Landscape, Heritage, and Social Relations: Two Ecomuseums from China Guizhou Province in a Comparative Perspective

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Published material incorporated in this thesis

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This statement is made in the interest of academic transparency and integrity. I remain fully responsible for the intellectual content and academic rigour of this work.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how the ecomuseum model has been adapted and implemented in two ethnic minority villages in Guizhou Province, Southwest China: the Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum and the Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum. Introduced to China in the late 1990s, the ecomuseum was promoted as an alternative to conventional heritage institutions, emphasising local participation, the integration of cultural and natural heritage, and the preservation of community life. In practice, however, its implementation intersects with broader policy frameworks concerning rural development, ethnic affairs, and tourism planning. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research and participatory visual methods, the study examines how heritage, landscape, and social relations are reshaped through the ecomuseum framework. The research analyses how spatial reorganisation, cultural representation, and village governance evolve in response to shifting institutional goals and the everyday practices of local actors. By comparing two villages with differing socio-spatial conditions and degrees of external influence, the thesis highlights the varied ways in which local communities engage with the ecomuseum model. The findings demonstrate that while ecomuseums are framed around ideals of community engagement and integrated conservation, their realisation is shaped by uneven interactions between institutional priorities and local agency. Residents do not passively absorb top-down interventions but respond through negotiation, adaptation, and resistance. By tracing how identity, space, and authority are co-produced in these contexts, the study contributes to broader discussions on cultural governance, rural transformation, and the localisation of international heritage models in contemporary China.

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Statement of Ethical Approval

This study received approval from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Communications Research Ethics Committee (AHCREC) (Ref. No. FAHC 21-087). All participants provided written informed consent, and all procedures complied with applicable regulations.

Abbreviations and Terms

AHD	*Authorised Heritage Discourse*
AR	*Augmented Reality*
CCP	*Chinese Communist Party*
CHS	*Critical Heritage Safeguarding*
CMB	*China Museum Boom*
FAO	*Food and Agriculture Organisation*
GIAHS	*Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems*
GDP	*Gross Domestic Product*
IAP2	*International Association for Public Participation*
ICCROM	*International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property*
ICH	*Intangible Cultural Heritage*
ICOM	*International Council of Museums*
IPA	*Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*
NGO	*Non-governmental Organisation*
PP	*Participatory Photography*
PRC	*People's Republic of China*
RTM	*Rural Tourism Maker*
UNESCO	*The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*

Chapter 1 Introduction

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1.1 Overview

The preservation of cultural heritage has increasingly been understood not merely as the conservation of material artefacts, but as the safeguarding of the social relationships, practices, and environments that give those artefacts meaning. Within museum and heritage studies, critical approaches emphasise that heritage is a dynamic cultural process, continually shaped by the lived experiences of communities and their interactions with place (Smith, L., 2006; Harrison, R., 2012). This perspective challenges object-centred paradigms as well as the list-based logic that treats intangible practices as discrete items for inscription and calls for more inclusive, context-sensitive forms of heritage engagement that recognise the value of everyday life, vernacular landscapes, and intangible cultural expressions.

My curiosity and exploration of these discussions began in 2018, when I conducted observational research in the Sainsbury African Gallery at the British Museum, focusing on visitors' demographics, behaviour, and interactions with the exhibits. For a week, I spent long hours immersed in a space filled with Benin bronzes, contemporary sculptures, and ritual vessels, often alone in the gallery during off-peak hours. These quiet moments sparked my reflection: What does it mean to view these culturally significant artefacts, separated from the communities that once created and used them, through glass walls? When cultural materials are extracted from their original contexts and transferred to national institutions, what types of relationships are lost or transformed? I realised that the role of museums goes far beyond preserving artefacts; they also mediate the relationship between people and the past, and between exhibitors and those being exhibited. I began to wonder whether it was possible to imagine a different approach to cultural heritage preservation that not only preserves artefacts, but also preserves the vibrant relationships, environments and practices, including songs, stories, craft skills, ritual performances, and the everyday landscapes in which they unfold, that give them life. These considerations led me to explore alternatives to traditional museology and introduced me to the concept of ecomuseums.

Ecomuseums are rooted in the local community. They seek to preserve the value of heritage in its original context and to link culture, community and environment in a

process of ongoing conservation and participation (Rivière, 1985; Davis, P., 2007). Ecomuseums are described as 'mirrors in which local people can see themselves' (de Varine, 1996). They are not buildings, but landscapes inhabited, interpreted and maintained by their inhabitants. Ecomuseums represent 'a new type of museum based on the participation of local residents in the conservation, interpretation and management of their cultural and natural heritage.' This participatory model reflects a broad shift in thinking about heritage from a collection of objects to a living relationship between people, places and memories. Ecomuseums aim to move museums beyond their public education function to respond more actively to social issues and better serve the needs of present and future communities. Based on this concept, the original idea of ecomuseums was to establish closer links between people and the environment (Gjestrum, 1992; An and Gjestrum, 1999; Davis, P., 2007; Corsane et al., 2008).

However, these participatory ideas are often challenged by real-world constraints. As scholars have pointed out, even community-based models such as ecomuseums can become embedded in state-led agendas or commercial development strategies (Waterton and Smith, 2010; Nitzky, 2012). As the ecomuseum model originated in Europe with the aim of decentralising heritage conservation practices and strengthening the links between communities and their cultural environments, its development in other contexts has prompted reflection on how heritage frameworks can be disseminated, adapted and transformed. China presents a particularly compelling case. As a state that actively engages with global heritage discourses while pursuing its own nation-building and development agendas, China's appropriation of the ecomuseum model reveals how international heritage ideals are reinterpreted through local governance structures, administrative hierarchies, and minority policies. Studying Chinese ecomuseums not only deepens our understanding of heritage politics in one of the world's most culturally and geographically diverse countries but also provides critical insights into how global heritage models are refashioned in practice. It highlights the tensions that emerge when participatory ideals encounter centralised governance and shows how heritage becomes entangled with questions of identity, authority, and socio-economic change in rural minority regions.

The ecomuseum concept was first introduced to China in the mid-1990s through collaborative efforts between Chinese scholars, local governments, and international partners, particularly from Norway. The establishment of pilot ecomuseums in Guizhou in 1998 represented the first formal effort to adapt this international model to China's specific cultural and administrative contexts (Nitzky, 2012; Pan, 2013). These "first-generation" ecomuseums were primarily situated in ethnic minority villages and framed as experiments in community-based heritage conservation. At the policy level, they were endorsed as innovative mechanisms for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, promoting cultural diversity, and supporting regional development. However, as the model was adopted and expanded, its implementation began to reflect the complexities of China's governance structure and ethnic policies. Rather than serving solely as community-driven initiatives, many Chinese ecomuseums became embedded within state-led frameworks that prioritised tourism development, poverty alleviation, and cultural promotion for national unity. Community participation, while cited in official narratives, often remained limited or symbolic, mediated by administrative hierarchies or dependent on external funding and expertise (Yin, K., 2019; Yin, K. and Nitzky, 2022; Li, M. and Selim, 2024). This divergence between participatory ideals and bureaucratic realities raises important questions about how ecomuseums function within local contexts, particularly in regions with sensitive ethnic dynamics and uneven development trajectories.

Guizhou Province has played a central role in this experiment. Home to a rich mosaic of minority groups and one of the first regions to implement the ecomuseum model, Guizhou provides a valuable site for examining the tensions and potentials of community-based heritage management in contemporary China. Despite its economic underdevelopment, Guizhou has long been recognised for the vitality of its intangible cultural heritage, traditional village life, and ecological landscapes. It is also a region where the imperatives of cultural preservation, tourism development, and state governance converge most visibly (Dong, B. et al., 2023). In this context, this study explores two of Guizhou's early ecomuseums: the Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum and the Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum, with the aim of understanding how ecomuseum practices are negotiated, reshaped, and experienced by local communities. Existing studies have examined ecomuseums as alternative heritage models and documented individual cases of heritage preservation in

China's ethnic minority regions, however, much of this literature has tended to focus on either theoretical advocacy or descriptive accounts of singular sites (for detailed literature review, please see Section 1.4). Few have undertaken in-depth, comparative ethnographic research that investigates how official heritage frameworks shape multiple dimensions of community life across different local contexts. This thesis will explore how landscape, cultural heritage, and social relations are transformed under the influence of state-led heritage discourse and administrative structures. Rather than treating ecomuseums as isolated experiments, the research situates them within broader processes of rural governance, ethnic policy, and cultural politics.

Both ecomuseums were established in the late 1990s in Guizhou Province as part of the first wave of ecomuseum experiments supported by Chinese and international heritage institutions. While they share a common administrative framework shaped by national heritage policy and tourism development goals, their respective trajectories reveal how ecomuseum practices are locally mediated through differing socio-spatial contexts.

Tang'an, located in a mountainous area of Liping County, has maintained relatively intact Dong cultural traditions and communal social organisation. Its relative geographic isolation and strong kinship networks have enabled certain customary practices to persist, even as the village has become a site of heritage intervention. Zhenshan, by contrast, is situated on the outskirts of Guiyang, the provincial capital, and has experienced more sustained exposure to urban expansion, shifting land-use policies, and state-led infrastructure projects. Although both villages are embedded in the same top-down heritage governance structure, these differing spatial and socio-economic conditions have led to divergent patterns of community participation, landscape transformation, and cultural representation.

These cases are not intended to represent diametrically opposed extremes, but rather to illustrate how the same ecomuseum policies can manifest differently in local contexts that are characterised by unevenness. The comparison makes it possible to trace how concepts such as participation, authenticity, and community agency are variously interpreted, enacted, or constrained under differing circumstances. It also allows for a critical

assessment of how the localisation of international heritage models, particularly those grounded in participatory ideals, interacts with the institutional structures, political agendas, and development logics that characterise minority regions in China. By exploring these dynamics, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the adaptive implementation of ecomuseum principles in diverse local settings. It further raises broader questions about how heritage governance frameworks are negotiated in practice, and how cultural projects are shaped by the interplay of state control, community responses, and spatial transformation.

1.2 Research Background

This introduction provides the research background in which the study is situated. Section 1.2.1 introduces China's official system of ethnic classification and minority policy, establishing the broader socio-political field in which heritage initiatives unfold. Section 1.2.2 traces the evolution from state-led ethnic museums to the more community oriented ecomuseum model, showing how ideas of cultural stewardship have been progressively reframed. Lastly, Section 1.2.3 introduces the two Guizhou ecomuseums, Tang'an and Zhenshan, that anchor the fieldwork of this study, illustrating how national policy and international museological concepts are translated into local village settings. These topics reveal the interaction among state ethnic policy, museum practices, and local village realities in China, thus provide a contextual compass for the analyses that follow.

1.2.1 Ethnic Minority Groups in China and Minority Policies

China has 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups, each with unique cultural, linguistic, and historical characteristics. The largest of these minorities are the Zhuang[1]

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[1] The Zhuang are the largest ethnic minority in China, primarily residing in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China. They possess their own distinct language and have a history stretching back to the ancient Baiyue peoples of the region. Their society is traditionally agrarian, with a rich heritage of folklore, songs, and intricate brocade weaving.

(壮族), Hui[2] (回族), Manchu[3] (满族), Uyghur[4] (维吾尔族), and Miao[5] (苗族), making up approximately 8% of China's total population. These groups are distributed throughout the country, with concentrations in regions such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Yunnan, and Guizhou. The Chinese government has designated certain areas as autonomous regions, prefectures, or counties, granting minority groups a level of administrative autonomy to manage local affairs and preserve cultural practices. This picture of diversity is shaped only after 1949, when the new government set up a nationwide project to manage ethnic minority groups.

