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The dynamic of Dai cultural landscape in Dehong in the sociopolitical context of China

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Abstract

Cultural landscapes of ethnic groups represent the evolution of human society over place and time. This paper explores the cultural landscape of Dai ethnic minority in Dehong of South China. Based on the qualitative field study in a case study village in Lianghe Township, this paper explores the characteristics of the village and houses and in-depth interviews with village leaders and residents. The analysis of findings reveals the characteristics of Dai cultural landscape which have been constructed under the sociopolitical forces in China over time and have resulted in today's dualistic patterns of Dai/Chinese cultural landscape that are not observable in other Dai cultural territories. Apparently from the study, the Dai characteristics persist in terms of spatial and social elements of settlement and village and peasant ways of life of the villagers whilst Chinese characteristics have influenced more in terms of houses and the ways of life inside. Their hybrid Chinese/Dai built forms. Their hybrid forms exhibit the means by which an ethnic minority find their ways to maintain ethnic identity while assimilating, forcibly and voluntary, into a more dominant culture. The social construction of dualistic identity, which involves the negotiation of powers and reinterpretation of different belief systems, has raised questions on the preservation of cultural heterogeneity. Finally, this study contributes to other social and architectural studies seeking to understand the production of ethnic minorities, which encounter the dynamic forces and factors in both regional and global contexts.

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an increasing awareness of preserving cultural landscapes while promoting cultural heterogeneity and regional identities. Ongoing studies continue to explore the production of cultural landscapes in multicultural context, where diverse ethnic groups share a cultural geography and their identities are performed as part of a perpetual negotiation and renegotiation between the different ethnicities. China, due to its vast geography and rich cultural diversity, has been the subject of studies about cultural landscapes in various aspects. Most research, however, has focused on the urban

landscapes of the Han Chinese, the majority of the Chinese population, while paying less attention to the cultural landscapes of ethnic minorities, who are fewer in number yet diverse in forms and largely dispersed in geographies (Knapp, 1992, 2000; Sun, 2013; Wang, 2000). The lack of study on cultural landscape of ethnic minorities in China has left unanswered questions regarding the production of the cultural landscape and ethnic identities under the socio-political constraints in China and how the changing patterns explain the cross-cultural interaction between Chinese and ethnic cultures (Ke, 2016; Wang, Liu, Li, & Li, 2016). The study of the cultural landscapes of ethnic minorities in China can therefore contribute to an understanding of the evolution of the identical built forms and the underlying reproduction of ethnic cultures in the large and complex social and political context of China. This paper intends to display the influences of sociopolitical context between the Dai and Chinese cultures and their impacts on the cultural landscape and architecture of the Dai in Dehong Prefecture.

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Literature Review

The Dai cultural landscape

The Dai, or Tai, is an indigenous ethnic group that is located across a wide geographical area in the borderlands between China, India and Southeast Asia. In China, the Dai population of approximately two million people is one of fifty-five ethnic minorities (Dodd, 1997; Oranratmanee, 2013; Xiao, 1998; Zhu, 1992.) The Dai's cultural landscape represents a lowland and water-based peasantry group who practice a traditional wet-rice cultivation method that is long rooted in China and Southeast Asia (Gao, 1998; Kojima, 2012; Oranratmanee, 2018; Santasombat, 2008; Wang & Yang, 2012). Customarily, the Dai live in stilt-type houses, known in Chinese as *ganlan*, meaning a house which is raised above ground. According to Chinese archeological evidence, the *ganlan*, or stilt house, is an archetype predominantly found in southern China and most parts of Southeast Asia, while the earthen house type, known as *yaodong*, is found in most parts of China (Knapp, 1992, 2010; Shan, 2011; Wang, 2000). However, previous studies of the Dai architecture tended to focus on the indigenous patterns of the Dai stilt house while neglecting the hybrid forms created as part of an assimilation to mainstream Chinese culture. Particularly in Yunnan, where the Dai are one of the largest ethnic minorities, there is evidence of Chinese-Dai mixed patterns of landscape and architecture especially in Dehong Prefecture, which borders southern China and Southeast Asia (Gao, 1998; Oranratmanee, 2020; Zhu, 1992).

