
Growing Old Together: Transformation and Community Building in Taiwan's Yunnan-Burmese Villages

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Abstract: In 1961, a group of migrants from Yunnan, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos were resettled in China's Taiwan region. This paper investigates the Yunnan-Burmese communities located in Kaohsiung City and Pingtung County, presenting their transformation over the past sixty years. It further explains how villagers have utilized community building and leveraged their existing demographic structure to revitalize declining and aging villages through active participation, thereby demonstrating the inherent vitality of these communities.

Keywords: Yunnan-Burmese Immigrants; Longitudinal Transformation; Rural Revitalization; Community Agency

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1. Introduction

Located along the banks of the Laonong River, the four Yunnan-Burmese villages consist of immigrants who originated from China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. These individuals were primarily personnel from Kuomintang (KMT) forces deployed along the Yunnan-Myanmar border during the Chinese Civil War. Following international diplomatic pressure, the United Nations mandated their withdrawal to Taiwan in 1961. Subsequently, 677 of these individuals were resettled at the Jiyang Farm, located at the boundary between Kaohsiung and Pingtung^[1], marking it as the resettlement site with the highest number of inhabitants among all such designated farms.

In the 1970s, anthropologists such as Ruey Yih-fu and Sung Kwang-yu conducted surveys on this group, primarily focusing on how they "adapted" to Taiwan's natural and cultural environment^[2]. However, after sixty years, Taiwan's political, economic, and social landscapes have undergone profound transformations. Consequently, this study utilizes materials gathered through fieldwork to present these shifts and illustrate how villagers, through community building (placemaking) and the strategic leveraging of existing demographic structures, have revitalized a declining and aging village. By fostering community participation, the study reveals the inherent agency of these Yunnan-Burmese rural settlements.

The subjects of this research include the original immigrants assigned to Jiyang Farm and their descendants. The fieldwork was conducted between 2019 and 2020 within the two Yunnan-Burmese communities located in Meinong District, Kaohsiung City, and Ligang Township, Pingtung County. The methodology employs sociological field surveys to obtain comprehensive data on various aspects of the villages, while simultaneously utilizing traditional anthropological fieldwork methods for in-depth observation of the local socio-cultural fabric. Due to recent Personal Data Protection Act regulations, the complete household records once maintained by village and district offices are no longer accessible or have been destroyed. Therefore, a significant challenge of this study lay in the necessity of conducting door-to-door verification to reconstruct community household data.

2. Status of Transformation

2.1. Environmental Transformation: From Barren Gravel Land to Landscape Scars

Jiyang Farm was originally a barren, rocky wasteland designated for the resettlement of Yunnan-Burmese migrants. Due to high soil permeability, the land was poorly suited for agricultural use. However, as Taiwan's economy accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s, the surging demand for construction materials transformed these seemingly worthless stones into lucrative "local black gold," triggering rampant illegal gravel extraction that left indelible scars on the riverine landscape.

In the late 1980s, the booming real estate market, coupled with the opening of cross-strait family visits, prompted many immigrants to sell their land to raise funds for homecoming trips or investments. Consequently, gravel operators seized the opportunity to establish plants in the area. However, some operators exploited the leasing and purchasing of farmland to conduct illegal gravel extraction, leaving behind more than 100 massive craters, some reaching depths of twenty to thirty meters^[3].

These craters attracted illicit actors who used them as dumping grounds for garbage and toxic waste, which were occasionally incinerated, causing severe air pollution and endangering the health of local residents. As gravel plants proliferated along the river embankments, the exiles were left with little choice but to sell their adjacent fields. Furthermore, the frequent transit of heavy gravel trucks through the villages compromised road safety and eventually incited organized protests by the villagers. This wave of development, triggered by land-use transformation, ultimately pushed the living environment of Jiyang Farm into a state of severe marginalization and decline.

2.2. Changes in Village Organization: From Institutional Management to Social Integration

The Yunnan-Burmese migrants were resettled at Jiyang Farm, an agricultural institution under the Veterans Affairs Council (VAC). Initially, the government provided housing and allocated land for reclamation, though no official titles were granted. These migrants were settled into four villages—Xinguo, Jingzhong, Dingyuan, and Chenggong—and were subject to the management and agricultural guidance of the Jiyang Farm administration^[4]. It was not until 1988, when the VAC initiated land privatization and terminated its supervisory role, that the administrative functions of these four villages were transferred from the military-led support system to the local Taiwanese civil administration.

Administratively and geographically, these four adjacent villages exhibit a cross-boundary characteristic: Xinguo and Dingyuan fall under Ligang Township in Pingtung County (predominantly Hoklo culture), while Jingzhong and Chenggong fall under Meinong District in Kaohsiung City (predominantly Hakka culture). Positioned between Hoklo and Hakka communities, the Yunnan-Burmese migrants leveraged their unique cultural identity to establish community development associations during the 1990s. Official statistics indicate that the Xinguo community consists of 209 households and 594 individuals, while the Jinggong community consists of 85 households and 197 individuals^[5]. However, this study reveals that across these two communities, there are 302 building structures and plots, with a ratio of actual occupied dwellings to vacant houses or lots reaching approximately 5:1.