Since the 1950s, the Chinese government has started defining and managing the country's vast cultural diversity to promote ethnic unity, economic development, and cultural preservation among minority communities. A massive ethnic classification (*mīnzù shíbié, 民族识别*) project was launched in the early 1950s to identify and recognise ethnic minority groups (Mullaney, 2011). This process eventually produced the familiar paradigm of 56 officially recognised ethnic groups. However, this ethnic classification project was not regarded as a neutral anthropological exercise by some scholars, but a state-building project that blended modern social science with political goals (Mullaney, 2011). Researchers and officials worked together to fit China's myriad communities into a taxonomy that was "realisable and applicable" to governance needs. Once categories were set, the state propagated a grand narrative of a single Chinese nation composed of 56 ancient yet harmonious ethnic groups. This foundational narrative affirmed that each minority had its own cultural heritage, including language, dress, songs, history (Schein,

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[2] The Hui are one of China's most geographically widespread minorities, distinguished primarily by their adherence to Islam. Their origins are often traced to Silk Road interactions, particularly to Arab and Persian merchants and mercenaries who began settling in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Over centuries, they have largely adopted Han Chinese languages and cultural practices while maintaining their unique religious identity and customs, such as dietary laws.

[3] The Manchu people originated from Manchuria (modern Northeast China) and are most known for founding the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the final imperial dynasty of China. Historically a semi-nomadic people skilled in horse riding and archery, they developed a unique "Banner" system for military and social organization. While the Manchu language is now critically endangered, their historical influence on Chinese politics and culture remains profound.

[4] The Uyghurs are a Turkic people native to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwestern China. Their cultural heartland is the Tarim Basin, a historic crossroads of empires and cultures on the ancient Silk Road. Uyghur culture is rich with influences from Central Asian, Persian, and Islamic traditions, evident in their music (especially the Muqam), dance, and cuisine. Their language is a Turkic language, and Islam is a central component of their identity.

[5] The Miao are a highly diverse and transnational ethnic group, residing primarily in the mountainous regions of southern China (Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan) and parts of Southeast Asia (where they are often identified as Hmong). They are not a monolithic group but comprise several sub-groups with distinct dialects, customs, and clothing styles, such as the intricate silverwork and embroidery for which they are renowned. They have a long history of resistance and migration, and their oral traditions are a vital repository of their history and culture.

2000; Mackerras, 2003). It created an official baseline for preserving (and selectively celebrating) minority cultures.

In tandem with classification, the 1950s saw the state lay groundwork for minority cultural development through language and education policy (Zhou, 2003). Many minority groups had historically been non-literate or used unique scripts, which new leaders saw as obstacles to socialist modernisation (Zhou, 2016). The government responded with a literising project to expand literacy and standardize languages among ethnic minorities (Harrell, 2012, p.28). Dozens of minority languages were analysed and, where needed, given newly devised writing systems (often using Latin-based alphabets) so that they could be used in schooling and publishing. Harrell (2012) argues that communist officials viewed literacy as a marker of progress: under this state-sponsored literising project, "cultural superiority or modernity was thought to rest on mastery of the appropriate texts (and linguistic forms) of the Han". In practice, this meant extending modern education into minority regions, sometimes in native languages, sometimes in Chinese, and producing primers, folklore collections, and translations that codified local oral traditions. Literacy and cultural standardization thus went hand-in-hand (Zhou, 2003). By turning oral heritage into written form, the state believed it could both preserve minority cultures and better integrate them into a unified socialist culture (Harrell, 2011; Gladney, 2020). Early minority-language publishing ventures (for example, the translation of epics and folk songs into Chinese or newly scripted minority languages) exemplified how heritage documentation was intertwined with education. These 1950s policies of recognition, linguistic development, and cultural research created an institutional foundation for minority cultural preservation – even if the political motive was to strengthen state control, the by-product was a growing archive of minority cultural material that future generations could draw upon.

The relatively pluralist approach of the 1950s gave way to more radical policies in the late Mao era (Heberer, 2017). During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and especially the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the government's stance toward minority groups hardened. The Cultural Revolution's ideological fervour to destroy the "Four Olds" (old ideas, culture, customs, habits) did not spare minority regions (Litzinger, 2000). Many

traditional cultural expressions were suppressed or attacked as "feudal" or "backward" during this period. Folk religious practices, minority art forms, and even minority languages in education were curtailed as the regime pushed a mass revolutionary culture in Chinese language. This period revealed how vulnerable the preservation of ethnic minority cultural heritage was to shifts in political winds (Zhou, 2003; Heberer, 2017). It also set the stage for a renewed commitment to supporting minority cultures once the political climate changed.

The late 1970s and 1980s marked a policy reversal and revival of minority cultural initiatives. China reinstated and expanded many of the minority rights and cultural policies that had been shelved. The new 1982 PRC Constitution and minority nationality law once again guaranteed minorities the freedom to use and develop their own languages and customs. The state rehabilitated minority leaders and intellectuals, and it re-established institutions devoted to minority affairs, such as the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and research academies for ethnic cultures. Minority communities were encouraged to revive festivals, artistic traditions, and languages that had been suppressed (Schein, 2000). Besides, officially recognized minorities have started asserting their identities (Gladney, 2020). In the 1980s, ethnographers and folklorists, many of which were minority scholars themselves, launched extensive projects to collect and publish minority folklore, music, and oral history (Bender, M., 2006). Traditional songs, epic poems, and origin myths of various groups were compiled into anthologies, often bilingually, as the state sought to "folklorise" minority heritage (Bendix, 2009; Bender, M., 2019). By translating these traditions into print and state-approved performances, the government claimed to be preserving minority culture even as it subtly changed the content. As a result of this 'literising project', a generation of educated minority cadres emerged from universities with both the skills to codify their own cultures and the ideological training to serve the state (Harrell, 2012). This delicate balance between authentic cultural preservation and guided cultural reform defined the reform-era approach (Harrell, 2011; Gladney, 2020).

By the 1990s, minority cultural expression had also become entangled with economic development and tourism (Schein, 2000; Mackerras, 2003). China's central cultural

agencies promoted the idea that minority costumes, dances and villages embodied "national heritage," while county and township governments translated that agenda into local festivals and tourist displays. On the strength of these steps, some argued that the government had shown genuine interesting in preserving ethnic minority heritage (Mackerras, 2003). Cultural development funds were devoted to minority art troupes, language publishing, and heritage sites. Periodic national and regional ethnic arts festivals were held to showcase minority traditions (now reframed as part of a socialist multiculturalism).

The late 1990s even saw innovative heritage projects that foreshadowed the new century. Several minority regions established their own cultural museums and heritage centres during the 1980s–90s, creating official repositories for traditional costumes, crafts, and histories (Varutti, 2014; Fraser, R., 2022). Toward the end of the 1990s, inspired by international museology, Chinese experts and local governments experimented with the first "ecomuseums", in ethnic minority villages. This model aimed to preserve not just artifacts in a building, but an entire living cultural landscape in situ, with local residents as stakeholders (Wang, Yahao, 2021; Fraser, R., 2022). Though modest at inception, these experiments reflected a new ethos of heritage protection that had grown out of decades of policy evolution (Su, D., 2008). In the next subsection, I will review the history of Chinese ethnic museums and ecomuseums.

1.2.2 Ethnic Museums and Ecomuseums

The history of Chinese museums has long been associated with the political power and authority of the state. According to Varutti (2014, p.4), 'museums in China largely remain enshrined in an authoritative monodirectional paradigm'. Within this top-down framework, the government has channelled substantial public resources into museum building and programming, turning museums into a flagship instrument of cultural policy. The study of Zhang, F. and Courty (2022) reveals that annual visitor numbers climb from about 100 million in 1995 to roughly 800 million by 2016, which was mainly powered by supply-side shifts, as government subsidies for cultural investment and policies to revitalise the cultural sector (see Section 1.4.3 for the discussion of this 'China Museum Boom' phenomenon). From an administrative perspective, museums are generally

divided in to four levels: national, provincial, municipal, and county-level museums. (Varutti, 2014). Some national museums are directly supervised by specific central government departments. Local museums (both municipal and county), on the other hand, operate within the framework of economic development strategies implemented by their respective local government bodies. Museums occupy a pivotal position within the heritage sector, particularly within ethnic minority and indigenous communities where they help to project state power and narratives. They function as critical arenas for the representation, consumption, and memorialisation of culture, while also interfacing with wider concerns related to local governance, economic progression, and state involvement (Fraser, R., 2022).

With the development of China's museum industry, academic attention has increased considerably, covering a wide range of topics such as the development and impact of tourism policy (Shepherd, R., 2006; Denton, 2014; Jia et al., 2021), the management of world heritage sites, the dynamics of the domestic tourism market, and tourism for ethnic minorities (Oakes, 2016). This burgeoning academic interest was set against the backdrop of the post-reform socio-economic transformation of the 1990s[6], marked by the rise of a new middle class, increased mobility, and renewed engagement with the country's pre-communist cultural heritage (Shepherd, R.J. and Yu, 2012). This period has witnessed heritage tourism becoming one of the most rapidly expanding segments of China's economy. Museums, in this scenario, serve as critical lenses through which the interplay between social and economic development, heritage conservation; and community integration within heritage tourism frameworks is examined. These related studies have increasingly focused on state efforts to mediate between cultural heritage preservation, economic growth and the lived realities of local, often minority, communities, revealing the complex challenges inherent in these endeavours.

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[6] Following President Deng's 1992 "Southern Tour," China accelerated market-oriented reforms: large-scale restructuring of state-owned enterprises, creation of new special economic zones, and legalisation of private business. GDP grew at roughly 10 percent annually, while urbanisation rose from 26 percent of the population in 1990 to 36 percent by 2000. An estimated 80 million rural migrants formed a new "floating population," and rising disposable incomes in coastal cities fuelled home ownership, leisure travel, and the emergence of an urban middle class whose tastes in consumption and heritage tourism would shape cultural policy through the next decade. Please see Naughton, B. 2007. *The Chinese economy: Transitions and growth.* MIT press.

Ethnic minority museums (*shǎoshùmínzú bówùguǎn,* 少数民族博物馆) are institutions focused on the exploration and representation of minority cultures and ethnic concerns, tasked with the conservation and exhibition of the cultural expressions and material artifacts of China's 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups (Varutti, 2011; Fraser, R., 2022). In 1950, the government began to send visiting missions to areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. The mission's task was mainly to publicise the Chinese Communist Party's ethnic policy among the ethnic minority populations, to understand the social conditions of the ethnic minorities, and to help resolve difficulties in production and life (Bulag, 2012). Many of the ethnic minority people entrusted the delegation with representative artefacts of their own ethnic groups as gifts to be brought to Beijing and presented to the central government; and these gifts became important ethnic cultural heritages. Meanwhile, the central government organised ethnic classification project (see Section 1.2.1). In the process, a large number of valuable historical artefacts of various ethnic groups were collected (Chinese National Museum of Ethnology, 2012). As the number of ethnic artefacts increased, the proposal to build a Chinese ethnic museum was put forward. In 1956, Xiaotong Fei [7]and other scholars proposed to the Government the establishment in Beijing of a "museum of nationalities suited to the needs of socialist construction and commensurate with China's status". Subsequently, due to China's economic difficulties and the outbreak of the "cultural revolution", the project of a Chinese National Museum of Ethnology was not implemented.

Finally, this museum began to be built in 1987 and was completed in 1995 (Chinese National Museum of Ethnology, 2012). Initially, the collection was housed in the Central Museum of Ethnic Minorities as part of the national collection. From the 1950s to the 1970s, however, local museums were established in a few ethnic minority areas, including Guizhou, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Gansu provinces. The function of these museums is to display the material culture of ethnic minority groups. The more important purpose is to publicise the national policy for the ethnic minority groups, as was the original purpose of the Government's delegation. Similar to other arenas where the politics of cultural heritage play out in China, museums act as contested spaces that both transmit and negotiate narratives (Silverman and Blumenfield, 2013,

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[7] Xiaotong Fei (1910–2005) was a Chinese sociologist and anthropologist, whose studies Peasant Life in China (1939) and From the Soil (1947) introduced the "differential mode of association" (chaxu geju) and shaped both modern Chinese social science and rural development policy.

p.15). Building on this contested role, museums can also serve as sites of questioning and inversion, where social norms and historical narratives are interrogated or re-interpreted. For instance, a museum might display artifacts from colonial periods in a way that challenges conventional narratives of power and domination, thereby becoming a space where cultural and historical stories are actively renegotiated.

