



The Invention of Tradition in China

Story of a Village and
a Nation Remade

Suvi Rautio

palgrave
macmillan

The Invention of Tradition in China

“Rautio’s wide-ranging and poignantly self-reflexive ethnography of Meili, a Dong village in Guizhou, moves adeptly from dominant, mainstream perspectives on what constitutes Dong “heritage” to the deeply intimate and individual experiences of gendered expectations, social obligations, and economic pressures facing rural ethnic minorities in China today. It is also a significant contribution to studies of conflict, kinship, and generational changes in a place targeted for “development” by local, state, and global forces. From the analysis of architectural renderings to a detailed and deeply personal account of Dong funerary rituals, this book illuminates how profoundly the heritage industry and its associated discourses of tradition have pervaded into the everyday lives and identities of Meili villagers, especially in an era of declining rural populations and increasing political investments in heritage projects across the country.”

—Jenny Chio, *Author of* A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China

“In ‘The Invention of Tradition in China’ Suvi Rautio takes the reader on an evocative journey into the heart of a Dong community in Guizhou Province, where personal and shared quests for progress interweave with the intricacies of heritage-in-the-making. Along the way, Rautio introduces the reader to the diverse and situated lives of those who navigate a terrain marked by modernity and heritage—from bureaucrats and planners to renowned artists and village leaders. With a strikingly nuanced methodology and self-reflexive approach, Rautio avoids the traps of ahistoricism and exoticism in examining the perseverance and transformation of skills, practices, and objects in the Dong community of Meili. Instead, she offers a pioneering approach to understanding how heritage projects are negotiated and lived. I highly recommend it!”

—Charlotte Bruckermann, *Author of* Claiming Homes: Confronting Domicide in Rural China

Suvi Rautio

The Invention of Tradition in China

Story of a Village and a Nation Remade

palgrave
macmillan

Suvi Rautio
University of Helsinki
Helsinki, Finland

ISBN 978-981-97-3838-0 ISBN 978-981-97-3839-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3839-7>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer
Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

To the people of Meili (again), who reminded me to laugh even when I fall

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book owes its life and thanks to a number of people. None of the work would have been made possible without everyone I met in my field-site, a village which I refer to as Meili. To this day, I am entirely indebted to the families who treated me like their own, showing me generosity, trust, and friendship. Words are not enough to express how grateful I am for their patience and guidance in hosting me during the many months I spent in Meili. Throughout my fieldwork, and the many years that have followed since, the people of Meili have taught me as much about them as they have about me. 感谢我在田野点 (文中化名为Meili的村子) 遇到的每一个人。是你们使这篇书成为了可能。在我研究过程中, 你们待我如亲人一般, 也教我找到生活的目的和幽默。对你们的慷慨与耐心帮助, 我的感激之情无以言表。

My introduction to Meili was made possible by Miss Li (referred to with a pseudonym) who reached out to me with generosity from the beginning, and who I owe this research journey to. I also want to thank the numerous architects, designers, and artists who spent different durations of time in the village; and the representatives of the state Cultural Bureau in the county town who received me in Meili and took me as a member of the heritage project. I thank everyone who travelled to see me during my fieldwork: Elina Hakanen, Sun Peipei, Liu Sutie, Paul Johansen, Sonya Chee, Jamie Barton, and my father, Mikko Rautio each visit opened new encounters and ways of understanding Meili while at the

same time opening new interpretations of my own positionality. Many of the photos that appear in this monograph were taken during these visits.

In Beijing, Wang Mingming provided me with invaluable academic and personal support prior to my ethnographic field-work during my visiting research fellow in the spring of 2015. The confidence he entrusted in me at the beginning of this journey gave me courage to explore themes that continue to stimulate my interests towards anthropology. He also trained me in the ethnographers' most vital task, the Chinese art of social drinking, which remained a vital skill throughout my ethnography.

At the University of Helsinki, my endless thanks and inspiration to Sarah Green while she was my doctoral supervisor. Always asking the right questions to help me work through my ideas and research interests, her endless curiosity and insight invited me to "look under the carpet" and delve further into the world of anthropological thought. I also want to thank my second supervisor, Katja Uusihakala, who offered emotional support to help me progress my research. Stephan Feuchtwang was an invaluable guide as an external advisor to my doctoral research. Stephan's expertise and commitment towards the anthropology of China have been a huge source of inspiration since I started my university studies. To have my work commented on by him in the amount of depth and commitment he has provided has been a huge privilege I could never have imagined when I started my thesis. I am grateful for the friendship that has grown since.

