom and bride must strictly follow the guidelines and suggestions of their parents and match maker. Marriage customs start with marriage proposal. When Zhuang men are adults and at the right age for marriage, their parents will ask the match maker to bring 2 kg of pork, a duck or chicken, one bottle of whiskey and other items to engage the bride at her home. If the bride's family accepts the engagement, they only have to accept the offerings. If all goes well, the groom's family will receive the birth date of the bride and check the horoscope to determine the best date and time of the marriage. If the bride's family dis-approves of the engagement, then they simply say that their daughters is still too young to start a family, lack of education or low family status and return the offerings to the match maker.

**Zhuang family structure and customs:** Zhuang's give the family institution great importance. Roles and importance within the family depends on each family member's status. The highest roles go to the elders. Female members are also admired and respected, which is a unique Zhuang culture. The classification of roles and responsibilities within the family is based on traditional relationships within the family where each individual is responsible for one another. Zhuang family customs has created a family with close relationships. The close family relationship has created a community that is giving, generous, responsible and takes care of each other. The Zhuang family values are the fundamentals leading to the creation of a united community and the creation of a community entity called Tu lao, meaning village with laws extended from the fundamental of Zhuang family.

Generally, Zhuang family will consist of grandfathers, grandmothers, father, mother, son and daughter. The family is considered whole, if there are step daughters, grand son or grand daughter. Children are called Loohk. Boys are called Loohk Bao or Loohk Chai. Boys first name's are preceded with the word Iee such as Iee Bung, Iee Chan or Iee Kung. Girls are called Loohk Ying or Loohk Sao. Girl's first names when they are young are preceded with the work Tah such as Tah Wai. Nephews and cousins are called Lahn Chai (male) and Lahn Ying (female).

Each member of the Zhuang family has their roles and responsibility. Grandfathers have the highest stature followed by Grandmothers. After the grandparents, the

parents are ranked next highest. Practically, the parents have the most responsibilities and activities within the family, but the opinions and suggestions of grandparents are highly regarded and followed. Disputes between family members, such as discontent between brothers, sisters and step daughters will be mitigated by the grandparents. Step daughters will have no say when it comes time for brothers and sisters of their husband separated to build a new family, but they will have complete ruling of the house when they have children of their own. Husbands and wives will together help each other share the responsibilities in raising their family. Important family problems must be discussed together with all sides contributing their suggestions. Male spouses have greater chances in education where female spouses will receive more funds and assets.

The majority of Zhuang village will have community restrictions and laws to uphold social justice and peace to benefit the entire community. These laws or regulations are created from experiences handed down through the generations. Many of these regulations are similar in many villages. They include;

- Elders must be respected. Adults must show mercy and compassion to children. Be in unity with each other and help each other
- Conduct just acts. Respect and follow the cultural traditions and customs of your tribe with strictness
- Do not steal. Do not gamble. Do not fight with another. Do not shelter thieves and robbers
- Do not destroy or cut down trees above the stream and the forests of the village. Do not cut down sacred trees where divine spirits resides. Do not cut down trees surround the village's spirit house
- Do not release cows and buffalos to destroy crops, gardens and rice sprouts. Those that do so will be punished and find
- Must collaborate in creating security to the village and community members such as security measures and protection scenarios for the village
- Must respect and participate in the traditional customs, restrictions and rituals such as offerings to spirits, gods and exorcism of evil spirits
- Create and agree on punishments for offenders such as finds, public confessions, capital punishments and exile from the village

Many of these regulations are to be enforced the village chief, family leaders and respected elders. Generally, the father of the family is still widely respected because he is the pillar of the family and has the right to decide on most of the business of the family. In a large

family, the person with the decision is the grand father, grand mother or the eldest son. Other male members of the family have the right to contribute their suggestions. When children set out to create their own family, the assets will be divided by their parents. If there are disputes, then the grand parents will give the ruling. Dividing assets will be done orally and without documents. When the parents die, their assets will go to their spouses or children that are taking care of them within the same house. Funeral expenses will be paid for by the spouses that received their parent's assets. If the amount of assets is minimum, then all the children will contribute to their parent's funeral expenses. Widows are allowed to re-marry but not allowed to take their husbands assets with them. Assets from a previous marriage can only be taken if they have children together, where some of the assets are sold to give for their children.

Other unique Zhuang cultural identities include, music, which consists of the Zhuang flute and single string pin. Handicraft such as the Zhuang weaved basket, textiles and pottery, language, folk dance. Symbolic ceremonial bronze drum. Zhuang unique styled house. Unique diet of black glutinous (sticky) rice. Clothing tradition of dark or navy blue textiles. Jewelry of silver bracelets. The worshipping and reverence of frogs as sacred animals and natural spirits. Zhuang language's similarity to the Thai language. Festivals and celebrations and Kalum or traditional Zhuang restrictions.

**Cultural adaptation:** As in the political and cultural realm, economic policy in Zhuang areas has changed dramatically since, 1949. The party initially offered all minority nationalities, including the Zhuang, preferential development policies. Zhuang autonomous areas were granted higher budgetary freedoms and special investment funds (Palmer, 2000).

