

**Between representation and performance:
celebrating intangible cultural heritage in the Longji
Ancient Zhuang Village, Longji Terraces, China**

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Between representation and performance: celebrating intangible cultural heritage in the Longji Ancient Zhuang Village, Longji Terraces, China¹

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ABSTRACT

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) serves as a powerful tool for representing cultural diversity and fostering local development in China. The state-led administrative system of ICH conveys the shift from immaterial cultural manifestations to an essential resource for cultural production and national identity construction in ethnic minority areas. Heritage tourism brings about ICH-making occurring at the national, regional and local levels, contributing to the creation of official heritage discourses. However, for ethnic minority communities, ICH is part of their everyday lives, even though it might not be recognised, staged and celebrated as an authorised ICH. Contextualised within the

dimension of performance, ICH is also related to emotion and experience. Thus, this paper investigates the representation and performance of ICH within and beyond official heritage discourse, by drawing on the Longji Ancient Zhuang Village in China as a case study. It argues that ICH-making that community members participate in or control is not only for cultural representation and tourism consumption but also a means for self-expression and engaging a sense of place.

Keywords

intangible cultural heritage, representation, performance, official heritage discourse

Introduction

ICH is a locally empowering approach for the local community and people to represent and express themselves. Entangled with issues of representation and performance, this research sheds light on how community members conduct ICH-making and sustain their traditions onstage and behind the scenes within the context of China's ICH safeguarding and tourism. Drawing upon the UNESCO framework of safeguarding ICH, China established a top-down and multilayered administration of ICH by developing policies and enacting legislation. The state published the ICH lists, thereby selectively safeguarding and representing ICH items and

inheritors. The institutionalisation of ICH theoretically presents a systematic and comprehensive approach to identifying, documenting, protecting and promoting ICH at multiple levels. This ICH safeguarding structure empowers officials and experts to formulate and implement policies but easily discounts local conditions and structural tensions among heritage agencies at different levels (Xu et al. 2022), as local authorities can also manipulate and shape policies that accommodate their developmental goals and needs.

Grounded in the state's policy efforts to combine ICH safeguarding and economic development, local ICH

initiatives have been driven by governmental agencies to address poverty alleviation and promote cultural tourism. As a key development strategy, heritage tourism is an integral component of the state-led heritage-making process (Light 2015, 145). ICH accordingly becomes a sustainable resource for tourist activities, which is selected, represented and leveraged by tourism industry players (Su 2019; Zhu and Liu 2021). The safeguarding process of ICH at the local level has always been in the control of regional and local authorities and external heritage professionals – meaning that the local ICH process is in the hands of those who are not embedded in the ICH itself. ICH as a living cultural manifestation of humanity seems to be recontextualised as an ‘experts’ discursive game’ (Yu 2015).

Local communities and people are the core players to maintain the viability of cultural traditions and expressions, yet their perceptions have regularly been glossed over in the official actions of safeguarding and representing their cultural traditions (Gilman 2022). Officially recognised ICH has been authenticated and assigned symbolic meanings by outsiders. Official ICH discourses centring on the protection and utilisation of cultural traditions place community members who practise them in a secondary position, potentially disempowering them (Beardslee 2015). From another point of view, Yu (2015) reflected on a vernacular way of safeguarding and transmitting ICH; Yu then unearthed that the local villagers can exercise their authority over the ritual by resisting dominant tourism discourses. In light of this, official ICH-making has an impact on the local ICH safeguarding attempts while official ICH discourses can also be marginalised in the everyday lives of most local community members (Yu 2015).

Some of the literature drawn from critical heritage studies have already incorporated critiques regarding the neglect of the perspective of local community members into their discussions. They accentuate community members’ subjectivity in determining what constitutes ICH, what is authentic, its cultural value and the worthiness of safeguarding ICH and representing it to others (Beardslee 2015; Su 2018). ICH can be a resource of power for unofficial actors in dialogue and contestation with official heritage discourses (Smith 2006). Local community members’ construction of ICH occurs in their daily lives, which capitalises on or ignores ICH values set by official institutions and other stakeholders (Crouch 2015).