Leading up to my doctoral defence, which this book builds on, my thesis pre-examiners, Harriet Evans (referred to again below) and Sam Gaell who offered generous comments and critique steering me deeper into my analysis. As a thesis opponent, Hans Steinmüller offered sharp comments and evocative questions in my thesis defence. Later, he persistently guided in the publication of my first article. The attentive reading Hans has offered towards my work and his insightful clarity has sharpened my thinking and given me vital tools to work towards becoming a better writer and thinker.

In June 2022, my manuscript draft went through an extensive revision procedure with Ilana Gershon, Ward Keeler, and Harriet Evans who shared their time, knowledge, and wisdom on how to improve the book into publication. I am particularly thankful for these comments, and especially the many long conversations that have continued since the workshop with Harriet Evans: your wisdom and astute perspectives on my

writing, but more importantly, your friendship has helped me reach the finish line with this book.

This work would not be the same without the support of colleagues and friends during my years at the University of Helsinki. A lot of the revisions and writing of this book took place during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. I particularly want to thank colleagues who supported my writing over virtual writing groups during one of many lockdowns. Andrew Graan, Elina Hartikainen, Anni Kajanus, and Heidi Härkönen helped steer my analytical approach around the rural valorisation of labour; and Loretta Lou, Lisheng Zhang, Sonia Lam-Knott, and Jiazhi Fengjiang offered generous rounds of in-depth comments and feedback on various chapters, which were crucial in helping my think and discuss through ideas and concepts that I was struggling to write about. The other virtual writing group led by Henni Alava was also a crucial avenue to gather peer support. The conviviality of writing together in the mornings gave me a sense of purpose that was missing in my life to persevere and get this monograph into its first drafts.

In New York, during my Visiting Scholar fellowship at John-Jay College City University New York, I was surrounded by inspirational people who uplifted my work and handheld this book to reality. Alisse Waterston: thank you for reminding me write fearlessly and for not letting me give up finding a home for this book. I am incredibly grateful for the boosts of energy and joy that new colleagues and old friends in New York brought to my life: Sophia McKinnon, Jennifer Dorothy Lee, Li Yao, Racquel Li, Rebecca Karl, Anru Lee, and Marta Laura Haynes.

I am grateful to the discussants, organisers, and participants of the many conferences I participated in that gave me new avenues to explore my ethnography throughout the numerous phases of writing. In particular, receiving discussant comments from Jenny Chio, whose writing has been a pillar to mine: for discussing ideas I was struggling with was invaluable in the final stages of this book: thank you! A big, warm thank you also goes to Charlotte Bruckermann for reviewing this book in manuscript form and offering such enthusiastic and detailed feedback, while also offering telling additions.

I want to thank my family, in particular my parents, for their unfailing support in this journey of academia from the very beginning. My father took on the informal role of research assistant early in my doctoral studies helping me work through my questions and keeping me up to date in public discussions and relevant news stories from Chinese media.

My mother has taught me to carry a sense of curiosity towards life, which became a vital tool in ethnography. In addition to those already mentioned above, I want to thank my anthropology friends I have made over the years who have supported me on this project with words of encouragement, advice, intellectual exchanges, and comradeship. Thank you especially to those who offered words of encouragement particularly as the manuscript started shaping to become a book from its PhD form: Sonja Trifuljesko, Lesley Braun, Roosa Rytönen, Ting Hui Lau, Maija-Eliina Sequeira, Annastiina Kallius, Willy Sier, Jay Ke-Schutte, and many more.

I want to express my gratitude for all the financial support that made my research possible. The Joel Toivola Foundation, Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund, and the University of Helsinki funded my doctoral studies. Kone Foundation has generously supported the writing and editing phases of this book manuscript. This monograph would not be complete without the help of my editors Albion Butters and Marie-Louise Karttunen, who both have had the treacherous task of cleaning up my chapters at different stages of my work.

