

Original Paper

Investigation on the Distribution Status of Transboundary Ethnic Groups in the Mountainous Regions of Mainland Southeast Asia in Southwest China

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Abstract

Through the compilation and analysis of relevant research in the papers and works of international scholars, this study aims to understand the attention and research of international and domestic scholars on transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia, and explore the significance of studying these groups in Southwest China. By investigating their distribution, the study focuses on the survival situation of transboundary ethnic groups from the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia in Southwest China, examining aspects such as population size, areas of residence, ethnic background information, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural characteristics. The goal is to contribute to the international development of research on transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China and eliminate barriers by adopting an international perspective. Furthermore, it should be noted that the mountainous transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia have long faced challenges related to politics, drugs, and socio-economic underdevelopment. However, since the last century, the Chinese government has been committed to the development of ethnic groups residing in the mountainous regions of Southwest China, achieving remarkable results. This development is set to positively impact the healthy growth of transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia.

Keywords

Transboundary ethnic groups in mountainous regions, Southwest China, Distribution status

1. Introduction

Transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia mainly refer to ethnic communities residing across national borders in the mountainous areas of Mainland Southeast

Asia. These groups typically live in remote inland mountainous regions that border neighboring countries, earning them the title of transboundary ethnic groups. The prehistoric cultures of the Southeast Asian peninsula, approximately ten thousand years ago, have long been categorized as Hoabinhian Culture in academic circles. These cultural remains were primarily discovered in the mountainous regions of northern Vietnam, the limestone mountains in the north and west highlands of Kanchanaburi Province and the southern region in Thailand, as well as the Malay Peninsula. Southwest China refers to the five provinces of Sichuan, Chongqing, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Tibet, which are located in the inland southwestern region of China characterized by plateaus and mountainous areas. This region boasts abundant natural resources and diverse ecological environments, housing various ethnic groups. Yunnan Province and Guangxi Province are provinces bordering Mainland Southeast Asia. Yunnan Province has 25 border counties (cities), sharing borders with Myanmar to the west, Laos to the south, and Vietnam to the south, with a total length of 4,060 kilometers of national borders. Guangxi Province has 8 border counties (cities) adjacent to Vietnam, with a national border stretching 1,020 kilometers.

2. Method

2.1 Literature Review

Since the 1990s, research on ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia, including the Indochinese Peninsula, has been conducted by Western countries. Although these studies were not specifically focused on transboundary ethnic groups, the multi-ethnic composition of Southeast Asia necessitated research in the fields of anthropology and sociology. Additionally, early Chinese historical records also mentioned the ethnic groups in the region. For example, the 4th-century local chronicle Huayang Guo Zhi documented the presence of various ethnic groups such as the ancestors of the Bulang, Blang, Wa, and Jingpo people. Similarly, the 5th-century historical records, Hou Han Shu and Nanman Zhuan, provided detailed accounts of the southwestern ethnic groups. However, the ancient Chinese texts primarily served as historical records and lacked in-depth understanding.

In the mid-19th century, Western travelers began to describe the mountainous ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia, including notable works such as “Journey from India to the Qing Empire” by Karlne and “In the Yunnan Province: From Tokyo Bay to India” by Henri D’Orleans. These works provided descriptions of social customs of certain ethnic groups, but did not offer in-depth analysis or generalization. Missionaries also conducted research on the mountainous ethnic groups in the region, such as the “Miao People’s History” by Savena and “The Tai People: Brothers of the Han” by William Dodd. However, the hypotheses regarding the origins of these groups put forth by the researchers were met with extensive controversy due to a lack of concrete evidence, and subsequent research has debunked many of these hypotheses.

The anthropological study of transboundary ethnic groups can be traced back to the concept of “hill tribes,” particularly emphasized by Thai researchers, who established the Tribe Research Center to

accommodate scholars from around the world. This institution has played a crucial role in the study of transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia, covering various topics such as ethnic migrations, religious beliefs, social issues, political conflicts, and even tourism development. Notable research achievements include “Tribes, Minorities, and Ethnicity in Southeast Asia,” edited by Quentin D. Atkinson, and “Ethnic Groups of the Golden Triangle” by the Lewis couple. The researchers at the Tribe Research Center not only introduced the concept of “hill tribes” but also laid the foundation for the study of transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia. Additionally, Japanese and Taiwanese researchers also started to study transboundary ethnic groups in the mid-20th century. With increasing attention to the Southeast Asian region, driven by strategic and security considerations, researchers have focused on issues such as diaspora, politics, and ethnic studies, inevitably connected to the region’s complex religious and social structures. Southeast Asia is known for its exceptional historical, cultural, and ethnic diversity due to significant influences from Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, as well as the colonial experiences of Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, France, and the United States.