Bulag (2002, p.8) highlights the inherent contradiction in China's ethnic strategy, which seeks to balance the goal of national unity and homogenisation of the state at the national level with the desire of ethnic minority groups to retain their distinct cultural and social identities. In the long run, The national policy of China has been to "gradually realise equality for all ethnic groups", and this is now seen as a necessity for a "harmonious society" (Sautman, 2014). The political discourse of multiculturalism highlights the common ideology of national unity and harmony (Denton, 2014). Official recognition of non-Han sites reinforces the theory of China as a multicultural nation with unbroken traditions dating back thousands of years. In China, the designation of heritage sites in minority regions carries significant political weight. The Chinese government seeks to enhance the incorporation of minority areas into the national framework through targeted heritage and tourism strategies (Shepherd, R., 2006, p.244; Silverman and Blumenfield, 2013).

In connection with this, there has been a trend towards so-called ecomuseums in ethnic minority areas and these are regarded as community-based ethnic museums (Wang, Yahao, 2021; Fraser, R., 2022). A key transition occurred in 2005, when the Chinese Museum Association, supported by the Norwegian government, convened the International Forum on Ecomuseums in Guizhou, which is the first event of its kind in Aisa (Su, D., 2008). At this conference, many scholars stated that there were no criteria for creating ecomuseums, and that there were no universal criteria for judging the success of these ecomuseums (Su, D., 2008; Nitzky, 2012). However, in response to this ambiguity, Chinese heritage experts and officials began to formulate a distinct, state-endorsed framework for ecomuseum development. This "China model" established its own criteria, often linking heritage preservation with national policies on cultural tourism and rural revitalisation (Su, J., 2018). Consequently, ethnic ecomuseums are a unique form of ethnic museums in China,

representing the proliferation of Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD, an expert-driven heritage management paradigm that privileges officially sanctioned, monumental values) at the local level (Smith, L., 2006). By redefining these ecomuseums as community-centred activities and integrating them into a dedicated heritage conservation management structure, their status as heritage entities has been formally recognised (Wang, Yahao, 2021). This adaptation highlights the inclusion of ethnic ecomuseums in the framework of authorised heritage, signalling their acceptance and recognition in official discourses of heritage protection.

Su Donghai, the proponent of China's ecomuseums, considered that the development of ecomuseums in China had gone through four generations (Su, D., 2008). The first generation of ecomuseums refers to a group established in Guizhou between 1995 and 2004 through a partnership between the Chinese and Norwegian governments. This group includes the Suoga Miao Ecomuseum, Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum, Longli Han Ecomuseum, and Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum. Since 1995, China has made considerable efforts to stimulate economic development by using various policy tools to stabilise growth and by applying to rejoin the World Trade Organisation. The government placed particular emphasis on rural development, prioritising agricultural advancement and the creation of rural cultural networks. These policies opened China to development support and collaboration from other countries. Following the Norwegian government's experience in managing ecomuseums, each of the four ecomuseums in China is divided into two main sections: the village and an information centre. The village encompasses the entire area where villagers live their daily lives, including the residents, natural environment, and cultural landscape. The information centre is typically located on the outskirts of the village in a separate building. It serves primarily to display the history and culture of the village, to safeguard the area's tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and to provide a space for community activities (An and Gjestrum, 1999).

The second generation of ecomuseums includes the Aulun Sumu Ecomuseum in Inner Mongolia and the Guangxi Ecomuseum Group. The Aulun Sumu Ecomuseum was the first ecomuseum established in northern China. Following this, the Guangxi Ethnological Museum implemented the "1+10" project, which guided the establishment of ten

ecomuseums in Guangxi between 2003 and 2005. These included the Nandan Baiku Yao Ecomuseum, the Sanjiang Dong Ecomuseum, and the Jingxi Zhuang Ecomuseum. This second generation of ecomuseums places a stronger emphasis on cooperation and communication between scholars and local communities, establishing mechanisms for interaction between research institutions and villagers (Pan, 2008). The third generation of ecomuseums, emerging around 2005, places a greater focus on local autonomy. For instance, the management of the Xishuangbanna Bulang Ecomuseum in Yunnan, was successfully transferred to the villagers. Similarly, the Dimen Ecomuseum in Guizhou is supported by a company that assists villagers in forming cooperatives (Pan, 2013). The fourth generation of ecomuseums is marked by a shift from rural to urban areas, demonstrating multi-dimensional development. An example is the Qianmen Hutong Ecomuseum in Beijing, which preserves this historic area as a living museum. Additionally, the Hutong Historical Memory Project has been initiated to document the oral histories of over 60 local residents (Su, D., 2008).

Under the premise of "ecomuseums with Chinese characteristics", while ecomuseum theory emphasises that change originate from and be led by local communities, this is particularly difficult in China, due to the changing relationship between ethnic minority communities and the state, as well as the historical dominance of the Han majority across much of the country. Butler, B. (2006, p.464) articulates that heritage should be envisioned as "the present past", essentially highlighting the ongoing creation of the past tailored to the requirements of the present. This perspective is particularly pertinent in the Chinese political milieu. Because it reveals how particular influential authorities in the present context decide on the construction of the past, choose which components of heritage to accept or exclude, and use heritage to prefigure the future (Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018). This approach emphasises the strategic use of heritage to shape historical narratives and future aspirations in the context of political power dynamics (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018).

1.2.3 Case Studies: Two Ecomuseums in Guizhou

This study takes two first-generation ecomuseums in Guizhou as case studies: the Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum and the Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum.
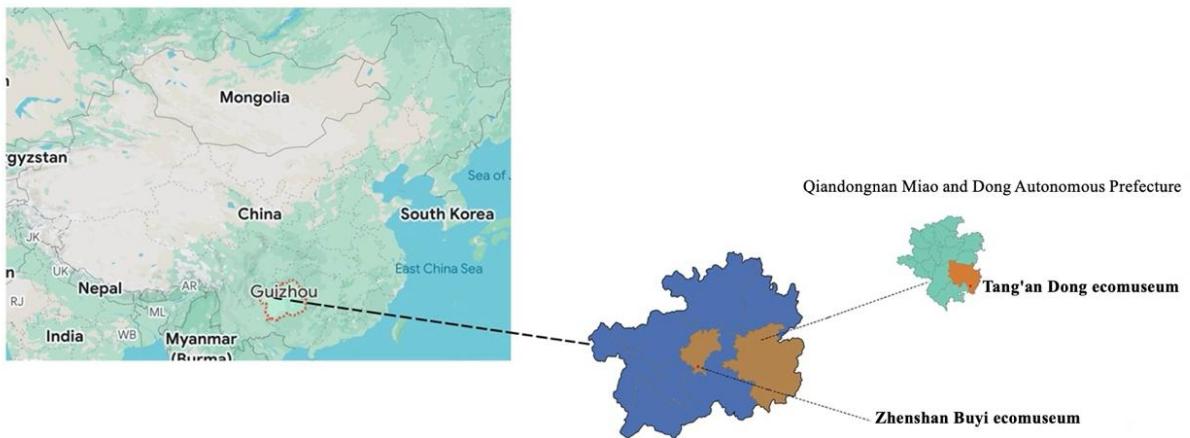
Figure 1-1 The location of two ecomuseums
Map made by the author, 2024

In 1995, China and Norway launched a pioneering heritage collaboration. A Sino–Norwegian team, Chinese museum experts Su Donghai and An Laishun (Chinese Society of Museums), Hu Chaoxiang (Guizhou cultural heritage official), and Norwegian museologist John Aage Gjestrum, secured funding from both governments to trial the ecomuseum concept in Guizhou. The result was a cluster of four pilot ecomuseums (the "first-generation" in China) set up in minority-inhabited areas of Guizhou. These were Suojia Ecomuseum (targeting the Qing Miao minority, opened 1998 in Suojia Town, Liuzhi District) which is the first ecomuseum in China, and three others: Zhenshan Ecomuseum (Buyi minority, 2002), Longli Ecomuseum (Han majority, 2004), and Tang'an Ecomuseum (Dong minority, 2005). Each project combined heritage preservation with rural development goals (for example, alleviating poverty and improving infrastructure) and was funded under the Sino–Norwegian agreement[8].

A core idea of the Guizhou ecomuseums was that local people themselves would manage and interpret their heritage, not outsiders. From the outset, villagers took active roles. Norwegian and Chinese specialists (e.g. Gjestrum and Chinese Society of Museums staff) trained young residents to document their own history and culture – for instance using sound and video recorders in a "Memory Project" to collect oral histories, songs, crafts and folk knowledge. These recorded "memories" were archived in the ecomuseums'

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[8] For funding details, please see Annex II in Review of the Sino-Norwegian Environmental Cooperation 1996-2005. https://www.norad.no/publikasjoner/2009/review-of-the-sino-norwegian-environmental-cooperation-1996-2005/

information centres (Su, D., 2008). For example, in the Suojia Ecomuseum a Documentation Centre was built (in traditional local style, with local labour) to store artifacts, publish local history and serve as a base for volunteer educators. Villagers volunteered as guides, storytellers and craftsmen there, ensuring that exhibitions and performances reflected genuine local culture. This "bottom-up" approach, training residents to be curators of their own heritage, not only preserved traditions but also boosted villagers' pride and self-confidence in their culture (Dong, R. et al., 2008).

Exchange visits further stimulated mutual learning. Before construction, selected community representatives from the ethnic minority villages and scholars participated in study tours to Norway (Yi, 2010). These trips (along with pre-construction workshops) acquainted local leaders with Scandinavian ecomuseum models and museological ideas. Likewise, Norwegian experts came to Guizhou to workshop with villagers. Such exchanges helped bridge cultural gaps and fostered a shared vision: local people began to see value in their everyday objects and customs, while outside experts learned how to adapt ecomuseum methods to Chinese conditions (Yi, 2010).

Building on the Guizhou pilots, a landmark outcome was the formulation of the "Liuzhi Principles" around 2000. Under the guidance of Norwegian heritage consultant Dag Myklebust and Chinese colleagues, nine guiding tenets were codified as a blueprint for Chinese ecomuseums. These principles have four core ideas:

- Community ownership and participation: The Liuzhi Principles assert that "the people of the villages are the true owners of their culture" and must have the right to interpret it. They recognise local communities' participation in governance as essential, making heritage preservation a democratic, shared responsibility.

- Integration of culture, nature, and development: The principles insist on a holistic approach, cultural heritage protection must be integrated within broader environmental conservation. They insist that short-term tourism or economic gain must never sacrifice long-term cultural integrity or environmental balance. In practice, this meant ecomuseums should plan "long-term and holistic," avoiding profit-driven projects that might erode traditions.

- Conservation prioritised over commercialisation: When tourism or development pressures conflict with heritage, preservation wins. The Liuzhi Principles explicitly state that "when there is a conflict between tourism and preservation of culture, the latter must be given priority". Traditional crafts may be marketed as souvenirs, but only in ways that respect authenticity. The idea is to boost livelihoods without "selling out" the culture, e.g. encouraging quality crafts production but forbidding exploitation of sacred customs.

- Contextual adaptation: The guidelines emphasise flexibility to suit each locality. "There is no fixed model for ecomuseums: they will all be different according to the specific culture and situation". In other words, while these values are compulsory in ethos, their application must be tailored to local social, economic and ecological contexts.

Together, these Liuzhi Principles have been acknowledged as "pivotal" and "compulsory" in guiding China's ecomuseum movement (Li, M. and Selim, 2024). They codified a new model in which rural heritage is preserved in situ by its own community, integrating cultural and natural conservation with sustainable local development. By enshrining community stewardship, integrated planning, and respect for local diversity, the first-generation Guizhou projects (under these principles) laid the foundation for subsequent ecomuseums nationwide (Borrelli, Nunzia and Ge, 2019).

Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum

Zhenshan Village, located in Shiban Town, Huaxi District, Guiyang City, Guizhou Province, is situated on a peninsula in the middle of the Huaxi Reservoir and backed by mountains, with picturesque landscapes. The village was established during the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty (1573–1620), giving it a history of over 400 years.

