

Community Participation in Ethnic Minority Cultural Heritage Management in China: A Case Study of Xianrendong Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village

Judy Xu

UCL Institute of Archaeology

Heritage protection in China has long been considered as the responsibility of the government. However, over the last 20 years, a number of heritage projects, mainly in ethnic minority regions, have attempted to engage with local communities. These seem to be an attractive alternative to top-down approaches. This paper explores the implications of a bottom-up approach for Chinese ethnic minority heritage management through an examination of the Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village project in Xianrendong in Yunnan province. It is a result of my fascination with the project's concept and my desire to understand its key characteristics, application and potential for future development in China. After a discussion of cultural performance, modernisation and inside/outside encounters, I conclude by suggesting that well-planned and well-informed community participation, with realistic control, contributes to reconciling tourism and cultural heritage conservation.

Keywords

China, community participation, cultural tourism, ethnic minority, heritage management

Introduction

'Empowerment movements' since the mid 1980s have made words such as 'participation', 'bottom-up planning' and 'indigenous voice' increasingly common in the worlds of development and heritage management (Henkel and Stirrat 2001: 168). In the West, these new concepts have become widely accepted in cultural heritage/resource management projects; incorporating community values, acknowledging the importance of indigenous knowledge and empowering local people can be easily found in their objectives. The internationally known Ozette Archaeological Project (Kirk with Daugherty 1974, 1978) and the Pueblo of Zuni Community Archaeology Project (started in early 1970s, Anyon and Ferguson 1995), both in North America, are two early examples (see Marshall 2002 and contributors for more examples in Australia, New Zealand, North America and the rest of the world). The publication of the journal *Public Archaeology* in 2000 suggests such projects are no longer merely located within heritage/cultural resource management, but have also become topics for serious academic research (Marshall 2002: 214). Meanwhile, many case studies articulate the importance and effectiveness of active local participation. By studying five living history sites in North America which involve native people in the interpretation of their cultures, Peers (1999: 59) concludes that their control over the representation of heritage is "essential to cultural survival and self-determination". In the same vein, Macdonald (1997) argues that local people cannot be regarded as merely the passive recipients of an external world and the objects of the "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990). They may also attempt to actively counter those externally imposed images and to construct alternative visions of their history and culture.

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However, with the rising view of participation as a “new orthodoxy” and “instant fad”, there has been a growing critique of the practice of participatory approaches in the development literature (Chambers 1997; Hailey 2001; Henkel and Stirrat 2001). Similarly, in the heritage sphere, concerns have been raised that the involvement of the local community, especially in the case of indigenous people in cultural representations, reinforces the stereotyped image of primitiveness and exoticness to entertain cultural others rather than challenging it (Francis 1992; MacCannell 1984). Another major concern is that without real understanding of local needs and effective mechanisms to motivate active community involvement, participatory forms of democracy can only be realised on a formal institutional level (Hailey 2001). The wide range of issues and debates on this approach, as demonstrated above, indicate that there are different possibilities and implications rather than an uncritical view of ‘participation’, which can be workable in all circumstances.

In China, for example, it is noteworthy that bottom-up approaches were rarely adopted in the past. China has a different cultural context from the western world (Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars 1993) and centralised power allows limited space for effective grass-roots participation. Nevertheless, it is a slightly different case in ethnic minority areas. The 1984 Law of Regional Ethnic Autonomy (amended in 2001) states that minorities have the right of autonomy including practising and developing their own cultures and religions and using their own languages. At the same time, the overwhelming problem of poverty in these remote and less developed minority areas urges effective methods to improve the livelihood of the locals without destroying their distinctive cultural heritage. It thus makes it possible to try different approaches to heritage management in the ethnic minority regions.

