

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

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**Abstract:** In 1961, a group of immigrants from Yunnan province of China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos were resettled in China's Taiwan region. This article takes immigrants from the Yunnan Myanmar community located in Kaohsiung City and Pingtung County as the survey objects, presenting their changes over the past 60 years, and explaining how villagers can use community building and the existing population structure to enable declining and aging villages to demonstrate the existing momentum of the Yunnan Myanmar community through community participation.

**Keywords:** Yunnan-Burmese immigrants; Community dynamics; Longitudinal transformation; Rural revitalization

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## 1. Introduction

The Yunnan-Myanmar Four Villages, located on the banks of the Laonong River in Taiwan, are a group of immigrants from China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. They were the troops deployed by the Kuomintang on 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<sup>[1]</sup>, marking it as the resettlement site with the highest number of inhabitants among all such designated farms. It is the farm with the largest number of resettled people in this batch.

In the 1970s, anthropologists Rui Yifu and Song Guangyu conducted a survey on this group, and their main concern at that time was how this group of people "adapted" to Taiwan's natural and cultural environment<sup>[2]</sup>. But after 58 years, Taiwan's political, economic, and social environment has undergone significant changes. Therefore, this study presents the changes in Yunnan-Burmese villages through materials obtained from field surveys, and explains how villagers can use community building and existing population structure to enable declining and aging villages to participate in the community and showcase the existing momentum of rural areas. This study focuses on immigrants and their descendants who were selected as survey subjects for the Jiyang branch. The survey was conducted from 2019 to 2010 in two Yunnan-Myanmar communities, Meinong District in Kaohsiung City and Ligang Township in Pingtung County. The research

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method is to use sociological fieldwork to obtain survey data on various aspects of the village, while using traditional anthropological fieldwork methods to observe the local social culture in depth. investigation research methods to deeply observe the local social culture. Due to the fact that in the past, village, neighborhood, and district offices in Taiwan had complete household data, but in recent years, due to the provisions of the Personal Data Protection Law, not only has the use of data been suspended, but some offices have even destroyed this batch of data. Therefore, in terms of verifying the relevant data of community residents in this study, we can only personally investigate them one by one, which is the difficulty point of this study.

## **2. Change situation**

### **2.1. Changes in living environment: From wilderness and gravel land to landscape scars**

Jiyang Farm was originally a barren gravel land for settling Yunnan-Burmese immigrants, which was unfavorable for cultivation due to its strong geological permeability. With the economic takeoff of Taiwan in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a significant increase in demand for building stone. Originally, useless stones were transformed into lucrative “black gold”, leading to illegal mining by industry players.

In the late 1980s, the housing market was booming, and with the opening of cross-strait visits, many immigrants sold their land to raise funds for returning home or investing. As a result, sand and gravel industry operators took advantage of the situation and established sand and gravel farms. However, some businesses resort to renting and purchasing agricultural land to engage in illegal excavation, resulting in over 100 huge pits on the surface that are 20–30 meters deep<sup>[3]</sup>. These collapsed pits were subsequently dumped with garbage and toxic waste by unscrupulous individuals and even illegally burned. The resulting air pollution seriously endangers the health of residents. With numerous sand and gravel fields surrounding the riverbank, Yimin was forced to sell nearby farmland; However, a large number of sand and gravel trucks frequently shuttle through villages, not only endangering road safety but also triggering intense protests from villagers. The development wave triggered by land transformation ultimately marginalized the living environment of Jiyang Farm.

### **2.2. Changes in village organization: From institutional management to social integration**

The Yunnan-Burmese immigrants were resettled in Jiyang Farm, an agricultural institution under the jurisdiction of the Retired Servicemen’s Association. The government built houses and allocated land for them to settle, but did not provide ownership certificates. These immigrants were resettled in four villages, namely “Xinguo, “ “Jingzhong, “ “Dingyuan, “ and “Chenggong, “ according to their identities, and were managed and guided by the Jiyang Farm Department in terms of agricultural technology and daily life<sup>[4]</sup>. It was not until 1988 that the Retired Servicemen’s Association officially promoted land release and terminated counseling tasks, and the various businesses of these four immigrant villages were transferred from the military counseling system to the administrative system of Taiwan’s local government. In terms of administrative geography, these four geographically adjacent villages exhibit cross-border characteristics: Xinguo and Dingyuan villages belong to Ligang Township in Pingtung County (with a focus on Hoklo culture), while Jingzhong and Chenggong villages belong to Meinong District in Kaohsiung City (with a focus on Hakka culture). Located between Heluo and Hakka villages, Burmese immigrants established community development associations in the 1990s due to their cultural uniqueness. According to official statistics, there are 209 households and 594 people in the Xinguo community; Jinggong Community has a total of 85 households and 197 people<sup>[5]</sup>. However, this study found that there are a total of 302 buildings and land in two communities, with an actual ratio of almost 5:1 between residential and vacant houses, as well as vacant land. There are many reasons for the high vacancy rate: on the one hand, after the privatization of land rights in the 1990s, it attracted investors to buy properties or retired people to move in and become holiday farmers; On the other hand, the original residents moved to other places due to factors such as employment and marriage, but did not dispose of their original real estate. This phenomenon of population mobility and spatial idleness reflects the significant social spatial restructuring and structural transformation that Yunnan Myanmar immigrant villages are undergoing after completing their

historic reclamation tasks.