Research on transboundary ethnic groups within China began relatively late. Initially, the focus was on providing evidence for hypotheses about the origins of Mainland Southeast Asian transboundary ethnic groups. Researchers such as Fang Guoyu and Xu Songshi analyzed the formation of transboundary ethnic groups from linguistic and migrational perspectives. Scholars like He Ping examined the distribution, origins, and influence on the stability of the Yunnan border regions by cross-border ethnic groups. In his work “Research on Transboundary Ethnic Groups in Mountainous Regions of Mainland Southeast Asia from the Perspective of Anthropology,” Zhang Liming reviewed and analyzed the current research status of transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia, providing insights into the non-traditional security situation in Southwest China and Southeast Asia. However, it should be noted that current Chinese research on transboundary ethnic groups focuses more on ethnic relationships and identity among cross-border and overseas ethnic groups, as well as the analysis of security situations, diverging significantly from the research direction of foreign scholars regarding transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia. Moreover, it is undeniable that the mountainous ethnic groups living in Southwest China face different challenges in the preservation and uniqueness of their cultural heritage in an era of advanced information and convenient transportation. These challenges differ from the political, drug-related, and socio-economic issues faced by transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia. Consequently, addressing these differences and researching the transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China with a broader international perspective can provide positive contributions to the development of transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia, given the healthy developmental examples and favorable conditions available.

2.2 Survey Method

The survey aimed to understand the distribution of transboundary ethnic groups from Mainland Southeast Asia in Southwest China, as well as analyze their ethnic information, population size, areas of residence, economic development, and cultural characteristics. These data served as the foundation for further research. The survey covered the following aspects:

- 1) Population Size and Areas of Residence: The survey investigated the population distribution and areas of residence of transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China, providing insights into population density and geographical distribution patterns.
- 2) Ethnic Background Information: This included the ethnic group's name, country or region of origin, language, and religious beliefs.
- 3) Socioeconomic Conditions: The survey aimed to understand the employment status, primary livelihood methods, and factors influencing socioeconomic development among transboundary ethnic groups.
- 4) Cultural Characteristics: The survey explored the cultural characteristics, customs, cultural heritage, and cultural identity of transboundary ethnic groups.

The survey was conducted in eight border counties and cities in Guangxi Province, namely Fangcheng District, Dongxing City, Ningming County, Pingxiang City, Longzhou County, Daxin County, Jingxi City, and Napo County. In Yunnan Province, the survey covered 25 border counties or cities, including Funing County, Malipo County, Maguan County, Hekou County, Jinping County, Lvchun County, Jiangcheng County, Mengla County, Jinghong City, Menghai County, Lancang County, Menglian County, Ximeng County, Cangyuan County, Gengma County, Zhenkang County, Longling County, Mang City, Ruili City, Longchuan County, Yingjiang County, Tengchong City, Lushui City, Fugong County, and Gongshan County. The survey focused on ethnic groups living in these regions. Specifically, it excluded ethnic groups with a population of less than 1,000 individuals in each county or city, as well as transboundary ethnic groups with a total population of less than 10,000 individuals within these areas. Due to their small numbers, these groups do not possess representative group characteristics and are therefore outside the scope of this survey.

3. Result

3.1 Population Size and Areas of Residence

The transboundary counties and cities in Guangxi are mainly adjacent to Vietnam. The transboundary ethnic groups residing in these areas are primarily Zhuang, Yao, and Jing. Other ethnic groups with a population of less than 1,000 individuals or with a total population of less than 10,000 individuals within these regions are not within the scope of this study. Based on distribution surveys and statistics, the Jing ethnic group has a larger population in areas closer to the seaport, such as Fangcheng District and Dongxing City. The Jing people are descendants of the main ethnic group in Vietnam and began migrating to China from places like Tu Shan in Vietnam (near Hai Fang City) since the 16th century.