As China has undergone (and is undergoing) a dramatic change since the economic reforms in 1978, both in terms of economic development and cultural heritage conservation, the shift in the perception of minority cultures among the majority Han people¹ is significant. Minority cultures had long been seen with distortion and prejudice as nothing but “backward” and “low profile” at every level of Chinese society in history (Yin 2002: 4). The ideological basis was that the majority Han claimed to have a superior degree of civilisation and committed themselves to bringing the ‘cultureless’ minorities up to a universal standard of progress or modernity through “civilising projects” (Harrell 1996: 8-12). Although 56 ethnic groups were recognized by the Ethnic Identification project of the 1950s (Fei 1988), the position of minority cultures within the state system had always been quite subordinate to the Han culture. As a consequence there has been a fast growing trend in the spread of Han Chinese language and culture in the minority areas as part of ‘modernisation’, at the expense of those of the minorities (Yin 2002). It is only in the last decade that the value of ethnic cultures has been appreciated throughout the country. Many factors account for the shift of perception: the rise of ethnic tourism; the growth of the multiculturalism concept promoted by the national government; an awareness among Chinese academics of the problem of cultural distinction posed by mass development and urbanisation (Su et al. 1996; Yin 2002); and the contribution of intellectuals and scholars who have devoted themselves to ethnic minority culture protection.

Ethnic minority culture is now considered to be an important and integral part of a collective heritage in China, especially in provinces with diverse ethnic populations such as Yunnan and Guizhou. With official support, many recent projects in these regions have been looking for new models of ethnic minority heritage management. Examples include: the UNESCO workshop on “Cultural Heritage Management and Tourism: Models for Cooperation among Stakeholders” in Lijiang, the World Heritage Site in Yunnan (Duan 2000); the Chinese-Norwegian cooperative project on establishing the first Chinese ecomuseum in Guizhou (Su et al. 1996); the “Wenhai Ecolodge” project, another exemplar of community-led eco-tourism management in a Naxi village in Lijiang area, Yunnan province (Yang F.Q. pers. comm.) and the “Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village” project (Yin 2002) (hereafter referred to as the project). There has been little research that offers an evaluation of these models and examines the implications of the participatory approach involved. Key questions are: Does the participatory approach make any difference to the relations between local host and tourist guest, ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’? Is tourism hospitality from the local perspective a purely commercial endeavour? Is any success in heritage conservation vitiated by changes (if any) which tourism brought to the local village?

Bearing these questions in mind, in April 2006, I conducted field research in Yunnan. I spent one week collecting policy documents and interviewing key scholars in Kunming, and two weeks in Xianrendong, one of the pilot sites of the project. The methodology I used in the village combined participant observation, a small-scale questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with the local population. I intentionally considered different age ranges, sexes and social statuses in distributing the questionnaire. I got 37 out of 809 (Xianrendong demographic statistics 2005) questionnaires back. Out of them I picked 30 informants with whom I conducted semi-structured interviews. I used a tape-recorder and I made the interviews as informal and casual as possible so that my informants would feel relaxed and open to sensitive questions like income status.

The Heritage Project and the Xianrendong Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village

The “Construction of Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village” project (1999-2004) is an adaptation of the ecomuseum paradigm introduced to China in the 1990s (Su et al. 1996). The site considered here is the Xianrendong village, located in Yunnan Province, China’s most ethnically diversified area (Fig. 1). The natives call themselves Sani people, a branch of Yi in the official ethnic classification. The local Sani culture has preserved a strong identity in the village due to relative geographical isolation and strong adherence to the traditional way of life. At the same time, poverty has been a longstanding problem. During the 1990s various income-generating options were explored at a local level but little improvement was made to the village economy. Tourism development resulted in chaos and conflicts between neighbouring villages due to the lack of effective management (Li 2001; Rong 2002). In 1997, a tourist resort with good facilities was built. The village began to benefit from the infrastructure improvements and subsequently became a pilot site of the project in 1999. The whole village, as many villagers recall, has been experiencing a dramatic change in all aspects of local life since then. Implications of the project for the local community will be discussed later. The distinctive Sani ethnic culture and the peaceful rural landscape (Fig. 2) are attract-

ing a growing volume of visitors from both within the country and overseas (130,000 visitors in 2005, Xianrendong Tourism Income Statistics).



