BioOne COMPLETE

# The Upper Min River Basin: A Key Ethno-cultural Corridor in China

Authors: Tu, Jian-jun, Chen, Yong, Ye, Yan-qiong, and Chen, Guo-jie

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 25(1) : 25-29

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2005)025[0025:TUMRB]2.0.CO;2

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

Mountain Research and Development Vol 25 No 1 Feb 2005: 25–29

# The Upper Min River Basin

## A Key Ethno-cultural Corridor in China

*Tu Jian-jun*
*Chen Yong*
*Ye Yan-qiong*
*Chen Guo-jie*



*Owing to its physical environment, the upper Min River Basin, situated at an ecological transition belt in China, has long been a place where many ethnic groups have settled; it is also a corridor through which different ethnic groups have migrated from northwestern to southwestern China or vice versa. Apart from its recognized biodiversity, it is also a place of cultural diversity, as an ethno-cultural corridor in China. A number of ethnic groups such as the Qiang, Tibetan, Han, and Hui nationalities and their different sub-groups have lived here for many centuries. The distribution of these ethnic groups follows altitudinal patterns, with the Han and the Hui people living in river valleys, the Qiang at a higher altitude, and the Tibetans at the highest altitudes. This points to their respective historical roles and adaptation to different environments. Given the inaccessibility and geographical isolation of their environment, all ethnic groups have maintained much of their traditional cultures, while some sub-ethnic groups came into being due to recurrent wars and cultural assimilation between groups. At present, with mountain natural resources exploited and mountain areas being greatly developed, many ethnic cultures are threatened with extinction. Much work at both local level and policy level needs to be done to preserve these diversified cultures and the potential for sustainability that they harbor.*



## Composition and distribution of ethnic groups

The upper part of the Min River, a tributary of the Yangtze River, includes several counties of the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefectures, and a small part of Dujiangyan City (Figure 1). It runs for 334 km and covers an area of 24,657 km$^2$. With a total population of over 375,000, the upper Min River Basin has an average population density of 15 persons/km$^2$. It belongs to a transitional climatic type between the monsoon zone of eastern China and the alpine zone of the Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau, and is a key biodiversity area.

Adjoining Gansu and Qinghai provinces in the north, and the Chengdu Plain in the south, the upper Min River Basin is located between the traditional farming zone of eastern China and the pasturing zone in western China. It was once a major throughway for different ethnic groups migrating from northwestern China to southwestern China, or vice versa. While it is the only place inhabited by the Qiang ethnic group, other ethnic groups are scattered through this area, such as the Tibetan, the Hui, the Man, the Miao, the Yi, and the Han (Table 1).

The Han and the Hui people generally live at the lowest altitudes, usually in towns and valleys along the Min River and its tributaries. Some of the Qiang people inhabit the valleys, and some the moun-