According to the *Epitaph of General Li Renyu*, during the twenty-eighth year of the Wanli reign (1600), General Li Renyu was ordered to enter Guizhou as part of the Ming army

sent to suppress the Bozhou Rebellion[9]. After stabilising the region, General Li stationed his troops in Anshun and later moved with his family to Zhenshan in Shiban Town to establish a military settlement. However, due to incompatibility with the local climate, his wife fell ill and passed away. General Li subsequently married into the local Buyi family clan, the Ban family, through whom he fathered two sons. The elder son retained the surname of Li, while the younger took on the surname of Ban. Over the centuries, the Li and Ban lineages have formed the primary family clans within Zhenshan Village. The village is built along the contours of the mountains, with fortifications constructed from large, precisely hewn stones, and gates formed by stone arches. The walls of the houses and courtyards are made of small slabs of stone, and irregular stone tiles replace traditional roof tiles. The roads and alleys are paved with large stone slabs. The village is known as the 'Stone Village' because of its unique stone building style, which also reveals the Tunpu culture[10] (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1-2 Zhenshan village
Photographed by the author, 2022

Zhenshan Village is primarily inhabited by the Buyi ethnic group[11], comprising approximately 160 households, the majority of which are Buyi (official data is not

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[9] The Bozhou Rebellion (1599–1600), also known as the Yang Yinglong Rebellion, was one of the three major campaigns of the Wanli era, fought in present-day Zunyi, Guizhou. See Kenneth M. Swope, "Civil-Military Coordination in the Bozhou Campaign of the Wanli Era," War & Society 18, no. 2 (2000): 1–22

[10] Tunpu culture, found primarily in Guizhou Province, China, originated from military settlements established by the Ming Dynasty in the 14th century. Soldiers from central and eastern China were stationed in southwestern China to control the frontier, eventually settling permanently and forming fortified villages known as *Tunpu*.

[11] The Buyi are one of China's ethnic minority groups, primarily residing in the southern and southwestern regions of

available as no census has been taken for many years). The Buyi people of Zhenshan have historically lived in mixed communities with the Han and Miao people. The primary language spoken by the Buyi people in Zhenshan is Buyi, which belongs to the Tai–Kadai language family. This language shares similarities with Zhuang and other Tai languages, reflecting cultural and linguistic ties across southern China (Diller et al., 2004). However, the Buyi language in Zhenshan has been influenced by prolonged interaction with neighbouring Han and Miao communities, leading to a degree of linguistic assimilation, especially among younger generations. In recent years, Mandarin has become more prevalent, particularly for education and communication with those outside the village, contributing to a gradual decline in the daily use of the Buyi language.

As a historical ethnic minority village, Zhenshan has been awarded many official titles since 1993 through the cooperation of the villagers and the local government (Table 1-1).

Table 1-1 Timeline of Zhenshan's official title

Year	Title	Process	Participators
1993	Ethnic Cultural Preservation Villages	Conducted research on the cultural heritage of Zhenshan and earmarked funds for the protection and improvement of Zhenshan's ethnic cultural heritage and village appearance.	Bureau of Culture of Guizhou Province and Huaxi District Culture and Broadcasting Bureau
1994	Guizhou Open-Air Folklore Museum	The villagers organised themselves into an open-air museum and were later certified by the government.	Cooperation between local communities and village governments
1995	Provincial Heritage Preservation unit	Approved by the provincial government, Zhenshan Village is a provincial heritage preservation unit. The Provincial Bureau of Culture invited Norwegian experts to visit Zhenshan. Through this visit, the experts included Zhenshan in the construction of potential ecomuseum clusters.	Bureau of Culture of Guizhou Province and Norwegian experts

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Guizhou Province, with smaller populations in Yunnan Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. According to the Seventh National Census in 2020, the Buyi population is approximately 2.87 million, making them one of the larger ethnic minority groups in China.

1998	Ecomuseum	In early 1998 the National Cultural Heritage Administration, the Chinese Museum Society and Norwegian experts again to Zhenshan, officially determined that Zhenshan as Chinese and Norwegian cultural co-operation in the international project of Guizhou ecomuseum.	National Cultural Heritage Administration, the Chinese Museum Society and Norwegian experts
2012	Chinese Traditional Village	Bureau of Culture of Guizhou Province cooperates with experts and scholars in the identification of traditional villages.	Bureau of Culture of Guizhou Province and Experts and Scholars
2017	Ethnic Minority Characteristic Villages	In order to better promote the protection and development of minority characteristic villages the National Ethnic Affairs Commission organised the naming of minority characteristic villages.	National Ethnic Affairs Commission as well as provincial and municipal ethnic committees

The Huaxi District of Guiyang City, the capital of Guizhou Province, where Zhenshan is located, has implemented the government's new policy of "Whole Region Tourism" since 2016. The policy means that the entire Huaxi District should be planned as a tourist destination with different functions. In this process, many of the new attractions being developed have taken over the farmland of the Zhenshan villagers. Consequently, the villagers have completely abandoned their agricultural livelihoods.

Tang'an Dong ecomuseum

Figure 1-3 Tang'an village
Photographed by the author, 2022

Tang'an Dong Village is located in Zhaoxing Town, Liping County, Qiandongnan Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou Province, halfway up Longbao Mountain, at an altitude of about 840 metres. The village has around 170 households and over 800 residents, with the Yin and Lu families being the most prominent. In the Dong language, "Tang" means pond, and "An" refers to a type of plant. Before the ancestors of Tang'an established a village here, they would drive geese to this area daily because of the presence of the "An" plants, which the geese liked to eat. Sometimes, the geese would not return for several days, and when their owner found them, the geese had already laid eggs in this place. Believing it to be a fortunate location, the ancestors decided to settle in Tang'an, and the village has now been inhabited for over 700 years.

The Dong people[12] are primarily engaged in agriculture and forestry, with rice cultivation as their main agricultural activity, a practice that has been part of their culture for generations. The most important building in a Dong village is the drum tower, a striking

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[12] The Dong people are one of China's ethnic minority groups, primarily distributed across Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi provinces. The Dong have a long history, with origins tracing back to the ancient Baiyue tribes of China. The Dong language belongs to the Kra-Dai language family within the Sino-Tibetan language system and is divided into two main dialects: Southern Dong and Northern Dong, each with a distinctive phonetic system. Dong architecture is predominantly wooden, with drum towers and wind-rain bridges serving as iconic structures within Dong villages. These buildings not only function as centers for community gatherings and festivals but also symbolize unity and cohesion within the village. The Dong people are renowned for their polyphonic choral singing, known as the "Dong Grand Song," which has been inscribed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.

wooden structure that demonstrates traditional craftsmanship without the use of nails. All the residential buildings in the village are built around the drum tower (Figure 3). The number of drum towers reflects the population of a village (Cornet, 2010). Tang'an is a small village with only one 9-storey drum tower. In the history of the Dong people, the drum tower was a place people gathered to discuss important matters in the village, or to defend against foreign invasion, all drums were beaten to call on the masses. In contemporary society, the drums are used as a place for villagers to socialise and entertain and gather at festivals. The stage beside the drum tower is the place for the performances of the grand song of Dong (dòngzú dàgē, 侗族大歌, hereafter grand song). The grand song is an unaccompanied polyphonic traditional singing. It is listed on UNESCO's representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. It includes "drum tower grand songs", "imitative songs", ballads, children's songs, "dance around the drum tower" songs and "congratulatory songs" and other genres. The music is passed on to the disciple choirs by experienced masters. Community members of all ages participate in this activity (UNESCO, 2009).

The primary language spoken in Tang'an Village is Dong. In Tang'an and its surrounding areas, the Dong language is divided into two main dialects: Southern Dong and Northern Dong (Long et al., 1998), with Tang'an Village primarily using the Southern Dong dialect. However, Mandarin has become more common, especially because of its importance in education and in external communication. In Tang'an, Dong remains an essential language for daily communication, traditional activities, and ceremonies, maintaining its significance in the cultural and communal identity of the villagers. All local residents speak Dong, with only the younger generation able to speak Mandarin. Apart from a few village officials, most middle-aged and elderly residents are unable to read or speak Mandarin.

Tang'an was the last village to become part of the first generation of ecomuseums. Due to its mountainous location, the process of establishing it as an ecomuseum was more challenging and complex. In April 1995, a group of Chinese and Norwegian scholars was formed to conduct field research on the idea of establishing ecomuseums in Guizhou. Norwegian experts and the local community selected a representative of the villagers to

travel to Norway to introduce Tang'an to museologists. During the selection process, the Norwegian experts rejected the villagers' proposal to send government staff and re-emphasised the importance of ordinary villagers' participation in the ecomuseum concept. A young female university student was chosen to represent the villagers, as the Norwegian experts considered her fluent in Mandarin and knowledgeable about Dong culture in her community. After her three trips to Norway to introduce Tang'an Village and study the ecomuseum concept, Tang'an was finally selected as one of the first-generation ecomuseums in China. In June 2005, as the last of the first-generation ecomuseums, Tang'an opened to the public. After this, Tang'an received multiple honorary titles, including "Liping Tangan Intangible Cultural Heritage Village", "Chinese Ethnic Minority Featured Village", "Demonstration Village for the Inheritance and Protection of Dong Grand Song," and "Charming Dong Village". However, specific information regarding the awarding institutions and dates has not been disclosed.

1.3 Research Aims and Research Questions

This research will investigate the following three core questions:

1. How has being designated as an ecomuseum affected the landscape of Tang'an and Zhenshan villages, and what similarities or contrasts emerge between the two sites?
2. How has the establishment of ecomuseums maintained, reshaped, and mobilised the cultural heritage of the local community?
3. How has the establishment of ecomuseums interplayed with the evolving social dynamics of the local community in both villages?

This first core question can be approached by two perspectives. First, from the local community's perspective, the thesis intends to answer:

- How do local community members visualise changes in their landscape?
- What are the perceptions and attitudes of locals towards these transformations?
- What level of agency do local residents possess in managing and influencing these changes?
- What aspects of landscape transformation matter most to local people?

Second, from the tourists' perspective:

- In what ways do tourism activities influence the physical and cultural landscape of the village?
- How do tourists' perceptions and expectations shape the representation and experience of the village landscape?

As for the second core question, this research explores how cultural heritage within ethnic minority communities has been negotiated, contested, and strategically presented by different stakeholders, including official authorities, local residents, and tourists:

- How have national and local heritage discourses guided what counts as "authentic" minority heritage within the ecomuseum, thereby shaping what is preserved and what is modified?
- How does the unique identity of being an ecomuseum influence and shape heritage tourism dynamics?
- In what ways have local communities utilised their cultural heritage strategically within the ecomuseum framework in response to external economic and cultural pressures?
- How have contestations and negotiations between stakeholders influenced the representation and interpretation of ethnic minority cultures?

Addressing the third core question requires a comprehensive understanding of the broader social dynamics within the community:

- How have relationships and power structures within local communities evolved following the establishment of ecomuseums?
- In what ways have ecomuseums contributed to changes in social interactions and intra-community relationships?
- What role do local governance structures and policies play in influencing community engagement and participation in ecomuseum activities?
- How have ethnic identity and self-perception among local residents been reshaped through interactions with tourists and external stakeholders?

Expanding from these core questions, this thesis has devised three specific aims to structure its research and analysis. The first aim is to critically explore how the designation of ecomuseums has transformed the village landscapes. This includes an examination of visual and material landscape changes driven by tourism infrastructure, heritage commodification, and policy-driven representations. Through participatory photography (i.e., photovoice), this study captures local residents' perceptions and interpretations of these landscape transformations, revealing insights beyond official narratives (Chapter 2).

The second aim focuses on understanding the complex interactions and negotiations surrounding cultural heritage preservation within ecomuseums. Specifically, it investigates how official heritage discourses influence heritage practices, both at the ecomuseum and community levels, and how local communities strategically respond to external pressures, policies, and commercial interests. This includes analysing contestations among stakeholders such as officials, tourists, and community members, and assessing their impacts on cultural heritage representation and authenticity (Chapter 3).

The third aim addresses the socio-cultural implications of establishing ecomuseums, particularly concerning social dynamics, power relations, and ethnic identity within local communities. It examines how ecomuseums affect intra-community relationships, influence power structures, and reshape ethnic self-perceptions. Additionally, it evaluates governance frameworks, policies, and participatory practices to determine their effectiveness in empowering local communities and facilitating genuine community participation in heritage management and tourism development (Chapter 4).