Lastly, a special acknowledgement to the publishers who have given me permission to republish sections of this book. Chapter Four includes excerpts from the 2021 article “Material Compromises in the Planning of a ‘Traditional Village’ in Southwest China” published in *Social Analysis* 65 (3), <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2021.6503OF2>. Chapter Five includes excerpts from the 2023 article “On Self-Reliant Masculinities and Rural Returnees in Ethnic China” published in *Focaal* 97, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2022.081802>. Both chapters are reproduced courtesy of Berghahn Books. The University of Helsinki and Unigrafia Publishing Services have granted permission to republish excerpts from my 2019 Ph.D. thesis, *The Jade Emperor’s Last Taste of Water: An Ethnography on the Making of a Village in China*.

NOTES ON TRANSLATION, UNITS OF MEASUREMENT AND PSEUDONYMS

Translation

The quotations included in this book are from conversations carried out in Meili and the region over the course of my research, which I have translated from Mandarin and Dong into English. All translations in this book are mine. When making translations, I refer to Mandarin words with standard *pinyin* in italicised form.

Only if consent was given to me did I record interviews and discussions at meetings and refer to them as direct quotations in my book. Discussions held in meetings aside, everyday conversations were not recorded but memorised and as soon as I could I would recall them from my memory to note them down. I also got into the habit of noting down events and quotes on my mobile phone, which was particularly helpful when conversations were carried out with the consumption of alcohol or whilst travelling to an event where finding time aside for field-notes would have been both challenging and impolite. Even though conversations were recalled from my memory, I have tried my best to capture the tone, meaning and context in which they were being carried out throughout my book.

Units and Measurements

Chinese *Renminbi* are given in the unit of RMB in my book. Weights are given in Chinese *jin*, which is equivalent to 0.5 kg.

Pseudonyms

To maintain the anonymity of my field-site, I have used pseudonyms for all the people and villages referred to in my book.

CONTENTS

1	The Invention of Tradition in China	1
	<i>Inventing Cultural Heritage in Rural China</i>	7
	<i>Rural-to-Urban Mobility and Returning to the Peripheries</i>	10
	<i>Inventing Cultural Heritage in Ethnic China</i>	14
	<i>Doing Village Ethnography in Meili: Facing Differences</i>	18
	<i>Overview of the Book</i>	24
	<i>References</i>	27
2	Meili Village, Between the Claws of a Dragon	33
	<i>Meili Settlement</i>	35
	<i>Meili Kinship Structure</i>	41
	<i>Threats from the Outside</i>	43
	<i>Fengshui Trees</i>	46
	<i>Spirited Forests</i>	51
	<i>Healing Trees</i>	55
	<i>Sites of Healing and Protection</i>	59
	<i>References</i>	63
3	Cultural Heritage and Renderings of a Village Whole	67
	<i>The Birth of Modern China's Cultural Heritage Protection Industry</i>	71
	<i>Administrative and Legislative Decisions on Cultural Property</i>	71
	<i>Incorporating International Preservation Standards</i>	76

	<i>Architectural Research in Chinese Academia</i>	78
	<i>Architect Scholars: Non-State Experts and Renderings of Meili</i>	81
	<i>The Authoritative Role of the Expert</i>	84
	<i>Intermediating Role of Experts</i>	86
	<i>References</i>	89
4	Where Planning and Materiality Intersect	95
	<i>The Social Dynamics and Agentive Potential of Plans</i>	100
	<i>The Materiality of “Yuanshi”</i>	102
	<i>Meili’s Wooden Homes</i>	106
	<i>A House That’s Bigger Than Your Neighbour’s</i>	108
	<i>Material Contradictions</i>	113
	<i>Material Compromise</i>	115
	<i>References</i>	119
5	Labouring Self-Reliant Masculinities	123
	<i>Masculinity and Labour Along the Peripheries</i>	128
	<i>Getting Your Hands Dirty to Do the Work</i>	130
	<i>Eats Well and Does Little</i>	134
	<i>He Speaks Spicy</i>	138
	<i>References</i>	142
6	Women’s Work as Weavers of Tradition	147
	<i>Meili’s Embroidered Crafts and Handwoven Textiles</i>	153
	<i>The Indigo Pot: Caring Labour of Dye Work</i>	156
	<i>Mastering the Needle: Friendship, Discipline, and Learning to be a Dong Woman</i>	161
	<i>From Craft to Industry?</i>	165
	<i>Dislocating Ethnicity, Making Women’s Labour Invisible</i>	168
	<i>References</i>	173
7	Fostering a Tiger that Grows up to Attack You	177
	<i>Singing for Dong Audiences</i>	179
	<i>Singing for Non-Dong Audiences: Going Onstage to Sing “Dong Big Song”</i>	182
	<i>“Dong Big Song”</i>	187
	<i>Is There Inclusivity and Autonomy in Partaking in “Dong Big Song”?</i>	191
	<i>Teacher Shi Forms a New Women’s Choir</i>	194
	<i>Who Came to Rouse the Ghosts?</i>	197
	<i>Fostering a Tiger Who Grows Up to Attack You</i>	202
	<i>Historical Traces of Bloodshed</i>	204
	<i>References</i>	208

