

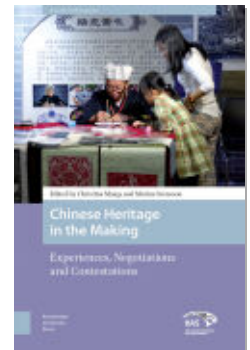


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7 Recognition and Misrecognition

The Politics of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Southwest China

Tami Blumenfield

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Abstract

This chapter discusses how communities in northwest Yunnan are navigating heritage policies, showing different experiences and negotiations with the cultural heritage discourse. A discussion of Moso weavers in a northwest Yunnan village shows the intricate and complex ways heritage is understood and how this affects the local community. The label ‘intangible cultural heritage’, or ‘transmitter of intangible cultural heritage’, guarantees neither protection nor commercial viability for the time-consuming handicrafts. This chapter explores what heritage ‘does’ or ‘does not’ do to individuals, communities, and their cultural practices and products. It alerts us to the difficult tensions between transmission, innovation, protection, and commercial use, asking whether and how local communities have a say in the protection and development of their heritage.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, Moso, northwest Yunnan, weaving, cultural heritage in China

Ms Yang settled back as she watched the weaver deftly pass the yarn through the loom apparatus, vibrant colours layering upon one another as the scarf took shape.¹ She was proud of her efforts to promote weaving in her community, and prouder still of her success in branding the products

¹ This chapter is a revised version of the paper presented at the Lund University Workshop on Cultural Heritage in China: ‘Contested Understandings, Images, and Practices’, 18 June 2015, organized by Marina Svensson. I thank the editors for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

and registering the label of Mosuo hand-woven goods for use in Lijiang's many tourist shops.²

The culmination of over a decade's efforts, the weaving activities had not received much special attention at first. When I visited Ms Yang's home in Walabi, a village near the end of the road in Yongning Township in northwest Yunnan, in 2002, the items lining the walls of one room were not particularly market-oriented. As an anthropologist studying cultural change and education, though, I was very pleased to see these long-practiced crafts being revived and taught once again, albeit in a different way from the transmission among female kin, from one generation to another, that had formed a cornerstone of the household economy in an earlier era. Inexpensive, machine-produced textiles that reached Yongning several decades before had freed women from the laborious process of growing hemp and flax, spinning it into thread and yarn, stewing the fibres with lard to toughen them, then weaving those materials into cloth that the women would later sew into the family's clothes. Villages around China experienced similar transitions from home-spun linens and clothing to that produced by machines, and villagers turned to purchased clothing for everyday use as soon as they could manage the cost.³

But later, the hand-woven goods became the hub of a flurry of attention and publicity through the burgeoning tourist industry, not only at Lugu Lake, about an hour away on bumpy roads from Ms Yang's courtyard workshop, but also in the tourist mecca of Lijiang. Still later, weaving became one of the many processes absorbed into the intangible cultural heritage system, a system that had not even existed when Ms Yang first began teaching women to weave in the courtyard of her home.

How did weaving go from a nearly-lost process to a named, branded and officially registered practice? This chapter explores how this happened, examining the promises and contradictions of the system of which it is now part, and engaging with local ideas about intangible heritage designation in the process.

2 'Mosuo' is the transliteration of the Chinese name for members of this group of people from northwest Yunnan, numbering around 20,000. I normally use 'Moso' when writing in English, but use 'Mosuo' here for consistency with the heritage labels and media coverage introduced below.

3 Some villages struggled to afford machine-produced textiles: in one western Yunnan region, an entire village shared a single set of machine-produced clothes, of which they were very proud. This set of clothes was reserved for special occasions, when a person needed to leave the village for official purposes or to go to a market. Afterwards, the clothing was carefully washed for the next user.

Contingent heritage and soft power

Joshua Kurlantzick (2008) argues that soft power has become a key diplomatic strategy for the People's Republic of China. The Beijing Olympics, Shanghai Expo, and spread of Confucius Institutes worldwide all represent China's efforts to raise its profile internationally (Hubbert 2014).

So too does the rush to pursue intangible cultural heritage recognition from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Shepherd 2014). Intangible cultural heritage, a category enshrined into the UNESCO pantheon of designable heritage only in 2003 (Bamo 2008; Ruggles and Silverman 2009; Smith and Akagawa 2009; Ye and Zhou 2013), represents the latest trend in a long cycle of changes in the ways ethnicity and cultural traditions have been alternately celebrated or denigrated in China (Svensson 2012: 193). As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have warned, however, 'Culture is a paradoxical commodity' (2002). This paradox resounds in China's deployment of its cultural patrimony as part of its soft power strategy.