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This section reviews the theoretical relevant to the study of landscape, heritage, and social relationships. While the ecomuseum concept provides the primary theoretical orientation, this study also draws on broader scholarship on landscape studies, critical heritage theory, and rural social relations. These fields offer essential perspectives for understanding how

space, identity, memory, and social structures are produced, negotiated, and transformed through heritage practices. Together, they provide the conceptual tools necessary for analysing the changing cultural landscapes and social relations in the two case study villages, Tang'an and Zhenshan. This section first reviews the origins and development of the ecomuseum concept and its localisation in China. It then examines key theoretical approaches relevant to the study of landscape, heritage, and social relationships, with particular attention to how these dimensions intersect in rural heritage contexts.

1.4.1 The conception of ecomuseum

The ecomuseum reflects the evolving ways in which human societies define values and identities and attempt to share their collective spirit. Emerging from the new museology movement of the 1970s, the ecomuseum represents a fundamental shift in the role of museums, emphasising their capacity to provide essential support to society rather than serving exclusively as institutions of the elite (Davis, P., 2004; Maggi, 2009). This approach foregrounds the integration of cultural and natural heritage within the lived environment, positioning museums as instruments of community empowerment and collective memory (Davis, P., 2011).

The first formal ecomuseum initiative was established between 1971 and 1974 at Le Creusot-Montceau under the direction of Hugues de Varine. Since that time, more than 400 ecomuseums have been created across Europe, the Americas, and Asia, illustrating the model's rapid global expansion and its central place within the development of new museology (Vergo, 1997; Davis, P., 2007). The distinction between traditional museums and ecomuseums was initially articulated by de Varine (1988), who proposed a simple but profound formula:

Museums = buildings + collections + public + experts

Ecomuseums = territory + heritage + inhabitants + memory.

Following this conceptualisation, Georges Henri Rivière expanded the ecomuseum into a more systematic model, proposing that it should act as a laboratory for the study of communities and their environments, a conservation centre for safeguarding local

heritage, and a school for the education and training of community members (Rivière, 1985). Rather than focusing on the accumulation of collections, Rivière's vision emphasised the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage within its original context, treating landscapes, built environments, traditional skills, social structures, and patterns of everyday life as integral components of the museum (Rivière, 1985; Davis, P., 2007). Reinforcing this emphasis, de Varine (1996) argued that objects are best preserved and interpreted in situ, allowing their meanings to be understood in relation to their environments. In this way, ecomuseums present the interaction between human communities and their natural surroundings, and encourage the protection of traditional ecosystems and habitats (Rivard, 2001). In further refining the concept, Rivard (1984) proposed a typology of ecomuseums, identifying four principal forms: the discovery ecomuseum, the developmental ecomuseum, the specialist economic ecomuseum, and the combat ecomuseum, each responding to different community needs and heritage contexts (Poulot, 2004). Discovery ecomuseums foster place-based learning and identity building; development ecomuseums link heritage work to broader socio-economic renewal; specialist economic ecomuseums manage a single strategic resource such as an industrial landscape; and combat ecomuseums mobilise heritage in struggles for social or environmental justice (Poulot, 2004).

Nonetheless, de Varine (1996) later cautioned against rigid classifications, emphasising the ecomuseum as a flexible and imaginative framework. He outlined four objectives for the ecomuseum: to serve as a community database, to act as an observatory of social and environmental change, to provide a laboratory for innovation, and to serve as a showcase for representing the community and its environment. This emphasis on flexibility, creativity, and close community engagement has remained a central characteristic of ecomuseum practice (Crooke, E, 2006). Several key conceptual definitions distinguish ecomuseums from traditional museums and heritage institutions. Central to these definitions is the recognition that heritage cannot be separated into discrete categories of cultural versus natural, or tangible versus intangible. Rather, ecomuseums adopt a holistic framework that emphasises the interconnectedness of different forms of heritage, as well as the relationships between heritage, landscape, memory, identity, place, and local communities (Davis, P., 2011). This integrated perspective positions the ecomuseum not merely as a site of preservation, but as a model for understanding and managing the

cultural and environmental dimensions of a specific territory in concert (Aydemir, 2016). In contrast to conventional museums, which often prioritise the collection, categorisation, and display of artefacts, the ecomuseum is concerned with the lived experiences and practices of the communities it serves. It seeks to represent heritage as an active and evolving process embedded in the everyday lives of local residents. This approach places particular emphasis on intangible heritage such as oral traditions, social practices, and environmental knowledge, which are often overlooked in object-centred institutions. The ecomuseum's commitment to sustainability and community participation further reinforces its departure from conventional museological paradigms, offering a model in which heritage is not only preserved but also meaningfully integrated into the ongoing life of a place (Dogan, 2015; Li, M. and Selim, 2024).

Ecomuseums are founded on three core principles: community management, the integration of cultural and natural heritage, and the in-situ preservation of that heritage (Poulot, 2004). Building on these fundamentals, individual ecomuseums diverge widely: some manage dispersed sites across whole cultural landscapes, others occupy purpose-built visitor centres, and many borrow methods from open-air museums (Maggi and Falletti, 2000; Howard, 2002). Their final shape always reflects the natural, cultural and historical character of the region and the objectives defined by the local community (Doğan and Timothy, 2020).

1.4.2 Ecomuseums in China

The ecomuseum concept was introduced into China in the late 1990s, following increasing concerns about the cultural and environmental pressures facing ethnic minority regions amid rapid modernisations. The model arrived not as a direct continuation of European practices but as part of a wider dialogue on cultural sustainability, heritage preservation, and participatory development. In 1998, the first pilot ecomuseum projects were launched in Guizhou Province through a collaboration between the State Administration of Cultural Heritage, the Guizhou Provincial Government, the International Council of Museums (ICOM), UNESCO, and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1998, with the cooperation of the Chinese and Norwegian governments, China's first ecomuseum was established in the Miao village of Suoga in

Guizhou Province (An and Gjestrum, 1999; Su, D., 2008). Subsequent development occurred in three stages. The development of ecomuseums in China has been discussed in Section 1.2.2. According to Hamrin (1996), the original ecomuseum model adopted at an early stage is consistent with the Scandinavian model. Both the first- and second-generation Chinese ecomuseums reflect this structure, typically comprising an information centre and multiple conservation sites distributed across the surrounding landscape (Yin, K., 2019). The centre serves multiple roles: it links dispersed cultural and historical sites, houses community collections, presents elements of traditional culture, and facilitates exchanges between residents and outside visitors (He, L., 2010).

The selection of Guizhou Province for China's initial ecomuseum projects was closely connected to its ethnic and ecological diversity, as well as its designation as a key target for rural development and poverty alleviation policies (Su, D., 2008). For Chinese policymakers and heritage professionals, it was viewed as an adaptable and pragmatic model capable of combining tourism development with cultural preservation, while also enhancing China's international reputation for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (Fraser, R., 2022; Li, M. and Selim, 2024). However, the adaptation of the ecomuseum model in China also introduced important structural and ideological shifts. While the original European concept emphasised local autonomy and bottom-up processes, Chinese ecomuseums have typically been framed within a top-down administrative structure. Yin, K. and Nitzky (2022, p.34) characterise Chinese ecomuseums as hybrid forms, combining participatory rhetoric with strong central oversight. Although community participation remains a stated goal, the level of genuine local involvement often depends on how well the community's interests align with policy directives and the goals of cultural authorities (Nitzky, 2012). The development of ecomuseums in China has followed a relatively fixed trajectory, with no substantial shifts in underlying principles. Although there have been continuous updates in technology and design, these changes have primarily affected surface-level features rather than the core structure or practice (Li, M. and Selim, 2024). The prevailing approach tends to place emphasis on external aspects such as physical scale, architectural form and spatial layout, while giving limited attention to community participation and local socio-cultural dynamics (Stojević, 2019). Over the past few decades, ecomuseums in China have often been treated as a standardised model. Efforts

have focused on replicating and refining this model instead of re-evaluating its foundational concepts or adapting it to changing local conditions (Li, M. and Selim, 2024).

1.4.3 Heritage as Social Practice and Process

The ecomuseum is a model of heritage preservation that reflects a broader shift in heritage thinking, moving away from the static collection and exhibition of objects toward a dynamic, community-based approach to heritage. From its inception, the ecomuseum has been conceptualised as a museum without walls, in which heritage is safeguarded in situ and managed in collaboration with the people who live with and embody it (Rivière, 1985; Davis, P., 2011). Rather than separating objects from their contexts, the ecomuseum frames heritage as inseparable from the cultural landscape, local knowledge systems, and everyday practices of community life. It is defined by its territorial focus, emphasis on memory, and the participation of inhabitants in the construction and interpretation of their own heritage (de Varine, 1996; Davis, P., 2007). This perspective aligns with critical heritage theory, which defines heritage as a socially embedded and culturally constructed process. Rather than viewing heritage as a fixed and objective assemblage of material remains, scholars have emphasised its character as a cultural practice shaped by historical, political, and institutional dynamics (Smith, L., 2006; Harrison, R., 2012). In this view, heritage is not simply inherited from the past but is continually produced, negotiated, and reinterpreted in the present. These conceptual shifts support the ecomuseum's theoretical foundations, where heritage is understood not as a set of curated artefacts but as a living, evolving relationship between people and place.

The evolution of heritage policy at the international level reflects this transformation. UNESCO's early initiatives focused primarily on immovable and movable tangible heritage, including monuments, architectural ensembles, and archaeological sites (UNESCO, 2001). Natural heritage was later incorporated, defined as habitats of exceptional biological, geological, and ecological significance. The introduction of the category of intangible cultural heritage further expanded this framework, acknowledging practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted within communities as vital components of cultural heritage (Van Mensch, 1993; Harrison, D. and Hitchcock, 2005). As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) points out, intangible heritage is,

like natural heritage, "alive," constantly changing, and embedded in cultural practices. It only becomes heritage when recognised as such by the communities who create and sustain it. The ecomuseum model, with its emphasis on safeguarding both tangible and intangible elements within their living context, aligns with this broader heritage philosophy and seeks to foster cultural continuity by creating conditions for heritage to remain meaningful and relevant to local communities (Davis, P., 2011; Aydemir, 2016).

Heritage, Authority, and Representation

While the ecomuseum offers a participatory and decentralised framework for heritage management, it often operates within dominant institutional structures that shape how heritage is defined, authorised, and controlled. These structures are most thoroughly theorised through the concept of the AHD. It provides a powerful lens through which to analyse the normative assumptions embedded in heritage practice.

Heritage is not a neutral collection of objects or traditions that simply await preservation. It is shaped through discourse, which refers to the structured ways of thinking and speaking about what heritage is and who holds the authority to define it. The AHD privileges tangible, expert-curated, and often monumental forms of heritage, while marginalising practices, meanings, and groups that do not conform to dominant narratives. It serves to naturalise particular values about what counts as legitimate heritage within the domains of conservation, management, and public representation (Smith, L., 2006; Smith, L., 2015). This process of "heritage-isation" (Harvey, 2001), should be understood not as a passive recognition of the past but as an active social and political construction. In this view, heritage is better approached as a verb rather than a noun.

The implications of the AHD extend into the realm of policy and governance. Scholars such as Waterton and Smith (2010) argue that the AHD entails not only an exclusion of alternative voices but also the marginalisation and misrecognition of subaltern groups and minority communities in defining and managing heritage. This form of exclusion is particularly significant in the context of heritage as a tool of governance. In Foucault's concept of governmentality, knowledge and truth-claiming discourses are always

entangled with dynamics of power (Foucault, 1991), which are manifested through everyday practices and institutional structures (Hoy, 1981). Heritage practices serve as means of governing identity, memory and territory through the exercise of institutional and expert power (Smith, L., 2006; Oakes, 2016). In these contexts, heritage operates as a technology of rule that can reinforce state authority and legitimise the imposition of external narratives onto local populations.

Within this AHD-driven heritage governance framework outlined above, the authority to define heritage remains highly centralised. Decisions about what qualifies as heritage, and how it should be interpreted or displayed, are often removed from the communities most intimately connected to it. As a result, critical heritage scholars increasingly advocate for alternative and plural heritage discourses, particularly in Indigenous and marginalised contexts (Wu, Z. and Hou, 2015). Several scholars have called for a post-Western or decolonised approach to heritage studies which would resist the universalising tendencies of UNESCO frameworks and seeks to explore how heritage is constructed and mobilised across diverse political and cultural contexts. (Winter, 2013; Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018).