8 Remaking A Village: Home, Where the Spider Rests	211
<i>Departure</i>	213
<i>Locating the Grave</i>	217
<i>Arriving at the Old Cotton Fields</i>	221
<i>Burial</i>	223
<i>Home: Where the Spider-Soul Rests</i>	225
<i>References</i>	232
Conclusion: A Nation Remade	235
Glossary	245
Index	251

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1.1	Guizhou, and neighbouring provinces (Wiki Commons)	4
Map 1.2	Qiandongnan autonomous prefecture (Wiki Commons)	5



CHAPTER 1

The Invention of Tradition in China



Panoramic view of Meili taken from the village entry point (Photo courtesy of Liu Sutie)

Arriving at Meili's entry point with a panoramic view of the village as a backdrop, teams of academics, local government officials, and media personnel step off minibuses for some fresh air. Still feeling lightheaded from the steep and winding mountain road that brought them here, their attention soon shifts to the bird's-eye view of the village scenery and the awe-inspiring new sights around them. They marvel at the compact layout of the rural enclave enveloped by lush evergreen forests and folded clastic mountains that crowd together, cut through by a deep valley and terraced fields. Peering into the valley, the rows of multi-storey wooden stilt houses with tiled gable roofs sit neatly along the river that gently meanders through the village. From above, the peaks of grey-tiled gabled rooftops lift to the skies, resembling a blanket of ocean waves. The architectural allure of Meili is further enhanced with covered bridges and a tall, pagoda-like drum tower, which is strategically located on a podium to orient the viewer's gaze. Marvelling at the symmetrical intactness of the village-scape and the looming backdrop of mountains and rich forests, the newly arrived visitors cannot help but be taken by Meili's beauty.

As members of the group adjust to their bearings, one of the passengers, who has a large camera hanging around his neck, takes the opportunity to snatch a group photo against the scenic background. He calls out, "Quick quick, line up! You, go to the middle! Now, smile for the camera! One-two-three-*qiezi*!"¹ Amidst the excitement and photo-taking, the visitors are swiftly led down the main road to the village gate, where they are officially greeted by the Dong village women's choir. Perfectly lined up across the gate, the gleaming faces of the choir animate when the guests arrive; their eyes widen, and the corners of their mouths expand into bright smiles as they sing "blocking the road" songs (*lanluge*) to welcome the newcomers. As the choir sings, guests are encouraged to come forward. Many use their cameras to document and film the event, while some jump in front of the group with their backs to the choir for a selfie. When the choir concludes the performance, embroidered bands are wrapped around the guests' necks and the singers excitedly pour rice wine into their gaping mouths, followed by a small portion of pickled fish or meat to balance the bitter taste of the alcohol.

¹ Due to the similarities with the English pronunciation of "cheese", the word *qiezi*, which literally means "eggplant", is the Chinese equivalent of saying "cheese" for a picture.

Passing through the village entrance, the guests are kept well entertained throughout the tour as a “Dong Big Song” (*dongzu dage*) and *lusheng* bamboo pipes echo across the riverbanks and in the narrow alleyways. Beautiful young women dressed in their best clothing are strategically located at stop-off points to perform in song, standing beside older women perched on stools weaving bright threads into eloquent depictions of embroidered flowers. Elderly men are positioned in circles, carving elaborate wooden statues, and braiding strands of dried rice plants into hay slippers or beating rice in stone pounders with each determined stamp of their feet.

The events that I have illustrated above mark an inspection tour (*kaocha*) organised in the village of Meili (a pseudonym meaning “enchanting”)² in Guizhou province. In such tours, Meili is showcased for its vernacular architecture and cultural attributes, which are associated with the Dong people of China—an ethnic minority population (*shaoshu minzu*) of around three million people referred to as *Kam* in the Dong language. Dong people tend to concentrate along the riverbanks spanning the ethnically interspersed highlands of Southwest China, including Guizhou, and neighbouring Hunan and Guangxi.