Figure 1. Location map of Xianrendong village of the Sani-Yi people in Yunnan Province, China.

Some site-specific factors that influence positively the reception of participative approaches in Xianrendong are worth noting at this point. First of all, Xianrendong benefits from its geographic location within a tourist resort and in Yunnan Province: the resort outside the village not only provides infrastructure and brings tourists, but also becomes a shield preserving the purity of the village; Yunnan has long been characterised as a region of diverse ethnic cultures, and political tension is rarely reported from this area. In this context government may be willing to offer more freedom to those

seeking bottom-up approaches in this area than elsewhere. Secondly, Xianrendong as a community is exceptional among rural villages in most parts of China for its unusually well organised and cohesive society. It has maintained a communal way of life and this makes it easier to resist outside control and achieve goals requiring collective contribution. The elected local leaders are often the most capable people in the village, which may lead to a more united community and a smooth decision-making process.

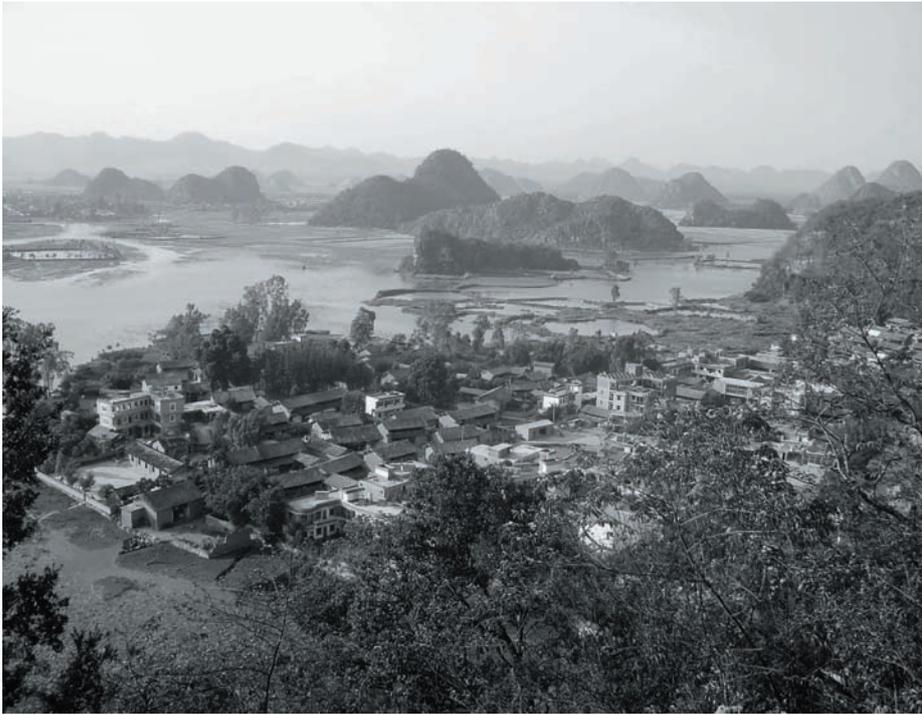


Figure 2. A view of Xianrendong village from the top of the hill near the village entrance.

According to the initiator, Professor Yin Shaoting, an anthropologist at the Yunnan University in Kunming, the project stresses the concept of local ownership of cultural heritage. The key notion is that the local population can take back control of their heritage and traditional ways of life with some outside encouragement, assistance and support if the culture is preserved *in situ* and in a holistic way (Yin, S.T. pers. comm.).