Dehong Prefecture

The study area (see Figure 1), Dehong Prefecture, is the oldest principality of Dai which dates back to the 13th century, known then as *Meng Mok Kao Mao Luang*, or *Meng Mao*. This principality is situated in the Kong river basin, which originates from Tibet Plateau and flows through Dehong and Shan State of Myanmar. During the 13th to 15th centuries, the Dai principality maintained sovereign power under the political tension forced by the Chinese empire, which intended to expand its political frontiers southward. Through three consecutive wartimes, the Chinese empire finally conquered Dai principality in Dehong in the 15th century and ruled the principality as a Chinese tributary state until the 19th century. In the 20th century, following the socialist reform in China, Dehong became an autonomous prefecture under the control of socialist China. Since then, Dehong Prefecture has undergone social changes due to Chinese state politics (Santasombat, 2008; Siriphon, 2008; Xiao, 1998).

The geography of Dehong lies between 97°31'–90°43' longitude east and 23°50'–25°20' latitude north. The total area comprises 11,526 square kilometers. It shares a 504 km border with Myanmar in the south and west, while the north and east are adjacent to the Baosang Prefecture. The climate in Dehong is sub-tropical, with mild, dry winters and abundant rainfall in the summer months. Twenty percent of the area consists of plains and valleys, while the rest of the prefecture is hilly or mountainous and has about sixty percent forest cover.

In 2017, Dehong had a population of 1.3 million, forty percent of which were Han Chinese living in urban areas. Another thirty percent were Dai, who since ancient times preferred living in lowland rural areas that were suitable for their traditional wet-rice cultivation, while the rest were

highland ethnic minorities, who chose to live in the remote highlands themselves due to their traditional highland settlement and avoidance of conflict of land use. The social structures and belief systems of the Dai in Dehong have both Dai and Chinese characteristics, including an extended family structure, patrilineal descent and beliefs in animism and Buddhism. The Dai in Dehong are fluent in both the Dai and the Chinese languages and have both Dai and Chinese names.

Methodology

This paper is a part of a three-year research project which comprised of two field studies. The first field study involved the geographic surveys of five townships in Dehong, published in Oranratmanee (2020). This paper draws the data from the second field study being an in-depth exploration about the characteristics of landscape and architecture in a case study village, namely *Wenglengcun* in Chinese language, or *Maan Unglern* in the Dai language (see Figure 1). This village was selected from the first field study due to its long history dating back to the Dai feudal state in the 13th century and the characteristics of a Dai village undergoing Chinese influences for a period of long time. The village comprised of 160 houses, with a total population of 600 people, most of whom were Dai.

The methods applied in the fieldwork included village survey, house measurement and in-depth interview. Physical survey of the village was made in terms of spatial planning and social relation using mapping analysis. Studies about architecture included the