Meili village is situated in the southeast frontiers of Guizhou province in Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture. With 55.5% of the province consisting of designated autonomous land and ten officially recognised minority nationalities, which account for more than 37% of the population, Guizhou is regarded as one of China’s most ethnically diverse provinces.³ In addition to its diverse ethnic minority population, the region is known for its rough climate and geographical terrain, which gets depicted in popular imagery that goes as far back as the seventeenth century, as recounted by travel writer Xu Xiaoke: “there are never three sunny days in a row and there is never three square feet of level land”.

The inspection tour is one of many that I observed and took part in over the course of thirteen months of fieldwork in Meili between 2014 and 2017. These types of group trips are regularly organised in places like Meili, which are listed under China’s nationally protected “Traditional Village” (*chuantong cunluo*) heritage site. Visitors on these tours

² With the exception of well-known public figures, I have used pseudonyms for all individuals and villages discussed in this book.

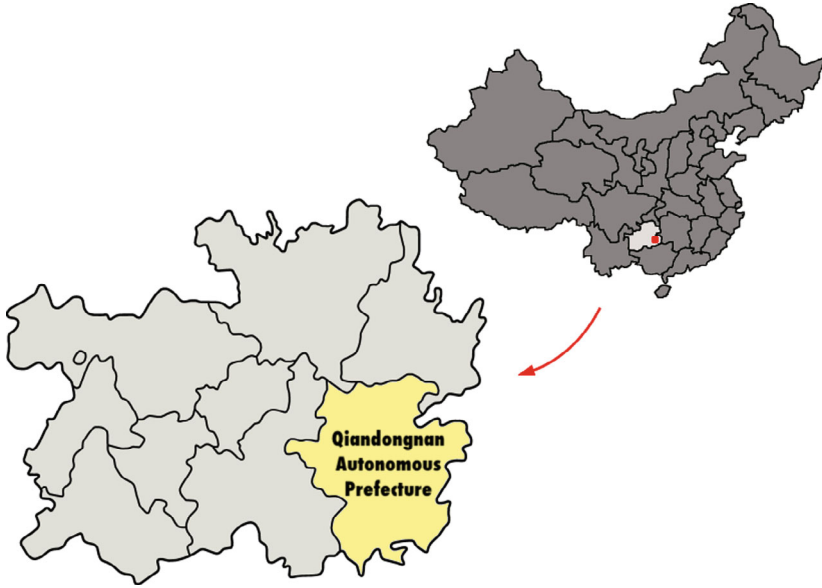
³ Guizhou is home to seventeen state-recognised ethnic minority groups. The highest populations are the Miao (*Hmong*), Buyi (*Bouyei*), and Tujia and Dong (*Kam*).



Map 1.1 Guizhou, and neighbouring provinces (Wiki Commons)

range from high-ranking provincial political figures to wealthy investors, UNESCO personnel, and academics from prestigious universities. Their participation and attendance speak to the growing interest in the number of heritage projects sprouting across China in villages like Meili (Maps 1.1 and 1.2).

Cultural heritage (*wenhua yichan*) and cultural protection (*wenhua baohu*) have been pivotal in the post-Mao Reform era in alignment with a long string of state campaigns that fit under the aegis of state-led development schemes. Projects such as the “Traditional Village” heritage scheme align with Xi Jinping’s drive to gear development towards a “new era” where Chinese heritage expansion sits at the core (Li 2016). After three decades of rapid urban expansion contingent on the eviction and demolition of neighbourhoods, protecting Chinese villages stands at the centre of this “new era” of heritage expansion to promote what



Map 1.2 Qiandongnan autonomous prefecture (Wiki Commons)

China's Party Congress refers to as "urban–rural integration" (*chengxiang ronghe*). Under this new era, cultural heritage and traditional culture function through economic and political imperatives of capitalism in the market economy. Places are reconfigured and promoted for their own unique, local speciality to uphold a legible, marketable, and profitable image of cultural branding that fits under the concept of "tradition" (*chuantong*) (Oakes 2000, 2006; Bruckermann 2016; Luo 2018).