Local People's Engagement with the Heritage Project

Financial benefits for the locals from participating in tourism do not necessarily demonstrate long term success. With rapid development of tourism, it is not difficult to recognise unfavorable changes occurring in some host societies both in China and elsewhere. One possible solution to the problem, as many scholars propose (McKhann 2001; Su et al. 1996; Yin 2002), is the involvement of local people in managing their own cultural heritage. Here, the definition of 'participation' in the project context should first be

articulated. What kind of community participation is the project looking for? How do local people get involved? And furthermore, if we don't know how locals receive these new ideas such as 'participation', 'cultural heritage' and 'conservation' in the specific context, there is no way of judging how well the project has met its aims.

Local Participation in the Heritage Management at Xianrendong

According to the working report, the project team, consisting of scholars, government officials and villagers' representatives, invested considerable time, emotion and energy building up trust and shared understanding between themselves and local people at a very early stage: "They conducted door to door interviews and organised village assemblies, explained the purpose, significance and content of the project, solicited suggestions from villagers and encouraged their active participation" (Yin 2002: 17). After raising awareness, mechanisms were developed for sustainable involvement. For example, local villagers were encouraged to participate in heritage tourism in the form of family hotels: economic independence in tourism is overwhelmingly seen by outside scholars as well as the locals as a huge achievement, ensuring that the local community gained realistic power and self-esteem within the wider society. Since the young generation plays a critical role in conserving traditional cultures, special attention was paid to raise their interests and encourage their participation. The project also fostered the formation of new local groups and organisations such as a seniors' association and a women's home and supported the equal involvement of both men and women. The scholars defined themselves as facilitators and withdrew from the village once these systems were established (Yin, S.T. pers. comm.).

However, we apparently cannot assume that the community is a homogeneous entity. In a traditional society in which people rely much on kinship relations, there are numerous situations where individuals find it easier, or become accustomed, not to participate (Cleaver 2001: 45). For example, a middle-aged couple I interviewed had not been much involved in the heritage project for two main reasons: a) they cannot speak the local Han dialect well, so that it becomes difficult for them to communicate with visitors from outside the village; b) they are both good farmers and are relatively well off as a result. In this way, non-participation is both a 'rational' strategy and a reflection of their considerations about costs and benefits. Furthermore, poor people may lack the resources for effective participation and be forced to remain in existing livelihood strategies. The imbalanced distribution of economic benefits brought by tourism within the Xianrendong community has been recognised in anthropological research (Rong 2002). Due to the different 'capitals' held by individuals on the basis of personal charm, social roles, financial status, access to information, and even geographical location, the results of participation in the heritage project vary. Nor can we oversimplify ideas about the benefits of participation to individuals and overlook the potential links between inclusion and possible subordination. As more villagers become stakeholders in the tourism industry, issues of power and control will further shape heritage management in the future.

Local Notions of Tourism Hospitality, Cultural Performance and Host-Guest Encounters

In response to the local needs of economic development, the project used various means to regenerate the area. One of them was to encourage local home-based guestrooms to accommodate holidaymakers within the traditional lifeways of the village community. The local accommodation in Xianrendong is called ‘nongjiale’, literally ‘a happy farmhouse’ (Fig. 3). Despite the project’s ‘ethnic’ and ‘ecological’ emphasis, local villagers do not have much understanding of these modern words, whereas ‘nongjiale’ much better reflects their understanding of the village’s character - its charm for tourists derives from rural life. Most tourists are from nearby urban cities like Kunming and seek ‘rustic’ experience distinct from the urban life. The villagers have strong awareness of the differences between ‘city’ and ‘rural village’. The term ‘Happy Farm House’ is widely embraced by locals and becomes more than merely a marketing creation. It therefore acquires its real meaning in the local sense. This city/village split can be considered as the basis of local attitudes to receiving tourists, as well as migration to bigger cities.



Figure 3. Nong Jia Le becomes a main resource of tourism income for local villagers.