The high vacancy rate is driven by multiple factors. On one hand, the privatization of land in the 1990s attracted real estate investors and retirees seeking to establish "weekend farms." On the other hand, original residents have migrated

elsewhere due to employment or marriage, often leaving their properties unattended. Such patterns of population mobility and spatial vacancy reflect the significant socio-spatial restructuring and structural transformation that these Yunnan-Burmese villages are experiencing following the completion of their historical reclamation mission.

2.3. Ethnic Transformation: From Conflict and Confrontation to Integration and Coexistence

When the Yunnan-Burmese migrants were first resettled at the farm, significant cultural and linguistic barriers led to intense frictions with neighboring ethnic communities. In the initial years, these differences frequently escalated, fueling cross-ethnic tensions and even resulting in physical confrontations. However, these antagonistic relations gradually dissipated through long-term interaction and the process of state-led enculturation through the national education system.

As the number of non-Yunnan-Burmese residents gradually increased, the ethnic landscape of the communities has shifted. Currently, there are 323 individuals of Yunnan-Burmese origin and 248 of non-Yunnan-Burmese origin, with the latter accounting for 43% of the actual resident population. While most first-generation villagers have acquired Mandarin, second-generation villagers have become multilingual, often speaking Hoklo and Hakka in addition to Mandarin. Although the third generation can still understand Yunnanese, Mandarin has become their primary language and the main medium of communication within families.

Furthermore, intermarriage has served as a primary vehicle for integration between the Yunnan-Burmese groups and other ethnic communities. According to this study, the male-to-female ratio among non-Yunnan-Burmese immigrants in the four villages is approximately 1.5:2. This gender disparity is largely attributed to the fact that, in addition to migrants who moved to the area independently, a significant proportion consists of women who married into the community. Additionally, since the 1990s, foreign spouses and migrant workers have become the most recent cohorts to join the process of ethnic integration within these Yunnan-Burmese villages.

2.4. Economic Transformation: From Agricultural Cultivation to External Employment

Although the Yunnan-Burmese immigrants were primarily soldiers skilled in warfare rather than agriculture, they eventually mastered cultivation techniques through government-led training. However, following the land release policy, many villagers opted to divest their land. Currently, 90% of the farmland across the four “New Villages” has been sold, with only 10% remaining in local hands. Consequently, agriculture is no longer the primary industry or source of livelihood. Today, the majority of residents commute outside the community for employment. Within the Xinguo and Jinggong communities, there are three and two gravel plants, respectively, along with two large-scale orchid nurseries. Additionally, the industrial zone within Ligang Township provides numerous labor-intensive job opportunities for local residents. White-collar workers, however, must commute to Pingtung or Kaohsiung City. Due to the limited internal services—requiring residents to travel to the town centers of Ligang or Qishan for healthcare, daily necessities, or financial services—the motivation for younger generations to remain in the villages is significantly diminished. As a result, the current community population consists predominantly of middle-aged and elderly residents, including a substantial number of elderly individuals living alone.

2.5. Demographic Changes: Declining Fertility and Population Aging

The children who arrived in Taiwan with the troops in 1961, along with those born shortly after their resettlement, are currently between the ages of 55 and 75. This cohort represents the second generation of Yunnan-Burmese migrants; they constitute the largest demographic group within the community and serve as the core force driving contemporary community affairs. According to standards set by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly in China, individuals aged 60 and above are classified as elderly. By this criterion, the elderly population in the Yunnan-Burmese communities accounts for 33% of the total, with those aged 70 and above representing 14%.

International benchmarks classify a region as an “aging society” when the population aged 60+ reaches 10%, or when

the population aged 65+ reaches 7%. A society is defined as an “aged society” when this proportion reaches 14%, and as a “super-aged society” when it hits 21%^[6]. The proportion of the elderly in the Yunnan-Burmese villages has already surpassed these international thresholds. The demographic structure of these rural areas has not only reached the “super-aged” level but is expected to continue aging. Due to outward migration and competition from neighboring schools, the local elementary school, originally established specifically for these villages, has faced significant challenges regarding its continued operation in recent years. This decline in birth rates has placed this unique institution—the only elementary school in Taiwan dedicated to the Yunnan-Burmese community—at risk of closure.

3. Community Building Organizational Models in Yunnan-Burmese Villages

Due to limited industrial development, contemporary Yunnan-Burmese villages are experiencing significant out-migration of their youth, resulting in a “super-aged” community structure. Furthermore, the outflow of the original Yunnan-Burmese population, coupled with the influx of diverse ethnic groups, has placed considerable strain on the villages’ ethnic composition, collective consciousness, and social cohesion. Consequently, navigating how to consolidate community awareness while preserving “Yunnan-Burmese culture” has emerged as a critical challenge.