This research, affected by these perceptions, critically – and in a nuanced way – examines ICH practices and performances conducted by community members from the Longji Ancient Zhuang Village (Longji Village). It acknowledges the impact of official ICH safeguarding efforts and tourism development on ICH-making and delves into the nature and experiences of community members’ engagement with official ICH discourses. Simultaneously, it discusses how community members make ICH as performance, offering a further understanding of their ways of preserving it. Their feelings, emotions and memories evoked by their ICH determine whether they make it sustainable, as a form of alternative heritage discourse.

The Longji Village is located in the Longsheng Autonomous County (Longsheng County) of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. It can be regarded as a geographically and culturally defined community of Zhuang people.² The terms ‘community members’ and ‘villagers’ are used interchangeably in this research to refer to people who live in the Longji Village. The Longji Village officially consists of four villages, or three lineage villages: the Liao Family Village (廖家寨), Hou Family Village (侯家寨), and Pan Family Village (潘家寨), which includes the Pingduan and Ping Villages (平段和平寨). Because of Longji Village’s terraced landscape, it also belongs to the Longji Terraced Fields Scenic Area (龙脊梯田风景区) as Longji Cultural Terraced Ancient Zhuang Village (龙脊古壮寨梯田文化观景区), which is in combination with Pingan Zhuang Terraced Fields Scenic Spot (平安壮族梯田景观区) and the Jingkeng Red Yao Terraced Fields Scenic Spot (金坑红瑶梯田景观区).

Making ICH as representation and performance

Related to the economy, the official framework for ICH safeguarding has bolstered its marketisation. The convergence of ICH discourse and tourism development domestically not only has a powerful impact on local ICH-making processes but also motivates local communities and people to practise and commodify their cultural forms and yield economic returns. At the local level, heritage authorities endow ICH with representational meanings and, as shown in this study, interweave it with the idea of ethnicity, which displays the varied cultural identities of people from ethnic minority groups who create and possess it. Thus, cultural practices officially identified as

ICH become a 'marker[s] of identity' and representations of locality and cultural diversity within unity instead of communities' own self-expressions and collective memories (Maags 2018, 139).

On the other hand, heritage tourism serves as the 'major intersection of authenticity and heritage' (Silverman 2015, 80). Community members' participation in official ICH-making allows them to represent themselves and negotiate cultural meanings. Moreover, ICH construction is not only a representational practice but also an unpredictable and dynamic practice that can destabilise narratives and identities predetermined by heritage authorities. People are always at the heart of representing and performing practices, skills, memories, knowledge and other facets of ICH. Importantly, community members' ICH safeguarding initiatives can be independent of official ICH discourses. Local communities and people might be not interested in heritage protection actions or concerned about the authorised recognition of cultural traditions they practise. As Kuah and Liu (2017, 4) noted, 'they continue to live their life around them'.

The emotions and memories that community members experience can affect their construction of heritage value and change their attitudes towards heritage stewardship, no matter whether official heritage discourses manoeuvre their engagement with heritage or not (Crouch 2015; Svensson and Maags 2018). As Smith (2006, 70) suggested, emotion is a critical issue in considering the performativity of heritage. To initiate a thorough consideration or rethinking of community members' construction of ICH values and their motivations, it is necessary to scrutinise ICH as performance and its ability to present alternative ICH stories.

The concept of performance in the domain of heritage studies dissects how heritage offers embodied and affective experiences that engage communication between performers and spectators. Within the field of heritage tourism, the idea of heritage as performance has been proposed and endorsed as a cultural process of heritage construction that allows the audience to negotiate or re-create heritage meanings (Haldrup and Bærenholdt 2015; Smith 2015). Haldrup and Bærenholdt (2015) also focus on visitors' affective engagement with heritage by distinguishing performances of, at and with heritage. Advancing Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory, they note that 'heritage meanings are practiced in processes

involving people experiencing heritage' (Haldrup and Bærenholdt 2015, 52).

Situating the notion of performance within the exploration of community members' ICH-making, this study accentuates the powerful and symbolic agency of ICH performances (McKerrell and Pfeiffer 2020, 26). As Tolia-Kelly, Waterton and Watson (2016, 2) note, making heritage as performances moves beyond representational issues, underscoring terms of affect, memory, emotion and feeling. Understanding ICH as performance can begin with two aspects: one considers performance of or with ICH as 'an embodied practice and an act of communication' (McKerrell and Pfeiffer 2020, 22); the other states that 'this embodied practice has a function in the present' (McKerrell and Pfeiffer 2020, 22; Smith 2006). In other words, ICH performances are physical and emotional experiences in which multiple layers of meanings and values have been created, remade and practised to transmit sense of place and assist the manifestation of identities (Smith 2015).

