Narratives of Suffering: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Two Yi Religious Communities in Southwest China

Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting, Louise Sundararajan and Qingbo Huang

Abstract

In China, there are 56 ethnic groups, among which Yi people are the seventh largest ethnic group who reside mainly in the most isolated and deprived regions. They are being marginalized with labels such as ‘AIDS/HIV,’ ‘drug addicts,’ ‘violent,’ ‘lazy’ and so on. This study adopted a psycholinguistic approach to examine cognitive processing of emotional information through an analysis of the narratives of suffering in two religious communities, Yi-Bimo and Yi-Christian, in Southwest China. It was predicted and found that in time of adversity, these two religious groups expressed their emotions differently in their narratives of suffering. The Yi-Bimo group tended to express their emotion through implicit codes such as talking about emotionally loaded events without naming their emotions, whereas the Yi-Christian group utilized a significantly more extensive lexicon of emotions. Their cognitive attribution of suffering was also shaped by their social ties and religious approaches. The Yi-Bimo group tended to rely on supernatural reasons to explain their suffering, whereas the Yi-Christian group made more use of internal attributions and life review. In terms of help-seeking methods, these two groups did not differ in their utilization of strong-ties relationship, but Yi-Christians included more weak ties as their resources. The Yi-Bimo utilized significantly more external interventions (e.g. rituals) than the Yi-Christian, while the latter utilized significantly more internal manipulations (e.g. prayer) than the former. In conclusion, as a cultural system, religion coevolves with the ecological niche and cognitive styles that have pervasive impact on the emotional expressions of the local community.

* Author Note: Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting, China University of Political Sciences and Law, Beijing, China; Louise Sundararajan, Rochester, New York; Qingbo Huang, Institute of Population Studies, Peking University, Beijing, China. This paper is supported by Fuller Travis Research Initiative Grant on Psychology of Religion in China. Ethical approval was obtained through the first author’s institute. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rachel Sing-Kiat Ting, 12, Jalan Lun, Sibu 96000, Sarawak, Malaysia. Tel: 1 (881) 053-3531; Email: rachelsk@cupl.edu.cn.
Keywords


The Historical Background of Yi Religions

According to Wickeri & Tam (2011), most of the ethnic minority groups in China have a very complicated religious context and historical lineage. The diversity among them is probably greater than the mainstream (Han) group. As China has 56 ethnic minority groups, each of them embodies a different set of indigenous traditions and spiritual beliefs, before the modern religions such as Buddhism and Christianity were introduced to the region. These indigenous religions are also intertwined with ethnicity and thus long ago became a unique cultural tradition. Some of these ethnic groups were exposed to other religions, but others remained untouched, depending on their geography and ecological system. Some scholars (for example, Wang, 2009) have used dichotomous terms such as ‘original’ versus ‘secondary’ religion to differentiate the religion that originated from the ancient tradition of the minority group from those of mainstream culture.

According to the 2010 China census, the population of the Yi ethnic minority made up 0.65% (8,714,393) of the total Chinese population and 25.55% (2,226,755) of them are living in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province. Sixty per cent of them are living in Yunnan Province. The Yi ethnic group is a heterogeneous group, as it consists of six different major tribes that have different linguistic features and subcultures. The name of Yi came from the Chinese character ‘夷’, which meant ‘the other’ and ‘uncivilized’ in ancient Chinese literature. The ethnic group has been formally labelled since the 1950s when the Chinese government attempted to differentiate different minority groups. While most historians and anthropologists would argue that Yi are an amalgamation of ethnic groups, the common denominator between different subgroups is their identification with the Bimo religious tradition (Wuda, 2008; Harrell, 2000)

In contrast to the prominent religions in China (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism, and Confucianism), the Yi group has an original and indigenous religion which is called ‘Bimo’ (Zhang, 2006). According to a well-known scholar, Bamoayi (1996), Bimo religion is a culture created and inherited by Bimo (the priest), transmitted by scripture and rituals which revolved around the worshipping of spirits, ghosts and witchcraft practices. This religious