Zhu (2019, p.1477) and Ludwig and Walton (2020) have further extended this critique to Chinese contexts, arguing that state-led heritage systems in China reflect distinct versions of the AHD. These frameworks combine bureaucratic classification systems with political objectives, resulting in a heritage regime that integrates cultural recognition with tools of economic planning and ideological governance. Zhu (2024, p.1477) argues that, within the context of Chinese heritage studies, historically, driven by Western-centric values and policies, the global heritage paradigm has significantly influenced the knowledge, values, and policies of Chinese heritage practices. This, in turn, has facilitated the emergence of modern AHD (Smith, L., 2006). In the Chinese context, this has often resulted in the direct adoption of concepts and models derived from Western policy and practice, without sufficient critical engagement with China's distinct historical, cultural, and political conditions. The widespread reliance on a 'Western theory and Chinese application' model risks reinforcing hegemonic practices and obscuring the complexities and internal dynamics of local heritage discourses and practices. This tendency to universalise

theoretical frameworks may limit the potential for developing heritage approaches that are more contextually grounded and responsive to China's specific realities.

Studies have also argued that heritage in China functions as a form of soft power, used to strengthen diplomatic relations and project a favourable national image in the international arena (Nakano and Zhu, 2020; Zhang, F. and Courty, 2021). Domestically, the party-state employs heritage as a tool for promoting a Han-centred vision of modern China, aiming to foster social cohesion and facilitate cultural governance. These national objectives are transmitted downward through policy programmes that repackage rural and minority landscapes as branded heritage zones, linking heritage work to poverty alleviation, rural revitalisation, and ethnic affairs administration (Zhu and Maags, 2020). Local governments frequently appropriate heritage frameworks not only to promote tourism and economic development but also to enhance social cohesion, particularly among ethnic minority groups (Oakes, 2013; Oakes, 2016). Heritage becomes a vehicle through which local officials can access funding streams, shape narratives of culture and tradition, and consolidate their administrative influence (Cui, 2018). Harrell (2011) considered Chinese heritage as part of broader modernisation efforts deeply intertwined with national integration strategies.

The ecomuseum model promotes community participation and decentralised heritage management, yet it frequently operates within institutional frameworks shaped by the AHD. This discourse privileges officially sanctioned narratives, expert-driven conservation practices, and tangible heritage forms, often marginalising local perspectives and alternative interpretations. In China, these dynamics are compounded by state-led heritage policies that instrumentalise cultural heritage for broader political objectives such as modernisation, national integration, and soft power projection. Heritage becomes a mechanism through which local authorities access state resources, consolidate administrative control, and shape narratives of identity and tradition. These developments influence not only what is preserved and promoted but also who holds the authority to define heritage.

Representing Minority Cultures in Chinese Museums

As heritage becomes increasingly embedded in national modernisation strategies, important questions emerge regarding the representation of minority cultures and the extent to which local voices are included in heritage-making processes. The next section examines the role of museums as key institutions through which minority cultures are presented and interpreted. It explores how museum practices reflect broader structures of power, reinforce essentialised ethnic identities, and mediate relationships between the state and minority communities.

China recognises 56 nationalities under a framework of "diversity in unity" (Zhou, 2016, p.128). This principle affirms the cultural distinctiveness of minority groups while embedding them within a unified national narrative. While such recognition might suggest inclusivity, scholars argue that the model supports a form of symbolic multiculturalism, wherein surface-level difference is celebrated but deeper cultural autonomy remains circumscribed (Shepherd, R.J. and Yu, 2012). Museums, closely aligned with state ideology, are key actors in reinforcing this structure. They selectively display minority cultures in ways that underscore their folkloric or traditional attributes, often as visual and rhetorical representations of national harmony (Smith, L., 2006; Waterton and Smith, 2010). This approach corresponds with the concept of AHD, in which heritage is defined by institutional authorities, privileging expert knowledge over community perspectives. In China, the AHD is institutionalised through centralised policies and bureaucratic oversight, which determine the boundaries of legitimate heritage representation. The display of minority traditions in museums thus becomes part of a state-led process of cultural regulation and ideological reproduction (Harrell, 2011; Harrell, 2012; Oakes, 2016).

Drawing on the concept of "China Museum Boom" (CMB) of Zhang, F. and Courty (2021), a centrally orchestrated expansion that turned museums into heavily subsidised public services after 2007, this study treats the boom as a heritage-making process rather than a neutral infrastructure project. These reforms transformed museums from partially user-funded institutions into heavily subsidised public services (Lu, 2013; Zhang, F. and Courty, 2021, p.33). The CMB reflects the state's broader cultural agenda, in which

museums are expected to fulfil multiple functions: to promote national identity, safeguard heritage, encourage public education, and support local economic development through tourism (Denton, 2014; Shan, 2014). The museum boom has created a two-tier system, comprising a small number of centrally managed "superstar" museums with significant resources, and a large number of low-budget, locally administered institutions. Despite significant regional disparities in GDP, museum growth has been relatively evenly distributed, which demonstrates deliberate government efforts to equalise access to cultural institutions (Zhang, F. and Courty, 2021; Zhang, F. and Courty, 2022). This expansion is not ideologically neutral. As Varutti (2014) notes, museum narratives in China consistently promote a sense of civilisational continuity and national unity. Minority cultures are often positioned as timeless and exotic, reinforcing a vision of ethnic diversity that is manageable and depoliticised. The strategic proliferation of history museums, the fastest growing category, underscores the role of museums in shaping collective memory and producing patriotic sentiment (Lu, 2013; Zhang, F. and Courty, 2021).

China's museum infrastructure operates under a hierarchical administrative system managed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and its sub-agencies, such as the National Cultural Heritage Administration. Policies are articulated through successive five-year plans, which set targets for museum construction, public accessibility, and thematic focus. All levels of government, including central, provincial, municipal, and county authorities, manage their own museum networks. While this allows for local differences, the system ultimately reinforces a standardised model of heritage interpretation dominated by national priorities (Lord et al., 2019; Zhang, F. and Courty, 2022). Several scholars have pointed out how Chinese museums use ethnicity as a visual and rhetorical tool. Minority cultures are often portrayed as 'authentic' but static images rooted in tradition and visually contrasting with mainstream modern Han culture (Schein and Luo, 2016). This process of internal orientalism, as Schein (2000) initially described it, reduces the complexity of minority identities and reinforces cultural hierarchies. Varutti (2014) indicates that such representational strategies serve to inscribe patriotic narratives into museum displays, where diversity is celebrated as a sign of national harmony rather than a call for pluralistic recognition. The representation of minority cultures in museums is shaped by both representational strategies and administrative

hierarchies. Fraser, R. (2020), in his study of the Orochen minority, emphasises how museum professionals, often from minority backgrounds themselves, operate as "heritage middlemen" who navigate between local knowledge and state expectations. While these individuals may draw upon lived cultural knowledge, their work is constrained by the institutional frameworks and ideological directives under which museums operate.

Representation within museums is further shaped by the political and institutional history of museums themselves. The modern museum emerged as a technology of power, designed to instil cultural norms and regulate social behaviour (Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 2017). In China, this function is not limited to historical exhibitions but is extended to cultural policy. Museums are part of a soft power strategy used to reinterpret the past in ways that reinforce cultural pride, national unity, and ideological legitimacy (Denton, 2014; Shelach-Lavi, 2019). Within this framework, the representation of minority heritage becomes part of a broader process of cultural regulation, in which ethnic cultures are curated to serve the nation-building project. The effects of this framework are evident in both tangible and intangible heritage policies. While official discourse embraces intangible cultural heritage as a living practice (UNESCO, 2003), its management often entails essentialising practices, symbolic classifications, and hierarchies of value. The politics of authenticity and the tendency to frame heritage as timeless and unchanging contradict the lived realities of minority communities whose cultures are dynamic, adaptive, and embedded in everyday life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Cominelli and Greffe, 2012).

In sum, the representation of minority cultures in Chinese museums is less a matter of curatorial interpretation than of political governance. Museums operate as mechanisms through which the state organises, displays, and regulates cultural difference. Through the AHD, they legitimise particular identities while delegitimising others, producing heritage not only as memory but as a tool for social ordering. Understanding these dynamics is essential to evaluating how museums mediate the relationship between minority communities, cultural heritage, and the state.

Community Participation in Heritage Production and Practice

The state-led logic of representation that characterises museum and heritage practices in China often positions communities as passive recipients rather than active agents in the production and transmission of cultural heritage. This has led to sustained scholarly reflection on how cultural heritage is defined, managed, and sustained, particularly in relation to local agency and participation. While the following section does not focus exclusively on the ecomuseum framework, the participatory ideals associated with ecomuseums offer a critical lens through which to understand broader debates about inclusive heritage governance. These discussions are especially relevant in contexts where heritage is closely tied to tourism development, raising further questions about the commodification of culture, the distribution of benefits, and the extent to which communities can shape the representation of their own traditions. This section, therefore, reviews key literature on community participation in Chinese heritage spaces, including in heritage tourism, to better understand the shifting configurations of authority, identity, and agency in contemporary heritage practice.

The principle of community participation has been integral to the development of ecomuseum theory and practice. From their origins in 1970s France, ecomuseums have promoted the idea that heritage management should be embedded within everyday life and shaped by the communities that live it (de Varine, 2006). Ecomuseum concept rejects object-centred approaches in favour of socially embedded models, where heritage is defined, interpreted, and preserved by the people to whom it matters (Maure, 2006; Davis, P., 2011). This community-driven orientation positions ecomuseums as sites for local empowerment, social learning, and cultural continuity. Scholars have argued that effective ecomuseums foster "sense of place" by engaging communities as knowledge holders and decision-makers (Borrelli, N and Davis, 2012). In global practice, initiatives such as the Him Dak Ecomuseum in Arizona have demonstrated how participatory frameworks can challenge cultural marginalisation and promote self-directed development (Doğan and Timothy, 2020). These approaches align with broader shifts in museum theory, particularly with new museology and social museology, which advocate for inclusive, dialogic, and user-centred institutional forms (Tzortzaki, 2021). The participatory values embedded in ecomuseums reflect wider international frameworks that promote community involvement as a foundation for inclusive heritage governance.

According to UNESCO's Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) and ICCROM's people-centred approaches (Wijesuriya et al., 2016), heritage derives meaning not solely from material form but through its ongoing connection to local communities. These frameworks define communities as essential stakeholders and stress that heritage management must respond to the social, cultural, and economic lives of those who inhabit heritage spaces (Lenzerini, 2011; Poulios, 2014).

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a widely cited model outlining five levels of participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. These levels provide a means of assessing the degree of influence afforded to community actors within heritage initiatives (De Leiuen and Arthure, 2016). In practice, participatory methods such as co-design workshops, oral history projects, and collaborative planning are used to strengthen heritage knowledge, foster shared authority, and build capacity among local residents (Atalay, 2010; Ferreira, 2018). Scholars have raised concerns about the romanticisation and tokenism that frequently accompany discourses of community participation. Waterton and Smith (2010) argue that the notion of "community" is frequently treated as a homogenous and harmonious entity, ignoring the diversity, contestation, and structural inequalities that characterise social life. Drawing on Burkett (2001), they suggest that participation must be understood not merely as inclusion but as a process entangled with recognition, legitimacy, and power. This position is supported by Nancy Fraser's (1998) status model of social justice, which defines misrecognition as the denial of equal participation and stresses the need for structural change to ensure parity of voice and agency in public life (Fraser, N., 2009). The theory of AHD provides further insight into how dominant institutional narratives exclude community knowledge. Within such frameworks, participation often remains constrained by top-down agendas, limiting communities to passive roles in heritage interpretation (Waterton and Smith, 2010, p.12).