Community members and outsiders all engage in encounters through experiencing the past constructed for the present, and their divergent responses to ICH-based performances can create affective atmospheres or spaces exuding powerful expressions of heritage. Certainly, the interaction between performers and spectators is not one-sided and rigid (Wulf 2015). It is intricate: cultural practitioners from the community as performers not only produce but also experience and embrace the variety of experiences offered by spectators. The audience – including other community members and outsiders – can also be viewed as performers who actively make sense of the past and develop diverse ways of interpreting and experiencing heritage.

Community members' beings, embodiments and feelings emerge from the process of practising ICH. Acting as performers and audience, they stage and practise ICH to communicate with each other and share symbolic knowledge, which brings about communal integration, local identities and cultural reproduction (Wulf 2015). Further, according to Herman (2017, 318), 'places, place-based practices, and material constructs' are integral components of ICH values. Community members assert their subjectivity in the production and transmission of tacit and embodied knowledge, in which their bodies serve as the medium that makes the meaning of a place (Ruggles and Silverman 2009; Wulf 2015). The correlation among

ICH, place and identity facilitates the dissemination of community members' emotional attachment to a location and how they continue to tell their own stories in their daily acts and experiences (Herman 2017).

This paper was developed from a part of my doctoral study on heritage-making, including research on an ethnic ecomuseum project launched in the Longji Zhuang Ancient Village. It employed an ethnographic approach by interviewing villagers and engaging in participant observation in the Longji Zhuang Ancient Village. Collecting data for this research primarily took place from May to July 2018. For the preliminary purpose of uncovering complicated power relations among official and unofficial actors embedded in the local heritage construction, interviewing villagers and observing their cultural activities facilitated a comprehensive exploration of their ICH-making process. Nevertheless, after communicating with and living with villagers, I noticed that the sustainability of some local cultural lifeways, to a large extent, rests on community members' work for tourism revenues and personal interests.

Safeguarding ICH in the Longji Ancient Zhuang Village

A great deal of domestic and international research has focused on the Longji Terraces, particularly in the domains of heritage tourism and ecomuseology (Chio 2013). Within such studies, the tension between ICH safeguarding and tourism development has been an ongoing issue that demands addressing. The fluidity of cultural heritage means it is 'not a legacy in any part already complete' (Holtorf 2018, 644). Rather than salvaging ICH as endangered, a dynamic and sustainable approach enhances its practitioners' and their communities' ability to adapt to its changing nature and harness it for economic well-being (Holtorf 2018). Heritage recognition and practices of community members are co-opted by official heritage discourses, which are manipulated and governed by political authorities or influential stakeholders. Community members can be actively or passively involved in the official heritage discourses.

In the Longji Village, the official ICH safeguarding framework encompasses the recognition and designation of ICH in the listings, as well as ecomuseological approaches and practices that sustain the tourism. For instance, the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (AMGX) in

Nanning (the capital city of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region) conducted a heritage preservation practice at the Longji Village as a part of the museum's '1+10 ethnic ecomuseums project', in conjunction with regional and local heritage authorities and heritage professionals. The ecomuseum's exhibition centre opened to the public in 2010 and, since then, the Longji Village has been considered as an ethnic ecomuseum. In 2018, the Longsheng government's application to the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation was successfully approved. The 'heritagisation' of the Longji Terraced Fields Scenic Area has allowed the Longsheng government to publicise the Longji area as an internationally renowned heritage site.

According to empirical research, many villagers did not express a firm commitment to transmitting traditions and histories, even though they realised their heritage was 'at risk'. These villagers are all local Zhuang people and belong to different lineage villages of the Longji village. Almost half of them are elders, and the rest are between 30 and 50. Most of the villagers actively participated in tourist activities, such as operating restaurants and family hotels or acting in performances to increase family income. When I communicated with them, they hardly expressed a desire to preserve cultural traditions, but they were willing to share their interests on folk songs, embroidery making, alcohol making and other cultural activities.