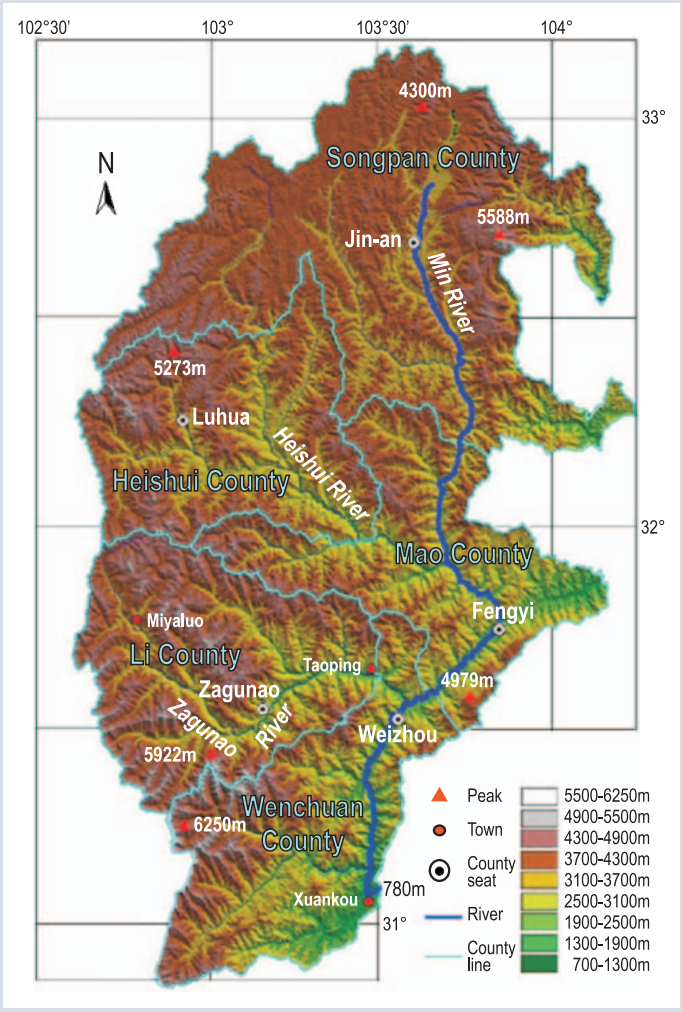



**FIGURE 1** Location of the upper Min River Basin. (Map by Tu Jian-jun)

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

**TABLE 1** Population of ethnic groups in the upper Min River Basin in 2001. (Source: Chen et al 2004)

| County (total population) | Qiang population (%) | Tibetan population (%) | Han population (%) | Hui population (%) | Others population (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Wenchuan (108,671)** | 32,890 (30.3) | 18,806 (17.3) | 55,219 (50.8) | 1300 (1.2) | 456 (0.4) |
| **Mao (100,245)** | 89,553 (89.3) | 1978 (1.9) | 6628 (6.6) | 2035 (2.0) | 51 (0.1) |
| **Songpan (67,266)** | 5615 (8.3) | 26,326 (39.1) | 25,724 (38.2) | 9568 (14.2) | 33 (0.1) |
| **Heishui (56,181)** | 439 (0.8) | 51,367 (91.4) | 4301 (7.7) | 64 (0.1) | 10 (–) |
| **Li (42,580)** | 13,643 (32.0) | 20,259 (47.6) | 8445 (19.8) | 180 (0.4) | 53 (0.1) |
| **Total (374,943)** | **142,140 (37.9)** | **118,736 (31.7)** | **100,317 (26.7)** | **13,147 (3.5)** | **603 (0.2)** |

tainsides. The much higher areas are the realm of the Tibetan people, among whom the Anduo Tibetans are located at higher altitudes than the Jiarong Tibetans. Anduo Tibetans generally settle above 3000 m, where they are limited by the altitude of the winter pastures. Thus the altitudinal distribution of the major nationalities in the upper Min River area reflects the horizontal distribution of nationalities from the western Sichuan Basin to the eastern Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau (Figure 2).

## Acculturation and cultural diversity

There is no homogeneity of cultures in the upper Min River Basin (Table 2). The long period of ethnic integration and local acculturation makes religion complex. Some Qiang who live near the Han area, for instance, may practice Buddhism or Taoism, while others near the Tibetan area practice Lamaism. A family may practice several religions or beliefs. It is not unusual for religions to borrow tenets and rituals from each other. For instance, Taoist ideas may be found in the religion of the Qiang, and the mountain-worship ritual of the Qiang is mingled with the temple ritual of Taoism. At their religious rituals, the Qiang might invite Lamas to chant scriptures. The Qiang people in Li County, Songpan County and Heishui County may recite Tibetan scripture in their rituals of mountain sacrifices and vows. Regardless of what religion it represents, a temple fair can be a grand religious meeting for local people with different beliefs.

Apart from religious practices, cultural integration can be discerned in marriage ceremonies, funerals, etiquette, costumes, and living and dietary habits. Due to their unique religious practices, the Hui people have maintained their traditions over a long period, maintaining greater cultural stability than other ethnic groups.

The Han culture has exerted the most powerful influence on others. Whereas the Qiang people maintain their New Year and the Tibetans have the Tibetan New Year, the Han New Year has become the grandest festival for all ethnic groups in this region. The Han language (standard Chinese) has become a common language for communication between different ethnic groups. At present, Han culture is