As numerous case studies have made abundantly clear, what receives recognition from UNESCO is contingent on subjective and political factors (both within China and internationally) rather than objective designation (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013; Fiskesjö 2010; Silverman and Blumenfield 2013; Swain 2013). Intangible heritage, like other forms of cultural heritage, is arbitrary in its designation, but the recentness and speed with which it has been taken up is somewhat breathtaking. By the early 2010s, an inventory craze had swept the country, with 1372 national-level and 11,042 provincial-level intangible cultural heritage (ICH) items inscribed by 2016 (China Daily 2016). Many more items have been designated at the county and prefectural levels. From a sceptical nonbeliever's perspective, everything and anything is heritage; anything can be considered intangible cultural heritage (Di Giovine 2009; Hafstein 2009). Why, then, should we care about it? Should we care about it, or should we cynically dismiss it as the latest fad deserving of wall-painted slogans, press coverage, and scholarly attention?⁴

4 As Holbig and Maags have demonstrated, the number of scholarly articles on the topic in Chinese has risen exponentially since 2005. In their analysis of articles in the China Academic Journals Database, they found that only twelve articles between 1981-1999 mentioned 'UNESCO' (*Lianheguo jiaokewen zuzhe*) and 'cultural heritage' (*wenhua yichan*), with none mentioning 'intangible cultural heritage' (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan*), or ICH. Articles about ICH began appearing in 2004, though not very many. By 2006, nearly 50 articles had appeared about ICH, with nearly 100 articles published on the topic in the following year. By 2011, the number of articles exceeded 200 (Holbig and Maags 2012).

Cynicism is difficult to avoid. After all, inherent within the ICH system is exclusion. Naming one practice as intangible heritage means that another practice is merely ordinary. Similarly, the process for naming ICH transmitters is fraught with all the problems and inequities that encompass much of life in contemporary China: who gets crowned with the title of ‘intangible cultural heritage transmitter’ has as much to do with who knows whom and who owes a favour to whom – the infamous *guanxi* system – as with who is a legitimate transmitter of a cultural practice. As Christina Maags has explored in her research on the intangible heritage transmitter designation process, the system can look entirely different from one province to the next, and from one community to the next, depending on who is in charge of the process and depending on how much importance a particular government (provincial, regional, or local) places on the intangible heritage designation process (Maags 2015; see chapter by Maags this volume). In a place like Yunnan Province, where ethnic culture is a crucial economic resource deployable through the tourism process, governments at every level have a strong incentive to invest in naming, promoting and celebrating intangible cultural heritage.

In northwest Yunnan, the politically savvy and well-connected Naxi people have successfully achieved designation of their principal city, Lijiang, as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site (Peters 2013; White 2010) and of Dongba painting as intangible cultural heritage. The nearby Mosuo people, less connected but with a world-renowned system of sexual visits and matrilineal households, have not managed to submit an application for similar status.⁵ Officials at the Lijiang office in charge of cultural heritage explained to me in 2011 that this was partly because of internal quotas on how many applications could be put forth from a particular region – the Naxi already held several intangible and tangible cultural heritage designations, and since the Mosuo were classified as a subgroup of Naxi, they had already reached the quota. The officials also hinted at other extenuating circumstances, though they did not elaborate.

For its part, the online publication *InKunming* reported on the circumstances precluding submission of Mosuo cultural elements for intangible heritage status:

He Hua, an official works [*sic*] in media of Ninglang County, said that both government in Lijiang City and Ninglang County have paid high attention to the protection of traditional Mosuo culture. ‘At first, we

5 For an in-depth discussion of this system and other elements of Mosuo culture, see Blumenfield Kedar 2010.

planned to apply for intangible cultural heritage of maternal culture, which was later said to be contradicting to the current laws, so we failed,' said he. Now, Lugu Lake has been listed as a cultural protection area by Lijiang City. (InKunming 2011)

Meanwhile, a Luoshui friend who saw the officials explained that their delegation had a pre-determined outcome. According to him, before arriving they had already decided not to protect the area or apply for heritage status, but they needed to give the appearance of investigating thoroughly. As the *InKunming* article noted, the reason they gave was incompatibility of the Mosuo sexual visit system with the values China wanted to promote (cf. Holbig and Maags 2012). But my Luoshui friend interpreted this as an excuse, informing me that the real reason for the rejection was the desire of the county government officials to avoid the restrictions on development that would inevitably accompany designation as cultural heritage.

Even without official designation as a national or international heritage zone, though, certain aspects of Mosuo culture are gaining attention through the intangible cultural heritage recognition system at the regional and provincial levels. Weavers like Ms Yang and other key individuals from this community are being hailed as 'intangible cultural heritage transmitters' and recognized at conferences and events that promulgate this new global brand. Exactly how is this taking shape, and with what effects?

Weaving Walabi

Dudjih Ma, or Yang Dajie (Big Sister Yang) has long been a fixture of Walabi. Tourism was on the rise at the nearby-yet-far-away Lugu Lake (it could take an hour over bumpy roads to get there, or longer in the rainy summer months), and while serving as the women's representative for the village, Ms Yang became concerned by the drain of village women to work in the less seemly sectors of the tourism industry. As one Walabi woman told me, 'Mosuo women are celebrated for being independent. [...] But life is actually very difficult for us Mosuo women. [...] So many of the younger women in the village are going to work at Lugu Lake.'⁶ Against the lure of

6 Personal communication, July 2013. The documentary film *Fall of Womenland* (He, 2009) provides context for these comments.

more lucrative options, Ms Yang developed a system of home-based weaving cooperatives.

Beginning in 2002, I visited Walabi often as part of my research on cultural change and education, watching the project morph from a small effort with another woman in the courtyard, to a much larger affair with additional weaving spaces added behind the house and women weaving throughout the village.⁷ I often saw women weaving in shops along the road, and sometimes encountered one or two women working in a family's courtyard. I also witnessed the explosion of the 'Mosuo weaving shop' phenomenon, complete with a 'Mosuo weaver' (or sometimes a young woman wearing Mosuo clothing), in Lijiang, Shuhe, and Luoshui.