### **2.3. Ethnic change status: From conflict and opposition to integration and coexistence**

At this time, the Yunnan-Burmese people had just been resettled, and due to cultural differences and language barriers, they had considerable conflicts and contradictions with the surrounding ethnic settlements. Due to cultural customs and language differences, conflicts often occurred in the first few years of the arrival of Yunnan-Burmese immigrants on the farm, which not only intensified the confrontational relationships between different ethnic groups but also led to armed conflicts. Such ethnic conflicts gradually disappear through long-term interactions and the enculturation of national education. With the gradual increase of foreign residents, there are currently 323 members of the Yunnan-Burmese ethnic group and 248 members of the non-Yunnan-Burmese ethnic group in the community, accounting for 43% of the actual population. Due to the fact that most of the first-generation villagers have already learned Mandarin, the second-generation villagers can even speak multiple languages, such as Hoklo and Hakka. Although the third generation can hear the Yunnan dialect, its main language has been replaced by Mandarin, and communication with family members is also conducted in Mandarin. In addition, intermarriage is also one of the main ways for the Yunnan-Myanmar community to integrate with other ethnic groups. According to this research survey, the male-to-female ratio of non-Yunnan-Burmese immigrants in the four villages is approximately 1.5:2. The reason for the gender ratio gap is that, among this group of non-Yunnan-Burmese immigrant women, apart from some who are immigrants, more are married women. In addition, after the 1990s, foreign spouses and foreign migrant workers were the later groups to join the ethnic integration process in Yunnan-Burmese villages.

### **2.4. Economic changes: From agricultural planting to outward employment**

Due to the fact that Yunnan-Burmese immigrants used to be soldiers who knew how to fight and were not good at farming, although the villagers had already mastered planting techniques with government guidance, many of them sold their land after the land was released. Currently, 90% of the farmland in the four new villages has been resold to others, leaving only 10% of the farmland. Therefore, agriculture is no longer the main industry and livelihood source in the local area. Nowadays, most residents in the community go out to work. There are three sand and gravel fields in the Xinguo community, two in the Jingzhong community, and two large-scale orchid gardens. There is also an industrial zone in Ligang Township, and the labor released from these gardens and fields provides many employment opportunities for residents. And white-collar residents need to commute to work in the urban areas of Pingtung or Kaohsiung City. Because the living function within the community is not high, if you want to go to the hospital for medical treatment, purchase daily necessities, or handle financial business, you need to go to Ligang or Qishan blocks. All of these have affected the willingness of young and middle-aged people to stay in the village. So currently, most of the people living in the community are middle-aged and elderly, and there are also many elderly people living alone.

### **2.5. Changes in age structure: Low birth rate and population aging**

The children who withdrew from Taiwan with the army in 1961, as well as the babies born after the withdrawal, are currently between the ages of 55 and 75. They are the second generation of Yunnan-Burmese immigrants; It is the age group with the largest population in the Yunnan-Myanmar communities; It is also the backbone of community affairs in the Yunnan-Myanmar communities today. According to China's Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly and the age standards defined by the World Health Organization, people over 60 years old are considered elderly. According to this standard, the elderly population in the Yunnan-Burmese communities accounts for 33%, of which the elderly population aged 70 and above accounts for 14% of the total population. According to international standards, an aging society refers to a region where the elderly population aged 60 and above accounts for 10% of the total population, or where the population aged 65 and above accounts for 7% of the total population; When its proportion reaches 14%, it is an aging society; When it reaches 21%, it is a super-aged society. So, the proportion of the elderly population in the

Yunnan-Burmese villages has exceeded international standards. The population structure in the Yunnan-Burmese villages has not only reached super aging, but the degree of aging will continue to rise in the future<sup>[6]</sup>. Due to population migration and competition from neighboring schools, primary schools originally established specifically for rural areas in Yunnan-Burma have also faced the issue of retention or abolition in recent years. The result of declining birth rates has led to the crisis of closure of this only primary school in Taiwan, which is located in the Yunnan-Burmese communities.