The Zhuang's are traditional farmers and their livelihood dependant on agriculture, nature and the environment. Male members of the family have responsibilities to farming where female members to weaving and house chores. Traditional Zhuang economy is a self sustained system and one that is a balance of human needs and natural resources. Traditional Zhuang economics has been effected and adapted in response to the change of modern economic policies. The change in the Chinese economy has greatly affected the Zhuang's lifestyle and culture. The general public and Zhuang are all in agreement that the changes to their lifestyle is the result of capitalism and industrialization. Many industrial projects and developments have expanded into traditional Zhuang territories. There is wide spread the mining

industry such as mines for gold, tin and manganese. There are industries and factories making industrial machinery, leather, textiles, sugar, medicine, printing and publishing, pottery, ceramics, tap water industries and oil refiners are just a few. The Zhuang's customs have gradually changed to modern trends after 1980, when new economic and development policies were initiated by the government. Zhuang community's, like other ethnic communities, opened their doors to modern economics and social changes and developments. These changes have allowed the exchange and cooperation in economics and culture with other communities within China and foreign countries. The economy was rapidly developed and the lifestyles of communities in China greatly improved. The improvements to lifestyles have made ethnic groups and the Zhuang, adjust and adapt their traditions and customs to survive in modern Chinese society.

Reform processes and the opening of Zhuang territory to respond to modern economic policies, has led to the development of local industries in communities in sub-districts and villages. It has also led to the creation of small towns and cities, which have lead to the adjustments of lifestyles by mixing technology, arts and culture of ethnic tribes and globalization together as one. The blend of cultural values and traditions has been passed down harmoniously to the next generations. The reforms in land, cooperatives, communist production system had to be made to adapt to new modern commerce systems. Traditional customs couldn't survive in their traditional forms, but the adjustments and adaptation have led to the creation of new ones. Such as new musical instruments, new weaving and textiles and ceramics made by utilizing machinery. The Zhuang's language has been limited while traditional dances and songs are only performed during local festivals and celebration. It has also led the central government to establish educational institutions to preserve local ethnic language and customs.

The Zhuang's traditional bronze drum is still performed during traditional celebrations and has been elevated as an ethnic symbol and souvenir. The Zhuang house has changed to become 2-3 story buildings. Animals that were once kept under the stilt houses have their own shelter or barns. Black glutinous rice is still a popular staple in rural areas and the tradition of wearing dark or navy blue clothing and traditional styles are still popular throughout Zhuang communities, rural and urban. The Zhuang still wear their silver ornaments and continue their customs in their respects to spirits, nature, ancestors and family values.

## CONCLUSION

Close to 40% of Guangxi's population is composed of ethnic minorities. Most are the Zhuang, a Tai-speaking people who are the most numerous of China's recognized minority. They are also among the most sinicized (Hutchings, 2003). Historical evidence indicates that the Zhuang's were an agricultural society. The Zhuang's lifestyle existed in coherence with nature, dependant upon the geographical environment of rice paddies and farms. Zhuang society and culture give great importance to the family institution. The roles, responsibilities and domination within the family depend on the individual's status. Respect of seniority and admiration to females are unique Zhuang cultural identities, which are based on profound relationships within the family, making each individual responsible for one another. The responsibility towards each other has created a strong association within the family and extended relatives. This close relationship of family values is the origin of the creation of the Zhuang's local community organization called *Tu laoh* meaning, village with discipline and edict derived from the fundamental values of Zhuang family. The many Zhuang groups in the province of Guangxi inherit and share the same unique identical culture, which include Zhuang's language, alphabet, clothing, food, beliefs, worship of sacred objects, music, festival performances, funeral rituals, folklore and social morality.

The Zhuang's traditional economy has been one of self sufficiency and independent for the past 2,000 years. The change of government, communist society,

globalization and the promotion of a modern economic policy have mostly affected the traditional economic structure of the Zhuang's. The Zhuang's culture, customs, traditions, beliefs and family system since ancient times have been altered to adapt to the changes of modern Chinese society. The influence of policies and new age Chinese commerce trends have influenced the Zhuang's to adapt, change and improve their technology and local knowledge to keep up with modernization and globalization within the region and to maintain an equilibrium within the Chinese society. The Zhuang's traditional system of assisted collective labor have changed to the use of small machinery and engaging in commerce and trade.

## REFERENCES

- Anonymous, 2009a. The Zhuang Ethnic Minority. <http://www.china.org.cn/e-groups/shaoshu/shao-2-zhuang.htm>.
- Anonymous, 2009b. The Zhuang Ethnic Group. <http://msdchina.org/userfiles/file/pdf/Zhuang.pdf>.
- Hutchings, G., 2003. *Modern China: A Guide to a Century of Change* Harvard University Press, pp: 71. ISBN: 10-0674012402, 13-9780674012400.
- Palmer, K., 2000. *Kaup creating the Zhuang: Ethnic politics in China*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp: 10. ISBN: 1555878865, 9781555878863.
- Wallipodom, S., 2001. *Socio-cultural development in Thai history*. Amarin Printing and Publishing. ISBN: 10-9742722978, 10-9789742722975.