

An Analysis of the Unique Salt Culture and its Tourism Potentials in Zigong, Sichuan Province, China*

UNE ANALYSE SUR LA CULTURE DU SEL UNIQUE ET LA POTENTIALITÉ TOURISTIQUE À ZIGONG, DANS LA PROVINCE DU SICHUAN, EN CHINE

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Abstract: Located in the south of Sichuan Province, southwest China, Zigong is famed for its unique salt culture. The city has a history of 1,900 years' rock (well) salt production starting from Zhangdi Emperor Period, the Eastern Han Dynasty (25~220 A.D.) , and has deposited a profound and noncloned salt culture in the world. This article intends to introduce the main cultural connotation of Zigong salt culture, reveal its unique features to the reader, analyses its tourism potentials and try to attract much more international investors and tourists to come to the site.

Key words: Zigong Salt Culture; Feature; Tourism Resources; Tourism Potentials

Resumé Situé dans le sud de la province du Sichuan, dans le sud-ouest de la Chine, Zigong est célèbre pour sa culture du sel unique. La ville a une histoire de 1900 ans de production de sel de puit à partir de la période de l'Empereur Zhangdi, de la dynastie des Han de l'Est (25 ~ 220 après J.-C.), et a déposé une culture de sel profonde dans le monde. Cet article tente d'introduire la connotation culturelle de la culture du sel de Zigong, révéler ses caractéristiques uniques aux lecteurs, analyser ses potentialités touristiques et essayer d'attirer plus d'investisseurs internationaux et de touristes à venir sur le site.

Mots-clés: Culture de Sel de Zigong; Caractéristique; Ressources Touristiques; Potentialité Touristique

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INTRODUCTION

Located in the south of Sichuan Basin and covering an area of 4.37 million m², Zigong, capital of well salt industry, is one of the national historical and cultural cities in China. Tracing back the history of the city, we know it was established thanks to its rich rock salt resource, and it is one of the earliest areas to and still produce rock well up to now, which is rare in the world. In a 1900-year's salt production history, Zigong people have created and accumulated a rich and deep salt culture and the city is full of "salt" atmosphere. Salt culture has become a carrier of the city and made the city full of featured and valuable historical, cultural tourism resources. Profound cultural heritage of salt culture has been reflected everywhere in the city, on its urban architecture, monuments, or in local opera, folk art, folk customs and so on. Salt

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culture has infiltrated into every corner of the city; each ancient guildhall, temple, ancient well fire stove, stone street, elegant villa of the gentry in the city is originated from salt production. It can be said that salt has shaped this beautiful city and nurtured the history and culture of it.

THE FEATURE OF ZIGONG SALT CULTURE

Being the historical and cultural factors, Zigong salt culture is a direct representation of material and spiritual fortunes produced by Zigong people. The culture is mainly reflected on the following aspects:

2.1 On the Relics and Sites of Salt Field

The salt production relics and sites are the carrier and base of salt culture. The first salt well was excavated in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 A.D.) and was named Fuyi Well, meaning well bringing about fortune and justice. In addition, salt production began to take primary shape in the Jin Dynasty (265~420 A.D.). Up to the Tang Dynasty (618~907 A.D.), Zigong salt fields were famous in whole Sichuan. In the Qing Dynasty (1644~1911), Zigong turned into the center of rock salt production. In the formation of salt industry, Zigong people invented a full set of superb well digging, brine extracting and salt boiling techniques. Zigong people dug approximately 13,000 wells early or late in the area. To 1970s, wooden derricks stood in serried ranks; salt boiling stoves scattered one after another; brine-conveying pipelines (made of bamboos) extended in all direction in the area. The following enumerates some wells with special characteristics:

- Shenhai Well: the first manual percussion well more than 1,000 meters deep in the world. People began to dig the well in 1830, and finished the work in 1835. It has been well reserved up to now and is still in production in an ancient way. Now it is a tourist attraction in Zigong.
- Dongyuan Well: rare high throughput well with natural gas
- Fuyi Well: the oldest well

