



Spatial Structure and Cultural Symbol: A Case Study of China's Dong Ethnic Group Settlement Patterns

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KEYWORDS Anthropological Theory of Space. Cultural Characterization. Dong People. Settlement Pattern. Spatial Structure

ABSTRACT The settlement of human is also a carrier of human production and cultural creation. As such, human settlement has objective and material characteristics along with its subjective, cultural and spiritual characteristics. Based on the field studies of Dong ethnic villages in Southern China, this paper analyses the unique spatial structure and cultural characterization of the settlement patterns of Dong people. The settlement space of Dong people can be categorized into five levels, namely houses, patrilineal communities that centers on drum towers, villages, arable lands, and graveyards. Each level has its own corresponding cultural function and the five levels of space together form integrated villages. In a farming civilization, the settlement space of Dong ethnic villages has its unique symbols of farming civilization, such as "Sa worship," "Drum Towers," and "Kuan organizations." These cultural symbols have helped to maintain the cultural integrity of Dong ethnic villages both internally and externally.

INTRODUCTION

The so-called settlement pattern refers to the pattern of human groups gathering in a certain region according to specific norms and constructing their living space according to the rules inherited from tradition. In a narrow sense, the term "settlement" embodies the physical spatial characteristics of the people gathering together, including places of residence, tombs, places of cultural activities, places of religious activities and surrounding natural environments. In a broad sense, in addition to the physical spatial characteristics, settlement also includes the cultural form — the way how people gather together. The pattern of human settlement belongs to architectural cultural heritage (Buchli 2018). According to the definition of the Nairobi Proposal adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 19th session in 1976, "Historical buildings include archaeological and palaeontological sites and their complexes, structures and open spaces. They constitute the human settlements in urban and rural environments which can be categorized into the following types: prehistoric

sites, historical towns, historical blocks, ancient villages and similar groups of historical sites... As such, the characteristics that need to be preserved include all material and spiritual components" (Yu 2005). Therefore, to study the patterns of settlement, we should not only observe the spatial characteristics of the material form, but also examine the intangible spiritual and cultural characteristics.

Human settlement is the fruit of human civilization and wisdom in that the purpose of human settlement is to integrate the strength of groups, to improve the ability to survive, and to avoid disorderly competition. According to *Wenxian Tongkao* (an encyclopedic book compiled in Song Dynasty, containing ancient statutes and regulations), "The Yellow Emperor demarcated the land and set up 'jing (neighborhood)' to stop disputes and stipulate the measurement units such as 'bu (approximately six feet)' and 'mu (approximately 500-600 square meters)'. Eight households became one 'jing' which had four roads as demarcation lines and one well would be dug in the centre." As such, the settlement involves both the spatial structure and the social structure. Therefore, anthropology holds that there is a relationship between settlement patterns and ecological and social structure. Taking Dong ethnic villages as the object, this paper endeavors to explore

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their settlement patterns and characteristics in two aspects: spatial structure and cultural characterization.

This paper endeavors to interpret the anthropological meaning of human settlement patterns with the age-old traditional settlement culture of the Dong people in southern China as an example. That is this paper attempts to explore what cultural laws this kind of settlement represents and what cultural arrangements this particular ethnic group has made in the process of adapting to the surrounding environments. Academic researches on human settlements have been prone to focus on the architectural and archaeology; the analysis of human settlements tend to be limited to the perspectives of human evolution, including physical space, building materials, aesthetics, functions and group survival needs. However, from the perspective of the large-scale settlement model of the Dong ethnic group in southern China, the Dong village is not only a static physical space, because this kind of space design and its distribution in physics include the careful arrangements by local people, and express their special cultural ideas, their ancient imagination about nature and the realistic family, and the symbolic meanings of their religious pursuit. Without this explanation, no one can understand why the age-old ethnic group has lived in harmony from generation to generation. Therefore, the existing evolutionary interpretation and archaeological, architectural or aesthetic discussions on human settlement patterns can hardly produce satisfactory results. A new anthropological interpretation model is needed to reveal the cultural images expressed by the settlement pattern from the perspective of cultural symbols and their cultural connotations.