Back in Walabi, though, like many projects, the weaving project was contentious and plagued by controversy. Was Ms Yang pocketing too much of the proceeds from weaving for herself? After all, she hosted the showroom in her home and opened it whenever visitors appeared – sometimes whole vans full of visitors who might purchase the women's products. Ms Yang coordinated with the outsiders who bought the woven goods for shops in Luoshui, Lijiang or Shuhe and arranged for the procurement of fibres that would be woven into scarves. With other family members, she eventually operated six shops of her own. Suspicions and envy emerged, and it was not long before competing arrangements appeared in the village.

Although more fragmented, the weaving efforts were so successful that women could barely keep up with the demand. When I visited in 2011, Ms Yang proudly told me that nobody left the village to work as a prostitute anymore. 'The ones who went out before are all back home now, with little children. The younger ones are going to school. Paying their school fees for elementary school and junior middle school is no longer a problem: we can earn what we need for them ourselves, without even asking their fathers or uncles to help out.' For high school, a local education fund would help out if need be. University tuition was still a problem, though, she sighed. I was in

7 My ethnographic research has explored demographic changes, education and media production in five Yongning Township villages with significant Mosuo populations, each affected by tourism in different ways (cf. Blumenfield 2003). I did not set out to study intangible cultural heritage *per se* but became interested early on by discussions of *wenhua chuancheng*, which translates loosely as 'cultural transmission and continuation'. It was in this context that I first met Ms Yang in 2002. Fieldwork for the early research and the 2016 research was funded by Fulbright fellowships and supported by Yunnan University. Fieldwork in 2013 focused on socio-ecological resilience and was funded by a Mellon Faculty Research Grant through the David E. Shi Center for Sustainability at Furman University, while 2011 research was funded in part by a grant from the Association for Asian Studies, China and Inner Asia Council.

the midst of editing a book about cultural heritage in China (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013) and had just completed interviews with officials in Lijiang on the topic, so I was startled when Ms Yang proclaimed with pride, 'I am a *fei wuzhi wenhua yichan chuancheng ren* [intangible cultural heritage transmitter].' This is quite a mouthful in Chinese, an awkward translation of the recently invented concept. Curious, I asked about this designation. Ms Yang explained about a Lijiang conference and her receipt, in 2007, of a certificate for being an intangible cultural heritage transmitter. Along with the cash award recognizing her contributions, Ms Yang also unofficially gained the opportunity to be a preferred vendor for government work units needing a supply of woven Mosuo goods. The 'intangible cultural heritage' phrase landed on the Lijiang weaving shops' bags, too, as she proudly showed me. While pleased for Ms Yang, this conversation made me suspect that 'intangible heritage' had surfaced as the latest form of branding, both for tourist consumption and for locals' edification.

Returning to the village in 2013, I was surprised to find a newly constituted village-wide weaving collective in operation that seemed to circumvent Ms Yang, who was no longer the women's association leader. Since her eager proclamation two years earlier, apparently the market for hand-woven goods had crashed. Machine-woven textiles were being sold in faux-Mosuo weaving shops. 'Tourists cannot tell the difference between hand-woven and machine-woven scarves,' a young woman named Dashih Latzo explained to me inside the new weaving space, at the other end of the village from Ms Yang's house in a partially constructed family home.⁸ No longer able to sell their textiles for decent prices, most women had stopped weaving. In the home where I stayed, scarves were piling up, unsold, in an empty bedroom.

With support from the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (*Guojia minwei*),⁹ and from the United Nations Development Program, two teachers from Singapore and Shanghai had come to teach the villagers how to create patterns that they claimed could not be imitated by machines.¹⁰ By the time

8 It had exterior walls and a completed courtyard and a roof, but interior walls and rooms had not yet been built.

9 Their website provides an overview on their mission and scope: http://www.seac.gov.cn/gjmw/mwjs/Mo8index_1.htm.

10 For background on this programme, see United Nations Development Program [2014] and related project videos, 'Weaving out of Poverty' (<http://bcove.me/z8svrah9>) and 'The Ethnic Minorities Cultural Products Development Project' (<http://bcove.me/8bqfk6ob>). A captioned photo gallery is available from on the *Global Times* website (Global Times 2015). Further information about the project is available from 'Weaving Tradition and Innovation into Poverty Reduction',

I visited the village, the villagers had elected leaders and were working towards fulfilling their first order. Many of the people involved with the nascent effort, still not officially registered, had spent some time working outside the village. Were they glad to be earning some income back home, in something approximating the '*li tu bu li xiang*' model (leave the fields, but not the hometown) – even though everyone was still immersed in farming work when not weaving? When I asked whether they were enjoying the weaving project, the women shot quizzical looks my way. 'It takes three, four, even five days to complete a shawl, even longer for the more complex ones. We only get 100 yuan for a finished shawl. That's not even 30 yuan per day'. Since the going wages for daily labour in the fields had recently jumped to over 100 yuan a day, the calculation was an unsettling one.