Another witness of salt production is the wooden derrick. As an operational frame, wooden derrick was a landmark of brine extracting from big diameter well to small diameter well, as well as from by labor to animal (buffalo) and mechanical facility. It is extraction from small diameter well that set up the leading position of Zigong in well salt industry. Nowadays, though the wooden derrick has lost its function and prosperity due to modern salt production, it has witnessed the history of salt production in Zigong and the rising of Zigong city, and led to the deep and thick salt culture. It can be said that the wooden derrick is a symbol of Zigong city. Dade Well in Zigong owned the highest wooden derrick in the well salt production in China, which was up to 113 meters and created the record of producing 90,000 tons of salt in a single small diameter well. From an aesthetic point of view, the wooden derrick is simple but majestic, magnificent and of elegant shape, smooth lines, cascading and waving levels, which fully embodies a lively masculine vitality. As important as the wooden derrick, there is bamboo brine conveying pipeline where the siphon principle is fully revealed and utilized for the purpose showing the intelligence and smartness of ancient Zigong people. The bamboo pipeline crossed rivers, and rolled over mountains meandering like a rainbow. The scenes are very spectacular. These two facilities are the typical representation of Zigong salt culture.

2.2 On the Ancient Town and Street

During each historical stage of Zigong well salt production, many towns and streets had formed one after another due to the salt distribution and trade along the Fuxi River, Tuojiang River and other main transportation lines. The ancient streets and towns had documented and witnessed the flourishing history of Zigong Salt production and constituted an important part of the cultural city. Located on the Fuxi River bank, the Fairy Lady Town is one of its representatives. Since the Ming Dynasty (1368 1644), Zigong salt fields had been increasingly prosperous. As an important distribution center, many salt merchants and tourists flocked in the Fairy Lady Town and built up four streets, four gates, five pavilions, three piers, and Sichuan Master Temple, Sichuan King Palace, Heaven Queen Palace, Long Live Palace and so on. These reflect the fortune of the salt merchants and their contributions to the local business and cultures.

2.3 On the Residential Compound and Mountain Fastness

The residential compound and mountain fastness had reflected the rich life of salt merchants. With the exploration of salt resource and development of salt economy, a wealthy class appeared due to salt business. The earlier was Wang, Li, Hu and Yan families, later Xiong, Hou, Luo families. They had spent huge funds building their own residential compounds. Nowadays, Wang's Compound in Yantan District and Yang's Compound in Fushun County are well preserved. Moreover, to avoid the war and protect their properties, rich salt merchants had jointly built up many mountain fastnesses, such as Sanduo Fastness, Da'an Fastness and Wufu Fastness. These buildings are the natural and inevitable outcomes of the salt economy. Nowadays, the Sanduo Fastness is best preserved. It is located on Buffalo Mouth Mountain with 436 meters

above sea level covering an area of 1.25 m². Surrounded by cliffs, the Fastness owns very steep terrain. In 1853, Li Zhenheng, Yan Changying and Wang Kejia, three rich bosses of salt works, began to build the Fastness and completed the construction in the year of 1859. The construction cost them over 100,000 taels of silver. The Fastness wall was completely made of firm stones with length of 4,650 meters, along which there were 2,555 gun buttresses, 24 barbets, and 24 posts. There were Chinese style courtyards, western style blocks and luxury houses with both styles totaling more than 300. Unfortunately, due to various historical events, most of the courtyards and blocks had disappeared, only several hundred meters of Fastness wall are kept.

2.4 On the Ancient Architecture for Salt Merchants and Workers' Entertainment

Besides the historical records on the prosperous well salt economy in Zigong, the ancient architecture is another way of record. They look like vivid historical pictures outlining the shape and profile of Zigong salt economy at that time. In Zigong, with the gradual development of salt economy, people of all sectors naturally formed their own guilds, and accordingly built their own venues - guildhall, palace, and temple. Yandi Guild formed by salt burning workers built Yandi Palace. Butchers built Huanhou (Marquis) Palace. Salt merchants from Shaanxi Province built West Qin Guildhall. Guangdong salt merchants built Nanhua (South China) Palace. Salt merchants from Hunan and Hubei Provinces built Yuwang (Emperor Yu) Palace and Fujian merchants built Tianhou (Heaven Queen) Palace. All the palaces, guildhalls and temples are the witness of development of the salt economy and the masterpiece of Zigong salt culture, which form an important part of the historical city and the scenes of salt culture tourism.