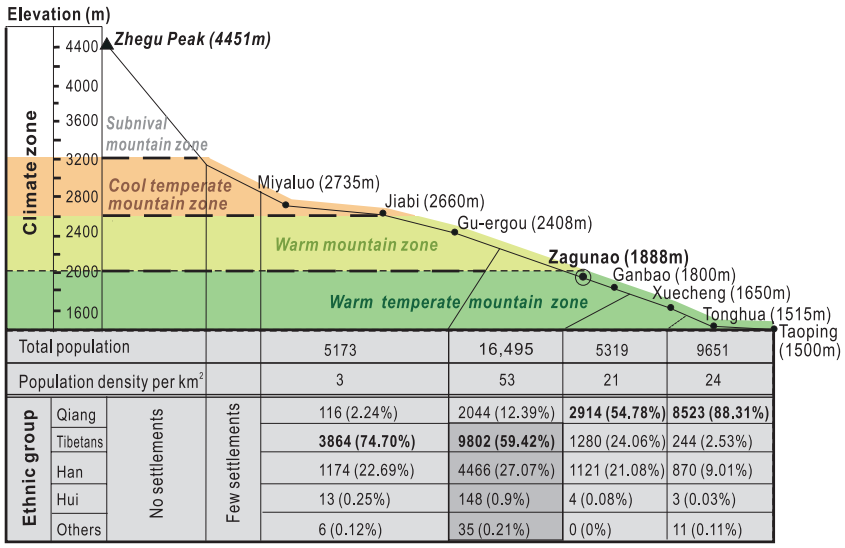



**FIGURE 2** Climate changes from the warm temperate mountain zone to the subnival zone, from Taoping to Miyaluo along the Zagunao River, a tributary of the Min River. The Qiang population decreases with increasing altitude, while the Tibetan population increases. The Hui people live mainly near the prosperous towns, and the Han are relatively sparsely distributed, with the majority living in towns. (Sketch by Tu Jian-jun)

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

**TABLE 2** Religions in the upper Min River Basin.

| Religion | Time of introduction | Ethnic groups | Religious authority |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Buddhism** | Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD 420~AD 589) | The Han people and some Qiang near Han settlements | Bonze |
| **Taoism** | Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD 420~AD 589) | The Han people and some Qiang near Han settlements | Taoist priest |
| **Lamaism** | | The Tibetan people and the Qiang living among the Tibetans | Lama/ Living Buddha |
| **Nyingma creed** | 9th century | | |
| **Sakya creed** | Mid 13th century | | |
| **Kagyu creed** | 13th century | | |
| **Gelug creed** | 15th century | | |
| **Ben creed** | 2nd century | A small number of Tibetans in Songpan County | |
| **Islam** | 8th century | The Hui people | Imam |
| **Polytheism** | Approximately 2000 years ago | The Qiang people | Koradji (Xu) |
| **Christianity (different creeds)** | Juncture between 19th and 20th centuries | Few followers after the 1940s | Priest |

becoming a mainstream culture in the upstream area of the Min River.

## Geography and ethnic cultural traditions

Geography lays the physical foundations for the subsistence and development of human beings and is important in shaping culture. High mountains and deep valleys have had a profound influence on culture in the upper Min River Basin. The ancient Qiang gradually gave up their nomadic lifestyle to pursue farming following their migration from the Hehuang area (northeastern Qinghai Province) into the valley area of the upstream Min River, making a transition from a nomadic to an agricultural culture. Though most of the Anduo Tibetans in the transitional region from the Songpan grasslands to the Min River valley are no longer pure nomads, they still keep livestock and undertake seasonal migration with their families. Some former nomads now engage in farming near their winter houses as the result of social and economic development. The Jiarong Tibetans, who live between the Tibetan and Qiang ethnic groups, engage in both farming and grazing activities, and thus have been much less dependent on mountainside pastures than the Anduo Tibetans in the Songpan region. In the Tibetan language, *jiarong* means "farming area near the Han people," indicating the Jiarong Tibetans' location and their type of land use. The Jiarong Tibetans actually have their roots in the alpine valley area, where the farming mode of the Qiang people and the grazing mode of the Tibetan people are combined for effective land use (Figure 3).

Isolation by mountains and valleys makes it difficult for people in the upper Min River Basin to interact, resulting in a diversity of ethnic languages. For instance, 9 different dialects are spoken in different parts of Heishui County. Even people in neighboring villages speak different languages.