But, two people assured me, this was not simply a financial calculation. They were just getting the project off the ground, still working hard to figure out the much more complex patterns developed by their fashionable teachers. The project had to succeed, because unlike previous efforts that would only benefit one or two people, it had the potential to help the entire village. To them, this deployment of woven heritage represented something like a collective self-improvement project (Oakes 2013), not only an attempt towards financial gain.¹¹

Curiously, although their weaving workshop was not far from the officially designated 'intangible cultural heritage transmitter,' who had without doubt spurred the development of weaving in the village, none of the people I spoke with in 2013 had heard of the concept of intangible cultural heritage. Only my friend Riba, elected the accountant for the collective, reflected on my question and said it sounded like something related to the United Nations. For most of the collective participants, the project was only partly about valorizing things from their 'ancient ethnic culture' (*gulaow minzu wenhua de dongxi*).

But in speaking with the weavers, I recognized something espoused during the 2013 Chengdu UNESCO meetings: 'Intangible cultural heritage will nurture people's self-awareness, self-confidence and cultural self-determination, and will play an ever-increasing role in constructing a

<http://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/successstories/weaving-tradition-and-innovation-into-poverty-reduction/>. Note that the celebratory narrative common across these articles espouses a rose-coloured view of the development project that only partially corresponds with the actual situations of people interviewed.

11 Like the projects discussed by Oakes, these projects also carried paternalistic self-improvement rhetoric by their funders. For glimpses of that rhetoric, see Zhou 2011 and Global Times 2015.

Figure 7.1 Working out the intricate patterns requires intense concentration



Photograph by Tami Blumenfeld

harmonious world and promoting cultural diversity' (UNESCO 2013: 3). Even without the awkwardly translated foreign vocabulary, the effects of new policies within China to support intangible cultural heritage had reached a village just beyond a tourist zone.

The weaving projects in context: Rethinking heritage designation

'I tell you, intangible cultural heritage is just a brand.'
 – Scholar from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

When I first began working on this project, I would have agreed with that scholar. The intangible cultural heritage designation process, despite its complexity, seemed arbitrary. How could one possibly differentiate among all the practices still alive and flourishing, when so many practices merited appreciation?

In a conversation with Archei, a Luoshui museum director and filmmaker, I argued that singling one person out for special attention unfairly sidelined others with similar skills, but he responded that people who earned the designation of intangible cultural heritage *transmitter*, as opposed to intangible cultural heritage *practitioner*, deserved the recognition. After all, they had not only dedicated their time to whatever earned them accolades,

they had also spent time teaching and encouraging others. In some cases, they also worked hard to connect their efforts with broader audiences. This, he assured me, was not an easy feat. Given his own background as a museum founder and director, Archei spoke from a position of some experience.

After similar conversations with others deeply invested in the process, I am no longer so vehement in my opposition to the designation project. First of all, while designation as intangible cultural heritage can certainly introduce new problems, it can also offer important opportunities to showcase something of which a community or even a single family is proud – opportunities that may particularly benefit women. Chinese Airline magazines and newspaper articles are full of examples hailing a recognized process or product as an exemplar of intangible cultural heritage. According to these articles, in many cases, only a single family or few members of a village had been practicing before designation brought a welcome recognition to their previously rather thankless efforts.

Sometimes the new recognitions collide with the lack of intellectual property protections, causing unanticipated problems. This happened with a laborious tofu-making process whose recognition ended up encouraging copycat factories. The newly available factory-produced pressed tofu saturated the market and drove down the prices for pressed tofu produced in family workshops. The plummeting prices forced most of the families out of business, leaving the product highly acclaimed but making the process nearly extinct.¹² The lack of intellectual property protections also created challenges for the Walabi weavers.

In Yunnan, Ms Yang and her son Achi Nima, based in the city of Lijiang, applied for trademark protection for twelve of the new designs.¹³ With this protection, they could challenge the machine-woven textile producers through the legal system. While this introduced new problems into a previously communal-based system in which no single individual held more rights than any other individual, it also allowed them to market the woven goods on Taobao, an online shopping site with broad name-recognition throughout urban China.¹⁴ Nima publicized the weaving process and marketed the woven goods through posts on the WeChat

12 The article appeared in a July 2015 Chinese airline magazine.

13 A Baike Baidu Wiki site contains full details, including images of the copyright license for the twelve Mosuo patterns (8 November 2012), the logo registered to Ms Yang (valid for ten years beginning on 14 December 2010), and her designation by the Yunnan Province Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Yunnan Province Cultural Bureau as an Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmitter (9 June 2007). See Baike.baidu.com n.d.

14 To visit the site, see <http://mosuo.taobao.com>.

social media platform.¹⁵ From there, potential buyers could be directed to online ordering pages. Transaction complete, the textiles would soon arrive at their homes, packaged in an attractive red canister imprinted with a stylized image of Ms Yang at her loom above the words, 'Intangible Cultural Heritage – A Traditional, Hand-crafted Mosuo [People's] Item' (*fei wuzhi wenhua yichan, Mosuoren chuangtong gongyipin*). The canisters also bore the trademarked logo with Ms Yang's Naru name, 'Achi Dudjih Ma' [in Chinese] (see Figure 7.2).