Considering that Guizhou has one of the lowest levels of GDP per capita among China's thirty-four provincial regions and Meili is located in a county labelled "poverty stricken" (*pinkun xian*), over the years the village has become a site for numerous pilot studies, projects, and campaigns to alleviate poverty through the identification and infusement of the area's regional flair in efforts to gain heritage recognition. Alongside the "Traditional Village" listing awarded in 2012, Meili is a prized token of the rural heritage village type through a range of provincial and national accolades that include the "One Hundred Village Program" awarded in 2012, the seventh listing of the "National Cultural Heritage

Protection” awarded in April 2013, and the sixth listing of the “Historical and Cultural Villages” awarded in March 2014. Alongside nationally acclaimed merits, in January 2013 Meili was added to UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention “Dong Village” tentative list, alongside twenty-two other Dong villages in Guizhou and neighbouring Guangxi and Hunan provinces that are considered “representative of the cultural landscape of Chinese ethnic minority villages” (UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity 2009). In addition to the tangible heritage criteria, the intangible heritage of Meili has also garnered international interest, such as Dong Big Song, which is listed under the UNESCO protocol as protected intangible heritage. All these listings are managed and monitored under political institutions, including the State Administration of Cultural Heritage Office and international agencies, which exercise powerful roles in China’s rapidly growing cultural heritage industry.

Rural development through heritage preservation initiatives, such as those in Meili, aims to “catch up” and bring rural areas closer to modernity, while heritage schemes and tourism ensure that rural places hold on to a relationship with the past that nurtures tradition. Since Xi Jinping came to power, across China cultural heritage has become a tool to enhance a puritan and univocal image of national identity to celebrate, protect, value, and reconcile a valuable heritage in the commonly stated notion that China has five thousand years of continuous history. This is a claim repeated in textbooks, mini-dramas, and tourist sites across the People’s Republic of China that both legitimates the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and unifies the nation (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013; Fiskesjö 2010; Zhu and Maags 2020; Maags 2021). As cultural heritage sites have become vehicles for the party-state to gain control of interpreting and controlling the nation’s past, the local government and ministries of the government leverage and essentialise the cultures and histories of local communities in order to brand people and places in the name of preservation (Maags 2021).

Xi Jinping’s cultural policies proclaim a neo-traditionalist present and ahistorical past that gets reinforced through heritage-making. These efforts are not only unique to China, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Rangers’ (1983) collection of essays on the invention of tradition reminds us. As a complex study of the interactions of past and present, Hobsbawm and Rangers show how traditions are deliberately created as a modern and nationalist effort to establish collective identities as strategic components

of nation-building. In this book, I lean on the notion of the “invention” to work towards one of its main objectives, which is to convey how a village is continuously crafted to serve particular political and economic goals that informs the present through a subjective, selective use of iconic tradition and history. In the chapters that unfold, I show how “invention” is taken on by non-elite actors, including the Dong inhabitants themselves who negotiate their own notions of tradition to manoeuvre through heritage worlds in the service of their own intentions and aspirations.

INVENTING CULTURAL HERITAGE IN RURAL CHINA

China’s prominent role as a rising global power triggered by over three decades of rapid economic expansion means that few countries have had the infrastructure to engage in the ambitious project of eliminating poverty on the same scale as China. And yet, in a country where rural citizens make up thirty-five per cent of the entire population (dropping from seventy per cent in 2000), it is the inhabitants in landlocked villages such as Meili that have remained at the margins of the country’s exponential economic growth.

The disparities across the urban and rural have been prevalent throughout China’s history, and yet the countryside and its rural landscapes have simultaneously been idealised with harmonious living and regarded as the pinnacle of aesthetic admiration reproduced through art and both religious and philosophical inspiration. Today, these ideals are streamed online through the lives of popular internet celebrities and entrepreneurs, such as Li Ziqi, who since 2016 has gained a following of some 100 million domestic and international fans who watch Li’s life in rural Sichuan where she takes part in traditional Chinese methods to cook, craft, and build. Li’s life in this rural otherworld appears industrious yet serene, calm, and carefree. Contemporary depictions of the countryside, such as that which Li Ziqi portrays, exist in proximity to timelessness and naturalness to reflect an orientation towards life that offers an escape from the city (Luo et al. 2019). This constructed notion that the countryside represents tradition and retains an unchanging, timeless identity is what attracts urbanites to Meili. As I heard one tourist declare at her arrival in Meili: “Being here feels like I have returned to my childhood!”