Unlike other transboundary ethnic groups, the Jing people migrated against the tide upstream and settled in Dongxing City, making them the only marine ethnic group in China. However, since this study mainly focuses on transboundary ethnic groups from the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia, the Jing ethnic group is not included. Therefore, the transboundary ethnic groups from the mountainous regions of Mainland Southeast Asia involved in the eight counties and cities in Guangxi are mainly Zhuang and Yao, with a primary border with Vietnam. Compared to the transboundary counties and cities in Yunnan, the ethnic diversity is relatively low in Guangxi, with a strong presence of ethnic concentration. For example, the Zhuang people are primarily concentrated in Longzhou County, Jingxi City, Daxin County, and Napo County, with over 90% of the population belonging to the Zhuang ethnicity. In Ningming County and Pingxiang City, the Zhuang people account for over 75% of the total population. According to the sixth national census conducted in 2010, the Zhuang population in the transboundary areas of Guangxi exceeds 1.5 million. The Yao population in the transboundary areas of Guangxi is around 34,000 individuals, mainly residing in Fangcheng District.

Table 1. Ethnic Distribution and Population Size in the Transboundary Areas (Data Sourced from the Seventh National Census Conducted in China in 2020)

No	Ethnic group	Main region	Population	Transboundary
01	Zhuang	Ningming County, Longzhou County, Daxin County, Jingxi City, Funing County, etc	1,928,367	Vietnam, Laos
02	Yao	Fangcheng District, Funing County, Malipo County, Hekou County, Jinping County, etc	208,935	Vietnam, Laos
03	Miao	Funing County, Malipo County, Maguan County, Hekou County, Lvchun County, etc	289,169	Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar
04	Yi	Maguan County, Jinping County, Jinghong City, Lancang County, Zhenkang County, etc	514,611	Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar
05	Dai	Mengla County, Jinghong City, Menghai County, Mang City, Yingjiang County, etc.	788,819	Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar
06	Buyei	Maguan County, Hekou County, Ruili City, Yingjiang County	9,227	Vietnam, Laos
07	Hani	Lvchun County, Lvchun County, Mengla County, Jinghong City, Menghai County, etc.	618,225	Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar
08	Lahu	Mengla County, Lancang County, Menglian County, Ximeng County, Cangyuan County, Gengma County, etc.	378,556	Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar

09	Blang	Mengla County, Jinghong City, Menghai County, Lancang County, Gengma County, etc	60,845	Vietnam, Laos
10	Va	Lancang County, Menglian County, Ximeng County, Cangyuan County, Gengma County, etc.	351,110	Vietnam, Laos
11	Lisu	Yingjiang County, Tengchong City, Lushui City, Fugong County, Gongshan County, etc.	249,343	Myanmar
12	De'ang	Gengma County, Zhenkang County, Mang City, Ruili City, Longchuan County	16,755	Myanmar
13	Jingpo	Gengma County, Longling County, Mang City, Ruili City, Longchuan County, Yingjiang County, etc	136,322	Myanmar
14	Achang	Longling County, Mang City, Longchuan County, Yingjiang County, Tengchong City, etc.	21,440	Myanmar
15	Nu	Lushui City, Fugong County, Gongshan County	27,837	Myanmar
16	Drung	Fugong County, Gongshan County	5,631	Myanmar

According to the data shown in Table 1, the transboundary counties and cities in Yunnan are primarily adjacent to three countries: Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Jiangcheng County is adjacent to Vietnam, and Hani and Yi Autonomous County is adjacent to Laos. Menghai County is adjacent to Laos and Myanmar, and it is only a little over 200 kilometers away from Chiang Rai in Thailand. Chiang Rai is an important research area for the Center for Mountain Ethnic Studies in Thailand and serves as one of the most representative gathering places for transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia. The transboundary ethnic groups living in this region have received extensive attention from researchers, resulting in rich research outcomes. These outcomes provide valuable insights for comparative studies on transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China. Compared to Guangxi, the transboundary ethnic groups in Yunnan are more dispersed in terms of their places of residence, with a notable phenomenon of ethnic mixing, particularly more evident as one moves westward. Among these groups, the most populous transboundary ethnic groups include Zhuang, Dai, Hani, Yi, with each having a population exceeding 500,000 individuals. The population of other ethnic groups such as Lahu, Wa, Miao, Lisu, Yao, and Jingpo exceeds 200,000 individuals. In this study, we will focus on the ethnic background, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural characteristics of these populous ethnic groups residing in the border counties and cities.