Figure 1
The terraced fields of the Longji Ancient Zhuang Village.
Photograph taken by the author.

Oakes (2013, 383) points out that cultural heritage is 'a knowledge of culture that emerges not from villagers themselves, but which nevertheless claims to represent them'. A few villagers delineate their conceptions of ICH:

It is hard to express what cultural heritage is. Intangible cultural heritage represents our Zhuang history and lifestyles without literary inscriptions. For example, ploughing fields is also an expression of our culture. Our Wan folk songs as well.³

Intangible cultural heritage is *yuanshengtai*, including singing and dancing [...] but [I] do not entirely understand it [...] It seems to be a simple part of our lives, but it is intangible cultural heritage. What elders did in the past can be the heritage of this culture now.⁴

As their words indicate, ICH is part of their everyday lives. Thus, for them, ICH represents traditional craft or skill possessed by elders, and *yuanshengtai* (原生态), an original way of life. To some extent, the notion of *yuanshengtai* reflects their problematic and exoticised depiction of cultural traditions, pandering to others' stereotypical imagination of them and the claim to local uniqueness compared with other scenic spots (Luo 2017).

The imbalanced tourism development and financial return among three Longji scenic spots and the migration of younger generations have exacerbated the crisis of sustaining the cultural landscape. Agricultural production is no longer the primary source of livelihood for some people in the villages, and many rice terraces have fallen into disuse. To guarantee the continual safeguarding of intangible agricultural practices and landscapes, the tourism company of the Longji Scenic Area offered the Longji Village rice seeds. These seeds can grow in up to five colours, and the company suggested cultivating this type of rice to create five-colour paddies. This new eye-catching spectacle was designed to attract more tourists and romanticise this ethnic community (Blum 2001). However, some villagers appreciated that it maintained their terraced fields as a tourism-based commodity.

An ideal of ecomuseum provides a holistic and sustainable approach that safeguards ICH, highlighting community participation and empowerment to enhance the connection between the community and its ICH (Nitzky 2012). Furthermore, the ethnic ecomuseum project

launched in the Longji Village prioritises the expertise and authority of community members in heritage preservation. In the setting of the ecomuseum, professionals from the AMGX have undertaken a series of actions contributing to heritage preservation, such as establishing an exhibition centre in the Pan Family Village, an ICH transmission centre in the Hou Family Village and recording heritage. The cultural memory project is one of the principal ecomuseological practices, which encourage community members to use cultural mapping techniques to engage with their cultural practices.

This community-based participatory approach serves as a practical tool for the community to 'capture more symbolic and intangible aspects of place' (Duxbury 2015, 1) from their insights. For instance, Mr Hou filmed a short video named 'Yeast for making alcohol', which recorded the making of water liquor (水酒). His interpretation demonstrated his ability to pursue, convey and appreciate the value of their heritage as knowledge instead of iconography or symbolism. A few community members who were also invested to share local knowledge and identity found approaches to present and celebrate their cultural heritage in their own way.

The ecomuseum ultimately has not embraced a holistic or useful approach that encourages villagers to recognise and participate in its ICH safeguarding, which remains an unfamiliar academic concept for these villagers. Some cultural traditions, such as the costumes of northern Zhuang people, water liquor, embroidery and agricultural skills related to terraces that villagers share with Zhuang communities who live in other scenic spots, are hardly selling points for cultural distinctiveness. The ecomuseological approach and tourism discourse perform a limited function in reinforcing the enthusiasm of community members for ICH safeguarding.

Performing ICH for tourism

On the morning of 27 July 2018, most Longji villagers took the earliest bus from their village to Longsheng County. They were required to wear their traditional white Zhuang costumes, and they gathered at a square in Longsheng County where the opening ceremony of the 7th Longji Terraced Fields Cultural Festival was held. A splendid parade, including participants from local areas, took place there. When the parade passed by, residents and tourists could distinguish where these

performers came from and which ethnic groups they belonged to simply from the flags they held and the outfits they wore.

