

Living as a Tree: The Concept of Symbiosis in the Zhanli Kam Minority Village

Jieling Yang¹

¹ Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, UK

Correspondence: Jieling Yang, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London, UK.

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Abstract

Zhanli Kam village in the Qiandongnan Region of Guizhou Province is known as ‘the first village in China for family planning.’ Geographic isolation and limited resources have led the Zhanli people to coordinate population and resources through autonomous family planning. There is a magical local herb called ‘flower changing herb’ that can control the sex of the foetus. Thus, every family in Zhanli has only one son and one daughter. People and the environment are not simply in a constraining relationship but are organically linked. The key lies in the moderating role of culture. This thesis aims to interpret the symbiotic concept behind the usage of the herb. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Zhanli, this thesis will explain how the symbiotic concept guides the Zhanli people’s behaviours by analysing the relationship between humans and nature, individuals and the community. Besides, this thesis will also figure out how Zhanli encounters the outside world on the impact of the penetration of urban culture and the government’s poverty reduction programme. Guided by the symbiotic concept, the Zhanli people constantly negotiate with their environment to create a cultural landscape that subverts the dichotomy between human society and the natural environment.

Keywords: Zhanli, Kam minority, symbiotic concept, cultural landscape

1. Introduction

‘Ancestors have lived in the mountains for generations,

there are no dams or rivers.

Cultivate the fields well and plant more trees,

have fewer children and live more happily.’

(One of the ancient songs of Zhanli Kam village)

Zhanli is a Kam ethnic minority (Note 1) village located in Gaozeng Township, Conjiang County, Qiandongnan Region, Guizhou Province. With its 192 residents, this small village has only added 159 people to its population from 1959 to 2020 through independent family planning, which is known as ‘the first village of family planning in China.’ The average annual growth is merely two people (Fig. 1, 2021). The ratio of gender is balanced, and every family has one son and one daughter. Legend has it that there is a unique fertility control herb called ‘flower changing herb’ in the village, which can control the sex of foetus when combined with the water from two wells in the village, one for boys and one for girls. In Qing Dynasty, Zhanli spontaneously relied on local ethics to establish a social contract to impose population control in civil legislation. A whole set of effective management systems has been formed, including fertility regulation measures, marriage partners selection, restriction on marriage age, and children’s upbringing and education. Besides, the neighbourhood is harmonious, and families are happy. There has not been a single criminal case since New China’s founding.

占里村一九五九年以来人口数据变化情况

年份	户数	人口	年份	户数	人口	年份	户数	人口	年份	户数	人口
1959	154	427	1985	127	660	1999	152	736	2013	176	831
1964	134	479	1986	126	668	2000	152	738	2014	162	832
1965		480	1987	133	671	2001	154	756	2015	182	830
1974		623	1988	134	675	2002	153	758	2016	188	829
1975	143	623	1989	133	680	2003	156	762	2017	182	817
1976	149	641	1990	146	695	2004	158	764	2018	192	819
1977	148	644	1991	144	714	2005	164	764	2019	194	804
1978	146	648	1992	142	712	2006	167	767	2020	192	814
1979	147	653	1993	145	718	2007	169	780	2021		
1980	146	654	1994	150	720	2008	171	810	2022		
1981	141	661	1995	151	728	2009	173	822	2023		
1982	147	671	1996	152	734	2010	175	832	2024		
1983	143	670	1997	152	734	2011	175	834	2025		
1984	128	606	1998	151	733	2012	178	834	2026		

Figure 1. Demographic data of Zhanli Village since 1959

Although Zhanli is famous for its ‘flower changing herb’, the whole set of cultural mechanisms behind the phenomenon is the secret recipe for Zhanli’s successful population control (Milton, 1996: 18). The environment and resources are necessary material conditions for human survival, finite and non-renewable, while human reproduction is a natural attribute of human beings (Malthus & James, 2008). In pre-industrial societies, population control included the means to lower the standard of living. In this way, it seems that the conflict between environment and population, at least in pre-industrial societies, is difficult to resolve (Harris, 1977). Fortunately, humans still have culture. Culture serves as a means to act as a moderator in the process of mutual accommodation between human development and the environment. In this process, there are times of mutual adaptation and disharmony, a movement full of change. In recent decades, the exploration of local ecological knowledge in human cultures through the lens of ecological anthropology has been popular in cultural anthropology. Rappaport (1970), for example, explored how humans interacted with their environment by examining the rituals and wars of the Maring tribe. Howell’s (1996) exploration of jungle understanding and knowledge among the Chewong, a tropical jungle people of the Malay Peninsula, and Ingold’s (2002) examination of indigenous cognitive systems in New Guinea helped us to understand how culture mediates between people and their environment. In any case, people and the environment are not simply constrained mutually. There is an organic link between the two, and the key lies in the regulating role of culture (Milton, 2010).

Zhanli is located deep in the mountains at the border of Guizhou Province and Guangxi Zhuang Minority Autonomous Region, which is relatively isolated and inconvenient to get around so that the outside world has long known little about this ‘paradise.’ It was not until the late 1950s that the Guizhou Ethnic Minority Social and Historical Survey Group of the Institute of Ethnic Studies, Guizhou Branch, Chinese Academy of Sciences conducted significant research on the socio-economic life of the ethnic minorities living in Guizhou, which was in a cultural rescue nature (1964). The research covered almost all aspects of Zhanli, including social organizations, living customs, culture, education, etc. Although significant as a historical record, this research report lacks etic analysis and emic interpretation. For example, it is subjective and straightforward to attribute the achievement of Zhanli’s population control to ‘infanticide.’

With the promotion of family planning in China, the high gender ratio at birth gradually became a social problem. Zhanli was established as a typical example of family planning work, attracting more scholars from different fields to investigate and study. Shi Kaizhong was one of the early sociologists and anthropologists to study Zhanli. He used the central location survey method to conduct fieldwork in Zhanli in 1993 and 1995 respectively (Shi, 1997a), providing a comprehensive and in-depth description of Zhanli’s village communities, demographic conditions, belief systems, and birth control practices. Most academic research started with population and fertility culture because Zhanli was known to the outside world for its miraculous fertility control herb. For example, some studies analysed and interpreted Zhanli from the perspective of marriage patterns and birth customs, including social structures and traditional practices, suggesting that population control is inextricably linked to social structures, vernacular power, and authority (Pan, 2008; Liu, 2006). Some studies situated this culturally conscious fertility culture in the broader Chinese context and considered how such internalised population policies acted on China’s population problems (Li, 2009). However, when placed in a larger cosmology context, family planning is only one cultural embodiment of it or a particular workaround of the relationship between humans and nature. I am more interested in the mechanism of operation and the development path of this cultural concept and other forms of embodiment.

Besides, Zhanli, as a traditional Kam village, provides fertile soil for the ancient village culture study and ethnographic research. For example, Shi Kaizhong studied the symbols and metaphors of the Kam village architecture from cultural heritage (Shi, 1997b). A similar situation can be seen in the ethnographic research on the Grand Song of Kam Minority (Note 2), the Mengshi Festival (Note 3), the Kam textile technology, and other minority cultural heritages (Shen, 2006; Ingram & Wu, 2017; Ingram, 2020). Some studies have also looked at how the Kamese (Note 4) is used and passed on in a contemporary society where Chinese Han culture is dominant, from linguistic and pedagogical perspectives (Finifrock, 2017; Tsung, 2009). Zhanli, as a relatively small and isolated Kam village, has a more marginal position in such scholarship. These studies all started from the collective culture shared by the Kam people. As a field site in multi-sited research, the specificity of Zhanli is weakened and integrated into the context of the entire Kam ethnic group. Moreover, most of the literature on Zhanli is a romanticized, idyllic examination of culture or a mystified hypothesis wrapped in the solid exotic colour of ethnic minorities, without elaborate further on the operation mechanism behind these symbols.