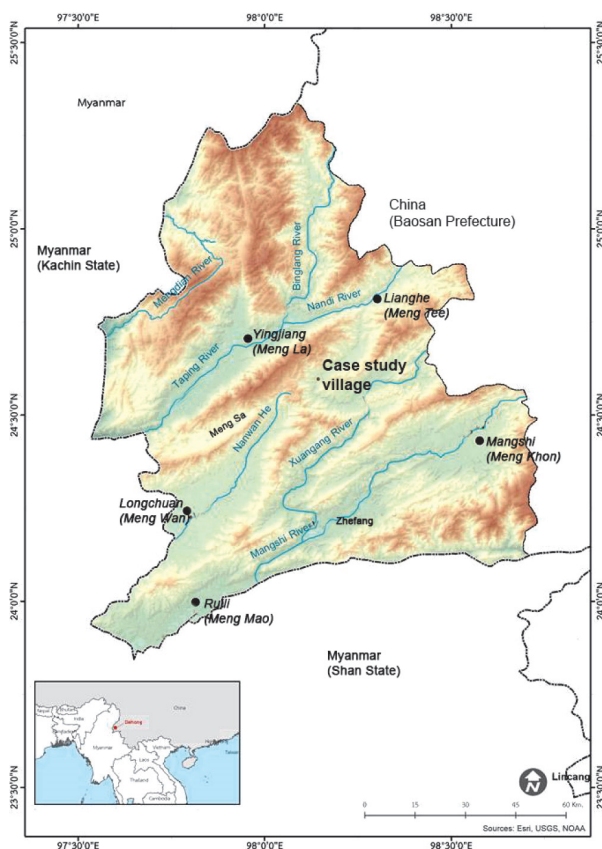


Figure 1 Map showing Dehong the study area
Source: author

exploration of 76 houses in terms of their forms, layout planning and building elements. In-depth interviews with residents were used to explore the historical development of house forms and pattern of daily space use while those with the village leaders and senior village members were related to the evolutionary patterns and underlying Chinese influences on the Dai cultural landscape. Discussion was made about the dualistic identity of the Dai under the realm of Chinese sociopolitical factors and how the dualistic identity implies the dynamic cultural adaptation.

Analysis

Village landscape

The village of *Wengleuncun*, or *Maan Unglern*, is located at 24°35'45.0"N 98°08'29.5"E, 37 km south of *Lianghe*, at approximately 1,030 meters above sea level. It is situated in the river basin of *Nam Huem*. Two tributaries of *Nam Huem* make up the north and south boundaries of the village, while rice fields and a mountain range enclose the east and west sides, respectively (see Figure 2).

According to interviews with the village leader, the land use of the village, which appears in linear pattern of settlement, responds firstly to the linear spatial form of river valley and follows the traditional Dai rules about cultural landscape of wet-rice farmers. The low-lying, river-flooded areas, ideal for traditional wet-rice cultivation, have been modified into rice fields, or *na*, and water from the rivers are allocated through traditional irrigation systems for both daily village use and agriculture. As seen in Figure 3, the village is comprised of housing compounds that are grouped together within a defined village boundary. The rice fields are located along the river. The forests are located behind the village compound, while mountains provide natural protection and water resources. The mountain ridges, which run parallel to the river, provide directional references of upstream-downstream for the settlements.

A topographical cross-section of the village landscape (Figure 4), shows the relationship between the land topography, water and the types of land use. The low level receives and collects water from the mountain through waterways and large swamps. The middle level is relatively dry and receives water from the traditional irrigation system, while the high level is

served by the headwater that collects underground and maintains the moisture needed for ecological balance. According to survey, the land use system, defined under the guidelines of the Socialist Chinese policies on rural land use during the 1950s, is divided into six types in relation to topography and water resources. These range from the lowest to the highest levels namely: (1) river (*hoy* in Dai), (2) rice field (*na* in Dai), (3) homestead garden (*soan* in Dai), (4) village (*baan* in Dai), (5) dry crops farm (*hai* in Dai), and (6) forest (*longmai* in Dai).

As shown in Figure 4, the river and the rice fields are located on the lowest level, which can be covered by water during the wet-rice planting season. The homestead gardens and village are located in the middle level where water can be drawn through water ducts for daily consumption. Dry farms and the forest are located in the high level. Different native plants mark the areas and provide boundaries between different levels and land uses. Stands of bamboo are found along the river and village boundaries; they are used to protect the top soil, prevent soil erosion and provide material for house construction and handicrafts. The long line of bamboo identifies the territory of each village and marks the linear parameter of waterways. Watercress is abundant in the rivers and swamp. Mixed tropical vegetables, fruits and tobacco are planted in the homestead gardens. Corn and dry crops are grown in the fields to provide food sources, while tall trees used for house construction are grown in the forest. There are two types of forests - a usable forest that is allocated based on household size for personal use, and a state forest which is protected and restricted to state use only.

The village map (Figure 5), exhibits the pattern of the village layout, which has existed since its establishment in the 13th century. The road system in the village includes one main road and a network of smaller roads. Along the roads are water ducts supplying water to the houses and rice fields. House compounds, however, are located next to one another on relatively similar rectangular plots. According to interviews, the rectangular plot sizes were structured by the village committee according to rules enforced by the 1950s Chinese land reform policy. Some remains of fortified structures including high walls and village gate provide evidence of past political tension during the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s. The roofscapes of houses also exhibit well-protected earthen brick walls around the houses.