Anthropological Theory of Space

People usually regard time and space as the most common basic elements in understanding social phenomena (Giddens 1984), but for a long time, social sciences seemed to have paid more attention to the temporal dimension than to the spatial dimension until the 1980s. On the one hand, it is necessary to break through Bourdieu's arguments that employed theories of practice to dispel "the conceptual tools and method-

ology of the dual opposites of subjective and objective knowledge modes" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004). On the other hand, it is necessary to break through Levi-Strauss' dominant idea of "social/cultural structure". As a result, the concept of space, which is both abstract and concrete and closely related to ordinary life, has become an important breakthrough point. Among them, the spatial study of human settlement is particularly prominent. Human settlement is first of all a physical space with objective characteristics of matter; in addition, settlement is a carrier for human activities and cultural creativity. Therefore settlement space can also be abstracted as a subjective category of culture and spirit.

Compared with other social sciences, anthropological study of settlement space is relatively early. Evolutionists regard the synchronic space as the carrier of different development stages of human culture, while propagandists regard the space as the structure of points, lines and surfaces for spreading culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Durkheim regarded space as an a priori basic concept of classification. Later functionalists regarded space as a relative or social structure reflecting society, while structuralists regarded the classification of space as the common psychological mechanism behind the common social order. Symbolists believed that the study of space should focus on the autonomy of symbolic system and independent cultural logic. In the postmodern period, the concept of space was expanded from physical space to spiritual space, including rituals, fields, habitus, and power. The core of anthropological attention to space lies in the dimension of "space-culture" and the representative ethnographic scholar of space and culture is Evans-Pritchard. In his book *The Nuer*, Pritchard describes in detail local classification of natural and structural spaces. He categorizes space into ecological space and structural space to illustrate the social relations and interaction among different groups in the political fission of the Nuer people. Villages may have equal ecological space, but their structural space will be different, depending on their respective positions in the fission branch (Evans-Pritchard 2002).

Space has always been a core concept in philosophical research. The "objectivity/subject-

tivity, relativity/absoluteness, finiteness/infinity” of space are the controversial focus for philosophers. The ancient Greek philosophers, represented by Anaximander, thought that space was substantial and that they could grasp the meaning of space by studying the extensiveness of matter. The Pythagorean school, by contrast, held that space was empty and separated from matter, and that although man’s senses could not perceive it, the void of space was real. Plato believed that space itself was a kind of reality, and was the place of creation for all things. In the view of anthropologists, the focus of discussion about space is: whether space is a kind of universal structural existence with independent characteristic, or just a kind of existence in cultural connections through which people know society and take action accordingly. Anthropologists, such as Hillier and Hanson, who hold the former view, argue that space can be explained by definite internal logic, that space is a priori, and that space analysis can be treated as an independent conceptual structure (Hillier and Hanson 1984). Scholars who hold the latter view argue that space can not be isolated, that is, space is a medium of social phenomena and a way of understanding social phenomena. For example, Sack thinks that the first characteristic of space is un-isolatability, and that one can only produce actions and results through space (Sack 1980).

In short, we must see that space does have its own internal logic, but space cannot exist in isolation from social phenomena. Space must work together with other sociocultural factors, especially mankind’s cultural activities. There is a basic consensus in the anthropological study of the ethnography of villages that there is an interdependent relationship between the village space and human settlement patterns. As early as the middle of the 20th century, settlement space once became the hot spot for anthropological research, and thus started the new category of “settlement archaeology”, and became a very popular academic action in that period.

The archaeological study of “settlement/space” further confirms Levi-Strauss’ conclusion: “The social structure of settlement, village, or colony has obvious relationships with spatial structure.” The institution of a society can be studied through the projective relationship

between space as an object and its external symbolic representation (Levi-Strauss 1963). Therefore it can be said that “space is not just a geographical form or a constructed environment; it is also a space category of social relations, cultural habits, ideology or political economy that people operate in combination with each other. These different spatial structures can not only work in combination with each other, but also have their depth and extensiveness due to their multi-level integration with social life” (Huang 1996).