I put forward a metaphor that these cultural symbols are the performances presented on the stage. The behind-the-scenes mechanism that directs the successful performance of the stage play is the Zhanli people's cosmology. Simultaneously, the theatre is the environment in which the Zhanli people are located, and the theatre audience is the other, both living and non-living, in this shared environment (Tsing, 2015: 159). A gripping stage play must be able to communicate efficiently with the audience and the theatre space. In this context, I propose to analyse some of the symbols (customs, lifestyles, etc.) to discover the cosmology, the mechanism behind the operation, and how the people deal with the relationship between humans, nature, and society through these symbols in Zhanli. Latour's actor-network theory provides the inspiration and theoretical basis for this thesis's symbolic analysis (Wessells, 2007). In this thesis, the mysterious 'flower changing herb' is not the focus of my research. Because of time and space limitations and some ethical issues, I will not delve into the 'flower changing herb's secrets but rather analyse the Zhanli cosmology and its causes through the herb. There is no denying that birth control is a practice guided by Zhanli's cosmology. The 'flower changing herb' was like a legendary bluebird that flapped its wings to lead me into this Kam village in the middle of the mountains.

In light of Geertz's argument in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, I will analyse the traditional customs and lifestyle of the Zhanli Kam village to gain an insight into the cosmology behind it, which I call 'the concept of symbiosis.' This biologically derived term has been debated in academia over its definition. Some argued that it should refer to the ongoing mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship, and others argued that it should apply to all biological interactions (Martin & Schwab, 2012). In 1949, Edward Haskell defined *symbiosis* in terms of social science as 'coactions,' which I think applies to this thesis (Haskell, 1949). This analysis of the symbiotic concept has a reciprocal force. On the one hand, I will make a thick description of the customs and lifestyles of the Zhanli people so that I can use the insights to decode the concept of symbiosis of Zhanli. On the other hand, culture as an acted document is communal. Therefore, the symbiotic concept of Zhanli as an intersecting system of interpretable symbols can, in turn, be used as a lens to see the pulse of Zhanli's social phenomena. Because the Zhanli concept of symbiosis is the control mechanism behind customs and traditions, Zhanli people rely on this outside-the-skin control mechanism to guide their behaviours (Geertz, 1973: 44).

This thesis will explain the mechanism behind the symbiotic concept by analysing how Zhanli deals with two relationships. Some research methods from landscape anthropology will also be used as space is an essential object of observation in this study, such as analysing how the Zhanli people perceive and construct their natural and social environment (Lefebvre, 1991). Chapter 1 will focus on how the Zhanli people deal with the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Firstly, since the fertility culture in Zhanli is inextricably linked to a sense of conservation of the natural environment, I will analyse how Zhanli achieved harmony with nature through population control by describing the natural landscape of Zhanli and tracing its history. Like other non-writing ethnic minorities, Zhanli's history is barely official, so the tracing of Zhanli's history has to come from folklore. Secondly, I will explain the logic behind the symbiosis with nature by analysing the specific practices of the Zhanli people in their lives, including their food habits and agricultural patterns. Chapter 2 will focus on how the Zhanli people deal with the symbiotic relationship between individuals and the community. Firstly, I will show the community construction of Zhanli by analysing the Drum Tower and the Zhai Lao system. Secondly, I will analyse the spiritual cohesion of Zhanli as a community through local bullfighting and the concept of 'sharing' behind it. Because of the national poverty reduction programme and the popularity of online social media and e-commerce, although Zhanli has its boundary, it has also been poked open by outside cultures with many air holes. Chapter 3 will explore how Zhanli encounters the outside world.

This study encountered many dilemmas due to the pandemic, and the main obstacle was the travel restrictions. Therefore, at one point, I went through changing the topic and switching to a library-based study. However, the

pandemic was also the precarious uncertainty that brought new inspiration for this study. This research entails investigating the lives of the Zhanli people in their original state. It involves the methodology of landscape anthropology (Feld, Hirsch, & O'Hanlon, 1997) and some sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015) so that immersive participant observation is an essential research method, which cannot be replaced by literature analysis. Fortunately, after the Chinese Lunar New Year, the local contact and the gatekeeper for this research, Wu Lingzi, the Shunxin farmhouse homestay owner in Zhanli, informed me that the local government's pandemic control was lifted, and they were ready to receive visitors.

This analysis of Zhanli is based on one-month fieldwork. The fieldwork was undertaken mainly in Zhanli, but some research was also done in nearby Kam villages such as Xiaohuang, Zhaoxing, and Bapa. I had much help from my gatekeeper and the owner of Shunxin farmhouse homestay, Wu Lingzi. She is very hospitable and has a wide range of contacts. At a later stage, I knew that her husband was the cultural minister of Zhanli village, which also provided much insight into Zhanli's cultural practices. I also met Wu Honghui, the brother-in-law of the village committee's head (Note 5), who was one of the key participants in this research. The acquaintance with him led me into the 'elite' circle of Zhanli (Note 6). Shi Mingcai, the village committee officer responsible for the poverty reduction programme, also provided much valid information from an official perspective on the political structure and spatial planning of Zhanli. The rest of the interviews with the participants began as informal chats, with a semi-structured interview after verbal consent.

Compared to other Kam villages that have become relatively mature tourist attractions, the village of Zhanli still assumes the primary function of living space for the residents, so the villagers' living conditions are less performative than the ones living in scenic areas. However, the prevalence of Mandarin in the village is not as high as in other large villages, which is one of the limitations of this research, and not knowing the Kamese is also the biggest obstacle in this research. In Zhanli, people under 60 can generally communicate in Mandarin (although less fluent and requiring careful identification), but older people only speak Kamese. Only Zhai Lao (Note 7) himself is over 60 years old among my 14 official participants. After all, the folklores, customs, and rituals that have been handed down through Zhanli's history are still held in the memories of the elderly. For this limitation, I practiced workarounds by analysing ancient texts and ancient songs written by official institutions, such as *Ethnography of Congjiang County* (2016) (Note 8) and *The Great Kam Culture* (2016) (Note 9), as well as collecting oral traditions in fieldwork to gain insight into the symbiotic concept behind Zhanli people's behaviours.

Additionally, many anthropologists have criticized the use of 'setting' as the opening of an ethnography, arguing that it portrays the village or community as a closed 'container' or a social life platform. The 'setting' confines the object of study to a particular place and time (Mueggler, 2001:10). Understandably, the spatial sense and temporality of Zhanli should be presented in a larger context and over a more extended period, in a spatial relationship and temporal vein. However, due to time and financial constraints, this study still has temporal and spatial limitations. Therefore, I tried to repeat the observations in the villages and interviewed many villagers, but this method indeed yielded much information that was not well researched, and only 14 participants were valid for the output of this paper. Also, this study does not yet provide a sufficiently detailed comparative perspective on the villages around Zhanli. It is clear that the symbiosis of Zhanli is constantly changing with its surroundings and is not confined to the village itself. Zhanli is like a tree in the forest, relying on nature's nutrients to spread its branches and leaves. The tree, in turn, feeds the forest, of which it is a part. Simultaneously, the tree has its ecosystem, the branches and leaves above the soil, and the roots beneath it forming the tree's whole. In nature, the tree is neither a subject nor an object (Tsing, 2015: 162). Breaking the dichotomy between the human society and the natural environment is precisely the cultural landscape that Zhanli creates in constant praxis, in negotiation with the environment. Zhanli depicts its cultural narrative and cosmology while containing implications for the Anthropocene (ibid.: 19), as I am about to clarify in this thesis.

2. Symbiotic Relationship Between Humans and Nature

The four-hour drive from Guiyang (Note 10) to Congjiang County, where Zhanli was located, was an endless tunnel of light and darkness on the highway. The early spring in the mountains was foggy and rainy, with clouds lingering around as if in the sky. The hills along the winding mountain road were mainly covered with evergreen trees such as fir and pine. After arriving in Congjiang County, I followed the national highway along the Duliu River northwards to the Sizhai River, then climbed a mountain along the village road from Congjiang to Zhanli Kam village, a total distance of about 20 kilometres.