### The need to maintain diversity

The upper Min River Basin cuts through high mountains with steep valleys. It is

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

**FIGURE 3** These two elderly women belong to the Jiarong Tibetans, whose customs are different from other Tibetans'. (Photo by Tu Jian-jun and Chen Yong)



connected with Gansu and Qinghai provinces at the northern end and the Chengdu Plain at the southern end. This natural pathway along the river valley may have been a prerequisite for establishment of the cultural corridor in the basin. Ethnic diversity in the upper Min River Basin has also been closely related to migration and played a major role in cross-cultural transition: as an area that links the eastern lowlands, with the Han ethnic group; the western highlands, with other ethnic minorities; and a marginal zone with both the Han and Tibetan cultures. From a cultural perspective, interaction, integration and assimilation between the Han and other ethnic minorities has been a dominant feature in the history of this area (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4** The ceremonious Lama temple fair in Jiabi Town, Li County is a grand gathering of all ethnic groups—a testimony to the ethno-cultural corridor function of the upper Min River Basin. (Photo by Tu Jian-jun)



Ethnic cultures in the upper Min River Basin are greatly influenced by altitude and remoteness. Conservation of the physical environment is conducive to preservation of cultural diversity, since cultural diversity has been a long-term result of human adaptation to the environment. But environmental degradation can threaten the support systems needed to maintain this diversity.

At present, ethnic minorities are also facing the threat of being acculturated by the Han people. As infrastructure (transportation, telecommunication, TV reception) in minority areas has been greatly improved in recent decades, more and more members of minority groups have left their homes for the big cities and the plains, where there are more employment opportunities and better chances of earning a livelihood. Although elderly people would like to stay at home and maintain their traditional way of life (including costumes, diet, etc), more and more young

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use



**FIGURE 5** This over 1000-year-old stone barbican (*diao* in Chinese) is located in Taoping Qiang village, Li County. Such architectural highlights are attractive to tourists. (Photo by Chen Yong and Tu Jian-jun)

people want to leave. Even those who return home seldom observe the beliefs, dress, and other aspects of cultural life observed by their parents and grandparents.

Another feature of change in the upper Min River corridor is the establishment of many hydropower stations. Some sections of the river have seen a radical landscape change. Despite environmental restoration and rehabilitation efforts in the upper Min River Basin, overall environmental degradation is still severe.

To prevent the loss of ethnic cultures and preserve cultural diversity in the upper Min River Basin, there is a need to establish an ethnic culture reserve, similar to a nature reserve. Relevant policies need to be formulated to achieve this. In addition, environmental protection and conservation of biodiversity should be further reinforced as a fundamental part of conservation of cultural diversity. As the upper Min River Basin is near large cities such as Chengdu and Chongqing, promotion of ethnic ecotourism could also stimulate local economic revitalization and preservation of ethnic cultural diversity (Figure 5).


## AUTHORS

***Tu Jian-jun and Chen Guo-jie***
Chengdu Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, Chinese Academy of Sciences, PO Box 417, Chengdu, Sichuan 610041, People's Republic of China.
zltjj@swnu.edu.cn or tujianjun81@yahoo.com.cn (T.J.); chengj@imde.ac.cn (C.G.)

*Tu Jian-jun is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, CAS. He is also a lecturer at the Southwest China Normal University. His main research interests are in the fields of human geography, regional development, and regional planning.*

*Chen Guo-jie is a professor at the Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment, CAS. His research field is sustainable mountain development.*

***Chen Yong***
Institute of Population Research & Institute of Environmental Science and Engineering, Sichuan University, 610064, Chengdu, People's Republic of China.
yongchenscu@19.com.cn

*Chen Yong holds a PhD and is an associate professor at Sichuan University. His main research field is ecological anthropography, with a focus on population, environment and sustainable development.*

***Ye Yan-qiong***
Ecology Department of South China Agriculture University, 510642, Guangzhou, People's Republic of China.
llyeyq@163.com

*Ye Yan-qiong holds a PhD and is a lecturer at South China Agriculture University. Her research focus is ecological and environmental evaluation.*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is based on research funded by the Knowledge Innovation Project of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Grant number KSCX1-07-03-01 and KZCX2-316).


## FURTHER READING


***Bridgewater PB.*** 2002. Biosphere reserves: Special places for people and nature. *Environmental Science and Policy* 5:9–12.

***Chen Y, Ai NS, He JX.*** 1998. Minority population and sustainable development in mountain regions. A case study of the Tibetan inhabited region in Sichuan, China. *The Journal of Chinese Geography* 8(4):333–341.

***Chen Y, Chen GJ, Yang DG.*** 2004. Distribution of human settlements in Upper Min River and their ecological characteristics [in Chinese with English abstract]. *Resource and Environment in the Yangtze Basin* 13(1):72–77.

***Shi S.*** 1996. Historical evolution and ethno-cultural features of Upper Min River Basin [in Chinese]. *In:* Ran GR, Kudo Motoo, editors. *Studies on Culture and History of Upper Min River Basin.* Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, pp 43–54.


Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use