Figure 2 Elements of cultural landscape of the case study village
Source: author

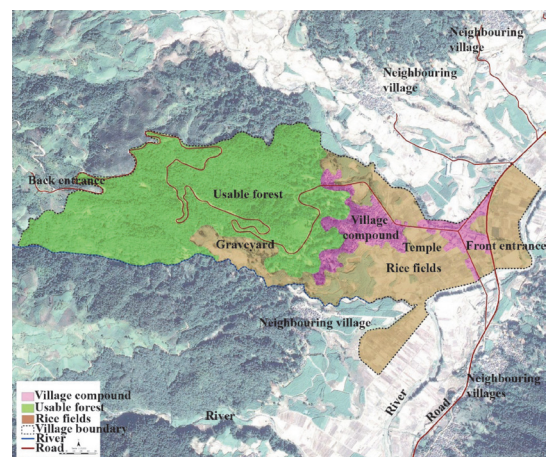


Figure 3 Map showing land uses of the case study village
Source: author

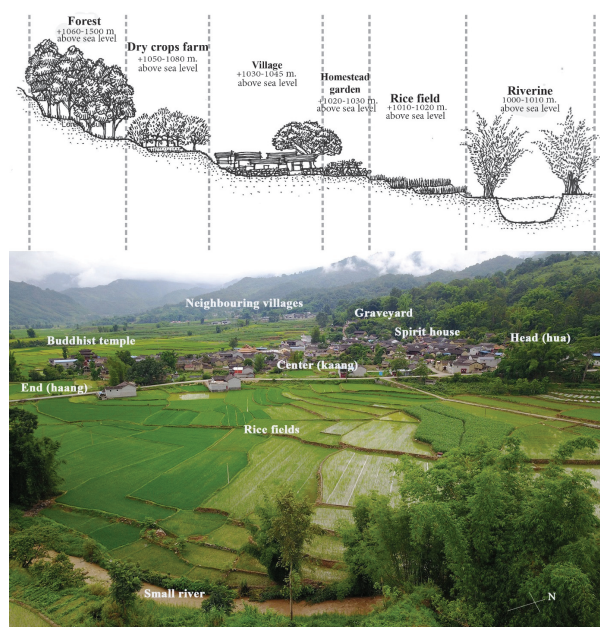


Figure 4 Landscape of the case study village showing land uses
Source: author



Figure 5 Village layout showing roadways and house compounds
Source: The author

To conclude, the analysis of village exhibits the existence of customary Dai cultural landscape as well as the resulting effects of Chinese influences. From the wider landscape, the effects from the change of land use are evident. Inside the village, Chinese land allocation system has resulted in smaller land plots and more condensed layout. Some important social nodes, including the temple, retain their place in the village while other spiritual nodes have been removed or relocated. The analysis on the houses in the next part will explain further the change inside the houses.

Houses

Analysis from survey of houses showed that, due to Child Limit policy in China, most households in the village have four to six family members living together. According to interviews, during the land reform of the 1950s, the amount of land plots per household was calculated based on the number of family members. From architectural survey data and a spatial analysis of 76 house samples, land plots ranged in size from 400 to 800 square meters and were mostly rectangular. As shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6, there are four types of house compounds, including an I-shape, L-shape, U-shape and O-shape. The I-shaped compounds consist of one main house, whereas the L-shaped compounds usually have a house and a kitchen. U-shaped and O-shaped compounds are similar to the Chinese courtyard houses called *sanheyuan* and *siheyuan*. Interviews revealed that most I-shaped and L-shaped houses are relatively old patterns built during the 1950s while U-shaped and O-shaped compounds were built from the 1980s following the decline of political restriction.

An analysis of the house plans in Figure 6 shows patterns of space planning inside. The main house is located on the west side of the land plot with its frontage and living room facing east, the auspicious direction of sunrise. Another reason for this orientation relates to a Dai geographical directive, stating that the roof ridge of a house should align in a north-south direction, relates to the direction of the river flow and the position of mountain ridges. These directional references are different from those directed by Chinese Feng Shui and Confucianism, which favor a south-facing direction for the main house. In addition to the main house, house compounds include a kitchen by the south side and storage by the north and east sides. Toilets and washing facilities are usually by the kitchen while animal pens are kept outside the compound for cleanliness and prevention of smells. The compound is enclosed by a high brick wall, similar to those enclosing a Chinese courtyard house. Access is through a wooden or steel gateway located on a side of the compound, depending on road access. Noticeably, there are no gateways to a house compound from the west side, where the main house is located.