The village is built on a hill, and the spatial distribution is not flat but three-dimensional. The wooden stilt houses with the inverted trapezoidal structure are built in a stepped pattern up the hill. The Drum Tower, the

tallest construction in the village, can be seen at a glance, giving the whole village a strong sense of geometry. The narrow lanes and staircases connecting the different subspaces and houses are not on the same level. This spatial pattern of the village renders GPS navigation useless here. Therefore, although this small village of 192 families is not very large, I still spent three days walking around, trying to recreate the village's spatial configuration with my feet and memory. At the village entrance are rows of drying racks. If one comes during the autumn harvest, one will see a spectacular sight of golden Kam sweet rice hanging in the air. A small stream meanders through the village, its water shallow and just above the ankles. In the stream, ducks were swimming, foraging, and resting; village women were plucking rice and doing their laundry; children were playing football by the stream, accidentally dropped their balls into the stream, and boys jumped into it and played. When the peach blossoms were in full bloom at the end of February, the village, surrounded by mountains, feels like a paradise.



Figure 2. The landscape of Zhanli

Although the artificial ‘folklore experience area,’ the courier station, the banners of the rural credit cooperative, the rebuilt aluminium windows of the old houses, and the TikTok BGM from the young people’s mobile phones all signified the effectiveness of the government’s poverty reduction programme and the intervention of modern symbols, the overall landscape of the village was still dominated by the wooden houses built by carpentry skills and the villagers in their ethnic daily clothes. There was a peaceful and serene atmosphere. The symbols of modern civilisation scattered throughout the villages were like small flowers from seeds brought in by foreigners in a forest, which at first glance seemed out of place. Nevertheless, the forest was welcoming and accommodating, so that they got along well. Kam minority ancient songs and village rules related to family planning were carved in Chinese characters on wooden boards in all corners of the village (Note 11). The mysterious birth control culture can be seen as a ‘special selling point’ chosen by the government to develop tourism, but it has long been part of the intrinsic cultural system for Zhanli people to control their population. This chapter will specifically analyse population control and other practices of symbiosis with nature.

2.1 Population Control and the Environment

The role of culture in the relationship between population and environment has been a focal point of discussion among ecological anthropologists. This relationship is, in fact, a process of adaptation through cultural means, which establishes a functional balance between the population demand and its environmental potential (He, 2006: 76). In the early days of development, perhaps the struggle between humans and land had not yet arisen, but the problem arose when the population reached a certain number which is a point of diminishing returns (Harris, 2001: 125). The isolated geographical environment constrained the Zhanli people from introducing new technologies and exploring new resources. Also, the Kam people suffered so much from migration during wartime so that they were reluctant to repeat their painful history. In this case, the only way to adapt to the environment is to control population and gender ratios. However, population control is, after all, a costly and even dehumanising decision. For example, hunting and gathering societies would control their population by extending infancy, and horticultural and agricultural societies would resort to infanticide. Control through political power may be effective in the short term, but long-term control requires a set of internalised cultural mechanisms. Of course, cultural regulation needs to be tailored to the specific situation and updated as

environmental conditions and population numbers change (Harris, 1977).

In this thesis's specific case, Zhanli is located in a densely forested valley with high mountains, a relatively isolated existence, and limited natural resources. The natural environment of Zhanli is characterised by varied terrain with layers of mountains and rugged roads. There are no harsh winters or hot summers, and rainfall is plentiful. This natural environment produces lush forests and herbaceous plants and provides a suitable habitat for wildlife. However, there are sometimes climatic problems such as lack of sunshine, late spring, and uneven distribution of rain because of its location, so occasional disastrous weather such as droughts and cold snap occurs (Note 12). Living in such a natural environment has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that the climate is mild and suitable for growing crops. The disadvantages are that the rugged terrain is difficult to irrigate, traffic is limited, and agricultural technology is challenging to develop. Therefore, this natural condition makes it difficult for the Zhanli people to explore more land and resources and develop new technologies. Only by putting in more work can they ensure steady food production.

In turn, the Zhanli people's perception of the surroundings reflects the local environment's state. In their ancient songs, which have been handed down to the present day, the central idea is '*nature as host and humans as guests*.' The Zhanli people believe that everything in nature predates humans' emergence, and the shining of the sun produces all things. Thus, the natural environment is a whole and must not be destroyed so that all the creatures that inhabit it can survive and flourish. Humans are just one type of creature, living in nature alongside other creatures. For nature, humans are guests, and guests are not free to destroy objects in their host's home; if they do, nature, as the host, has the right to expel the guest and impose punishment. Guided by such a cultural view, the Zhanli people believe that nature has a strong agency. Therefore, humans and nature are both parts of the same actor-network (Latour, 2005). The concept of symbiosis results from negotiation between humans and nature. Population control is a practice of this concept.

Zhanli's culturally based population control measures are reflected in all aspects of villagers' daily lives. For example, population control is regulated through spatial construction and folk legislation. Zhanli has six separate gates facing different directions, respectively. The gates make full use of the natural barriers, some with wooden fences and some made of mud and rammed as walls. These six gates' responsibility to protect the village is now no longer relevant, but their existence's symbolic significance is greatly enhanced. One of the village rules is that '*no dwelling in the village shall extend beyond the village gate*.' The six gates strictly limit the size of the village, reducing the possibility of population growth. It needs to be emphasised that the village rules that emerged from folk legislation have their origins in the history and folklore of Zhanli and have been passed down through the generations (Note 13). In a Kam society like Zhanli, which is 'without writing,' this belief system, in which survival is the motivation, provides the villagers with logic for understanding the world around them by folklore and myth (Tylor, 1871). Moreover, this understanding is not just general but comprehensive (Lévi-Strauss, 2005: 6). In this context, the power of population control is cultural, creating a complete and logical discourse to give meaning to the world (Tylor, 1871:286) and discipline villagers through ethical constraints. The folklore is derived from the past experiences of ancestors in Zhanli. This embodiment is more acceptable and empathetic to the subject so that the individual body can become the bearer of a relationship between effectiveness and submission (Hoffman, 2011).

Thus, even after Zhanli was incorporated into the national legal system, village rules, which have been in place since ancient times, continue to influence and guide villagers' behaviours in their belief system. During the literature review and interviews with villagers, I have learned that local herbalists with the secret of 'flower changing herb' often perform abortions on village women (Note 14). So, another direct result of this ethical constraint described above is the alleviation of the psychological, emotional, and moral stress that many women experience due to abortion. However, this stress is so great in such a small and isolated village that the village rules are not enough to dispel the fears. Therefore, the Zhanli people use many witchcraft and taboos to divert people's fears to resolve the conflict between humans and nature and their inner sense of existence. This belief becomes a tremendous and deeply hidden force for psychological adjustment and maintenance of faith in survival, which is why the 'flower changing herb' is always mysterious. However, it should be stressed that the 'supernatural' practices of Zhanli are not the same as religion. The witchcraft and taboos of Zhanli are psychological treatments made to relieve mental stress. The symbiotic concept of Zhanli cannot be attributed solely to the worship of nature but rather to an animistic attitude of negotiation with nature (Frazer, 2012).

In the fieldwork, whether it was the village rules' content or when asked why villagers consciously control their fertility, most of the responses pointed to one conclusion: cannot afford to have more than two kids. Both middle-aged mothers and young mothers mentioned that '*in the past, if we had more than one boy, we would not have enough fields for them to plant; and if we had more than one girl, we would not have enough clothes for*

them to wear,' or 'we all have one son and one daughter. It is natural. We do not want the third one. It is hard to bring up more than two. Two kids are enough.' It shows that the fertility culture guided by Zhanli's concept of symbiosis acts as a power to regulate the villagers' autonomous birth control from the cognitive system (Foucault, 1979). The oral traditions of Zhanli also reflect the symbiotic concept: it is said that the *Feng shui* of the old village address was terrible, producing only fierce warriors but not good farmers. But in fact, the reason why people cannot get along is overpopulation and thus lack of resources.