2.5 On the Local Food Culture with Unique Salt Economy Features

The formation of a regional food customs has very close ties with the local natural conditions and economic and social development level. Zigong Salt has a long history, which profoundly affected the local people's lives of and customs. With the salt economy development, large numbers of people gathered increasingly here, including merchants and workers. They came with their own eating patterns and habits of different tastes. In order to meet the needs of all lifestyles and different tastes, chefs from all over the country had also come here with their own skills as well. Therefore, Zigong restaurants of various regional styles stood everywhere. All kinds of cuisine and food culture also developed very quickly and deeply marked with the brand of salt. Zigong beef is the most characteristic local food. Cattle played a pivotal role in the salt production in Zigong because in the long past time, cattle is the main labor force. It played an irreplaceable role in lifting water and carrying salt packs. Under normal circumstances, the salt fields kept about 30,000 heads year round; in the heyday, the working cattle had as many as 100,000 heads. Therefore, the beef in Zigong was numerous and cheap. Great variety of dishes took beef as raw materials of cuisines to make many popular delicacies, in which "beef toasted at fire" is the most famous. One of the important features of Zigong salt food culture is the broad mind to accept and incorporate different cuisines of diverse styles. The rise of salt led many other industries' development and people from all directions came for a "Gold Rush". Zigong catering industry could meet all kinds of requirement of and adapt for people from different regions. During the process, a special salt catering culture has been formed. It absorbed the essence of dishes throughout the country, took the initiative to transform the dishes, and has greatly enriched and developed the content of Zigong food culture and flavor. Precisely because of its rich dishes, prominent features, and radiation to the area in south Sichuan, Zigong "Small River Cuisine School" has been formed, which enjoys the equal fame with Chengdu flavor "Upper River Cuisine School" and Chongqing flavor "Down River Cuisine School".

2.6 On the Local Culture Related to Salt Business

In the long history of salt production in Zigong, its customs and folklores had accumulated and many of them are closely related with the salt industry. Thus many unique cultural characteristics, festivals, and celebrations have been formed. A great variety of festivals and fairs concerning salt production appeared on the salt works and kept a harmonious atmosphere with the salt economy. A pragmatic and innovative spirit of social life gradually developed and created in the salt production process is reflected in the true folk festivals and fairs. Due to the economic profits from salt production and its unique adventure, people in the city formed the spirit of making adventure, bearing hardship, and creating. On various festivals and fairs, people showed their joy of success in various ways. For example, at that time, there were King Cattle Fair, Prince Fair, Land Fair and Water Discharging Festival etc.

3. THE HUMANE TOURISM RESOURCES IN ZIGONG

From the above-mentioned description, it can be found the tourism resource in Zigong is indeed associated with the birth and development of well salt production. The salt cultural resource and its advantages and features are clearly demonstrated in the following aspects:

3.1 The Unique Landscape, Long History and High Value

Zigong salt cultural resources not only have high aesthetic and cultural values, but also have very high scientific and economic values. Zigong salt industry history occupies a prominent place in science and technology in the history of human civilization. Zigong people firstly in the world created and used deep well drilling technology - percussion drill method, creating a precedent for mechanical drilling. Now the well-preserved first over 1000 meters deep well in the world by percussion drilling, the ancient manual production workshop of salt and various historical artifacts, sites, objects, tools, etc. are all unique and cannot be reproduced.

3.2. The Great Variety

Zigong salt cultural tourism resources have a great variety, rich in content and high in grade, such as the lantern show, salt history museum, the existing and operational ancient salt producing workshop etc.

3.3 The Unique Folk Customs and Habits

Many customs and festivals in Zigong formed in the process of salt production are unique and rare China. All of them can be developed and exploited as tourism projects and may not be reproduced anywhere else in the world, e.g. the lantern show in Chinese new year, the work song when crossing over a mountain, the dumplings, salted eggs, realgar wine in Dragon Boating Festival, various cuisine related to cattle and salt etc.

3.4 The Great Potential for Development

For a long period, due to poor infrastructure and blocking traffic, development of salt cultural tourism resources in Zigong has been lagging. Many tourists' attractions are still at the unexploited stage; a large number of tourism projects have not yet been developed. Therefore, there is a great potential for exploitation. With the strengthening and outreach of publicizing to attract investment and increasing improvement of investment environment, the great potential of salt cultural tourism resources will be fully displayed.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the rich salt culture and its tourism values are unique and rare in the world. They have provided the city with best blessing humane cultural resources. However, to change the salt cultural resource into tourism products, Zigong people need do numerous painstaking works. We believe through the active exploration, careful design, and comprehensive plan, Zigong will become a real outstanding tourist city in the world. Moreover, the city welcomes all businesspersons all over the world to invest and explore the unmatched and ingenious humane cultural resource.

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