A comparative analysis of the four types of house compounds in Figure 6 reveals the spaces used for daily life activities. Type A (I-Shape) is comprised of a main house built as the central core of most domestic activities, including living, cooking, eating and sleeping. It exhibits the traditional pattern of a Dai house under one roof, despite a form that looks more like a Chinese ground house. A toilet and storage are built in the corners. Type B (L-Shape) is comprised of a main house for living and sleeping and subordinated structures for the kitchen and storage, while a toilet and animal pens are by the back side. Type C (U-Shape) and type D (O-shape)

separate the kitchen and storage areas. Despite their differences, all of the main houses appear similar due to social rules, which strictly apply to main houses, while the layout of kitchens and storage areas depends on a family's spatial demands and their economic status.

A type C house was the most common one found in the village. A closer look inside Type C house (Figure 7) reveals ideas about spatial and social relationships, which are influenced by Dai and Chinese dwelling cultures and by geographic and climatic adaptation to the sub-tropical climate. The main house is located on the western parameter and includes three rooms, making a reference to the three-room houses found in both Dai and Chinese cultures. It is raised 1.20 meters above ground and has an attic used to store household utensils. The middle hall contains a living room and a sacred place with altars for worshipping ancestral spirits as well as other natural spirits, including those of earth, sky and fire. The master bedroom is always located in the north, while another bedroom in the south is reserved for a son after his marriage. Customarily, people sleep with their heads pointing towards the spirit altar, which is also towards the head of the river. The two buildings constructed alongside the courtyard include the kitchen and dining building and the rice granary and storage building. Both of these buildings have a second story used for storage and bedrooms for children or for guests. The toilet and animal pens are behind the kitchen. Enquiries about structural systems and building materials revealed that the main house uses a Dai/Chinese structural building system, with a mixed construction of wood and earth. The wooden structures and materials are found in columns, beams, joists and interior walls, while earthen structures and materials are found on exterior walls, floors and roofs.

Moreover, the interviews revealed that the dwellers expressed a sense of happiness living inside their houses due to the suitability of house functions to daily life activities, the ability to cope with cold climate for comfortable living as well as security and protection of house compound. The dwellers expressed some concerns over future house expansion for younger people due to the plot size.

In conclusion, the study of houses outlines house archetypes that have evolved over time. These types, though different in spatial layout, appear similar in the adopted Chinese courtyard house pattern based on mixed earthen and wooden building materials and technologies. Some Dai characteristics which remain in the houses are the directional reference, the higher floor level and the daily life space use.

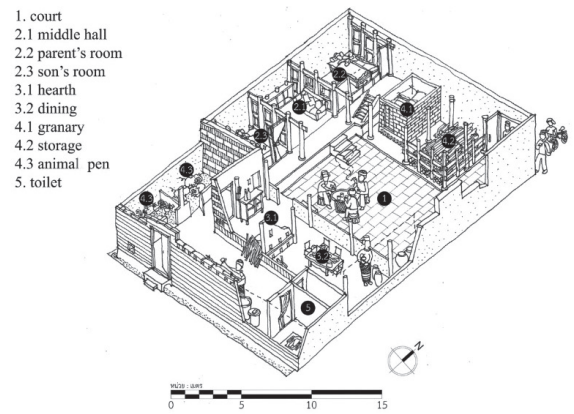


Figure 7 Isometric and photograph of a sample Type C house
Source: Oranratmanee, 2020