### **3. Organizational model for community building in Yunnan-Burmese villages**

Due to limited industrial development, contemporary Yunnan-Burmese villages have experienced a loss of young and middle-aged population, making them super aging communities. In addition, with the outflow of population from the Yunnan-Myanmar communities and the addition of foreign ethnic groups, the ethnic structure, ethnic consciousness, and cohesion in the Yunnan-Myanmar communities are facing great challenges. Therefore, how to consolidate community consciousness and inherit the "Yunnan-Burmese culture" is another dilemma that the community needs to face. Faced with changes in the external environment and within the village, Yunnan-Myanmar communities have developed two types of activity organizations in response to the community population structure, with the age group of 55 to 75 years old, which is the largest population in the village mentioned above, as the main force of operation.

#### **3.1. Community care station**

Considering that the elderly population aged 80 and above accounts for 7% of the total population. The Xinguo Community Development Association applied to the county government in 2013 to establish a "Community Care Station". This policy focuses on community building and active participation, with the chairman convening volunteers and selecting activity centers as bases to promote elder care activities every Tuesday. Although the funding is under the jurisdiction of the Pingtung County Government, due to the "acquaintance society" characteristic of the four villages sharing the same roots and origins, the event is also open to villagers from Jinggong Community, which is under the jurisdiction of Kaohsiung City. Currently, 25 elders are participating in the care center, with an average age of 80.12 years old; The volunteer team has a total of 27 people, including 11 people over 65 years old and 6 people aged 60–64. This mutual aid model of "elderly service for the elderly" fully reflects the local care path developed by Yunnan-Burmese villages following the characteristics of population structure.

However, the operation of the base faces multiple challenges, including mobilizing unpaid volunteers, maintaining attendance stability, designing fun courses, establishing activity order, and ensuring that volunteers complete government-mandated qualification training. Through long-term practice, the base has successfully established the lifestyle habits of its members, and every Tuesday has become the most anticipated day for the elders. In addition, some villagers, although not directly involved, also expressed their identification through donating materials or money. For two consecutive years in 2014 and 2015, the Xinguo Community Development Association won the "Pingtung County Community Care and Care Base Evaluation" Excellence Award, attracting other communities to come and observe. Through mutual assistance and gradual practice among villagers, the care station in the Yunnan-Burmese Community has received many praises from surrounding villages, overturning the early discriminatory impression of the Yunnan-Myanmar communities by the outside world.

#### **3.2. Mom's classroom dance group**

Every night at 7:30, the lights and music of the Xinguo Community Activity Center start playing, and 17 women with an average age of 58 begin to dance. The dance they perform is a minority dance with the style of southwestern China. This is the Mom Classroom Dance Group established by the Xinguo Community. When it was founded in 1983, there were only six members, and all members were Yunnan-Burmese migrants or their descendants. Afterwards, members of the dance group began to have villagers from different ethnic groups join one after another. At present, a daughter-in-law married from a neighboring Hoklo settlement serves as the class monitor. Her understanding of geography and local social

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networks can help her mother's classroom obtain more social resources, making it more stable in operation.

These 17 members are villagers from two communities, Xinguo and Jingzhong. Among them, 7 are descendants of the Yunnan-Burmese migrants and the rest are villagers who married into Yunnan-Burmese Communities or new immigrants who later moved into the communities. All members join voluntarily and practice every day after work and dinner with a passion. Whenever the county and township governments invite activities or groups to visit the community, the Mom Classroom Dance Group will perform, becoming a business card for promoting the Yunnan-Burmese Community to the outside world. At the same time, through these methods, the Yunnan-Burmese culture has been invisibly passed down.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Yunnan-Burmese communities located at the border of Kaohsiung and Pingtung are constantly experiencing various losses, including forced exile from their homeland, former refugee status, fragmentation of administrative boundaries, commercialization of agricultural land, bottlenecks in industrial transformation, and challenges posed by an aging population. They are embedded in the grand history and intertwined in the larger environment, even though they have left the border, they are still caught in the social context of the 'edge'. Faced with a helpless situation, the Yunnan-Myanmar community took advantage of the situation by creating a community care station and Mom Classroom Dance Group. With the participation of villagers, they crossed ethnic boundaries, transformed their own disadvantages, and broke free from the existing stigma and established a framework. This proves that even in depressed communities, there is still infinite potential for vitality. This bottom-up practical model is not only a simple localized care, but also a process in which community members reconstruct their subjectivity and spatial identity through daily performances and emotional support, providing another empirical and thinking path for social resilience in the current transformation of rural Taiwan.

However, with population mobility and structural changes, the continuous increase in the proportion of non-Yunnan-Burmese ethnic groups has brought new challenges to community networks. How to maintain the existing community order and continue to practice the inheritance of "Yunnan-Burmese culture" in the increasingly complex dynamics of ethnic structure has become an important issue at present. Especially when the "Yunnan-Burmese identity" is broken in intergenerational transmission, how to break away from the narrative of a single ethnic group and transform traditional culture into a more inclusive community public asset that can cross ethnic barriers is not only to preserve past memories, but also to find a new positioning for sustainable community management, which is still a topic that needs to be further explored in the future.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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