A vital idea reflected in the ancient songs is the unequal distribution of land as the population increases, creating a gap between rich and poor and the resulting fight between people. For example, 'Zhanli is a boat. If there are too many people on it, it will capsize' and 'The only way to get to the other side of the river is to keep the boat from being overloaded.' 'Boat' is a basic symbolic image in Zhanli's concept of symbiosis. They compare the whole village to a boat, a fluid dwelling. The village Zhai Lao is the helmsman, and the villagers are the passengers on the boat. The environment on which the whole village depends is the flowing water that carries the boat. The boat must constantly follow the course of the current in order to make steady progress. The condition for the boat to move forward is the harmonious development of humans and nature. After all, as the old Chinese saying goes, 'water can carry a boat as well as overturn it.' The boat's image also reflects the collectivist values of the Zhanli people and the agency of the Zhanli community as a whole. At this point, the mysterious 'flower changing herb' is partially unveiled. It is a folk measure that supplements birth control to balance gender and results from a negotiation between subjects regulated by the fertility culture and nature.

Whatever the secret behind it and the actual composition of the herb, it is a compromise made after negotiation between the Zhanli people and nature, each taking a step back. This compromise places humans and nature in a cultural circle of symbiosis and maintains its dynamic balance. As the cultural mechanism behind population control, the concept of symbiosis has permeated every corner of Zhanli, guiding people's daily lives and cultural activities.

2.2 The Practice of Living in Symbiosis With Nature

As mentioned above, the Zhanli people, who have the philosophy of 'nature as host and humans as guests,' are the 'tenants' of nature along with other creatures. Therefore, in negotiating with the 'landlord' (nature), Zhanli must also deal with the relationship with the 'roommates' (other creatures). In the oral tradition of Zhanli, they believe that the world can be divided into two categories. One category is those that arise directly from the shining of the sun, such as mountains, forests, and rivers, which have been existed before the emergence of humans so that they are the 'host.' The other category is those that arise at a certain point in the development of nature, such as humans and animals. They are all siblings born of one mother and are 'guests' in nature. Therefore, humans and animals are relatively equal in Zhanli's symbiotic concept, and the fundamental boundary between species is relatively blurred.

During the fieldwork, I found that in addition to foraging for themselves, the local people's free-range chickens and ducks would eat the same Kam sweet rice as people rather than poultry feed. 'We usually cannot eat all this rice and vegetables we grow. We share it all with them (the animals),' said Ms. Wu, one of the participants. It can be seen that population control made it possible to maintain a relatively equal relationship between humans and animals by making sufficient food production. Human is a complex and a mixture of microorganisms, as are other creatures in nature (Haraway, 2008: 31). Zhanli's concept of symbiosis breaks down the dichotomy between humans and non-humans. The Zhanli people believe that everything in nature is all spiritual beings and must not be destroyed at will. But they are all in the biological chain of killing and being killed, so there are many resulting customs and rituals. When confronted with the contradictions of animism and Darwinism, the Zhanli people resolve them not by overriding the biological chain but by weaving themselves into the ecosystem that nature has already built. The following section explains this in detail through the dietary preference and agricultural patterns of the Zhanli people.

2.3 Eating 'bie' Before Eating Beef

Beef bie hotpot is the most unusual dish in the Zhanli diet. 'Bie' is the undigested forage in the cattle's stomach and small intestine. The Zhanli people think of bie as cattle's 'dung' that has not yet taken shape. When making the beef bie hotpot, they will take out the forage residue, squeezing out the green juice in it, and then simmer in a pot with cattle's bile and seasonings to create a unique hotpot soup base. Few non-Kam people dare to try it, but the Zhanli people think it is the most delicious home taste. When I was first invited to taste but refused because of fear, the host laughed and said, 'What is there to be scary? It does not stink at all. We grew up eating it. The cattle are grass eaters. They are much cleaner than us humans.'

Regarding the origins of eating bie, Wu Lingzi's husband, Mr. Wu, who is also the cultural minister in Zhanli,

told me this mythical story:

A long time ago, cattle could talk just like people, so people were afraid to eat their meat. Think about it, if cattle can talk and think, then aren't they just like people? Eating their meat is like eating the flesh of people. However, humans cannot stop eating meat, for if they do not eat meat, they will not have the energy to do farm work. Then humans talked to the cattle and asked them to stop talking. The cattle were not happy about it. They said to humans, 'You make us work for you, eat our meat, and now not let us speak. It is not fair.' So, humans promised the cattle that, to be fair, they would eat the bie before eating the beef. Bie is the cattle's dung. When the cattle saw that humans ate their dung, they were resigned and agreed not to speak in the future.

In this story, although it appears that humans trick the cattle, and it seems that humans become the master, in reality, humans do not have so much autonomy when it comes to nature and other creatures. Firstly, whether humans need to eat beef or need cattle to help with farm work, the ultimate aim is to keep their agricultural work strength. Secondly, cattle have the right to object, and humans who want to eat beef have to negotiate with them. Thirdly, to satisfy their own needs, humans must make compromises at the expense of some of their interests, i.e., to eat beef, eat cattle's 'dung' first. It is clear from this diet that the Zhanli people are also guided by a symbiotic concept of their relationship with animals, using natural resources to a limited extent, but not arbitrarily. Furthermore, the cattle have a significant symbolic meaning in Zhanli's culture. The relationship between humans and cattle can also be reflected in the relationship between individuals and the community, which will be elaborated in Chapter 2 through bullfighting.

2.4 Rice-Fish-Duck Farming System

The Zhanli people and nature have negotiated and agreed on a set of symbiotic contracts that are sustainable for both parties. As nature's tenants, Zhanli people can also build creatively in their available space without disturbing the landlord. The rice-fish-duck farming system is a practice inspired by Zhanli's symbiotic relationship with nature. Zhanli is located in a mountainous and rainy area with limited fields, making it impossible for general rice varieties to survive. Nevertheless, Kam sweet rice is relatively not afraid of flooding so that more fry can be stocked in the paddy, and thus the ducks have more bait. I have drawn up a simple diagram below to show how the rice-fish-duck farming system works. It can give a more visual representation of how the Zhanli people have created a miniature ecosystem with rice, fish, and ducks, inspired by the natural ecosystem.

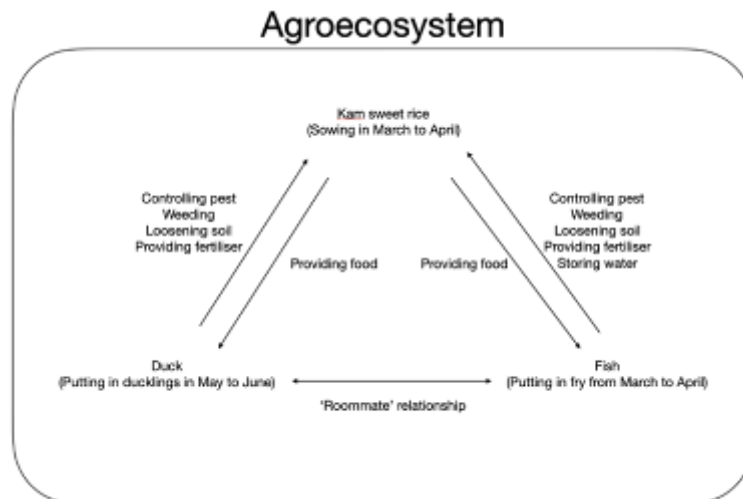


Figure 3. The rice-fish-duck farming system

In this thesis, which borrows the biological term as its theme, I also want to use the biological theory for anthropological analysis. The American ecologist Odum believes that ecosystem development principles have important implications for the interrelationship between humans and nature. However, ecosystem development's response is to obtain the maximum support for complex biological structures, while the human aim is to strive for the highest possible yield, which is often contradictory (Odum, 1953). Fortunately, because of the moderating

role of culture, this contradiction is resolved in the context of Zhanli by a symbiotic concept (Note 15). Zhanli's concept of symbiosis is a mediation between the response of the ecosystem and humans' purpose, which confirms Latour's argument that the solution to the ecological crisis is located in the elimination of the dichotomy. In the realm of human and non-human activity, heterogeneous forces are constantly being generated, receding, shifting, changing, and building science in networks by chance (Latour, 1993). These three species co-exist cooperatively in this small ecosphere, while their disturbance of the larger environment becomes 'ecosystems engineering' (Tsing, 2015: 161). Just as the Zhanli people are inspired by the nature in which they live, they have spontaneously engaged in the practice of constructing a small agroecosystem. This agroecosystem ensures species diversity and the integration and entanglement of the Zhanli people and multiple species into an organically integrated collective. The sense of collectivism is also reflected in the community construction by Zhanli, which will be analysed in Chapter 2.

