



Heritage making after the earthquake

Safeguarding the intangible heritage of the Qiang people in China

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After the 8.0-magnitude Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the Chinese State set about to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as a part of their efforts to support the ethnic Qiang people and their cultural life.¹ The Qiang were hit hard, with more than 80 percent of their population living across severely affected areas. The Chinese government led swift and comprehensive relief efforts, placing a particular emphasis on recovering the Qiang culture. The inscription of selected Qiang cultural practices as national ICH, as well as the rescue and promotion of the newly-nominated ICH, became a major part of the post-earthquake heritage recovery plan.

Soon after the disaster, four Qiang cultural practices (Qiang Sheepskin Drum Dance, Qiang Embroidery Skills, Qiang New Year, and Qiang Polyphonic Singing) were included on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China, becoming the first time that a large number of ICH of such a small ethnic group were added to the national list at once. In 2009, the Qiang New Year was inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding sponsored by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). With such an unusually fast inscription of the Qiang ICH into the Chinese national and UNESCO lists, there was considerable state funding and governmental planning invested in the rescue and promotion of Qiang ICH and their stewards. For instance, annual celebrations of the Qiang New Year have been held in the Qiang concentrated counties by

the local governments since then. Thanks to these initiatives, local industry has been rebuilt and transformed mainly through an emerging heritage tourism. At the local level, these newly-heritagized cultural practices have thrived in many Qiang villages where associated practices such as worship, healing, exorcism, dance rituals, as well as embroidery and watchtower construction skills, were given space and resources to continue to be practiced.

This heritagization—which emerged as a matter of urgent safeguarding needs—should be seen as a State and scholarly-led process. Selected Chinese scholars worked closely with the PRC Ministry of Culture and local culture and sports bureaus in order to interpret, promote, and regulate the implementation of ICH safeguarding measures. Such scholar and State collaborations have been established since the beginning of the Chinese ICH

safeguarding campaign in the early 2000s. The Chinese ICH safeguarding campaign therefore transformed the status, significance, and even the practices of the heritagized cultural traditions in Qiang. The campaign also changed how the Chinese general public perceive and interact with such items.

Challenges for ICH safeguarding

What I refer to as the ICH knowledge-making process in China includes the following three aspects. First, sponsored by the central government, the ICH safeguarding campaign has grown to be a major means to protect and celebrate traditional and ethnic cultural practices as national treasures in China. ICH is a nascent yet politically energizing concept in contemporary Chinese

¹ A Qiang Shibi and A Qiang Sheepskin Drum Dance Master performing at a government-sponsored Qiang New Year celebration. Photo by author.