These challenges are visible in the Chinese context, where ecomuseum development and heritage management continue to operate within state-led frameworks. Li, M. and Selim (2024) note that although national policy frameworks in China, such as the "Liuzhi Principle," emphasise community-led heritage interpretation, these principles are seldom

applied in practice. Instead, ecomuseums are often aligned with economic and tourism goals, prioritising visible outputs over long-term cultural sustainability. Residents are consulted only after infrastructure is in place, and participation is rarely institutionalised at the decision-making level (Nitzky, 2012). According to official data, only 27 ecomuseums are formally registered in China, and very few incorporate mechanisms for sustained, community-driven governance (National Cultural Heritage Administration, 2023). The governance structure of heritage in China reflects a top-down model where the state retains primary authority. Heritage management responsibilities are divided among central, provincial, and local agencies, and community input is mediated through administrative units such as Street Offices and Residents' Committees, which primarily represent state rather than local interests (Verdini, 2015; Li, Y. et al., 2020). NGOs, where present, are often affiliated with government entities, limiting their ability to advocate independently for participatory approaches (Fan, L., 2014; Svensson, M., 2016).

The sociopolitical construction of "community" in China further complicates participation. Communities are not spontaneously formed social entities but administratively defined units, created to facilitate policy delivery (Bray, 2006; Heberer, 2009). In rural areas, participation is often filtered through village leadership or local party structures, which may not represent all segments of the population equally (Qian, 2014; Xu, Y., 2019). In addition, many communities lack the institutional capacity, historical awareness, or economic security necessary to engage in heritage management on equal terms (Yang, F., 2016). Even with these limitations, minority communities have developed a variety of ways to participate. In the case of ecomuseums, community members may participate in project planning, cultural documentation, and exhibition development, although their involvement is often limited to later stages of implementation (Nitzky, 2012; Li, Ying, 2015). Where community participation is formally recognised, it is often framed within externally imposed categories. For example, ICH safeguarding programmes typically identify designated inheritors (*chuánchéngrén,* 传承人), whose role is to transmit cultural traditions according to codified criteria. While this model provides visibility and recognition to selected individuals, it can marginalise broader communal practices and reframe living heritage as fixed, performative, or decontextualised (Lee, J., 2020; Su, Xinwei et al., 2020).

Moreover, the selection and certification of inheritors are generally conducted by state agencies or affiliated experts, which may reproduce hierarchies and limit the scope of grassroots participation (Alivizatou, 2016). Many individuals and groups exercise agency by leveraging their cultural expertise and positionality to negotiate visibility and influence within institutional frameworks. ICH practitioners play an active role in shaping cultural heritage narratives through their direct participation in performances, exhibitions, and educational outreach activities (Su, J., 2018; Wang, Yahao, 2022). Several participatory methods have emerged to facilitate ethnic minority communities' engagement in heritage management. Co-curation allows community members to influence exhibition content and narrative framing, ensuring that displays reflect local perspectives. Community-based collecting enables residents to contribute artefacts and contextual knowledge, which enhances the authenticity and relevance of heritage interpretation. Oral history initiatives incorporate vernacular memory into institutional frameworks and grant visibility to lived experience as a legitimate form of historical authority (Beardslee, 2016; Fraser, R., 2021). In addition, participatory exhibition design and live heritage demonstrations help to sustain the transmission of skills and cultural expressions in interactive formats. A central mechanism supporting these approaches is the presence of heritage intermediaries, individuals who mediate between community knowledge and institutional protocols, enabling more responsive and negotiated heritage practices (Fraser, R., 2020; Fraser, R., 2022). While these alternative models remain emergent in China, there is increasing evidence that some museums and heritage programmes are adapting participatory methods to better include minority perspectives (Ferreira, 2018; Li, M. and Selim, 2024).

However, China's growing body of critical heritage studies literature indicates that bottom-up heritage practices are gradually being recognised as significant interventions in mainstream discourse. These practices, even if partial or informal, signal a shift in the understanding of heritage towards one that is more diverse and acknowledges conflict, negotiation, and agency (Su, Xiaobo, 2013; Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018; Zhu, 2019). While the integration of tourism further complicates these dynamics, by introducing market logics and external audiences into the heritage-making process, it also creates new opportunities for minority groups to assert cultural agency.

Minority Participation in Heritage Tourism: Internal Transformations and Community Dynamics

Ecomuseums in China have been promoted as locally embedded institutions designed to safeguard the cultural heritage of ethnic minority communities in a dynamic and community-centred way. At the same time, they are often situated in underdeveloped regions and expected to contribute to local economic development. Tourism has therefore become a key mechanism through which ecomuseums seek to achieve this dual mission (Mo, 2016). Since the targeted poverty-alleviation campaign (2013–2020) and the Rural Revitalization Strategy set out in the 14th five-year plan (2021–2025), heritage-based tourism has been explicitly promoted by the central government as a vehicle for job creation and income generation in ethnic-minority regions. By engaging in tourism, minority communities not only increase their economic returns but also gain greater exposure to external ideas, networks and lifestyles. This interaction with the outside world has, in many cases, catalysed cultural change, as villagers actively participate in tourism-related business activities, adopt new practices and reframe their cultural identity in more entrepreneurial and outward-looking terms (Graburn and Jin, 2011).

These changes need to be understood in the broader socio-economic context of post-reform China, where leisure and tourism have emerged as one of the fastest growing sectors of the service industry (Walsh, 2002). As part of this expansion, heritage has increasingly been mobilised as a cultural and economic resource. However, cultural tourism also brings significant challenges. According to Silverman and Blumenfield (2013), the pressures generated by large-scale tourism can lead to the degradation of built heritage, strain natural environments and destabilise traditional settlement patterns. Such developments may disrupt existing social relationships, compromise long-standing community sustainability practices and generate new sources of political friction. Walsh (2002) notes that transforming historical sites into market commodities often undermines the conservation principles that initially justified their protection. This concern has been echoed by Bowden (2005), who warns that the long-term impact of mass tourism may be more destructive than beneficial to heritage environments. Consequently, cultural heritage in China has become a site of intense negotiation, especially in areas where it is embedded in museum displays or integrated into tourism infrastructure. Di Giovine (2008) highlights how these spaces are shaped by conflicting interpretations and competing

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interests. Stakeholders do not share a unified vision of heritage development. Even within the state, different actors at central and local levels pursue divergent priorities and strategies. The exercise of state power in cultural governance is not a linear process but a field of constant negotiation among heterogeneous bureaucratic forces (Hsing and Lee, 2009).

The expansion of heritage tourism in China has produced complex and often contradictory effects within ethnic minority communities. Although tourism is often seen as a tool for cultural preservation and rural development, it frequently leads to unequal power relations within communities, elite monopolisation, and socioeconomic stratification. Local residents' participation in tourism planning and governance is often symbolic, with substantive decision-making power remaining in the hands of government officials, tourism enterprises, and selected elites (Weng and Peng, 2014; Tian et al., 2023). This exclusion has significant political and psychological consequences, as residents report disillusionment, frustration, and a loss of trust in both internal leadership and external stakeholders (Qu et al., 2023). Economic inequalities are another major concern. Although some residents have benefited financially, the majority are unable to access tourism's economic gains due to barriers such as limited capital, educational constraints, and lack of administrative networks. Community participation in Chinese tourism is more about sharing benefits than participating in decision-making (Ying and Zhou, 2007). When tourism income is concentrated among non-local investors, village officials, or returnee entrepreneurs, it can deepen feelings of exclusion and provoke tensions between community members (Xu, Zichun and Sun, 2020; Tian et al., 2023).

Rapid top-down interventions that exclude community members and local stakeholders from participatory processes frequently exacerbate internal divisions. Divergent attachments to place, conflicting views on heritage preservation and sharing, and uneven levels of engagement or perceived benefit contribute to fragmentation within communities. These differences can intensify tensions both among local groups and between local and external stakeholders, sometimes giving rise to resistance against dominant tourism discourses and promotional strategies (Waterton and Smith, 2010; Crooke, Elizabeth, 2016; Dragouni and Fouseki, 2018). Such intra-community

stratification is frequently accompanied by a sense of relative deprivation, as residents perceive themselves to be disadvantaged in comparison to others who appear to benefit more substantially from tourism initiatives (Seaton, 1997; Peng et al., 2016). Relative deprivation theory has been widely applied in tourism studies to interpret these inequalities. It suggests that deprivation is felt not only in terms of absolute loss, but also through comparisons to others or to a remembered past (Xu, Zichun and Sun, 2020). Local communities often perceive a decline in communal solidarity and autonomy compared to pre-tourism periods. Residents lament a shift from egalitarian social norms toward competitive, profit-driven behaviours, with traditional leadership structures losing their legitimacy in the eyes of the community (Qu et al., 2023) .

Intergenerational and gender-based tensions have also been exacerbated by tourism development. As younger residents engage with tourism through digital platforms and entrepreneurial projects, their interpretation of heritage increasingly centres on performance and commercial appeal. While this may revitalise certain cultural forms, it risks sidelining elders and fragmenting intergenerational knowledge transmission (Blumenfield, 2018). At the same time, the designation of specific cultural practices as heritage can introduce new gendered hierarchies. For example, when women's crafts are valorised through heritage classification while men's traditional livelihoods are excluded, it can create imbalances in how cultural identity and labour are valued across gender lines (Blumenfield, 2018; Fraser, R., 2020). Internal governance is another source of conflict. Village committees, although officially intended to represent collective interests, often function in alignment with government or business priorities. Local elites and returning urban migrants with stronger institutional ties may dominate heritage-related decisions, while less-connected villagers are left with limited input or compensation (Bao and Sun, 2007; Xu, Y., 2019). These asymmetries have prompted grassroots protests, informal negotiations, and in some cases, the withdrawal of local cooperation. Disagreements over land use, tourist access, or festival planning have exposed deeper disputes about authority, fairness, and the distribution of benefits (Hu, J. et al., 2018; Qu et al., 2023). The transformation of cultural authority is a recurring theme in such literature. The development of tourism often depends on the designation of 'cultural experts' or 'authentic' practices, thereby reshaping public knowledge into carefully planned, market-driven spectacles (Zhu, 2015; Fraser, R., 2020). These processes elevate some voices

while suppressing others, reconfiguring internal power structures. The transformations brought about by heritage tourism are not confined to the social and economic realms; they are also materially embedded in the landscape. Through selective reshaping, symbolic reinterpretation, and material reconfiguration, rural landscapes become key arenas where broader cultural and political dynamics are made visible and tangible. To better understand how these spatial transformations are bound up with the evolution of ecomuseum practices, the following section examines landscape theory, foregrounding its relevance to processes of rural change, identity formation, and contested spatial meanings.

Landscape, Power, and the Transformation of Cultural Space

In recent decades, landscape theory has shifted from viewing landscapes as static visual or ecological backdrops to recognising them as dynamic, socially constructed terrains imbued with cultural meaning, identity, and power (Cosgrove, D.E., 1998; Mitchell, Donald, 2000; Duncan, 2004). Cultural landscapes are no longer understood solely as material assemblages of natural and built elements but as relational spaces that emerge through human engagement, practices, and representation (Jones, M., 2006; Olwig, 2007). This reorientation has significant implications for heritage and development studies, especially in contexts such as ecomuseums, where landscapes are both symbolic repositories and active arenas of negotiation. One key strand of landscape research explores how landscape materialities and representations are co-constituted through everyday social practices and institutional processes (Gailing and Leibenath, 2017). As Gailing (2012) argues, landscapes serve not only as outcomes of social interaction but also as frameworks through which subjects perceive, inhabit, and are shaped by space. This dual character means that landscapes both reflect and reproduce cultural norms and power relations.

These representational regimes frequently operate through planning mechanisms such as mapping, zoning, and visual branding (Ernwein and Matthey, 2019). As Peluso (1995) and Foster, J. (2010) note, technical representations like maps or conservation plans carry political weight, defining what counts as landscape and determining who is entitled to shape or access it. In postcolonial and rural contexts, these tools have often been used to

legitimise external authority while displacing local interpretations and practices. The shaping of landscape is inextricable from broader socio-political and economic processes, asserting that power relations are not simply overlaid on the landscape but are constitutive of it (Olwig and Mitchell, 2007). The concept of landscape democracy, advanced in relation to the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000), further foregrounds participation and justice in landscape governance. Yet scholars argue that in practice, inclusion is often limited to consultation rather than shared decision-making, and the notion of "the people" remains ambiguously defined (Olwig, 2005; Conrad et al., 2011). This gap between democratic aspiration and institutional reality raises important questions about whose identities and knowledge systems are legitimised in landscape-making processes (Mels, 2016).