3. Symbiotic Relationship Between Individuals and the Community

The village is both a public space for social interaction and a private space for daily life. The logic behind the overlap between public and private space is based on the indivisibility and reciprocity of cultural communities. The Chinese anthropologist Wu Wenzao once advocated 'looking at society and understanding it from a community perspective' (Wu, 1990: 144), especially ethnic minority communities. Such communities carry the ethnic culture and also connect to the national system. On the one hand, they have deep local knowledge; on the other hand, they can reflect the larger society's structure and changes. The Zhanli Kam village has been outside the national system for most of its history due to its geography. Nevertheless, even in tribal societies where no political authority figures such as monarchs or chiefs existed, some mechanism for maintaining social order must have existed. Thus, in orderly anarchic communities, their social control is arranged primarily based on groups constituted by blood and geographical ties (Wang, 2002: 85-86). Evans-Pritchard (1969) found that the political system, clan system, and age set were crucial factors in constructing the anarchic social order through his study of the Nuer society. In his study of the Azande people (1972), he argued that the belief system also structured and maintained social life.

In the context of this thesis, Zhanli is a group formed as a result of cooperation. This group's cohesion begins with the reinforcement of individual loyalty, especially to the group leader, and develops partly by nature and partly by deliberation. The practice of population control analysed in Chapter 1, for example, originated with the social leader: 'Zhai Lao' Wu Gong. This mythical figure has the stereotyping characteristics that are worshipped: tall, eloquent, and gifted. The people began to implement family planning out of their natural loyalty to Zhai Lao and thinking deeply about the relationship between humans and nature. It is evident that 'the original mechanism of social cohesion, as it is still to be found among the most primitive races, operated through individual psychology without the need of anything that could be called government' (Russell, 2005: 23). This inner 'individual psychology' is internalised by transforming the cultural power mentioned in Chapter 1 into cognitive belief, a sense of cultural identity, and moral constraint. It is necessary to clarify that power in the context of Zhanli is more of an authority. In vernacular societies, authority is often greater than power. It is difficult for power to be adequate when it is possessed alone without authority (Weber & Henderson, 2012). Specifically, the authority is guided by the symbiotic concept that transforms the management of power over the individuals into their attachment to the community. This attachment, fed by emotional ties and social norms, has created social capital for Zhanli (Bourdieu, 1986). This chapter will analyse two aspects of community construction and the spiritual cohesion of Zhanli.

3.1 Community Construction

In Zhanli, a village covering 18 square kilometres, there are apparent gender and age divisions in the different spaces. Walking immersively through the different spaces, one can find that the spaces seem to have human characteristics because of the people who occupy them. In other words, every space is bound to the people who are in it, thus giving rise to symbolic meaning (Lefebvre, 1991: 32-33). When one wants to search for a particular group of people, one knows which space they must be in. For example, the village clinic is a place for young and middle-aged women with their children to gather and chat (the clinic itself is diminished in its function of providing treatment). The stream and basketball court are places for children to play. The kiosk and barbecue stalls are places for unmarried men and women to socialise. An open square is a gathering place for middle-aged and older people, mainly women and some men, who sit around the fire to bake sticky rice cakes and chat. The 'wind and rain bridge' is the most unisex and the most widely distributed in age group, linking the two sides of the stream. Throughout the village, a wooden building like a pagoda stands out among the stilt houses. This building is called Drum Tower because it has a drum on top to transmit messages. In the Drum Tower, where fire and television are available, all the village's respected elders, including Zhai Lao, gather in the

Drum Tower to watch television and chat. In what follows, I will analyse the structure of the Zhanli community through the Drum Tower.

The Drum Tower is an important symbol and gathering space in the village. When the drum on top of the tower is beaten, people must gather in front of the Drum Tower to listen to the Zhai Lao's instructions. Therefore, the Drum Tower is generally the first and tallest building in a Kam village. It is the village's soul. To analyse the community construction in Zhanli through the Drum Tower is necessary to sort out the relationship between the Drum Tower and the fir tree. The area in which Zhanli is located has been one of China's leading producers of fir lumber. Due to the long cultivation and the fact that the fir tree has directly benefited humans, the Kam people have a special affection for it, comparing it to a sacred tree and a protective umbrella. When a village is destroyed by fire or a new village is built, fir lumber is set up to replace the Drum Tower temporarily, and then the Drum Tower and the house are rebuilt (Note 16). The folklore that one of the participants told is more straightforward about the origins of the Drum Tower symbol:

In ancient times, people had no homes, so they gathered under the fir tree, which sheltered them from the wind and rain. Later, when villages began to be established, the Drum Tower was built in the fir tree's shape as a sign of gratitude to the tree and only then were houses built.

The fir tree is, therefore, the prototype for the Drum Tower. Furthermore, the fir tree's shape is an isosceles triangle, a relatively stable image that symbolises the home's stability. The community structure of Zhanli is also inspired by it. However, the 'isosceles triangle' in the community structure is a hidden image that only manifests itself when people engage in related activities. When the community structure is combined with the image of the fir tree and set up in the village, not only is the social structure visualised and fixed, but it is also empowered and signified.



Figure 4. The Drum Tower in Zhanli

Each village is a surname and has a chief called Zhai Lao. The surname is divided into different 'Dou' according to the different bloodlines. Each 'Dou' has a leader called 'Dou Lao.' Each 'Dou' is subdivided into different 'Fang.' Each 'Fang' is divided into different families based on uncles and brothers. Each family is divided into different households, each with a head of household who is the most basic organiser of the community structure of Zhanli. In addition, there are organisations based on gender and age set. All the organisations mentioned above form the reticulated hierarchy of the Zhanli community. The skeleton of the community is a pyramidal structure similar to that of the Drum Tower and fir. Also, all the wood for building the Drum Tower was donated by the families, indicating that it was built by the whole community, and in turn, everyone was part of the Drum Tower and the community. Thus, the botanically-derived Drum Tower implies both the vitality of the fir tree and the community's structure, a three-dimensional symbol of the entwined symbiosis of nature, community, and humanity.

If the Drum Tower is the village's soul, then Zhai Lao is the Drum Tower in human form, becoming the spiritual

leader. The Zhai Lao is usually the older man recognised by the public as high moral standing, with one to several depending on the village's size. There are currently six Zhai Lao in Zhanli. Zhai Lao is non-hereditary, unpaid, and works under the supervision of the villagers. They convene the Drum Tower meeting to discuss significant issues with the villagers, enforce the village rules, mediate civil disputes and adjudicate on village affairs, and preside over rituals. The Zhai Lao system is, in fact, a remnant of the gerontocracy of primitive societies. It is a politics in which political power is held and ruled by a small number of older people or predominantly by the elderly (Spencer, 2004). The elderly have plenty of social experience and the capability to deal with emergencies, thus holding political power in primitive societies, such as natural leaders like chiefs and patriarchs in tribal times. Gerontocracy has also evolved and changed a lot, becoming more adapted to the current society. The Zhai Lao system in Zhanli is both traditional and modern. During the fieldwork, I met one of the Zhai Lao at Drum Tower. Zhai Lao is one of the few over 60 who can speak Mandarin. In his seventies, this Zhai Lao proudly told me, *'You don't understand our language here, but I know some Mandarin. I have studied too. I went up to the fourth grade!'* (Note 17)

After the founding of New China, people's power in the counties became increasingly sound, and various village organisations became increasingly sophisticated. During the Cultural Revolution, the Zhai Lao were suppressed as 'enemies of the people', and their political function gradually disappeared. In the 1980s, the Zhai Lao system was reinstated, and the village committee invited them to attend meetings, and their views were respected again. The village committee officer Shi Mingcai told me, *'Zhai Lao is for the village; we are for the poverty reduction programme. We also work with Zhai Lao to collect materials, inform villagers of arrangements, and so on. The village rules are also important for the village itself and are voluntary for the villagers to follow.'* Thus, after Zhanli was incorporated into the national system, the Zhai Lao represented the civil power, and the village committee represented the national political power.