This paper is not a study based on statistical or survey data. Instead, it uses traditional and classical field survey methods of anthropology to carry out an in-depth cultural explanation on the basis of understanding the local culture, a Clifford Geertz-style cultural interpretation model. This article attempts to demonstrate the village culture of the Dong ethnic group in southern China as objectively and impartially as possible by means of a detailed and objective description of cultural factors. On this basis, the Levi-Strauss structuralism interpretation framework is adopted to integrate these cultural representations and to explain the cultural connotations and symbols hidden in various cultural elements in Dong villages. Levi-Strauss created the concept of “house society” (“sociétés à maison”), regarded “house” as a kind of institutional concept, thought that the house was originally a “moral subject”, that the house held an inheritance made up of material and immaterial wealth, and that the house continued by inheriting its name in line with a real or imaginary vein, and manifested itself as a relative or in-laws (Buchli 2018). The concept of “house society”, which expresses structuralism, provides a basic explanation framework for this paper.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Spatial Structure and Symbolic Conversion of the Settlement Pattern of Dong Ethnic Villages

Most Dong ethnic villages are located in the transitional zone between Yungui Plateau and the eastern hills, where there are undulating mountains, dense gullies, and impact basins. Due to this kind of special geographical envi-

ronment, the settlement space of the Dong people has demonstrated different levels of space division, ranging from family to village, each symbolizing different cultural functions.

The first level and the most basic settlement space is the house. The house is not only the space for production and consumption, but also the space for the reproduction of patrilineal families. Therefore, the space of the house is private and closed. Inside a Dong ethnic village, houses are generally not linked to each other, but are separated by roads, fish ponds and ditches, with very clear boundaries, partly to prevent a fire that breaks out in one house from harming a neighbor and partly to culturally define the paternal nuclear family in space Fig. 1.

The second level of settlement space is a patrilineal community that centers on the drum tower. A stockaded village with several family names usually has several drum towers. If a surname has a big population, the descendants of the same ancestor (known as "Fangzu") would build a drum tower for themselves. Members of the same patrilineal family built houses around the drum tower. Because of the complex terrain, all the houses can not hold the same orientation, but the relative position of the whole house must take the drum tower as the "centripetal force". This spatial feature reflects the strong cohesion and cultural identity of the Dong patrilineal family.

The third level of settlement space is the village. Most of the Dong ethnic villages are mixed-surnamed settlements and thus a village often has several drum towers which represent different patrilineal groups. The village space appears to be a patchwork of a few drum towers. Generally speaking, because of the different mountainous terrain, different types of village settlement have different layouts in terms of space. In foothill-riparian villages, houses tend to form clusters on slopes; mountain-facing villages tend to be built along rivers, taking the form of a band; restricted by topography, villages of the ridge-pass type show a flexible style in their layouts.

The fourth level of settlement space is the cultivated land. Outside the village are rice paddies and dry lands, intertwined with intricate field trails, channels that connect ridges, and irrigation canals. Rice paddies, villages, houses, hills and streams all together form a harmonious picture of natural landscape.

The fifth level of settlement space is the graveyard. The graveyard is the place where ancestors rest after death, representing the history of the reproduction of the patrilineal family in the village, which is closely related to the development of the settlement. Graveyards are generally located outside arable lands and are often selected by their ancestors as geomantically auspicious lands. The graveyard is structured like a village, forming a well-defined space for a relatively centralized population around the same Drum Tower.

The division of the spatial level of the Dong ethnic group's settlement is only for the purpose of research. In fact, it is very difficult to define the spatial structure of the Dong ethnic group's settlement in a stylized way. As the Dong ethnic group's settlement space is not a castle after all, there is no wall boundary. Settlements are connected by roads and farmlands. The boundaries of settlement space are often streams, undulating mountains, irrigation canals, or field trails. They would also build a stockaded gate or a *fengyu* bridge (a kind of roofed bridge) to embody the spiritual element of the village boundaries. Within these physical and spiritual boundaries, all artificial structures have some cultural symbolism for the existence of settlements.