Various members of ethnic minorities from distant villages, dressed in colourful costumes, were treated as tourist attractions to demonstrate the modern and romantic image of cultural diversity. Apart from the parade, the Longsheng Cultural Bureau carried out a range of events, such as the ICH programmes. Some villagers from Longji Village sold bamboo rice during the festival, and two sang folk songs, representing traditional music in the Longji Scenic Area. Other Zhuang villages showcased other ICH practices, such as water liquor distillation and embroidery. The heritage that the Longji villagers presented to tourists did not embody the 'representativeness' of its Zhuang culture, which made it difficult for them to assert their unique cultural identity through shared cultural heritage. Under this circumstance, ICH cannot be identified as a competitive advantage that supports the Longji Village's heritage tourism.

Chhabra (2019, 2) described ICH as a 'distinct selling asset for host communities', which is critical in the competition among heritage destinations and can contribute to sustainable tourism development. However, cultural practices in the Longji Village, governed by Longsheng County, have been selected and framed as shared ICH to serve a political agenda for integrating ethnic minority cultures with tourism. Unfortunately, these shared ICH practices have led to the homogenisation of tourism resources and have intensified the competition between these communities. Community members in the Longji Village are hardly driven by shared resources to safeguard ICH for tourism.

Since 2012, Longsheng County has held the Longji Terraces Cultural Festival (龙脊梯田文化节) every year. This spectacular festival is tied to the Longsheng government's marketing strategy to transform cultural heritage into cultural and tourism products, and it promotes this location as a culture-rich tourism destination. The Longsheng government created this festival to showcase the diversity of ethnic minority cultures in the county and increase the ability of the Longji Terraced Fields to raise local revenue. The 'festivalisation' of culture pertaining to the Longji Terraced Fields indicates that the formation of the local tourism discourse heavily relies on the cultural landscape of the terraced fields.

Having branded itself as the 'County of Hundreds of Festivals' (百节之县), the Longsheng government structured a marketing framework for festivalising the ICH practices of ethnic groups in the county and legitimising the heritagisation of their traditional festivals as one aspect of folklorisation (Hafstein 2018).⁵ In this sense, the festival created and reinvented for tourism is 'a genre of display characteristic of intangible heritage' (Hafstein, 2018, 148), enabling official and unofficial heritage stakeholders to stage their expressions of identity and cultural authenticity. ICH performance in the festival is tasked with attaching meaning to a destination, fuelling a series of promotional activities linked with it that are carried out by stakeholders such as the Longsheng government, travel agents, local entrepreneurs and ethnic communities.

Performing ICH is not merely a channel through which community members in the Longji Village communicate their knowledge and expertise; it embroils them in a political task of cultural production. The official heritage discourse is 'in theory, positive processes in which cultural sites and practices are recognised as being of value' (Zhu and Maags, 2020, 146). While community members' heritage mobilisation and representation barely depart from the 'the upper scale of heritage' (Lähdesmäki, Zhu and Thomas 2019, 11), they passionately participate in the tourism industry because of their distinct motivations and interests (Svensson and Maags 2018).

Collaborating with community members, the Longsheng government and tourism company have purposely revived and repackaged the traditional festivals of ethnic communities living in the Longji area. These festivals have been manipulated and legitimised as one of the significant vehicles for agricultural tourism and heritage entertainment to thrive beyond their original 'superstitious' and spiritual meanings to generate tourism revenue. Throughout the year, more than five festivals are held in different ethnic communities in the Longji Scenic Area, including the Long Hair Festival in March, the Kaigeng Festival (开耕) of the Longji Village in May, the Shuyang (梳秧) Festival of the Pingan Village in June, the Shaiyi (晒衣) Festival in July and the Kailian (开镰) Festival in October.

As some villagers mentioned, these festivals are not inscribed as valuable ICH or respected as meaningful rituals or ceremonies. Their names and historical backgrounds became the new cultural economy with a

collective title: 'Longji Terraced Cultural Festivals'. The tourism company and community members negotiated to create some new events for this festival, such as a greeting ceremony and a fish-catching competition to entertain tourists. Every village had to encourage a certain number of villagers to join and perform how they celebrate these festivals.