It is also noteworthy that Sani are famous for their hospitality in this region. They perceive themselves as hosts rather than just service providers. The custom of singing ‘songs of toast’ to welcome guests from far away is now enacted in the family hotels. I would suggest that it is an adaptation of traditional customs to social and economic

changes. They are adding new meanings to the existing traditions. The arrival of tourists is anticipated. Most villagers are much more at ease and confident to face the visitors than a decade ago, because of several years' contacts with people foreign to their culture, together with the experience and knowledge gained in the project. A heightened ethnic consciousness and realistic economic autonomy motivate them to show personal dignity and gain self-respect in their interaction with tourists rather than losing themselves in profit-seeking activities.

Like most ethnic cultural heritage sites, Xianrendong has folk music and dances in organised campfire evenings as requested by visitors. Heritage representations, in the form of cultural performances for tourists, are criticised by many writers as 'inauthentic' and having negative effects on the performer society (Francis 1992; Greenwood 1989; MacCannell 1992). The major concern is that commercialisation for tourism will fossilise culture as a museum object or make the living culture "cease to evolve naturally" (MacCannell 1984: 388). At one extreme, it may mean that people "struggle to get the details correct for any particular performance in the hope that detail somehow equals authenticity" (Ucko 2000: 72), or at the other that the living culture starts to become a tourist-created hybrid which cleverly borrows ideas from other cultures. Fortunately, it seems not to be the case at this site, at least not so far. In Xianrendong, it is important to note that locals think that the performance is not just intended for tourists, but also for themselves. Most villagers attend (or used to attend) the dances regularly as a cohesive social activity. The performers are exclusively local Sani who are still farming in the land or doing other occupations in the daytime and "having fun dancing and singing in the evening" (interview with an old villager). So these performances are not separate events, but are incorporated into the social life of the village. With control over local heritage management and the full involvement of members of the community of all ages, they are simply being themselves in their own milieu. In this context, the performance is open to change. In fact, innovations within local culture are encouraged in order to continue to be relevant to the people and modern life.

It would be interesting to discuss the motivation of the villagers who are watching and performing. The overwhelming majority of the locals like watching the performances again and again. They come either as an audience or a performer for fun. To explain the source of such 'fun' despite its repetitive nature, I would suggest that the villagers are in fact as curious as the tourists. The difference is that they are not curious about what is performed, but about the reactions of the tourists and the interactions during the performance. In the process of interacting with or observing tourists who are often 'cultural others', locals raise their awareness of their own culture and form a notion of their own ethnic identities. So it may be irrelevant in this case to ask how far the culture presented in the campfire evening shows will be perceived as theirs to be watched and re-watched. But, similar to what McKean (1989: 132) argues in his discussion of Balinese tourism, the villagers find their identity as Sani sharply framed by the mirror that tourism holds up to them, and has led many of them to celebrate their own traditions with continued vitality.

Discussion

Implications for the Community: Changes in the Village

Change, in the form of modernisation, is evident in the contemporary Xianrendong society. It is obvious that “a syncretic process” has occurred here in which elements of tradition and modernity are mixed (McKean 1989: 125). Traditions adapted for tourists result in innovations within the culture.

In terms of perceptions, conditions of life have also been challenged along with the social and economic changes. Taking housing as an example, most local Sani prefer clean and bright new houses. As a result many ‘stylish’ new houses based on a typical rural Chinese image of modern life were constructed, gradually destroying the harmonious native landscape (Fig. 4). Modernisation and the shift to a mixed tourism and subsistence economy have had a number of effects on occupational roles as well. Many locals hope that their children will receive better education and get permanent urban employment in more skilled work. Although more than half of them claim that they love farming, none of them hope that their children will carry on doing it.



Figure 4. A stylish new house at Xianrendong.