From this point of view, we can divide the inner space of Dong ethnic group's settlement into two functional parts: sacred space and secular space. Sacred space refers to people's activities in the space that express cultural concepts and practices, such as rituals, taboos, beliefs, and codes of conduct. Secular space, being material, is for people's production and life. Both the sacred space and the secular space symbolize the Dong people's concept of existence and their care for life.

Sacred space is usually made up of Sa halls (commemorating *sax siis*, a goddess of the Dong people), Feishan temples (temples built to commemorate Yang Zaisi, a Dong general in Jingzhou of Hunan Province), *fengyu* bridges (a kind of roofed bridge), graveyards, Nanyue palaces, Land-god halls, City-god temples, Confucius temples, rebirth parent trees, other temples, shrines, ancestral halls, *ongs bux laos senl* (ancestral altars), *fengshui* (geomantic) forests, etc. Secular space is usually made up of drum towers, stockaded gates, *lusheng* squares (*lusheng*:

a reed-pipe wind instrument), stages, fields, houses, school halls, clubhouses, fish ponds, roads, irrigation systems, grain-sunning ground, public lands, etc.

Space represents not only an idealized material network of objective objects and subjective consciousness, but also a region of common meanings for a group of people. It is not only an abstract geographical concept, but also the material and spiritual space subjectively defined by a group of people. Just because space has the characteristics of human subjective definition, neither sacred space nor secular space has absolutely impassable boundaries. That is to say, sacred space and secular space can be mutually converted. The drum tower, for example, is a secular place for villagers to cool down, relax, and entertain themselves. But the drum tower is also the place where agreements are concluded and thus is a symbol of the village authority. Once punishment is enforced, forces are mobilized, or important matters are discussed, the drum tower will become sacred space.

In the past, if someone was expelled from the village for violating regulations, all the village elders would gather and drink an oath in the drum tower and sink a rake in the central pillar of the tower to show that the punishment was a sacred and indisputable fact. At this time, the drum tower was a sacred space for the patrilineal

group. In the same way, the Sa Hall is a sacred space in peacetime, but when the village sacrifice ceremony is held, Sa goddess as the “grandmother goddess”, returns to people’s secular life. In fact, in the mind of the Dong people who worship polytheism, the physical world is full of sacred significance. Just as Levy-Bruhl put it, “there is no pure physical phenomenon for the primitive man... In other words, the reality around the primitive man is mysterious” (Levy-Bruhl 1997).

There is not only the possibility of conversion between sacred space and secular space, but also the symbolic system of these spatial symbols in the sense of structuralism. That is to say, these cultural creations constructed in the settlement space do not exist in isolation but depend on each other to form the complete structure of the Dong ethnic village, which has resulted in the Dong ethnic group’s settlement’s locality, ethnic unity, and homogeneity. Behind this complete structure is the unchanging psychological mechanism of the Dong people from generation to generation and a symbolic system of sacred and secular orders expressed by cultural symbols to maintain a harmonious order between sanctity and vulgarity, man and nature, and internal and external worlds. Taking Sa halls and drum towers, villages, and graveyards as examples, the Dong people’s psychological