The Kaigeng Festival, held in the Longji Village every spring, signifies the start of the ploughing season. This festival used to be full of religious rituals associated with the local communities' agricultural production and worship of nature. In the past, the elder chiefs (寨老) in the Longji Village would invite Daoist priests (道士) to enshrine and commemorate the gods of land and pray for a good harvest, sacrificing livestock at the edge of the terraced fields. Currently, community members dress up and visit the terraced fields to show how they use their traditional instruments or buffalos to plough their fields. Female villagers are supposed to welcome tourists at the welcoming reception of the Longji Village. At night, they sing and dance in official performances. However, this festival has been instrumentalised as a symbol of the cultural authenticity of the locals to pander to tourist interests in experiencing the 'original' lifestyles of the village. Indeed, the appropriation of this festival has deviated from its original cultural meanings and the local identities embedded in it (Maags 2018, 124). From community members' perceptions, the transformation of the Kaigeng Festival is acceptable, as its original meaning and functions are no longer significant in their lives.

Celebrating ICH beyond representation

The section above delineates the impact of heritage tourism on the festivalisation of heritage. This section, based on three sub-cases, yields another dimension to the understanding of community members' ICH-making. Crucially, the line between villagers' tourism activities and their lives behind the scenes is becoming blurred. Without demonstrating a strong commitment to living traditions, they sustain and celebrate some ICH organically.

1. 'The doubling of the world'

An elder of the Hou Family Village passed away during my fieldwork. The three-day funeral ceremony held in front of the visitor centre was under the gaze of tourists at all times. The ICH transmission centre constructed by ecomuseum practitioners had also temporarily become

the extended reception area for people who attended the rite. The local Daoist priests had been invited to perform the religious rite, which was part of the folklore in the Longji Village and inevitably became a special experience for tourists who witnessed this rite. Villagers' daily lives blended with what villagers presented to tourists. Residents in Longji treated their village as a tourist destination by mobilising their heritage and ethnicity, but it also continued to be a space where they spent their daily lives. This 'condition of drifting back and forth between the two worlds', proposed by Ogino (2016, 25), is 'the doubling of the world'. Experiencing 'the doubling of the world', they could not clearly differentiate what they staged for tourists from their everyday experiences – the two had grown inseparable. Due to the impact of tourism, their performances gave them new forms of identity that intertwined with their original ones, instead of generating a loss of local identity (Tapp 2008).

2. The worship of Moyi Dawang

If the Kaigeng Festival in the Longji Village resulted from the interference of local authorities and markets, the She Festivals (社节) and the Wugumiao (五谷庙节) Festival are locals' dynamic and independent expressions of belief, and they represent their contemporary demands. Every February and August of the lunar calendar, there are celebrations of the She Festivals held at two family



Figure 2
The funeral rite in front of the visitor centre (Hou Family Village).
Photograph taken by the author.

temples in the Longji Village – Moyi Dawang Temple (莫一大王) and the temple of the Hou Family Village (侯家寨庙) – by Liao and Hou Family Villages. The Moyi Dawang Temple is always locked to avoid tourists visiting. Both villages enshrine Moyi Dawang, but for residents, these festivals are family rituals rather than ceremonies for the entire village. The Wugumiao Festival in June commemorates the birthday of Moyi Dawang, as villagers from the Liao family believe that Moyi Dawang saved their ancestors. It has now been transformed to replicate the She Festivals.

Historically, Moyi Dawang was the hero of the Zhuang people in the northern Guangxi area and gradually became the God of Land of some Zhuang communities. During the She Festivals and the Wugumiao Festival, villagers invite the divine (师公) to perform the ritual, and they slaughter chickens, ducks, goats and pigs at temples. Pig jaws would hang at temples to prove that attendees had already finished the ritual. Consequently, villagers believed that Moyi Dawang would bless the safety of the whole village and relieve people of suffering, and they could anticipate a bumper harvest. This tradition is evolving and adapts to current social and cultural circumstances.

The meaning of the She Festivals has been expanded from Moyi Dawang worship to a voluntary day of roads, bridge or pavilion reconstruction, and it represents a family gathering day. Notwithstanding that the villagers' faith in Moyi Dawang tends to be diluted, these festivals are more compatible with their current situation and

new conditions of time and place. Labourers in cities return home and help construct or reconstruct roads in their family villages. Notably, less tourists can be found at these festivals. Villagers' donations provide funding for the festivals. In sum, even though their 'original' culture changed, the village continues Moyi Dawang worship, which maintains strong family ties and provokes local nostalgia (Chhabra, Healy and Sills 2003).