Similarly, even though Zhanli has been incorporated into the national legal system, village rules' binding force remains. Unlike national laws enforce from the outside in, village rules are culturally and emotionally binding from the inside out by shaping values. However, key participant Wu Honghui also said, *'The role of Zhai Lao, although essential, is not as important as it used to be. There is still Zhai Lao present during the Drum Tower meeting, but they usually just give their opinions and listen to what people say.'* Zhai Lao's authority and the power of traditional belief have gradually diminished following the intervention of national government forces. The younger generation of villagers may consider some ritual traditions to be superstitions. However, both the village committee officer and the 'elite' of the village affirm the significance of Zhai Lao's presence in Zhanli. Only Zhai Lao's role has changed from a decision-maker to an opinion-giver, from authority within the village to a bridge between the village committee and the villagers, from fulfilling a political responsibility to fulfilling a symbolic cultural responsibility.

The Drum Tower is the symbol of the village's soul. Even though the village has changed over time and space, the Drum Tower will always be the village's foundation. The Zhai Lao is the spiritual leader of Zhanli and is respected by the villagers. This internal community construction, which still exists under the influence of the national government, is a common value held by the entire population of Zhanli. Such value is the product of social emotions that arise under the guidance of the symbiotic concept. However, without the symbols that represent the value, social emotions cannot be sustained. Because of the contradiction between the permanence of society and the temporality of its members, any society's continuation depends on the reproduction of its members themselves and the reproduction of the social culture shared by its members, forming a collective consciousness (Allan, 2005: 109).

3.2 *Spiritual Cohesion of the Community*

Watching bullfighting is the serendipity during the fieldwork. This activity is traditionally held mainly in March and September. However, bullfighting could not be held in 2020 due to the government ban on multi-person gatherings during the pandemic. Therefore, during the Chinese Lunar New Year 2021, after the temporary lifting of government control, the Kam villages in Congjiang County have held several bullfights at the 'bull pond' (Note 18) in Bapa village (Note 19). So, in February, I was lucky enough to participate in one of the bullfights during the fieldwork. Bullfighting is a stimulating and spectator-friendly outdoor recreational activity enjoyed by Kam people, mostly between villages close to each other. One of the bullfights I watched involved a dozen nearby villages with a great deal of excitement.

Bullfighting consists of two parts: the entrance of the bull and the fighting of the bull. The usual entry time is about 10 minutes. The village men blow reedpipes and bang gongs and drums to surround the bull. The 'entrance ceremony' is a process that village teams carrying various flags and banners, with the bull going around the 'bull

pond' three times. Each bull has a mighty, masculine name, such as 'Little King Kong,' 'Big Thunder,' 'Victory King.' After the firecrackers exploded, the two bulls in the fight rush up and fight each other in a tense and heated atmosphere. The fight usually lasts around 3 to 5 minutes, with one end forcing the other to run away as the winner. When a certain bull wins, the village men drape the bull with a red cloth representing the victory and set off firecrackers to celebrate. If there is still no winner after 5 minutes, each team will pull the bull's leg and separate the two bulls to end in a draw and celebrate together (Yang, 1988).



Figure 5. The Kam Minority bullfighting

Wu Honghui suggested that the symbolic nature of bullfighting as a spiritual cohesion of communities has become far greater than the competitive nature of the game itself:

Every village in our area keeps at least one bull specifically for fighting, which never works on the farm and eats a special feed containing valuable herbs. A qualified fighting bull will cost between 100,000 and 200,000 RMB. All villagers will come together to raise funds for the purchase. I quite like there is a bull inside the village because I feel that having a bull means that the village is cohesive. If there is a bull around the Drum Tower, then basically, a lot of the elderly would like to stay in that place. Many young people would also like to gather in that place after they finish their farm work. If the bull will go on a fight, everyone works together. Last night many of our young men stayed around the bull all night because they would go on the fight the next day, just like soldiers going into battle. The winner bulls will be kept, and everyone will come and celebrate. In some villages, the bulls will be killed when they lose, and then the whole village has a banquet to share, and everyone is happy too.

It shows that the bulls used for bullfighting no longer have a farming function but have been given cultural symbolism by the Kam people and are the whole village's spiritual cohesion. It has been metaphorically transformed into a warrior, so the Kam people use many rituals to cheer the warrior on the battle. For example, young men keep watching the night before the bullfighting, blow the reedpipes before going on the fight, and jump and shout around the bull. The bull as a symbol of village spiritual cohesion makes bullfighting a meaningful ceremony for the Kam people. This ceremony brings the whole village and other surrounding Kam villages together on specific days each year to form a grand party.

In this grand social space, the individual unit is blurred out in favour of the village, and the sense of community and cohesion is stronger than ever. A Kam villager who was there to watch bullfighting said, '*The funniest thing (about the bullfighting) is that when different villages come to fight with their bulls, they can mingle with their friends and relatives. Nowadays, people don't care about winning or losing. They just find a chance to hang out. I don't know when the bullfighting started, but it's a custom that we have to pass on.*' Although most Kam people are unaware of bullfighting's origin, it does manage to be passed down from generation to generation, and even Gen Z believes it is a tradition that must be carried on. Bullfighting has been shaped by the internalisation and subjectivisation of social structure as the historical embodiment of individual and collective (Wacquant, 2011: 85). Bullfighting is, therefore, a manifestation of cultural identity and self-awareness. The bullfighting attached to the festival culture brings out the Kam community's collective belief and cosmology, thus enhancing the ties

between individuals and the community.

Furthermore, bullfighting is a significant social gathering between villages, like a carnival rather than a competition. As well as watching bullfighting, there are many food stalls and rides, and many young unmarried men and women take the opportunity to find a suitable match. While watching bullfighting is superficially a physical and mental pleasure, internal is the exchange of feelings between groups. Bullfighting maintains the emotional connection and family feeling of the whole village entertainingly and socially. Therefore, it is understandable why bullfighting is a joyous event, no matter win or lose, because both winners and losers do the same thing at the end of the day: kill the bulls or pigs and share it with the whole village. This can also be echoed back to the *Introduction*, where it is mentioned that there has not been a single criminal case in Zhanli since the founding of New China. Such a 'utopian' village is made possible by the strong family nature of the community in Zhanli. 'Sharing' is an essential view in the construction of the Zhanli community. Both the marriage pattern of endogamy (Note 20) and the punishment in the village rules (Note 21) reflect the attributes of the Zhanli community as a whole.

4. Encounters Between Zhanli and the Outside World

Since ancient times, the central government has been unable to reach out to marginalised communities, especially in less accessible minority areas. As a result, the people of these areas are confined to their worlds. Since modernisation, with the development of transport, these communities have gradually been integrated into the national system. Out of concern for these communities, the government has invested plenty of resources to rehabilitate their living conditions. For a long time, ethnic minorities have been called 'barbarians' by the central government and have needed to be 'educated.' Even when they are included in the national system, there is a sense of cultural 'superiority.' However, with the development of modern civilisation, the relationship between humans and the environment has deteriorated. In this context, people turn to the 'countryside,' hoping that a solution can be found. The poverty reduction programme has changed the economic forms, social networks, values and beliefs, demographics, and infrastructures, such as irrigation waterways of many mountain and rural areas in southwest China (Galipeau, 2015). This chapter will analyse how Zhanli, an ancient village that has just been lifted out of poverty in 2020, encounters the outside world.

4.1 *The Influence of the Outside World on Zhanli*

Zhanli is the last group to be helped by the poverty reduction programme, and the officers serving on the village committee are responsible for this. Shi Mingcai said that improving the living conditions in Zhanli was the main objective of the help. In the past, the Kam people's wooden houses kept livestock on the ground floor, and people lived on the upper floors. Thus, there are problems with leaks and the mixing of animals and people. Nowadays, livestock has been removed from houses. The ground floors of some decaying wooden houses have been converted to brick. Apart from the actual improvement of living conditions, one of the more crucial aspects of the help is improving the economic level. Because the fields in Zhanli are limited and the crops are all self-sufficient, it is hard to achieve mass production through cash crops. Therefore, as an ancient minority village, tourism is the main direction of development. The mysterious fertility culture of 'one son and one daughter per family' has become a selling point for the government's tourism marketing.