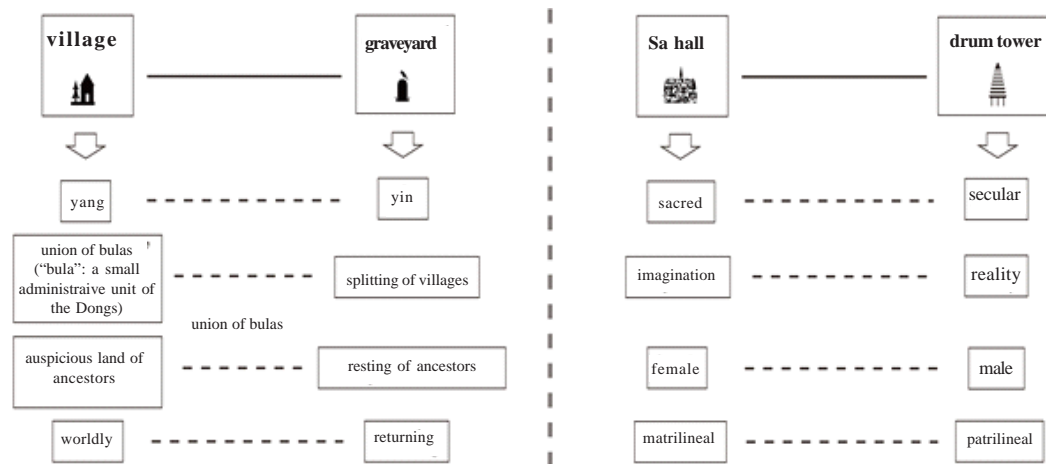


Fig. 1. Correspondence between the spatial structure and its symbolic meanings in Dong Settlements
 Source: Authors

mechanism of spatial conversion can be clearly understood.

In these one-to-one structural orders, the existence of one kind of symbol is conditional on another. Therefore, although the settlement space of the Dong people is clear at different levels, it is internally complex and intersecting. That is, the spatial boundaries of internal cultural symbols correspond to and complement each other. This kind of spatial concept shows that the Dong ethnic group's settlement has the ability to culturally sustain and regulate itself and to maintain the harmonious existence of the symbols. It is the psychological mechanism by which the Dong people maintain their ability to sustain themselves in their settlement space, which makes the Dong ethnic village, as we can see today, have unique characteristics in both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. On the one hand, the locality and ethnic style of the Dong ethnic village has a long history and maintains a complete and unified settlement culture over a long period of time and over a large expanse of space; on the other hand, as a result of the common psychological mechanism of the Dong people, almost all Dong ethnic villages show high homogeneity in terms of spatial characteristics.

Cultural Characterization of the Settlement Pattern of Dong Ethnic Villages

Dong ethnic villages are generally large and old, showing a high degree of homogeneity from the overall layout to symbolic representation. People of these villages have been engaged in the production and life of farming for many generations. Based on farming civilization, both the inside and outside of Dong ethnic villages constitute the interrelated cultural entity.

Farming Culture Symbolized By "Sa" Worship

"Sa" or "Sasui", also known as "sax siis" in the Dong language (meaning "grandmother"), is the supreme goddess of the Dong people. In Dong ethnic villages, "Sa" not only symbolizes the village, but also is the spiritual bond among villagers in the village space. The space for making sacrifices to "Sa" is called "Sa altar" or "Sa hall", a very sacred place. In general, there is at least one "Sa hall" in one Dong ethnic village. If

there are several big surnames in a village, there may be several "Sa halls", which is similar to the case of "ancestral hall" in the Han area of Southern China. As such, "Sa hall" is a cultural symbol of the big surnames in Dong ethnic villages.

Sacrifices to "Sa" are offered in patrilineal groups; "Sa" is not the title of an old grandmother in a matrilineal society but the title of an old grandmother in a patrilineal society. The Dong ethnic legend "Female tortoises that Hatch Eggs" is the interpretation of the "old-grandmother" belief. The legend has it that Song-en and Song-sang, the first human ancestors, was born of tortoises (Literature and Art Research Office of Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Ethnic Autonomous Prefecture 1981). Four female tortoises were at the foot of the slope, each hatching one egg. Three eggs failed to hatch; one good egg hatched: a smart and flexible boy named Song-en hatched from the egg. Another four female tortoises were at the foot of the stockaded gate. They also hatched four eggs. Three eggs failed to hatch; one good egg hatched: a beautiful girl named Song-sang hatched from the egg. Since then, talents were born into the world and offspring of Song-en and Song-sang grew in number. The marriage of Song-en and Song-sang is the matrimonial system of a patrilineal society. The couple came from the eggs of their female ancestors — "female tortoises", and thus the system of deities came into being, centering on "female ancestors".