With support from external organizations, Ms Yang and Nima also built a lofty new showcase for woven goods and other handcrafted items historically used by Na people. On two floors of a separate building, they built spaces where people could set up their looms and where the family could store textiles. The mother-son pair named their newly created space the Mosuo Traditional Handicraft Transmission Centre (*Mosuo chuangtong shougong chuancheng zhongxin*), emphasizing its role in passing on knowledge rather than simply selling products. When I visited in June 2016, Ms Yang proudly informed me that she had been conducting classes for students interested in learning to weave during school vacations and on weekends. These efforts, portrayed in a DVD produced by Onci Archei, sounded worthwhile. However, the vastness of the space and the piles of unsold textiles concerned me. After all, how successful could the new Taobao venture really be? I asked Ms Yang, 'Could the scale be a little too big?'

'Exactly,' she replied. She could only entrust the online shop to her son and hope for the best. But size aside, the new buildings did provide a needed space for the weaving and teaching activities, while also creating showcase areas for already-produced items.

As for the other weaving collective in Walabi, although launched with great fanfare and celebrated on the United Nations Development Program website (UNDP [2014]), it lasted about a year. The weavers never earned salaries, but they did not mind as long as the money from the sales of the textiles was shared. However, when the person in charge failed to distribute the money appropriately, the collective dissolved.¹⁶ Members of the former collective made their own efforts to earn money from the weaving. Riba and his partner, Adru Aga, rented space from a relative in a lakeside tourist village and tried selling their goods there. At first, they were the only ones

15 CCTV-10 Storytelling 2010 profiled Nima and his mother in a 25-minute television programme, 'Nima's Springtime.'

16 Riba, personal communication, June 2016.

Figure 7.2 In the newly completed weaving showroom, red canisters with Ms Yang's image and logo await customer orders



Photograph by Tami Blumenfield

Figure 7.3 Guiding visitors on a tour of his newly completed exhibit spaces at Mosuo Buluo, Dudjih Dashih pauses in front of an enlarged photograph taken early in the previous century. The room behind him features woven baskets and leather bags



Photograph by Tami Blumenfield

selling woven goods in the lakeside village, but soon after they were joined by two other weavers who also set up looms to demonstrate weaving. With shops also selling similar merchandise, their business ran into trouble. Frustrated and barely able to cover the expenses of the rent, they planned to abandon the effort as soon as their lease expired in late 2016.

From my perspective, it seemed that as often happens, the fruits of intangible cultural heritage had been unevenly distributed. Certain individuals, possessing ample social capital, were well-positioned to take advantage of the designation. Others, excluded from designation and lacking social capital, became frustrated in their efforts (cf. Maags 2015: 10). But in 2016, Ms Yang explained, that seemed poised to change. Walabi had recently become part of the ‘ancient villages cultural protection village’ system (*gu cunluo baohu cun*).¹⁷ As part of this process, the village would benefit from a significant investment for building and enhancing infrastructure. Meanwhile, in one room of their weaving centre, Ms Yang and her son planned to showcase the new group of intangible cultural heritage transmitters from their village whose designation had recently been approved by heritage experts. Many skills in addition to weaving could earn someone recognition: These included making the salted, preserved pork known in Chinese as *zhubiaorou*; making *pige* leather clothing used in ceremonies; and making *sulima* alcohol. *Haba* dancing ability; medical expertise using medicinal plants and bone-setting procedures; carpentry and wood-carving skills; and expertise as a *daba* ritual specialist (discussed below) could also earn recognition.

Some of these skills and talents, like the medical knowledge and the talents of the *daba* ritual specialist, are possessed only by a select few individuals. Others, like the production of *zhubiaorou* and *sulima* alcohol, are skills that nearly every adult villager of the designated gender possesses. Normally, men are responsible for the butchering of the pigs and subsequent cleaning and salting of the meat, while women usually distil *sulima* alcohol from grain. With these new designations, the intangible cultural heritage system was poised to complete its move from a rarely heard term that few understood, to a broader designation that recognized more people as valued contributors to their village’s, and their culture’s, heritage. As for Ms Yang and Nima, they were playing key roles in helping others earn that recognition by hosting the heritage showcase within their weaving centre.

17 This designation reportedly comes with a 3,000,000 yuan allocation from a government unit.

Daba as intangible cultural heritage transmitter

Although the process for recognizing additional intangible cultural heritage transmitters in Walabi had just begun at the time of this writing, Ahwo Tuodi, the sole *daba* ritual specialist in Yongning Township, has already enjoyed several years of celebration as an intangible cultural heritage transmitter. His experiences may provide insight into how others from his village might perceive their pending designations.

Tuodi has been invited to conferences celebrating Naxi *dongba* ritual specialists (cf. White 2010), where he received special certificates recognizing his achievement and granting him a *daba* degree.¹⁸ One might be tempted to look askance at the involvement of external arbiters of *daba* ritual skill, particularly when those arbiters bear the authority of the Chinese state. After all, *daba* operate in an entirely different plane from most state actors, mediating between the human and spirit worlds through ceremonies that involve chanting, figurines, animals, and ancestors.¹⁹ But when I met with Tuodi in 2013, he rushed to show me his certificates, beaming with pride. Not only did he enjoy the process of being celebrated along with other *daba* and *dongba*, as someone whose education had never involved sitting in a schoolhouse desk, receiving a degree-level certificate was a very special honour. Never very comfortable speaking in Mandarin, and often breaking down into self-conscious giggles mid-sentence when the words did not come, Tuodi now possessed a document that affirmed