Zhanli's fertility culture coincided with the national government's family planning policy and was therefore used as propaganda after government intervention. In order to develop tourism, the symbiotic concept of Zhanli has been mystified. For example, most of the information on Zhanli deliberately emphasises such eye-catching words as '*mysterious herbs*' and '*villagers keep their mouths shut.*' Narratives and cultures that are local knowledge (Mitchel, 1997: 2) are packaged as selling points for tourism products. Zhanli is shaped as a utopian pastoral space to be consumed. This approach to spatial shaping has brought new industries to Zhanli, but it also has significant limitations. Firstly, the space is not shaped in harmony with the real life of the inhabitants. In the fieldwork, most villagers expressed the disruption and inconvenience to their lives caused by tourism. Thus, the villagers' lives, which are not of any performative nature, subliminally establish a boundary and make it more challenging to sell tourism products. Secondly, Zhanli's symbiotic concept is flattened into the view of fertility. The ancient songs and village rules, translated into Chinese characters, are chosen on purpose for their fertility content, leaving visitors with no way to immerse themselves in the integrated cultural landscape of Zhanli. As Wu Honghui says, '*Zhanli doesn't have many usual tourist entertainment options, so the visitors cannot perceive the charm of Zhanli. But Zhanli has its atmosphere, and you need to feel it.*'

4.2 Boundary Awareness Among the Zhanli People

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, the Zhanli people have a solid sense of family and community. This rustic feeling has allowed the Zhanli people to establish their boundary with the outside world spontaneously. From the inside-out perspective, this boundary generates a community spirit that strengthens the social capital so that the community can sustain even in precarity (Borgonovi & Andrieu, 2020). As a result of the poverty reduction programme, outside cultures have entered Zhanli, creating new needs for the villagers. This entry opens up the boundary of Zhanli; naturally, the interior flows outwards. More and more young people are being driven out of their home by new demands searching for better education and job opportunities. However, this exodus is a temporary change or a state of suspension. The proportion of young people in Zhanli is the highest compared to the surrounding villages. The young people told me, *'It is not convenient for us to go out, because our families are in the village. Settling down outside is not an option. We just go out to earn money for several years and then come back.'* The young people's motivation in Zhanli to 'go out' is to gain access to resources not available in the village rather than become urban migrants. The symbiotic concept of Zhanli grasps the emotional pivot from within, and the geographical location of home does not change as individuals move.

From the outside-in perspective, this boundary also deconstructs some of the external cultures that enter the village. When I first entered Zhanli, I noticed that some of the renovated houses had the same security windows as in the city, which looked out of place in the houses' wooden construction. During the interviews, I learned that security windows followed the poverty reduction programme into Zhanli, but this village with a solid sense of community did not need them. Ms. Wu, a participant, said, *'This whole set of windows was given to us by the government. It is not for security purpose. We don't even lock our doors when we go out.'* It shows that the security windows have lost their original burglar-proof function in Zhanli. Their original meaning has been dissolved. The security windows have become a symbol of modernisation brought about by the government. Furthermore, the 'flower changing herb' has attracted some seekers from outside, but the success rate is not 100% as it is for the Zhanli people. Wu Lingzi explained that this is because the water and air in Zhanli are different from outside, and there are taboos and rituals that people outside do not know how to do. It is thus clear that 'herb,' which is scientific, is interpreted differently in Zhanli. With the ontological turn, the other can no longer be understood based on knowledge from one cultural system (Sahlins, 1996), but rather as an imaginary and interpretative world as well as an ontologically real world (Kohn, 2013).

5. Conclusion

Using an herb that can control the sex of a foetus in the Zhanli Kam village as a trigger, this thesis explores two relationships to explain the cultural mechanism behind fertility control: the concept of symbiosis. The first is the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. Because of the isolated geography and limited resources, the Zhanli people use endogenous culture as an intermediary to regulate humans and nature. Human practices driven by the symbiotic concept are reflected in all aspects of the Zhanli people's lives, of which population control is only one. The Zhanli people believe that both humans and nature have agency. Sustainability is about continually adapting human behaviour to the environment while also shaping it so that life moves forward and lives as a lush forest. And the beliefs and customs that the Zhanli people have derived from this are a reasonable compromise negotiated with nature. The second is the symbiotic relationship between individuals and the community. As a group brought together by cooperation, Zhanli's community cohesion comes from individual loyalty to authority and collective cultural identity. Guided by a symbiotic concept, this cohesion is translated into an intrinsic personal attachment to the land and home (Fei, 1975), thus creating ample social capital for Zhanli (Bourdieu, 1986). Here is a quote from Wu Honghui can explain the emotional bonding between Zhanli and the villagers:

We live off the mountains and rivers, so very attached to Zhanli. My grandfather passed away last year, and he would still want to go up to the mountains to see his fields until he was on his deathbed. When I'm away from home, I see a particular mountain or a picture, and I get homesick. People like me who left home at a very early age feel this way about Zhanli, not to mention the villagers who have lived here all their lives. There is a block of wood on that hill over there, in which a place is recessed. It is said that there is a land god just below that recessed ground. Every time I am outside and homesick, I suddenly think of the wood, and nostalgia springs up. That wood has been there for as many years as Zhanli has been down here. No one can move it. So, it is not just a landscape; it is a culture.

Furthermore, the relationship between Zhanli and the outside world cannot be ignored in the light of modern developments. The region of Qiandongnan has always been a place where multiple cultures meet. Internet technology has brought about new social phenomena, providing opportunities to exchange modern science, ancient religions, and medical systems. For science, the world has rules to follow and is objectively real, but the

world has no fixed shape for interpretation. It changes according to the individual's perspective, position, and expectation (Lambek, 2014). The world is made up of many subjects, each of which is a small world. These small worlds are like bubbles of different shapes and colours. As people interact with each other, bubbles also collide and communicate, either creating new bubbles or annihilating each other. The whole world is a process of entanglement, collision, and interweaving of bubbles. Thus, interpretation is essentially ethnography of encounter (Faier & Rofel, 2014), which abandons the central view and allows each world to be unique and intertwined.

With a perspective of interpretation and entanglement, look back at Zhanli. As China completes its poverty reduction programme, urban culture will move more and more into the villages. Zhanli has changed tremendously in the six years since the internet was brought in 2015. I wonder if, in a few years, it will still be the same as I saw it then. However, as Geertz says, the interpretation of ethnographic interpretation lies in 'trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms' (Geertz, 1973:20). Even if Zhanli changes irreversibly in the future, the one I am immersed in is forever frozen in this thesis in that moment, which is probably one of the meanings of anthropology.

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Appendix A

Some Ancient Songs of Zhanli:

养得多女无银戴，养得崽多无田耕，女争金银男争地，兄弟姐妹闹不清。

There is no silver jewellery for more daughters, no fields for more sons. The women compete for silver, the men for land, then sibling troubles rise.

盗贼来自贫穷起，多生儿女穷祸根。

Thieves appear because they are poor, and having more children leads to poverty.

家养崽多家贫穷，树结果多树翻根。

If the family has too many children, the family will become poor; if the tree bears too much fruit, it will turn over its roots.

崽多要分田，女多要嫁妆。

If there are many sons, the land will be divided. If there are many daughters, the dowry will be divided.

祖先留下的地盘犹如一张桌子，人多了就会垮。

The land left by ancestors is like a table that collapses when there are too many people.

崽多了无田种，娶不了媳妇，女多了无银两，嫁不出姑娘。

If there are many sons and no fields to plant, they cannot get a wife. If there are many daughters with no money, they cannot marry a man.

人与自然要和谐，需求供给要平衡。船舶载货不超载，顺风使舵到彼岸。

Humans and nature must be in harmony, and demand and supply must be balanced. Boats should not be overloaded to make it to the other side of the river with the wind.