The symbol of "Sa" worship is "mound". Without any idol, "Sa" worship is a natural one. Its most sacred material form is earth — a piece of sacred earth brought from the ancestral land. To lay the foundation of a new stockaded village or to rebuild a "Sa altar", the Dong people need to get a handful of earth from the "Sa altar" of the original ancestral land or from the birthplace of "Sa" — Longtanggai Mountain in ZhaoDong ethnic Village in Liping County, Guizhou Province. Therefore, the true connotation of "Sa" worship lies in the worship of "land/earth". The worship of land is the most basic form of belief in farming culture. The Dong people regard "land/earth" as mother because it can give birth to everything and thus land-gods are not to be offended. If anyone offends land-gods, they need to kill pigs and sheep as sacrifices. Therefore, the Dong ethnic group's settlement, sym-

bolized by “Sa” worship, interprets the vivid vitality of agricultural heritage.

A Lifestyle Centered on the Drum Tower

In a Dong ethnic village, families with the same surname usually build a drum tower for themselves. Therefore, the drum tower is the symbol of the surname system. If “Sa” is the symbol of matriarchy, then the drum tower is the symbol of patriarchy. As a farming people, the ancestors of the Dong ethnic group not only needed to plant crops, but also to prevent foreign enemies from invading, to prevent wild animals from wreaking destruction, and to fight against natural disasters. This called for the establishment of a public place in order to mobilize forces and take united action, and for this purpose the drum tower was built. The original function of the Drum Tower was to pay tribute to the ancestors, to conduct proceedings, to deal with disputes or conflicts, and to welcome guests; now it is mainly a place for villagers to relax, cool down, entertain themselves, and to impart traditional skills.

The Dong people have the tradition of “building a drum tower before building a house”. This is because the drum tower is a sign of the independent development of a big family in a village. Regardless of the size of the population, a family must live around the drum tower which is in the center. The Dong people are said to live together, which in fact means that the Dong people live around the drum tower. Considering the actual situation of Dong ethnic villages, mixed-surname ethnic groups usually settle around the drum tower. The cultural characteristics of dividing the living space with the drum tower are conducive to strengthening the cohesion of the Dong people.

The residential mode of living around the Drum Tower makes it possible for the Dong people to form large-scale villages on the basis of the small-scale peasant economy. In order to effectively prevent the invasion of foreign enemies, to combat natural disasters, to improve internal cooperation, the Dong people often need to unite several or even a dozen big families into a self-sufficient village. The residents of the village take the village as the center and form a living and religious settlement space with a radi-

us of about 1-2 km. Within the village, not only the reproduction of material life can be extended from generation to generation, but also the patrilineal families can form an intermarriage circle to ensure the reproduction of a large settlement population.

Settlement System Based on “Kuan” as the Norm

Before Ming Dynasty, the Dong ethnic areas was considered “of little value” to the central government and thus a sort of internal military management was adopted in the Dong ethnic areas. Being a kind of alliance organization of villages, the so-called “kuan” essentially refers to both the primitive military alliance organization and the traditional social autonomy of the Dong people. “Kuan” can be categorized into three levels: small, medium and large. A small “kuan” is usually made up of a large village or several small villages. It is an acquaintance society or a semi-acquaintance society. The head of a “kuan” — a “kuan head” — usually settles internal disputes and internal and external conflicts on the basis of “kuan clauses”. In each village, the “kuan head” will interpret “kuan clauses” to villagers, or engraves the clauses on a stone tablet as village rules to regulate social behavior. “Kuan clauses” of this type still influence the values and behavior of the Dong people as a kind of cultural power.

“Covenant Clauses” that are prevalent in Dong ethnic areas recorded: “The following have been stipulated: six-side yin (death penalty), six-side yang (suffering), six-side up (reasonable), six-side down (unreasonable). Altogether 12 clauses and 18 regulations are drawn up” (Office of Ancient Books on Ethnic Minorities in Human Province 1988). These clauses set out the principles of punishment for conflicts, theft, deviance, foreign war, resistance to aggression, and other acts that destabilize the social structure of Dong ethnic villages.