18 The Naxi *Dongba (Daba)* Degree-Level Certificate read:

In accordance with the <<Yunnan Province Naxi Dongba Culture Protection Regulation>>, in order to effectively accomplish the Dongba Culture Transmission Work, through the authorization of the Yulong County People's Government, under the supervision and verification of the Yulong County Culture and Media Bureau, the Lijiang City Naxi Dongba Culture Transmission Association and the Yushui Zhai [Jade Water Village] Dongba Culture Transmission Base have organized Dongba Degree Qualification Examinations and Expert Specialist Appraisal Examinations, and in accordance with the standard stipulated by the <<Dongba (Daba) Degree Level Assessment Method>>, have determined the degree of:

DABA MASTER (法師 *fashi*)

Special Certificate Holder: Daba

Birthplace: Ninglang County Yongning Township

Lijiang City Yulong Naxi Autonomous County People's Government

Lijiang City Naxi Dongba Culture Transmission Association

November 2012.

19 For some examples of *daba*-led rituals, see *Some Na Ceremonies*, a film by Onci Archei and Ruheng Duoji, produced by Tami Blumenfield (Berkeley Media, 2015). Common rituals include protective rites, healing ceremonies conducted on behalf of someone who is ill, and funerals.

his knowledge in another realm. To me, this document represented little more than a nice acknowledgement of his abilities, but to Tuodi, it meant much more.

'Recognition', defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2002) as 'acknowledgement or admission of an achievement, service, ability, kindness, etc. [...] acknowledgement of something as true, valid, legal, or worthy of consideration; esp. formal acknowledgement conveying approval or sanction of something', takes on new meaning when viewed from Tuodi's perspective. That official sanction became very important to him. As for the others slated to become official intangible cultural heritage transmitters, many of whom have struggled to gain recognition in a society that disparages rural residents with little formal school-based education, I believe the new designations will prove highly meaningful to them, too.

In addition to participating in regional conferences, Tuodi's designation as a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage transmitter meant he could also join conferences for all of the provincial-level transmitters in Yunnan. In fact, three of the four Ninglang County residents recognized as provincial-level intangible cultural heritage transmitters are from Yongning, Tuodi and Archei told me in June 2016. In addition to Ms Yang and the *daba*, an older man from Amiwoh Village named Adjih Tzihdi earned recognition for his talent in creating wall paintings (*bihua*).²⁰

Once I grasped the concept of a provincial-level transmitter at the county level, I asked Tuodi and Archei, 'By now, has heritage designation fully transformed local people's appreciation for these special talents?' The answer was not quite what I expected. Archei responded, 'To put it bluntly, the main question is, 'Is it worth money or not? Can it be sold?' If so, great – everyone will be willing to learn how to do it. If not, it will be very difficult. No one will be willing to pursue it.' 'Like with studying to be a *daba*, right?' I asked. 'Right,' Archei responded. 'No matter how great, how special, if there's no economic benefit, nobody will be willing to study.'²¹

20 That all three transmitters identify as Mosuo is probably less an indication of Mosuo people's extraordinary talents and more a reflection of the tourism-propelled spotlight under which Mosuo people find themselves. With journalists and researchers constantly streaming into the region, it is not surprising that more Mosuo individuals have been identified than those from other ethnic groups. This unevenness underscores the arbitrary nature of the recognition system – quite possibly others in the county are equally deserving, but do not encounter media or researchers in their daily lives like those living closer to the tourism zones do.

21 Personal communication, Luoshui Village, June 2016.

From previous experiences exploring with others possible ways to promote *daba* knowledge in the region, I recognized the truth in his comments. We could praise and admire *daba* all we wanted, but that did not resolve the fundamental rupture in *daba* training that would likely lead to absence of *daba* in future decades.

The spread of intangible cultural heritage

As noted above, few people were aware of the concept of intangible cultural heritage during my 2013 visit to Yongning and Lugu Lake. The concept had not yet penetrated very far. By 2016 it had made serious headway, and not only among the scholarly or governmental community. When I posted a photo of pounded rice cakes on WeChat, along with a short video of a few Badzu friends working together to pound, roll and stamp them, a friend from the same village now living in Shenzhen commented with a grinning emoji, 'Mosuo intangible cultural heritage!' (*Mosuo fei wuzhi wenhua yichan*) (18 June 2016). True, this friend can be considered a cultural worker, making his living from representing ethnic minority cultures like his own at a theme park, but his comment still represented a broader diffusion of the concept than I had previously encountered.

Even more significant than the tongue-in-cheek social media recognition of an everyday process using the intangible heritage terminology was the development by a young university graduate of a sprawling cultural showcase in his family's new hillside home. Dashih Dudjih's father, a hugely popular icon of the nearby lakeside village of Lige, had given his son free reign in designing and filling the exhibit rooms. With the tenacity of someone who had grown up hearing people bemoan the imminent loss of Mosuo culture, plus the financial support of a family flush with hard-earned profits from a successful barbecue business catering to tourists, Dashih Dudjih had spent three years quietly gathering items. By the time he graduated with his marketing degree in 2015, he possessed both the items and a keen eye for presentation. 'I had this idea all along, but I did not want to tell anyone in case I could not make it happen,' Dashih Dudjih explained as he proudly showed Archei, a Hong Kong researcher, and me around shortly after the June 2016 grand opening (see Figure 7.3).²²

22 Archei, a museum director himself, turned to me after we left and said, 'I feel like I just encountered a fifteen-years-prior version of myself.' Like this young man, he too had taken the profits from his family's successful tourist-oriented business to build a cultural centre and

Amazed by this new place and in awe of what the young man had accomplished with his family's help, the sign in front of the weaving exhibit room should not have surprised me, but it did. In Chinese and English, it read:

Traditional Textiles (Intangible Cultural Heritage)

These textiles and w[e]aving tools are the earliest artistic creation proofs of the primitive Mosuo. By using their fantastic wisdom and craftsmanship, the Mosuo people demonstrate their earnest understanding towards life, nature and religion. Each and every textile contains the days' and months' hard work of the Mosuo women, with traditional techniques and natural materials.