3.2 Ethnic Background Information

According to molecular anthropological research utilizing molecular analysis of human genomes and DNA genetic information, populations in East Asia with the gene for short stature, dark skin, and curly hair include the Tibetan, Yi, Jingpo, and Yao ethnic groups. Approximately 30,000 years ago, the

O-type Mongoloid people arrived in the regions of Myanmar, Yunnan, and northeastern India, leading to a split. The O3 branch joined mainland China from Yunnan, forming the “Baipu” ethnic groups in the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. Examples of these ethnic groups include the Dulong, Yi, Jingpo, Naxi, Lisu, Bai, Hani, Lahu, Pumi, Nu, and Achang ethnic groups, all of which belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The O2 branch settled in Yunnan and developed into the Austroasiatic language family, including the Wa, De’ang, and Blang ethnic groups. It can be said that the majority of ethnic groups in China, including the transboundary ethnic groups residing in Southwest China, share the same ancestral roots. Additionally, these mountainous ethnic groups have been documented in ancient literature and records since the Qin and Han dynasties.

Table 2. Summarizes the Language Families, Religious Beliefs, and Ancestral Origins of the Transboundary Ethnic Groups

No	Language	Ethnic group	Religious beliefs	Ancestral origins
01		Zhuang	Ind religion, Taoism, Buddhism	“Baiyue”, “Liao” people
02	Sino-Tibetan language family	Zhuang-Dong Dai branch	Dai	Theravada Buddhism
03		Buyei	Ind religion, Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism	“Baiyue”, “Liao” people
04		Hani	Ind religion	
05		Yi	Ind religion, Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism	“Baipu”; Qiang ethnic minority
06		Lahu	Ind religion, Buddhism, Christianity	
07	Sino-Tibetan language family	Tibeten-Myanmar Language branch	Lisu	Ind religion
08		Jingpo	Ind religion	“Baipu”, Qiang ethnic minority
09		Achang	Theravada Buddhism	
10		Drung	Ind religion, Christianity	“Baipu”
11		Nu	Ind religion, Catholicism, Christianit, Tibetan	“Baipu”

			Buddhism		
12	Sino-Tibetan language family	Miao Yao branch	Miao	Ind religion	Miao ethnic group
13			Yao	Ind religion, Taoism, Buddhism	Qiang ethnic minority
14	Austro-Asiatic language family	Mon-Khmer branch	Va	Ind religion, Buddhism, Catholicism	“Baipu”
15			De’ang	Theravada Buddhism	“Baipu”
16			Blang	Theravada Buddhism	

The language structure of transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China is highly complex. In general, different ethnic groups living in the same region have mutual understanding of each other’s languages. For example, the Lisu language is widely used among many ethnic groups in the Nujiang area, while the Jingpo language is well-known in the counties and cities of the transboundary region. Basic words related to animals and numbers in the Dai and Zhuang languages are similar and widely circulated in areas where various ethnic groups live together. Furthermore, there can be significant linguistic differences among the same ethnic group due to variations in their living areas. For instance, the Yi language spoken in Funing County and Malipo County, located in the border region of Yunnan and Guangxi, differs from the Yi language spoken in the Nujiang area. Therefore, the study of the languages of transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China is highly complex and cannot be simply divided based on ethnic groups. It requires a focus on regional and social conditions. The linguistic characteristics can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the languages of ethnic groups with smaller populations are often influenced by the dominant ethnic groups in their living areas. Secondly, languages within the same language family show similarities, with some ethnic groups even sharing common vocabulary. Thirdly, the languages of ethnic groups with larger populations but living in dispersed areas widely circulate within the same region. Fourthly, certain ethnic groups have linguistically simple structures with a small number of basic words, leading to direct borrowing of vocabulary from other ethnic languages for expression. Lastly, onomatopoeic words also exist in some languages.