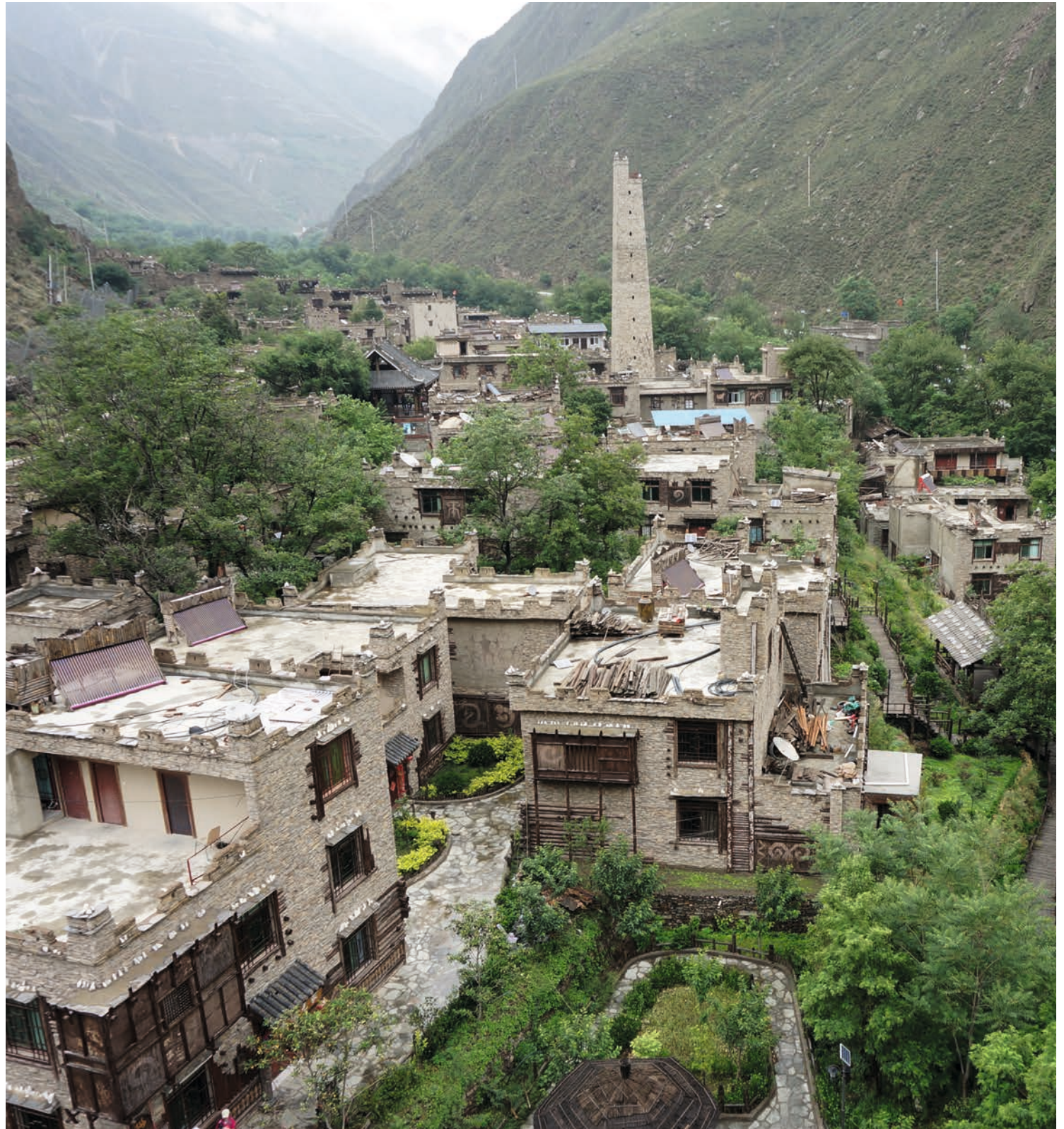
campaigns for cultural heritage protection and promotion. When introduced to the Chinese public in the early 2000s, intangible heritage was seen as a morphologically and culturally alien concept. Nevertheless, China is now the country hosting the largest number of elements on the UNESCO-recognized Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Chinese Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage now includes almost 1300 elements.

Second, the heritagization of folk rituals is a process of knowledge production and identity transformation in which the folk ritual is officially reinterpreted and upheld as national heritage. Adopting and adapting UNESCO's discourse on ICH, the campaign grants heritage status to what was previously considered to be private, old, local, and once denigrated cultural practices, allowing these to enter the public and collective Chinese cultural life. Described as 'feudal superstition' and officially banned or condemned in the past, some of the now-celebrated ICH items were long despised for contributing little importance to Chinese culture in aesthetic, intellectual, or social terms. In this context, the heritagization that took place is a culturalizing process that integrates 'backward' and 'superstitious' practices into new and promising "cultural categories".² The *culturalizing* process recognizes and represents the folk rituals' political viability, scientific validity, educational utility, and social positivity, essential for the nationalist construction of a modernizing multi-ethnic China. The making of the Qiang New Year as national ICH is a case in point: this Qiang worship ritual is reinterpreted as an occasion for the Qiang to express "respect and admiration to all spirits, the motherland, and the ancestors",³ to "promote ethnic unity and harmony",⁴ to be educated about civilized conducts, as well as to celebrate the 'positive energy' (*zheng nengliang* 正能量) embedded in the officially-acclaimed 'miraculous reconstruction' after the earthquake.

Last, but not least, along with the state-led ICH safeguarding campaign, the local stakeholders' perceptions and performances of their own traditional cultural practices have been transformed. In large part, this is because heritagized practices are now articulated within the terms of 'multivocality'—that is, where a folk ritual is used to display multiple diverse voices and meanings when presented to different audiences and performed by varied practitioners.⁵ The protection awarded by ICH designation provided new resources and opportunities for the folk rituals to survive. Admittedly, the promotion of the Qiang ICH led to the development of both performative and sacred aspects of these rituals. Villagers safely and creatively took advantage of the preeminence of ritual practices, such as the continuation of the New Year celebration and *shibi* rituals in funerals and house construction, to fulfill their responsibilities and reinforce social relations (*Shibi* are the Qiang ritual specialists who monitor major Qiang rituals at funerals, weddings, and Qiang New Year). Such responsibilities and relations form the backbone of everyday community life, which in turn provides socially-accepted meanings and artifacts of the manifestation of cultural heritage. At the same time, the local Qiang added new meaning and function to the heritage cultural practices. For example, after the earthquake *shibi* were frequently asked to perform the 'sending the red' ritual to bless villagers' new cars, in which specialists place a piece of 'blessed' red cloth under the windshield of the vehicle. In the past, *shibi* would only perform such a ritual when worshipping the spirits.