Traditionally, the Dong ethnic society divides a village into different areas according to blood relationship, geographical space and cultural tradition. Different “kuans” usually have their own unique clauses, and they also establish a common code of conduct with other “kuans”. Therefore, “kuans” often unite to agree

on some rules and regulations, known as “joint clauses”. Villagers shall abide by both the “joint clauses” and the distinctive “kuan clauses” drawn up in their respective “kuans”.

Security-oriented Concept of Settlement

Although Dong Ethnic villages are built around the drum tower, the Dong ethnic group’s settlement has not formed a mature clan system and patriarchal society as the Han people in South China. Because the original purpose of the Dong people living together is not to pursue the so-called ideal of “big families”. Different settlements of same-surname families did not form clan alliances by means of genealogy. Then what is the primary reason for the Dong people to live together? It should be a need for security. Due to the difficult and dangerous natural conditions and the complicated ethnic relations in history, the Dong people have developed the security-oriented concept of settlement.

In order to deal with the threat of war, banditry and armed struggles, the Dong people must use collective forces to confront external disturbances. When they choose the site for a village, their first consideration is the defense of the village, so most Dong ethnic villages use mountains as barriers and build houses on hillsides or cliffs. Outside the village are often open dissolution basins; the impact soils at the bottom of these basins are extremely fertile and are developed as agricultural land to meet the living needs of large populations. These farmlands are the main sources of livelihood for the Dong people; they are also buffer zones to ensure the security of Dong ethnic villages. This kind of internal and external layout provides the Dong ethnic villages with very strong military defense. Deng Minwen, a scholar of the Dong ethnic culture, said, “With respect to the structure and cultural characteristics, ancient Dong ethnic villages also have the function of defensive military encampment... All this indicates that Dong ethnic villages originated from ancient defensive military encampments” (Wu 2004).

In essence, this settlement pattern was also advocated by Chinese feudal dynasties. For example, in Tianzhu County, Guizhou Province, there still exists a decree of the 17th year under the reign of Emperor Guangxu, calling for local

authorities to set up neighborhood administrative units. The decree reads: “There are many small households scattered in deep mountains and valleys, originally for the convenience of plowing the fields. As the villages are remote and isolated, good people are vulnerable to bandits, and the villages are prone to be the hiding places of treacherous people. As such, neighborhood administrative units shall carefully compile the registrations of such households and make sure that scattered households live in big villages for security purposes and for the convenience of inspection.” (Liang 2008) Under the item “Flat Land” of his book *Xi Man Cong Xiao*, Zhu Fu of Song Dynasty wrote: “Although the topography outside the houses is dangerous, it is very wide in the middle of the mountains. In one place, for instance, a bird would be flying flat, which mean the bird could not fly out of the flat area. A few dozen *li* around the houses are rich fields.” It can be seen that using open farmlands as the peripheries, relying on the treacherous mountains as defense, the Dong people have realized their concept of security-oriented settlement.

Dong ethnic villages as military fortresses can only defend against foreign invasion, whereas the greatest inner danger is fire. Timber is the main building material in Dong ethnic villages, and hundreds or even thousands of people live together. If a fire breaks out in one house, the whole village could become a burning ground. Therefore, for safety reasons, the Dong ethnic group’s settlement space must have a package of fire-proof cultural settings.

First of all, crisscrosses of bluestone-paved roads are built in the village, linking the whole village into a compact yet complete, well-arranged cultural landscape. At ordinary times, these bluestone-paved roads connect each household and thus help promote harmony among neighbors; once a fire breaks out; the roads not only serve to isolate the fire, but also help evacuate the crowd. Secondly, there are many fish ponds in the village. These ponds are an important part of the underground drainage system, and they also play an important role in filtering domestic waste-water and in firefighting. Thirdly, a patrol system is in place. According to the traditional “kuan clauses”, the Dong people engrave all kinds of injunctions on stone

tablets as the code of daily conduct to prevent fire and theft and to ensure village security.