The locals value the changes and the dramatic improvements in their livelihoods. Development for a better life and education is an intrinsic need of local community. But the meaning of development should be first clarified. To some extent I would agree with Macdonald’s (1997) argument in his analysis of a Gaelic heritage centre, follow-

ing McKean's notion of 'cultural involution', that "development here is not accepted as meaning conversion into an industrial, urban archetype but as strengthening and extending the local and traditional.... 'Change' is not imposed from the outside, but fully incorporated within it [local culture]". However, it is obviously over-simplistic to assert that such 'development' leads to the conservation and elaboration of the traditional. Even if development and change are carried out in local terms, they are still partly autonomous and may lead to unintended consequences. Rather than worrying about changes, it may be better to invest more resources in educating the locals to recognise and manipulate these changes to their advantage.

Implications for Chinese Heritage Management: Lessons and Challenges

Community participation under the project's theoretical model has profound implications for Chinese ethnic minority cultural heritage management. It provides rural ethnic societies with an alternative to development either under outside control or direct incorporation into a national unified plan. It provides a number of lessons: the tremendous importance of a sophisticated planning process setting the strategies and techniques for the effective participation at an early stage; pre-tourism consultations and training are important to provide information about the project and to raise cultural awareness; the local community should be given access to mentorship and guidance too, as they tackle the difficult and long-term process of conserving natural and cultural resources in the context of heritage tourism; only if the local group is truly assured of benefits and assigned full responsibility, will the advantages of community participation be realised. Nevertheless, the self-interest of local culture and goodwill in conserving it are obviously far less than enough to achieve sustainable heritage management in China. In a site where the local group has control of its heritage, the practical ability to sympathetically exploit the resources, and, more importantly, the capability to manipulate outside assistance in development is a necessary requirement. In Xianrendong there is still much space for improvement.

First of all, the sustainability of these 'abilities' and 'capabilities' needs more cautious examination. The fact that Xianrendong has an exceptionally capable leader, Huang Shaozhong, has been widely recognized (Yin, S.T. pers. comm.). The disparity of capability in the management committee can be a potential problem in the village. A possible solution may be a mechanism to provide more opportunities for qualified young villagers to join in management activities. A mix of both formal (i.e. higher education) and informal education (e.g. on-job training, oral teaching by old people) can play a vital role in fostering potential leaders in the heritage conservation enterprise.

Secondly, the impact of tourism on the local environment is another key challenge that the site as well as other places in China are facing. Pollution is produced by the activities of both local society and tourists. To solve the problem, awareness should be raised both in the village, with Huang primarily responsible for it, and among tourists; the value of Xianrendong as an Ethnic Cultural and Ecological Village should be strengthened in order to develop more environmentally sensitive behaviour. As the trend in Xianrendong towards economic dependence on tourism continues, the effects of the

influx of tourists on the contemporary Sani village will certainly develop in unexpected ways in the future. Therefore, cooperation between the community and outside scholars is needed to improve the local competence to communicate the site's value and regulate tourist behaviour. Capacity building is a continuous and long-term mission.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would suggest that well-planned and well-informed community participation with genuine power-sharing may contribute to ethnic dignity and cultural pride and lead to a commitment to sustainable cultural conservation. Ultimately, power relations will be a key factor shaping the future of Xianrendong heritage management. If power and control is balanced between the local community and the government authorities as well as outside economic interests, tourists' demands, and the ethnic society, community participation can work in a communal village like Xianrendong as in other Chinese ethnic minority regions.

The Western cases mentioned in the beginning are not merely for the purpose of comparison, but also an indication of the lack of Southeast Asian cases studies in the literature. Within a different social, political and cultural context, the community participative approach in heritage management undoubtedly presents distinctive features. Chinese perspectives, as well as those of other countries in Southeast Asia, are thus much needed to contribute to the discussion on collaborative heritage management and cultural tourism across the world. This is the aim of this paper and of my continuing research on this topic.

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Notes

1. In China, the term 'ethnic minorities' (shaoshu minzu in Chinese) refers to 55 state recognised ethnic groups which make up 8.41% of the total population (according to the national demographic statistics in 2000). The overwhelming majority of people (91.59%) belong to the ethnic group called Han.

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