Beyond the embrace of the ICH terminology, the text and its earnestness really left an impression on me. Furthermore, the presence of woven goods as exhibit items rather than products designed for sale distinguished them from similar displays I had seen elsewhere. In fact, as Dashih Dudjih kept emphasizing, nothing was for sale in the exhibit area.²³

This lack of concern with financial gain made the cultural centre experience wholly unlike that of the weaving showroom in Walabi. Without external support, the weavers there needed to sell their carefully designed woven shawls and scarves so they could earn some income. Some may disparage their efforts as overly commercialized or too market-oriented, but is that fair? Who among us does not hope to earn income from our work? Instead, the range of showrooms and exhibits demonstrates the breadth of experiences Mosuo people hoped to offer to their visitors, friends and possibly customers. Some operate without much regard to cost, and others depend on visitors' support to stay solvent.

Concerns vary from one scale of heritage-making to another (Harvey 2015). Convincing an international body how deserving an ICH element was would involve moving across several registers: cultural boundaries, national boundaries, and social norms. It therefore poses more challenges

museum. Unlike him, though, Archei had still hoped to earn money from the venture – a goal that the young graduate completely dismissed.

²³ Dashih Dudjih reminded me of a Luoshui friend, Duoji, who had explained a few days earlier that his 'Mosuo-house visit' experience was the only one at the lake that did not attempt to sell anything to the tourists, although the travel agencies that arranged their visit compensated Duoji for hosting them. What Timothy Oakes, in the context of Guizhou 'Tunpu' communities, calls the 'disavowing of commercialization', is apparently a common feature in tourist zones (Oakes 2013: 398).

than demonstrating an individual merits inclusion on a list. Nonetheless, the international recognition remains very important to many Chinese officials, who carefully decide which element(s) to nominate for UNESCO inscription each year.

Is international recognition still necessary? UNESCO and the Torch Festival

In January 2015, over a month after the event had concluded, a terse announcement appeared on the Chinaculture.org website: 'Thirty-four entries were added to the World Intangible Cultural Heritage List at the ninth session of the Intergovernmental Committee held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. [...] The Torch Festival of the Yi ethnic group failed to be included on the list this year' (Chinaculture.org 2015).

For many years, China was the most successful nation in the race to inscribe elements within the UNESCO heritage regime (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013).²⁴ Only 12 of the 46 proposed entries were deferred at the 2014 session. So what happened in Paris, and what explains the failure to be included?

Before the Yi Torch Festival (*Huoba jie*), a frenzy of activity that culminates in late-night spectacles of flaming sticks being carried around predominately Yi cities and villages in Yunnan and Sichuan every summer, was considered for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014, years of work and a huge financial investment went into preparing a complex, multilingual, multimedia application (cf. Tu An et al. 2013). This intensive effort culminated in the rejection, in the presence of the 950 official attendees as well as journalists and other observers at the Paris session, of the proposed inscription, following contentious debate over the inclusion of animal fights for entertainment purposes.²⁵ Participants debated whether these fights fit in with the sustainable development ethos espoused by the international body.

24 For an updated list of UNESCO-designated intangible cultural heritage in China, see <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/state/cn>.

25 The ninth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage took place at UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, from 24 to 28 November 2014. Committee members included Afghanistan, Algeria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Hungary, India, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Mongolia, Namibia, Nigeria, Peru, Republic of Korea, Saint Lucia, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda and Uruguay.

The text from the decision document, after praising many elements of the Torch Festival, includes the following explanations for the deferral.

R.1: Although the Torch festival includes different cultural expressions and practices transmitted from generation to generation, *additional information would be needed on those of its components that involve animal fights to explain whether these are compatible with the requirement of respect for the sensitivities of diverse communities, groups and individuals, and respect for sustainable development*; [emphasis added]

R.2: Although its inscription on the Representative List could contribute to the visibility of the intangible cultural heritage, *additional information would be needed to explain how some components of the festival that involve the use of living animals for entertainment could encourage dialogue among communities that have a different sensitivity*. [emphasis added]

1. [The Committee] Decides to refer the nomination of *Torch Festival of the Yi people* to the submitting State Party and invites it to resubmit the nomination to the Committee for examination during a following cycle. [emphasis in original] (UNESCO 2014: 34-35)

For the individuals who had worked so hard to advance the nomination, the experience at the Paris session felt like a huge slap in the face. Also, as the Torch Festival was the sole nomination advanced by China for that year, its deferral from inclusion on the list represented a lost opportunity for another element's inscription.