3.3 Socioeconomic Conditions

Since 2020, the demographic landscape of the 33 border counties and cities in Southwest China has been subject to frequent changes. Among them, the ethnic population proportion has shown an upward trend in 14 counties and cities, while a downward trend is observed in 19 counties and cities. According to the economic data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2022, among the 22 border counties in Southwest China, only Pingxiang City in Guangxi has a per capita GDP of 54,000 RMB, surpassing the average level of Guangxi’s per capita GDP of 52,200 RMB. The per capita GDP of the

other seven border counties and cities in Guangxi is lower and falls below the standards of Guangxi Province and even lower-level municipal areas. In Yunnan, among the 35 border counties and cities, the per capita GDP reached 61,700 RMB in 2022. He Kou Yao Autonomous County stood out with a per capita GDP of 120,000 RMB, ranking first in Honghe Prefecture, while the per capita GDP of Ruili City reached 68,000 RMB. However, the per capita GDP of the remaining 31 border counties and cities falls below the level of Yunnan Province. For instance, Fugong County and Gongshan Dulong and Nu Autonomous County in Nujiang Prefecture, as well as Jinping Miao, Yao and Dai Autonomous County and Lvchun County in Honghe Prefecture, all have a per capita GDP of less than 20,000 RMB. Moreover, a common characteristic of these areas is the significant urban-rural disparity, with urban residents having much higher disposable incomes than rural residents. Therefore, the economic conditions of these transboundary ethnic groups in the mountainous regions may be even poorer than the actual data suggests.

However, compared to the transboundary ethnic groups in other countries in Mainland Southeast Asia, the transboundary ethnic groups residing in Southwest China enjoy more stable and peaceful social conditions, as evidenced by the recent population migration trends in China. In fact, the population surveys conducted among these transboundary mountainous ethnic groups show stable population development with sustained growth and a balanced gender ratio. With the strong support and assistance from the government, they enjoy more stable lifestyles, higher economic incomes, and healthier sources of income. Even in underdeveloped and impoverished areas like Nujiang, national policies have been implemented to ensure highway accessibility and internet connectivity in every village.

3.4 Cultural Characteristics

The transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China share their cultures and histories through ethnic clusters and community settings. From artistic forms like architecture, craftsmanship, music, and dance to cultural aspects such as language, writing, religious beliefs, customs, and mythological legends, there are close connections among them. In terms of architecture, the traditional dwellings of these transboundary ethnic groups are mostly two-story bamboo and timber structures known as “stilt houses” or “thousand-foot houses,” with roofs made of thatch or palm leaves. These houses are typically built amidst forests, with low walls that blend into the surrounding mountains. Kitchens are usually located at the central part of the house, and a hearth is often placed at the center space of the main house, where people gather to live and share communal hearth customs. From the perspective of craftsmanship, these transboundary ethnic groups excel in weaving, using similar weaving tools. They are particularly skilled in bamboo crafts. Although the development of this craft has been declining in recent years, back in the 1950s and 1960s, the quantity of bamboo crafts in possession was considered an indicator of wealth in social-economic surveys. This indicates the prevalence of bamboo crafts among these ethnic groups. Some of these groups possess the knowledge of silver and iron craftsmanship, with the Achang ethnic group known for their ironworking skills, producing renowned Achang knives. Additionally, music among these ethnic groups is performed mainly through duets and

solos. The songs cover various themes, including historical narratives, labor scenes, religious rituals, and love life. They make use of natural elements such as leaves and utilize musical instruments like wind instruments, stringed instruments, and percussion instruments. The dances are often related to ceremonies and are performed in group or accompanied by music.

4. Discussion

After nearly half a century of development, the transboundary groups in Southwest China have experienced astonishing regional growth. However in today's rapidly changing era, the social and attributes formed by regional cultures are being assimilated at the pace. In comparison to Southwest China, the transboundary ethnic groups in the Mainland Southeast Asia region have certain advantages in terms of regional cohesion. Due to their settlements in border mountainous areas and prolonged underdevelopment and marginalization, these transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia face challenges in their livelihoods. Social unrest, political instability, drug cultivation, and trafficking hinder their healthy development. In contrast, the Chinese government has long been committed to the development of the mountainous ethnic groups residing in Southwest China. According to the distribution survey data from this study, social stability and steady economic development have been observed in these areas. Therefore, although there are certain differences in the research directions between the study of transboundary ethnic groups in Southwest China and the study of mountainous ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia, it is crucial to learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses in future research. This study aims to lay a solid foundation for subsequent research. In any case, conducting research on transboundary ethnic groups in Mainland Southeast Asia as a whole concept will play a significant role in future studies.

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