3. Making quilted embroidery

Quilted embroidery is deeply rooted in Zhuang tradition; when daughters get married, their mothers express their love and best wishes by sending quilts as gifts. They have intricate patterns – such as dragons, phoenix, flowers or the sun – invented by the makers. These patterns can also be sewn onto baby carriers or infant hats to bless newborns. The creation of embroidered hats with tails sprang from the cultural tradition of the Yao community in the Longji area. Yao people have acquired embroidered hats from the Longji Village for many years, and they provide the Zhuang community with braces for baby carriers. To this day, quilted embroidery makers have also made their own braces. Liao Yunjin and Liao Yulan are two renowned quilted embroidery makers from the Liao Family Village. These two female elders have developed an excellent collaborative relationship with the director of the ecomuseum following his efforts. They unofficially gained opportunities from the director and government work units to put on demonstrations at the AMGX and the Guilin Museum in Guangxi and to sell their products.

Currently, fewer female villagers have learned to make quilted embroidery compared with prior generations. Quilted embroidery makers (all female) in Longji mostly came from the Liao family and learned this skill from these two makers. Their average age is 40 years old. Making quilted embroidery is time-consuming and challenging to learn, so most women who make embroidery regard it as a hobby or part-time work instead of devoting all their time to it. When they have spare time after agricultural production or other business activities, they usually choose to make these items as leisure activities in front of their houses, at pavilions or at the elder activity centre. They make baby carriers or infants' hats as souvenirs for friends or relatives or sell their handicrafts in Heping or the wider county. Tourism does not make the quilted embroidery economically viable, and at the same time, villagers make no effort to combine their production of embroidered handicrafts with the officially sanctioned



Figure 3
Moyi Dawang Temple in the Liao Family Village.
Photograph taken by the author.



Figure 4
Making quilted embroidery.
Photograph taken by the author.

ICH projects. It has survived by virtue of these villagers' interests and its cultural and economic value as a place-based experience.

Discussion and conclusion

How do official ICH and tourism discourses shape community members' ICH-making? Crucially, how and why do they celebrate ICH beyond the goals of protection and representation? Centring on the Longji Village, the sections above present three dimensions encompassing the influence of ICH protection measures taken, the creation and reconstruction of festivals for the tourism and community members' ICH practices behind the scenes to address these questions. They demonstrate how cultural traditions were staged and performed by community members to suit the interests of different actors and reinforce ICH's cultural and socio-economic values. By regarding ICH as performance, this study has provided a lens to reflect on the marginalised position of community

members in the representation of their own ICH and their motivations for 'safeguarding' ICH.

As depicted above, through selecting and identifying ICH from cultural practices and performances of Longji Village, ecomuseum practitioners and tourism authorities seek to represent local Zhuang culture and display their power over ICH management. Villagers selectively participated in cultural preservation led by the ecomuseum project and commercialisation for practical expediences, which resulted in the dissonance between two ICH discourses. With decreased villager participation, ecomuseum practitioners have been alienated from local heritage management. While villagers engaging in official ICH discourses seemingly become a 'method' to manage ICH, heritage authorities and agencies carry out ICH work heavily depending on their participation.

Gilman (2022) questioned the blurred boundaries between ICH safeguarding efforts and ICH commercialisation, which have been given considerable attention in ICH development. Nevertheless, heritage tourism functions as a means of heritage consumption and cultural display, which is intrinsically political and not the polar opposite of cultural traditions and heritage preservation (Salazar 2009). Rather than excessively concentrating on the shortcomings of ICH tourism and commodification, existing research affirms their positive effect on the empowerment of cultural practitioners who actively participate in the development and representation of ICH (Kim et al. 2019; Su 2019). The case of the Longji Village indicates the decentralisation of heritage preservation and the significant role of tourism-driven production (Yu 2015).

In the view of Kim et al. (2019), cultural preservation and ICH tourism undertake distinct roles but complement each other, potentially developing in parallel. In fact, apart from benefitting from tourists visiting, villagers acquired less profit from safeguarding terraced fields and participating in events held by tourism and heritage agencies, such as performing in festivals. Involvement in ethnic tourism development is also not a task for villagers given by outsiders; instead, the villagers are the ones who initiated these activities and called on the tourism company and local authorities for help to increase revenues. However, local heritage and tourism discourses are mainly constructed around the cultural landscape of Longji Terraces and diverse ethnic cultures in this area.