The experience of associating villages with nostalgic traditions, whether invented or genuine, is not unique to the marginal sites of China but a part of the wider modernity project (Hobsbawm and Rangers 1983).

Turning to the countryside and the primitive as objects of nostalgic desire are recurring ideals in Western modernity, particularly in the cultural representations of people and places that came to the fore in Enlightenment social theory (Strathern 1992; Felski 1995). In describing the cultural epochs that frame hierarchical divisions of peoples and places, the dichotomy between the imagined rural identity—which appears “communal”, “traditional”, and “serene”—from the “complex”, “heterogeneous”, and “diverse” urban society has become a normative way of seeing the world.

As a response to the so-called complexity of urban life, villages are cast as sites that have been left behind from modernity. In China’s onward march to modernity, many urbanites have stopped to claim urgency to the loss of serene rural nature or remote (*pianpi*) hamlets that are feared to be swallowed up by the moral (and environmental) pollution of cities existing in a state of globalisation-induced disrepair. In response to this urgency, heritage discourse portrays villages as mediums through which urban elites express their visions of the nation’s path to recovering a lost Chinese civilisation.

It should come as no surprise then that anthropologists have also turned rural China into a site from which tradition can be read. Ideas around the countryside are projected and upheld through scholarly work, particularly through the “father” of Chinese anthropology Fei Xiaotong ([1948] 1992: 27), whose work reinforces the notion that the Chinese people are “fundamentally rural because its foundation is rural”. It is from this same perspective that peasantry values are projected in China’s national narrative, which promotes the imagination of a modern nation with an exceptionally unique Chinese cultural essence that is rural in nature. These representations get enhanced and promoted in the marketisation of rural tourism (Notar 2006), in particular, the experience of living in rural guesthouses (Chio 2014; Park 2014); ethnic singing competitions that reserve authentic value for singers from remote villages (Kendall 2016); and trending consumer habits geared towards promoting organic farming in urban China (Cody 2019).

Although representations imposed on rural places and its inhabitants are not always entirely inaccurate, they can easily fall prey to envisioning rural life through rose-tinted glasses. These depictions can easily gloss over the poverty and hardship of rural life to transform the quotidian into a sublime ideal. The outcome is one that not only culturally essentialises rural populations but also enforces a “nationalist patriarchal” disposition

of perception and rule (Duara 1995: 299). On a more political level, the celebration of rural China as comprising sites of tradition endorses the more joyful and pristine images of rural life, thereby neglecting some of the harsher realities of agrarian decline and underdevelopment that a vast portion of the rural population in China face on a daily basis.

Counter to the more romanticised image of rural remoteness that urbanites are exposed to, the residents of Meili draw on remoteness as a metaphor to describe the inescapability and captivity of village life as a site of poverty surrounded by mountains and a rugged vertical landscape of “thick” (*hou*) folded clastic mountains that encircle the village space. In Meili, remoteness is encapsulated in its inaccessibility. Although today Meili is not considered to be far from the county town, the hamlet can only be reached via narrow mountain trails and a single concrete road built in the 1970s for commuting on cars and motorcycles. The exception is for when it rains heavily (which in this part of China it does) during which the roads flood over and mountain slides are frequent. When the mountains are not sliding down, they guard the village. Mountains also signify marginality and the challenges of eliminating poverty for many Meili inhabitants who expressed this frustration through comments such as: “First thing in the morning, you open your door and you are blocked by a mountain”.

The visceral experience of being marginal is conducive to place-making. These are themes that anthropologists interested in making sense of how modern states are redefining localities under the pressures of globalisation have been working on since the early 2000s. As Sarah Green (2005) remarks, many anthropologists have been driven to do research along the peripheries in an effort to shine a spotlight on the people and places that are so often discarded and ignored due to where they are. Shedding light on discarded places situates marginality “at the heart of things, precisely because of its asserted marginalisation in relation to the heart of things” (Green 2005: 2). In the hope of giving voice to those who are so rarely heard, anthropologists working along the margins seek to reach a more nuanced understanding of relationships and the interplay across hegemonic norms as an alternative to master narratives. In paying attention to how marginality is negotiated through power relations, the margins become sites of agency shot through with politico-economic relations, and ethnographers have been able to show the processes that “out-of-the-way” places go through to resist sovereign rule (Tsing 1993, 2005;

Rutherford 2003; Scott 2009; Byler 2017, 2022). Observed from the peripheries, remoteness becomes blurry, and centres are no longer distant references but places made by people that shape their understandings and practices around inheritance and passing down knowledge.