In response to these evolving external environments and internal demographic shifts, Yunnan-Burmese villages have adapted by developing two distinct types of organizational activities. These initiatives are primarily driven by the community’s largest demographic cohort—residents aged 55 to 75—who serve as the backbone for all operational activities.

3.1. Community Care Station

Given that the population aged 80 and above accounts for 7% of the total, the Xinguo Community Development Association applied to the county government in 2013 to establish a Community Care Station. Rooted in the principles of community building and grassroots participation, the program was launched by the Association’s chairperson, who recruited volunteers and utilized the community activity center as the primary hub for weekly elder-care activities. Although the funding is provided by the Pingtung County Government, the program—based on the “acquaintance society” dynamics shared by the four interconnected villages—is also open to residents of the Jinggong community, which falls under the jurisdiction of Kaohsiung City.

Currently, 25 elders participate in the program, with an average age of 80.12. The volunteer team consists of 27 members, including 11 aged 65 and above, and 6 aged between 60 and 64. This model of “the elderly serving the super-elderly” fully reflects the localized care pathway developed by these villages in response to their specific demographic structure.

However, the operation of the Community Care Station faces multiple challenges, including recruiting unpaid volunteers, maintaining consistent attendance, designing engaging curricula, establishing activity protocols, and ensuring that all volunteers complete the mandatory government training to obtain formal qualifications. Through long-term practice, the station has successfully integrated these activities into the participants’ daily routines; for the elders, Tuesday has become the most anticipated day of the week. Furthermore, some villagers who do not directly participate still express their support through donations of supplies or funds. In 2014 and 2015, the Xinguo Community Development Association received the “Excellence Award” in the Pingtung County Community Care Station Evaluation for two consecutive years, attracting visitors from other communities. Through mutual assistance and incremental implementation, these Community Care Stations have garnered significant acclaim, effectively overturning historical prejudices and stigmas once associated with Yunnan-Burmese communities.

3.2. “Mama Classroom” Dance Group

Every evening at 7:30 PM, the community activity center in Xinguo comes alive with music and light as 17 women,

with an average age of 58, begin to dance. They perform dances characterized by the ethnic minority styles of Southwest China. This is the “Mama Classroom” Dance Group, established in 1983. At its inception, the group consisted of only six members, all of whom were Yunnan-Burmese migrants or their descendants. Over time, the membership diversified to include villagers from various ethnic backgrounds. Currently, the group is led by a “daughter-in-law” who married into the community from a neighboring Hoklo village. Her deep familiarity with local geography and social networks has enabled the group to secure greater social resources, thereby enhancing its operational stability.

The 17 members are residents of both the Xinguo and Jinggong communities. Among them, seven are descendants of the Yunnan-Burmese migrants, while the remaining members are either women who married into the village or more recent arrivals who moved into the community. All members participate on a voluntary basis, driven by a shared passion, gathering for practice every day after work and dinner. Whenever the county or township government hosts an event, or when external groups visit the community, the group performs, effectively serving as the public face of the Yunnan-Burmese villages. Through these public engagements, the group plays a vital role in the tacit preservation and transmission of Yunnan-Burmese culture.

4. Conclusion

From the forced displacement from their homeland and their historical status as refugees to the challenges of administrative fragmentation, the commodification of farmland, industrial stagnation, and rapid population aging, the Yunnan-Burmese communities located at the border of Kaohsiung and Pingtung have continuously grappled with various forms of loss. Embedded within “Grand History” and caught in the “involution” of their socio-economic environment, they remain situated on the periphery in a social sense, even after leaving the geographical borderlands. Faced with these seemingly intractable predicaments, the Yunnan-Burmese communities have adapted by leveraging their agency. Through community-building initiatives—specifically the Community Care Station and the “Mama Classroom” recreational dance group—and fueled by active villager participation, they have transcended ethnic boundaries, transformed inherent disadvantages, and dismantled the stigmas and fixed frameworks previously imposed upon them. This proves that even within declining rural communities, there remains a potential for vibrant renewal.

This bottom-up practice is more than just localized care; it is a process through which community members reconstruct their subjectivity and sense of place through daily performance and mutual emotional support, offering a compelling case for “social resilience” in the context of contemporary rural transformation in Taiwan. However, as the proportion of non-Yunnan-Burmese residents continues to rise, the community network faces new challenges. Maintaining existing order and ensuring the authentic transmission of “Yunnan-Burmese culture” amid increasingly complex ethnic dynamics has become a significant task. In particular, as “Yunnan-Burmese identity” faces potential ruptures across generations, the question of how to move beyond single-ethnic narratives and transform traditional culture into an inclusive community asset—one that bridges ethnic divides—is key to securing a new position for the community’s sustainable development and remains a critical issue for future exploration.

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Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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