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 cultural politics.

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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 derogated cultural practices, allowing these to enter the public and collective Chinese cultural life. Described as ‘feudal superstition’ and officially banned or condemned in 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

heritage expertise across Asia

The Focus

A land’s eye view of the reconstructed Qiang village. Photo by author.

“Heritagized practices are now articulated within the terms of ‘multivocality’.”

Note

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.

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 practices into showcases for state power and nationalistic 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 to display multiple diverse voices and meanings when presented to different audiences and performed by varied practitioners. The protection awarded by ICH designation provided new resources and opportunities for folk rituals to survive. Admittedly, the promotion of the Qiang ICH led to the development of both performative and sacrificial aspects of these rituals. Villagers safely and creatively took advantage of the preeminence of these rituals, such as the continuation of the folk ritual that celebrates the Qiang worship ritual is reinterpreted and upheld as an occasion for the Qiang to express “respect and worship ritual is reinterpreted as an occasion for the Qiang to express “respect and worship rituals and other autochthonous cultural practices. For example, after the earthquake, 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 and funding strategies involved. The emergence of 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 areas in following years demonstrated 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-cultural context surrounding the tradition —especially the human-environmental and inter-personal relations involved — in which such practices originate and develop. 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.

Notes

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