RURAL-TO-URBAN MOBILITY AND RETURNING TO THE PERIPHERIES

If rural living is seen as natural and pure, rural citizens are often associated with primitive traits and deemed morally inferior. Historically, these inferior connotations derive from associations with culture (*wenbua*) and civilisation or civility (*wenming*) in ancient and modern China that were attributed to qualities of the educated elite, who had an expert understanding of traditional rituals and patriarchal notions of propriety. As opposed to the life of mundane labour of the peasant, the literati cultivated cultural attainment. Such hierarchies were turned on their head at the start of the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong rule (1949–1976). The frugal and labouring lives of peasants that the imperial and modern literati found vulgar and backwards were placed at the forefront of the Communist Revolution to castigate the imperialist-driven bourgeoisie. The rural area became a politically active space celebrated through the lives of peasants (*nongmin*)⁴ as the agents of national and historical transformation.

After Maoist rule, from the late 1970s on, with the country's reform and economic integration into the global economy, the lives of China's rural population went through another radical change. In the aftermath of failed Maoist efforts, reform-era state discourse refashioned peasantry agency and defined the nation's values along the divided trajectories of tradition and modernity with "civilisation" at the backbone of CCP political ideological thought.⁵ Marking a departure from the Maoist dogma of

⁴ Translated from the English term "peasant", *nongmin* emerged as a modern historical and political category in China at the turn of the twentieth century to refer to agricultural labourer (Day 2019). For wider discussions around the definition of peasantry and present-day agricultural regimes beyond China, see Narotzky (2016).

⁵ *Wenming* was first imported from Meiji Japan and seeped into the Chinese language in the 1880s. Today, modern notions of spiritual civility are defined by one's level of culture (*wenbua*) and quality (*suzhi*) that reflect the physical, mental, and moral development of a person. The *wenming* campaign carries two connotations: one spiritual or directly translated as "essence-vitality" (*jingshen*) and the other material (*wuzhi*).

class struggle and its deep narratives of self-sacrifice and socialist values, Deng Xiaoping launched the Household Responsibility System (*jiating chengbao zeren zhi*) removing Chinese rural citizens from a social safety net and no longer tying citizens to their land and ultimately transformed peasants into small property owners. For the most part, these mass changes led to a decline and stagnation of real incomes by the late 1980s in vast parts of the country. The retrieval of the central levels of government was felt even deeper with the abolishment of agricultural taxes in the 1990s. The motivation behind this retrieval was to increase rural incomes and grain subsidies, but inevitably it only led to the widening gap across rural and urban China dredging further into the burdening role that the countryside carries on the state.

Alongside the gradual detachment of the state in the lives of those living in rural China, the government allowed for and encouraged long-distance migration. Over the years, mass rural-to-urban migration has created a hyper-mobile and precarious workforce upheld through a precarious work regime of wage labour, or *dagong*. Associated with unskilled and low-wage labour, *dagong* implies working for a boss in the informal sector as a capitalist exchange of labour for wages.⁶

While the drive to turn labour into profit has opened up new opportunities and lifted vast rural populations out of poverty, out-migration has also led to devastating long-term consequences for vast arrays of rural life. The mass migration to urban centres has led to a “hollowing out” of villages, with them becoming what is often referred to as “empty nests” (*kongchao*). As rural sites are further devalued due to the limited access to job opportunities, land grabs of villagers’ agricultural holdings and homes with none to little compensation have prevailed across the countryside as urbanisation spreads across the nation (Lora-Wainwright 2012). This has led to the opening up of easy access for external investors to occupy rural China’s “empty nests” in a strategy referred to as “vacating the cage for a new bird” (*teng long huan niao*) (Yan et al. 2020).

On the other hand, although the scale of the rural-to-urban movement has been unprecedented, it is important to be aware that most rural

⁶ In 2000, China’s rural population was seventy per cent. According to the 2021 bulletin released by the National Bureau of Statistics, China’s rural population has dropped to thirty-five per cent. In the same year, the total number of migrant workers was 292.51 million, of whom 171.72 million were working away from home and 120.79 million were working closer to home (Huang 2022).