Discussion

My long-term field research for this case study, since 2012, cautions against ignoring the politics of interpretation and safeguarding that may alienate local practices from local communities, turning the ICH inscribed



A bird's-eye view of the reconstructed Qiang village. Photo by author.

practices into showcases for state power and nationalist agendas. In the events that unfolded as part of urgent heritage-safeguarding planning, the viewpoints and expectations of the Qiang ICH stakeholders and ordinary villagers were marginalized. I argue that their right to define their own cultural practices in their own terms as well as employ agency in the way that they would

have preferred to protect such practices were disregarded.

Local community members and scholars alike have also been concerned with the influence of tourism and a market economy on the transmission of these ICH practices.

For example, the celebration of the Qiang New Year, or the practices and skills involved in traditional embroidery, were mobilized as commodities for tourism consumption.⁶ Many stewards of the Qiang New Year, Qiang Sheepskin Drum Dance, and Qiang Embroidery Skills became representatives not only for the noted cultural practices, but also for Qiang earthquake victims. They were popularly invited to perform their skills and techniques at various events to demonstrate the survival of endangered practices as well as the resilience of the Qiang population as a whole. However, increasingly the Qiang *shibi* were accused by villagers of performing 'fake' and out-of-context rituals for the sole purpose of entertaining tourists at the expense of engaging in blasphemy of spirits or ancestors. *Shibi* and their apprentices expressed similar concerns with offending the spirits in such

performances, preferring to create special rituals just for tourism events, while retaining the authentic practice for its sacred purposes.

In addition, there was a lack of sustainable planning or funding strategies involved. The emergent Qiang ICH preservation campaign seemed to come to an end along with the completion of the State-led reconstruction projects in 2011. My research in the affected Qiang communities shows that very little long-term effort was devoted to the transmission of these ICH within local communities when the media and scholarly attention on the Qiang faded away. This contrast leads to two main issues surrounding the newly-heritagized cultural practices. On the one hand, the lack of funding or cultural preservation planning may prompt villagers to participate more in for-profit performance of their traditions, misrepresenting the social and cultural meanings of these practices and essentializing and further marginalizing rituals and the Qiang. On the other hand, the short-lived preservation campaign failed to preserve, and sometimes even destroyed, the socio-ecological context surrounding the tradition—especially the human-environmental and inter-personal relations involved—in which such practices originate and develop.⁷ Although there were cases in which individual villagers re-discovered values through these practices, culturally insensitive safeguarding programs may cause ICH items to lose their attachment to community values, reducing their liveliness and relevance.

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Notes

- 1 The Qiang people are one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC). They have a comparatively small population of 300,000 and have long been economically, politically, and culturally marginalized.
- 2 Gao, B. 2014. 'How Does Superstition Become Intangible Cultural Heritage in Postsocialist China?' *Positions* 22 (3):551-72.
- 3 ICH China. 2013. 'Qiang Nian 羌年' [Qiang New Year Festival]. <http://www.ihchina.cn/4/10460.html> (accessed 7 Feb 2018).
- 4 ICH China. 2013. 'Daizu Poshuijie 傣族泼水节' [Dai Water-splashing Festival]. <http://www.ihchina.cn/5/11073.html> (accessed 7 Feb 2018).
- 5 McDowell, J.H. 2010. 'Rethinking Folklorization in Ecuador: Multivocality in the Expressive Contact Zone', *Western Folklore* 69:181-209.
- 6 Le Mentec, K. & Zhang, Q. 2017. 'Heritagization of disaster ruins and ethnic culture in China: Recovery plans after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake', *China Information* 31(3):349-370.
- 7 Zhang, Q. & Barrios, R.E. 2017. 'Imagining Culture: The Politics of Culturally Sensitive Reconstruction and Resilience-building in Post-Wenchuan Earthquake China', in Companion, M. & Chaiken, M. (eds) *Responses to Disasters and Climate Change: Understanding Vulnerability and Fostering Resilience*. CRC Press, pp.93-102.