Anyone who violates the clauses will be severely punished. For example, the “Fire Prevention Convention” of Pingtan Dong ethnic Village in Tongdao County stipulates: “Whoever causes a fire accident shall be fined 120 jin of rice and 120 jin of meat, on top of local governments’ legal punishments. It is strictly prohibited to carry firewood into the village, to pile or put it disorderly, and to draw power lines indiscriminately. Burning firewood and sundries in the village is strictly prohibited. Violators will be fined 10 yuan per person each time.” In order to detect problems in time and prevent disasters, Dong ethnic villages also carry out a patrol system. For example, the “kuan clauses” of Zhongbu Dong ethnic Village in Tongdao County stipulate that each household shall send one person to take part in the rotational patrol which consists of 17 groups, each in turn consisting of four people. The village patrol system stipulates: “At nighttime, patrolmen must sound the night watches along the lanes until dawn when they can leave their posts. If a patrolman leaves his post, he will face a fine of 10 yuan.” These village regulations, together with the village patrol system, are the cultural continuation of the primitive military autonomy of the traditional Dong ethnic group’s settlement.

CONCLUSION

The study of human settlement patterns, especially human architecture, shouldn’t be limited to the built form in a variety of material ways; otherwise, it will only be trapped in the discussion of simple material and specific problems. The discussion of material patterns, such as wood, concrete, stone or soil and the construction skills, is a specialty in architecture and archaeology, which provides empirical or aesthetic explanations for understanding human settlements. This article argues that the human settlement pattern, like other cultures created by mankind, speaks for the existence of diversity and people need to recognize and interpret it from different perspectives, such as images, metaphors, representations, symbols and collections of symbols. The settlement pattern of the Dong people in southern China presents a set of com-

plete cultural patterns adapted to environments and survival laws, forms various symbols, represented and distributed in the physical sense, and shows the Dong people’s unique family social structure. The social structure of the Dong people in China obtains the externalized form with a collectivity of moral personality through its special settlement pattern. For thousands of years, they have lived together, carrying out the production activities they want in this physical space year after year, producing and reproducing their communities from generation to generation, and thus forming a super-stable social structure. This is the Dong people’s order and the basic rules by which they deal with people, nature, their own past and future, and the community within and without.

RECOMMENDATIONS

However, our research is, after all, limited. With the development of globalization, industrialization and the modernization of China, market-oriented economy has penetrated into every corner, even in the traditionally secluded Dong society in the southern mountainous area of China. Obviously, our investigation focuses on a still, highly homogenized mountainous area where ethnic minorities live, and therefore our interpretation needs to face the test of the social fact that changes rapidly in the future. For example, industrialization attracts a large number of Dong people from their homeland to urban areas; the traditional family social structure is becoming more and more de-nuclearized; the modern awareness brought by a large number of young people returning from cities poses a challenge to traditional authority; modern buildings have a big impact on traditional houses; the traditional way of life is deconstructed; the cohesion of the family social structure is increasingly being diluted by national power; the traditional culture that used to be subject to the traditional order is replaced by the rule-of-law culture of the modern country. The culture carrying these modern colors inevitably brings unprecedented changes to the traditional settlement pattern and the construction space of the Dong people, and thus the super-stable social structure of the pre-industrialization society will no longer be static and may become a dynamic cul-

ture. This change has already shown itself in the Dong society. Although the tradition still has a great stabilizing force, we cannot ignore this trend. This investigation and research will continue in the coming few years, and it is necessary to use the long-term observation method to record and analyze the possible adaptive changes of this super-stable settlement pattern and its meaning characterized by cultural symbols.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is supported by National Philosophy and Social Sciences Fund Project of P. R. China (18BMZ066) entitled "A Study of the Cultural Inheritance and Creativity in the Reaches of Yuan River."

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Paper received for publication in October, 2019
Paper accepted for publication in December, 2019