A critical problem raised there was that the exploitation of ICH overemphasised its representational value. Most cultural traditions of the Longji Village are manifested and protected as a shared Zhuang culture and as resources for villagers to participate in tourism. Villagers may find it difficult to stake a claim to them, as the representations of their communities and Zhuang culture and transform them into sustainable commercial products.

Evidently, it is impossible to entirely ascribe the continuity of their ICH to practices and endeavours of safeguarding and representation within the authorised ICH discourses. When moving the focus to community members' ways of understanding and making ICH, we can find out whether ICH development benefits them and their internal impetus to work on it (Yu 2015). This research argues that the sustainability of a local community's ICH is not always tightly bound with safeguarding work and economic activities, which can be enhanced by community members' communication and experiences in practices of cultural traditions. The longevity of the ICH depends their experiences and feelings, and how they create a local identity through celebrating ICH. This case study has shown that people from the Longji Village perform and practise ICH for various purposes, including attracting visitors, commodifying it for income, representing their cultural uniqueness, as leisure activities and as entertainment. These divergent intentions stimulate distinct experiences and emotions, which are always concealed in the preoccupation with the issues such as heritage transformation, cultural loss and disempowerment.

ICH performance is a toolkit for community members to re-create the past in the present and experience it in response to varied heritage discourses. As a social and emotional bond, it supports people's affirmation or construction of place-based identity and demonstrates their sense of belonging (Kuah and Liu 2017; McKerrell and Pfeiffer 2020). What is illustrated above reiterates the critical positions of community members as cultural practitioners, performers and audiences of a 'living past'. Their affective experiences, emerging from the construction of embodied knowledge, inextricably connect them to a sense of community and belonging. Furthermore, the continuity and transformation of local cultural heritage, such as making quilted embroidery, can occur independently of the representational meanings attached to it, highlighting community members'

innermost thoughts and emotional responses (Svensson and Maags 2018, 22).

The scrutinisation of community members' ICH-making turns the spotlight on their practices of cultural traditions beyond the intervention and gaze of outsiders. Not all ICH practices and performances were typified and celebrated as representative ICH in the Longji Village that demand more attention and valuable economic capital. However, scholars have acknowledged that distinct cultural heritage can be defined as 'different things being valued or being valued differently' (Holtorf and Fairclough 2013, 500). For example, the Kaigeng Festival, funeral rites and festivals for the worship of Moyi Dawang are not valued as major cultural representations, which are shaped and reformed to echo changing social and cultural circumstances. Nonetheless, they are responsible for bonding community members together. These festivals as performances through which people communicate their ways of feeling contribute to engaging a sense of place, evoking collective memories and creating a collective identity. Cai (2022, 16) argues that the communication between cultural practitioners and place during the process of embodied performances renders the construction of a local identity, while a local cultural identity prompts the sustainable development of ICH. Villagers' nostalgic motivations, interactions and emotional bonding with a place can act as the catalyst for their actions to steward ICH and revitalise their community.

Various actors have been involved in the construction and capitalisation of ICH as a sustainable resource, which is built upon the significant role ICH practitioners played in ICH transmission (Lenzerini 2011). Their consciousness and practices concerning cultural conservation are shaped by official ICH initiatives (Zhang 2020). A comprehensive and democratic understanding of ICH-making in an ethnic community cannot ignore the motives and experiences of community members and their ability to turn living pasts into a process of production, which is equally important. 'Safeguarding' ICH, to some villagers, is a part of their life – between the representation and performance of it. 🇬🇧

ENDNOTES

1. This paper is adapted from the author's PhD thesis.
2. China has 56 ethnic groups. Zhuang people are one of ethnic minority groups in China. Villagers living in the Longji Village belong to a subgroup of Zhuang people (White Zhuang).
3. This interview was held on 23 June 2018 in the Longji Village. Interviewee is a villager from Pan Family Village of the Longji Village.
4. This interview was held on 23 June 2018 in the Longji Village. Interviewee is a villager from Liao Family Village of the Longji Village.
5. For more information about the Longsheng government's current cultural policies related to ethnic cultures, see http://www.glls.gov.cn/xwzx/jrls/202112/t20211222_2190315.html [accessed 15 June 2022].

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