'Should we reapply?' a leading government official asked one of the presenters. Humiliated by the entire affair, she responded, 'Forget it.' Frustrated by the narrow focus on elements of the festival that involved animal fights and animal sacrifice by *bimo* ritual specialists, she felt that the Paris participants overlooked the deeper beauty of a festival honouring the Fire Spirit, allowing only for a sanitized view of heritage. In any case, the Torch Festival already enjoyed widespread official recognition within China, recognized on multiple levels and officially designated national-level intangible cultural heritage. Why bother further pursuing international designation from a body that failed to recognize that sometimes intangible cultural heritage involved messy elements?

Abandoning the pursuit of international recognition represented a reassertion of heritage as valued within China, something that the 2011 Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of China also emphasizes. Certainly, approbation from an international body remains important. But with intangible cultural heritage firmly enshrined within multiple levels of Chinese governance (cf.

Holbig and Maags 2012; Maags 2015), the international approval has become less crucial than in an earlier era, even just a decade before. After all, China has its own, trademarked ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ logo.²⁶

Conclusion

All over China, heritage designation and its associated spotlight has raised some important issues. What counts as heritage, especially intangible heritage? Who decides what ‘counts’, and who holds the right to question a designation deemed legitimate by others? Moreover, does heritage even matter?

To return to the question I posed earlier in this chapter – Should we care about intangible heritage? – I argue that yes, we should, because it has become an important category affirming value in areas long devalued by outsiders.²⁷ Much like the transformation of ethnic classification from a crucial issue worth fighting the government on to one no longer needing official attention since tourists and media have given *de facto* recognition to the *Mosuo* category (Blumenfield Kedar 2010), intangible heritage has been reconstituted as a site of significance to those needing to deploy the category – even though many people still do not participate in those conversations. As the Chengdu Recommendations, issued at the Chengdu International Conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage in Celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, made clear, the concept has ‘reconfigured’ relationships and created a ‘fundamentally new paradigm’:

The concept of ‘intangible cultural heritage’ has entered the vocabulary of languages to an extent that few could have imagined a decade earlier. The Convention’s [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage] ground-breaking definition of intangible cultural

26 The logo can be found on the CCTV English website: <http://www.cctv.com/english/special/C18595/01/index.shtml>. Note that a year after their unsuccessful application for UNESCO ICH status, the Chinese delegation did succeed in getting another form of intangible heritage designated: The ‘Twenty-Four Solar Terms’ were inscribed on the ‘Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity’ in 2016. See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/the-twenty-four-solar-terms-knowledge-in-china-of-time-and-practices-developed-through-observation-of-the-suns-annual-motion-00647>.

27 As Holtorf 2010 has discussed, the process of valuing heritage encloses a specific sensibility, one that is gradually expanding its purview. See also Shepherd 2009 and Swain 2013.

heritage has fundamentally reconfigured the relations between the bearers and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage and the officials, experts and institutions involved in its safeguarding. By emphasizing the active agency of communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, and their indispensable role in recognizing their own intangible heritage and taking responsibility for its safeguarding, the Convention has established a fundamentally new paradigm. (UNESCO 2013: 1)

But we should also move beyond deciding whether these are analytical categories worth exploring and investigate the consequences of their embrace – or lack of awareness of their existence. The recommendations also address the tension between ‘transmission and innovation and between safeguarding and commercial use’ (UNESCO 2013: 2), and indeed, the danger of ossifying cultural forms under the new, yet strangely familiar intangible heritage category, is one to guard against. As Taylor reminds us, ‘The production of culture is even more important to capitalism than in the past’ (2014: 164). How, then, can this production itself become a site for exploitative relations? What power differentials can this encompass? With regard to the examples shared above, what does it mean when a wealthy family possesses means to showcase cultural elements without regard to selling them, while another family facing financial pressure must select those elements that seem viable in a rapidly changing commercial market? And what effects do the presence of new systems of designations have on gender roles within a particular village and among members of a cultural group? As we have seen above, both women and men have embraced the intangible cultural heritage label, but their abilities to capitalize on it may vary. Women like Ms. Yang have the flexibility to leave when needed, but usually remain involved with household tasks like cooking and farming that often keep them close to home, if they are not out working in another town or city. As for other weavers in Walabi, weaving and its monetization have allowed them to attend to their families, allowing them to earn some income without leaving home. Meanwhile, men in Mosuo communities typically have fewer consistent, daily responsibilities and thus have greater liberty to travel to distant conferences or move from place to place. Ms. Yang’s son Nima, for example, has become an important partner in the effort to market Mosuo woven goods under her trademark.²⁸ This is by no means to say that women never leave home or that men never stay home, but only to

²⁸ One wonders, though: would a container bearing his image be just as successful a marketing tool, or is the female weaver’s silhouette a more effective label element?

suggest that as cultural elements are redefined through the heritage system, analysing gendered mobility will be particularly important.

Deconstructing the discursive power of cultural production and its attendant effects, and the ways in which these discourses become embraced, incorporated, ignored, and eventually challenged (cf. Chio 2014; Oakes 2013; Svensson 2012), remain important tasks for those observing the rapidly changing landscape for heritage in China. In the meantime, we would do well to keep in mind that much is at stake for those immersed in the discourses and productions – as well as for those who are left out of them.

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About the author

Tami Blumenfield, Assistant Professor of Asian Studies, Furman University, Greenville, USA