Some village rules of Zhanli:

款约一：不准多生，夫妻只生两个好，多生者不娶其女做媳，不嫁其子为妻，使其男孤女单，自感羞耻，严重多生驱出寨门。

Rule 1: No more children, only two for couples. Not to marry a person who has been over-born. So, they are left alone and feel ashamed of themselves. Serious offenders are expelled from the village.

款约二：不准乱砍滥伐，乱伐者罚银五十二两，并杀耕牛全寨分享与警示村民。

Rule 2: No deforestation. Anyone who does so is fined 52 taels of silver, and his cattle are killed and shared with the whole village as a warning to the villagers.

款约三：安全用火，失火者杀耕牛并驱出寨门三年，回来罚五十二两作买寨钱，但是只能住寨边。

Rule 3: Safe use of fire. If someone misused the fire, he would have his cattle killed and be expelled from the village for three years. If the one wants to return to the village after three years, he has to pay a fine of 52, but he can only live at the edge of the village.

款约四：禁止赌、毒。吸毒，赌博者，要处罚银两，屡教不改者，杀其耕牛全寨分享，没收财产驱出寨

门。

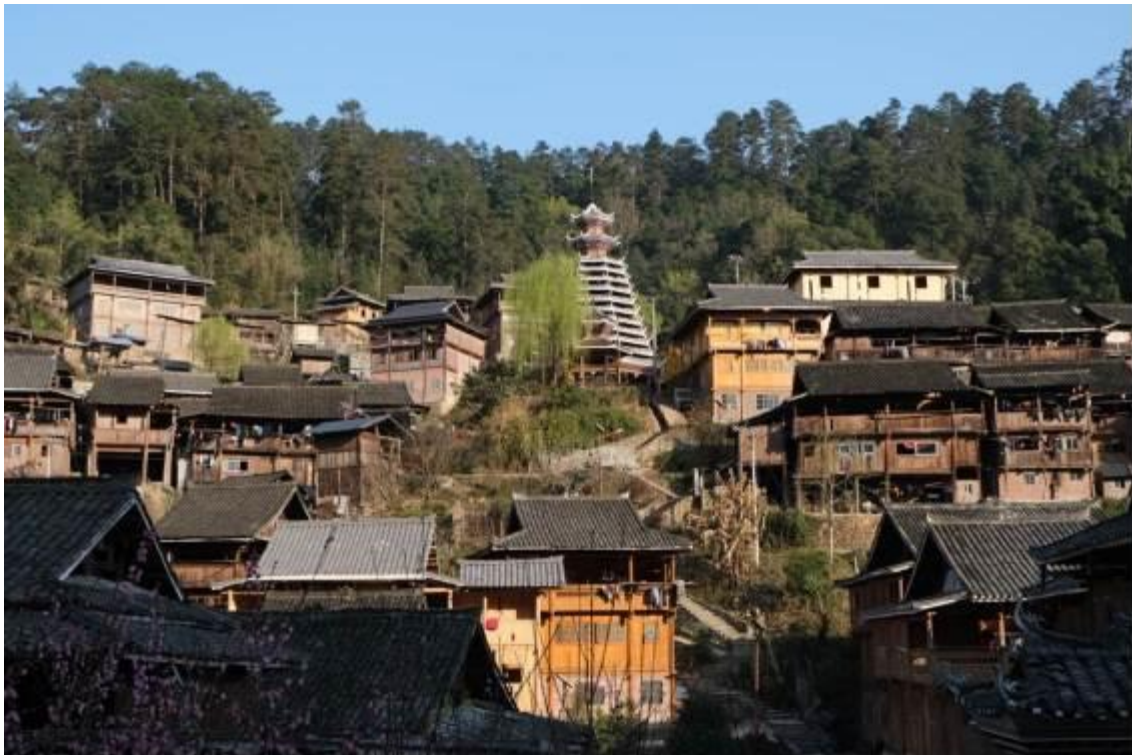
Rule 4: No gambling or drugs. Those who take drugs or gamble will be fined with silver taels. Those who repeatedly fail to do so will have their cattle killed and shared throughout the village, and his property will be confiscated, and he will be expelled from the village.

款约六：杜绝受贿，寨老断事要公正，不能收受他人财物，颠倒是非，否则将其财物全寨分享，并取消寨老资格，重者还杀其耕牛全寨分享以警示全寨村民。

Rule 5: Eliminate bribery. The Zhai Lao must be fair in deciding matters and must not accept other people's property or reverse what is right and wrong. Otherwise, his property will be shared with the whole village, and he will be disqualified as a Zhai Lao. In severe cases, the cattle will be killed and shared throughout the village as a warning to all villagers.

Appendix B

Additional Images:





Architectural landscape of Zhanli, photos taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The 'wind and rain bridge', photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



An open square for middle-aged and older people to gather, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The stream through the Zhanli Kam village, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The ancient song in Chinese character, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The two wells in the village, one for boys and one for girls, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The basketball court in Zhanli, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The sculpture in honour of Zhai Lao Wu Gong, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



Advertisements for the Supply and Marketing Association and China Mobile, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



Zhanli villagers barbecuing for fun, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The man playing the bracket harp, a unique instrument of Kam minority, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



Two old men playing 'three three chess' (a popular chess game among Kam people) by the Drum Tower, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The beef bie hotpot, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The Zhanli woman weaving the cloth, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The villagers killing the cattle to get its bie, the green stuff in the bucket is the freshly removed bie, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The rice-fish-duck farming system, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



The scene of bullfighting with a huge crowd, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021



Blowing the reedpipes during the bullfighting entrance ceremony, photo taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021







The men cheering around the winner bull, photos taken by Jieling Yang, February 2021

Notes

Note 1. In Chinese, Dong, an ethnic minority in China. Guizhou is the province with the largest Kam population.

Note 2. A kind of folk song.

Note 3. A kind of vowed festival, which is the grandest festival of the Kam people.

Note 4. The language of Kam Minority.

Note 5. The village committee's head is the village leader in the national political system, which is different from the village chief called Zhai Lao that will be elaborated on in Chapter 2.

Note 6. He works as a media photographer in Guiyang, the capital city of Guizhou Province, and has assisted CCTV in filming a cultural documentary in Zhanli. His girlfriend is also from Zhanli, and both of them studied at the Normal University in Guiyang, who are the only two university students in Zhanli.

Note 7. Lord of the village in civil legislation.

Note 8. Edited by Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of Congjiang County.

Note 9. Edited by Ethnic Affairs Commission of Guizhou Province.

Note 10. The capital city of Guizhou Province.

Note 11. See appendix 1 for some ancient songs and village rules.

Note 12. Cited from *Ethnography of Congjiang County, 2016*.

Note 13. According to folklore, in the Qing Dynasty, the population of Zhanli grew too fast, and the once-prosperous Kam village began to decline. The Zhai Lao of the village, Wu Gong, was inspired by the relationship between people and boats, birds and forests, and made up 'Song of Contract' and 'Song of Persuasion,' setting the rule a couple could only have two children.

Note 14. Not sure if this is a way to achieve gender balance.

Note 15. Zhanli's minority specificity must be taken into account.

Note 16. Cited from *The Great Kam Culture, 2016*.

Note 17. At present, the highest level of schooling in Zhanli is only up to the third grade, and to continue, children have to go to primary school in Congjiang County.

Note 18. An arena dedicated to bullfighting.

Note 19. A Kam village near Zhanli.

Note 20. There has always been a tradition in Zhanli of not marrying outside the village, and today only a very few young people marry outside. 'Be doubly related' is the state of marriage that the Zhanli people seek. Although all the surnames in the village are Wu, there are different family distinctions in Zhanli that have been passed down since ancient times to prevent genetic problems in the next generation caused by inbreeding. Weddings are also celebrated in groups, with the 26th day of the 12th month of the lunar calendar being the group wedding day each year and no weddings at the rest of the year.

Note 21. The main form of punishment in the Zhanli village rules is sharing the cattle and finances of the violator of the village rules with the whole village. The most severe punishment is to expulse the violator from the village, which is the expulsion of an individual by a community.

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