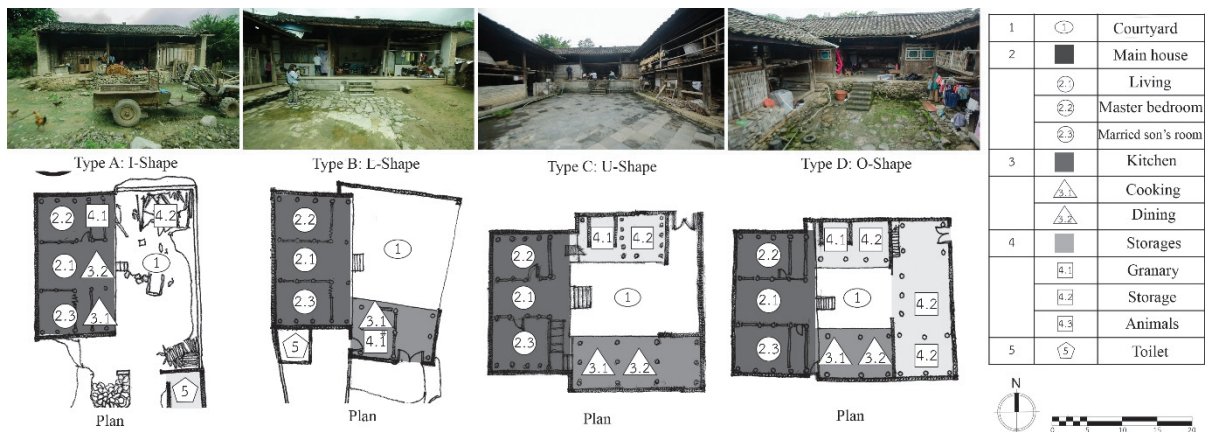


Figure 6 House archetypes
Source: author

Discussion

Constructing Identity of Dai Cultural Landscape in China

This discussion draws from findings from the study of village landscape and houses. According to the findings, the persistence of Dehong Dai cultural landscape is apparent in the physical planning, which corresponds to lowland river valleys and the social element of village, which is governed by the belief systems noted in literature. Meanwhile, village landscape has changed from Chinese policies of land allocation and use. On the other hand, the persistence of Dai architectural characteristics is found in the houses' directional reference and the raised ground floor level, which are suitable for lowland geographies and the subtropical climate of Dehong. Chinese influences are observable in the modifications of house forms, which incorporate the Chinese built forms, courtyard spatial arrangements, mixed earthen/wooden building structures and elements. The transformations of houses tend to first reflect geographic and environmental factors in order to provide a comfortable living condition and adaptive use of available local materials and construction. Later on, the Dai appropriate more Chinese house patterns due to the cultural assimilation.

To discuss the change through time, the findings have found that Chinese interference in Dehong's Dai principality from the 13th to 19th centuries tends to have had less impact on the Dai landscape and house than the intensive social and political reform in the 20th century. During this period, implementation of land reform and the Cultural Revolution changed spatial configurations of land plots, the social system of land use and the shared economic production system. Changes in land configuration and use, together with the destruction of cultural identity caused by political tensions and the cultural assimilation from intermarriages, have resulted in a hybrid Dai-Chinese pattern. In-depth interviews further reveal why the Dai have chosen to adopt the hybrid forms of Dai-Chinese architecture. As is expressed, some of the characteristics of traditional Dai wooden houses were inferior in terms of material suitability in the cold winter and the archetype of *ganlan* or a traditional Dai stilt house built in a relatively open compound could not provide adequate sense of security and protection during wartime in the past. Moreover, the traditional Dai house compound required a considerable space between houses, whereas during the land reform, the land area per house was minimized. Comparatively, the Chinese archetype of *yaodong*, or an earthen, ground-based courtyard house, was more suitable in terms of physical comfort, security and protection as well as spatial limit of land plots. However, the styles of new houses are constantly evolving because of different generational norms and values. The field study found that newer houses built by the younger generations now reflect more modern building forms and materials. More recent housing construction has adopted a modern Chinese house style, resulting in a denser, two-floor structure with additional roof covering the courtyard. These recent changes have mostly resulted from the expression of household economic well-being and social status. These continuing changes reflect the reproduction of architecture due to the changes of lifestyles, norms and values.

Conclusion

Toward the end, this paper reveals the dynamics of Dai village and houses and the complexities involved in how the dominant Chinese culture has permeated ethnic societies, not just through political force but also from voluntary social integration and cultural assimilation over time. Nevertheless, changes in ethnic cultural landscape continue in a more rapid manner due to diverse external influences. These rapid changes address the need to continue studying the dynamic of ethnic cultural landscapes under constraints not only in China but also in other regions.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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