Closely tied to these concerns is the issue of identity. As Bender, B. (1993) and Till (2004) assert, landscapes are integral to the formation and contestation of both individual and collective identities. The concept of landscape identity has evolved to recognise the intricate interplay between the material environment, cultural meanings, and power structures. Landscapes are not static backgrounds but are shaped and reshaped through social, economic, and political processes that influence how they are perceived, inhabited, and contested (Antrop, 2005; Butler, A. and Sarlöv-Herlin, 2019). This dynamic quality is particularly evident in heritage contexts, where changes to the physical and symbolic dimensions of landscape often accompany shifts in governance, representation, and local participation.

At the core of landscape, identity theory is the idea that identity is formed through ongoing interaction between people and place (Proshansky, 1983). Two forms of this interaction are commonly distinguished: 'place identity', which refers to the characteristics that distinguish one landscape from another, and 'place-identity', which describes how individuals and groups see themselves in relation to specific landscapes (Proshansky, 1983; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). In the context of ecomuseums, these identities are never merely frozen for preservation; they have always been and continue to be actively constructed and renegotiated. When institutional heritage initiatives intervene, they layer new meanings onto identities that local communities have long

shaped (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Landscape change, particularly when externally imposed, can disrupt local relationships with place. As Butler, A. et al. (2018) argue, when the activities that sustain landscape identity, such as farming, foraging or ritual practices, are no longer viable or recognised, individuals may experience a sense of dislocation or even "solastalgia," a form of distress associated with environmental change (Albrecht, 2010). These disruptions are not only psychological in nature but also political, as they influence whose knowledge is legitimised and whose values are reflected in planning decisions (Dossche et al., 2016; Ramos et al., 2016). Crucially, landscape identity is not merely a reflection of cultural continuity but a site of negotiation and potential conflict. As Hague and Jenkins (2004) and Hopkins and Dixon (2006) emphasise, questions of who belongs, who has the right to interpret the landscape, and whose practices are legitimised are deeply political. Identity claims embedded in landscape often exclude alternative histories and voices, reinforcing existing power asymmetries.

Yet, landscape identity also offers a framework for resistance and community empowerment. When communities actively engage in reshaping their landscapes through participatory planning, the revitalisation of local customs, or community-led mapping, they assert alternative understandings of place that challenge institutional hegemony (Llewellyn et al., 2019). These practices do not merely preserve the landscape but rearticulate its meaning in response to changing social realities.

This politics of recognition is especially relevant in ethnically diverse and economically marginalised regions, where state-led heritage development often redefines landscapes according to dominant narratives. As the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000) stresses, landscape should be recognised as both a cultural and natural construct, shaped by collective memory and shared practice. However, in practice, local understandings of landscape are frequently overridden by visual or touristic criteria that prioritise spectacle over meaning (Butler, A. et al., 2018; Fairclough et al., 2018). As Mitchell, Donald (2000) observes, landscapes can symbolise a relation "between a people and a portion of the natural world to which they are tied by the sweat of their labour," underscoring their role in forming collective attachments to place. The transformation of local landscapes into national "homelands" has historically involved a collaborative effort

among artists, travellers, writers, and political actors, who have imbued everyday environments with national symbolism and historical depth (Till, 2004; Gailing and Leibenath, 2017). In this sense, landscape functions not only as a lived space but also as a cultural and political metaphor through which relationships between citizens, the state, and the land are imagined and legitimised. Such symbolic constructions are not politically neutral. Matless (1998) demonstrates how debates over landscape in England have served as arenas for articulating competing visions of national identity, while Olwig (1996) argues that both British and German aesthetic traditions have shaped how landscapes are used to express national values in other contexts. In colonial settings, the landscape has often operated as a vehicle for expressing ethnic hierarchies and imperial dominance. Colonial landscapes were constituted simultaneously as economic resources and aesthetic ideals, playing a central role in constructing ethnic difference and legitimising racialised national supremacy (Brück, 2007; Gailing and Leibenath, 2017). Landscape is not merely a backdrop for cultural or economic activity; it functions as a politically charged medium through which ethnic identities, historical narratives, and senses of national belonging are produced and contested. Whether employed to articulate local heritage or promote national unity, landscapes play a central role in the construction of collective identity and frequently provide the spatial foundations for political communities, including villages, regions, and modern nation-states (Gailing and Leibenath, 2017).

In regions where ethnic heritage is made visible for tourism, the transformation of physical space is neither incidental nor neutral. Instead, landscapes become a medium through which authority is articulated, cultural identities are negotiated, and economic priorities are spatially inscribed. In the Chinese context, where development strategies often rely on visual and material representations of ethnic culture and where the government has, for decades, spent considerable effort trying to tame and change landscapes, landscape plays a vital role in regulating the relationship between communities, institutions, and heritage discourse. Within Chinese heritage tourism, landscape transformation is closely tied to the state's efforts to present ethnic regions as both authentically traditional and progressively modern (Zhang, R. and Brown, 2023). Chio (2014) demonstrates how this dual imperative is manifested in what she terms the "village-as-theme park" model, in which ethnic villages are spatially curated to satisfy the visual expectations of tourists and the political aspirations of local authorities. Ethnic

architecture, trails, clothing, and agricultural scenes are carefully arranged to evoke a picturesque and marketable aesthetic, often at the cost of vernacular spatial logics and everyday functionality. Chio's analysis reveals that such transformations are not simply decorative but serve to reinscribe notions of ethnic difference and cultural legibility within the gaze of the state and the tourist industry (Chio, 2014, p.204). Traditional village footpaths, which were once closely tied to everyday practices, religious rituals, and cosmological worldviews, have been transformed into segmented tourism routes that prioritise visually prominent heritage features such as watchtowers and archaeological sites. These spatial reconfigurations often reflect external interests, overriding local cultural meanings and disrupting the continuity of the cultural landscape (Li, Ying, 2015). In China, rural ethnic landscapes also carry the ethnic narrative of harmony, tradition, and unity. Ethnic minority communities sometimes re-embed their symbolic geographical features into spaces repurposed for tourism through festivals, ancestral homesteads, or farming practices. However, these bottom-up interventions remain uncertain, especially when they conflict with the aesthetic demands of state institutions or commercial developers. As a result, ongoing negotiations continue among various stakeholders regarding the meaning, use, and control of the landscape (Wang, Yahao, 2021; Fraser, R., 2022).

By reviewing the diverse body of literature on landscape, both in Chinese and international contexts, it becomes evident that landscape is far more than a physical or visual background for human activity. It is a socially constructed, ideologically charged, and politically mediated field through which relations of power, identity, and governance are produced and contested. Theories from cultural geography, visual studies, and heritage research emphasise that landscape is shaped not only through material transformation but also through discursive practices and regimes of visuality (Cosgrove, D., 1985; Foster, H., 1988; Mitchell, W.J.T., 2002). In the Chinese context, these dynamics are particularly pronounced in rural heritage and tourism development, where state policies, market imperatives, and local responses converge to reconfigure space and meaning. From the visual ordering of ethnic minority villages (Chio, 2014) to the politicisation of natural and cultural heritage in national narratives (Brück, 2007; Jia et al., 2021), landscape operates as a medium of both symbolic expression and social regulation. Recognising its active role in shaping experience, memory, and belonging is

essential to any critical inquiry into rural transformation and heritage governance. This theoretical foundation provides a necessary framework for examining how ecomuseum practices intervene in and reshape contemporary landscapes in China.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Rationale for Case Study

In order to answer the research questions, I take the case study approach. According to Yin, R.K. (2009), case study focuses on contemporary events without requiring the control over the behavioural events. It is particularly suitable for answering the research questions about 'how' and 'why'. In this research, the two first-generation ecomuseums in southwestern China, Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum and Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum, are studied. It is designed as a holistic multiple-cases study. Although within each case study, i.e., each village, there are clear subunits including the members of the local governments, native villagers, and new residents, the research objective is to generate conclusions related to the whole community in different perspectives.

The rationale of designing a two-site case study comes from the prior hypothesizing of different types of conditions in the two villages. Contrasting situations in the case study could strengthen the mutual theoretical formulation. The reasoning of the selection of research subjects is stated below. First, because the first four ecomuseums were established under a unified framework with guidance from the Norwegian government and all located in Guizhou, it is reasonable to do comparative study and analyse their differences. Most of the variables that influence ecomuseums can be controlled. However, if comparing one first generation ecomuseum in Guizhou with a third/fourth generation ecomuseum in Eastern China, big differences in various perspectives, such as their local economic level, population distribution, size of funding and museum display, may lead to inadequate analysis and invalid results. Thus, the number of selected cases could be too many to make the detailed case study infeasible.

Second, it has been much longer time since the establishment of first generation ecomuseums than those of ecomuseums in other generations. The impact of ecomuseums

on the local community in all perspectives is more observable, while ecomuseums of later generations are normally associated with much shorter history, with which the researchers cannot observe the change/influence of the ecomuseums on the local community in various perspectives. Thirdly, this study aims to explore the relationship between ecomuseums and local ethnic minority groups regarding their culture and self-identification, etc. While some of later established ecomuseums are in eastern China area where Han Chinese are dominant residents, making them irrelevant to the objectives of this study.

Third, noting that there are four first-generation ecomuseums in Guizhou Province, Longli Ecomuseum and Liuzhi Ecomuseum are not selected in my study. Liuzhi Ecomuseum, known as the first ecomuseum in China, receives much attention from the academia and thus has been studied extensively already. Therefore, using it as the case study may not be revelatory. Also, this ecomuseum is in deep mountains, sharing some common characteristics as Tang'an Ecomsueum, including but not limited to transportation condition and local economy. Since replication is not a significant consideration in the design of the case study, Liuzhi Ecomuseum is not included. As for Longli Ecomuseum, although established in the ethnic minority villages, presents the contents related to Han Chinese, which contradicts the research objectives with the focus on ethnic minority groups in China.

1.5.2 Overview for Mixed-Method Approach

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilising both quantitative and qualitative strategies. Both approaches are related to various epistemological theories (Bowers, 2016). Quantitative research method is about collecting, analysing and describing data. Quantitative research is largely concerned with pre-determined features and consists in collecting statistics and numbers for the purpose of examining the proposed hypotheses (Pole and Lampard, 2002). It emphasises the objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data collected through polls, questionnaires, and surveys, or by manipulating pre-existing statistical data using computational techniques. Quantitative research focuses on gathering numerical data and generalising it across groups of people or to explain a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Babbie, 2020).

The core advantage of quantitative analysis over qualitative analysis is that quantitative method can quickly deduct the circumstance of the overall population from a plenty of collected samples. In this case, the samples exploited in the quantitative analysis need to be representative.

Quantitative analysis is primarily deployed in the part of examining the change of local economic landscape. Simple data visualisation and descriptive statistical analysis are applied to offer some insights such as revealing the difference before and after the establishment of ecomuseums and delivering the big picture of what local community looks like and what participation level they have regarding the operation and management of ecomuseums. Also, the researcher takes qualitative method to better understand the research questions from a more subjective way through narratives of how people have experienced their changing in finances and the living conditions.

Different from quantitative approaches, qualitative research methodology is widely applied in fields including anthropology, sociology and clinical psychology (Merriam, 2002), suggesting that knowledge is socially constructed by individuals from their interaction with the world rather than can be simply observed from the world (Hofer and Pintrich, 2012; Creswell, 2013). According to the statement of Denzen and Lincoln (2005):

> *Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts -that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives.*

While some of the impacts of local ecomuseums on the local population can be studied mainly through quantitative techniques, the conceptualisation and meaning of cultures

and objects may be best explored through qualitative methods (Ten Have, 2003). Compared with quantitative research method, qualitative research method plays a dominant role in the study and is deployed through the whole study. Qualitative research method is not only involved in the parts where there is no available data for statistical, mathematical, and numerical analysis but also in the parts where the quantitative methods are applied to as well to help explain the examined phenomenon from another perspective and cross-validate the findings. One example of the research area of how qualitative method is applied in the study is the governance of ecomuseums in China. Compared to other subfields of museum studies, research on the governance of ecomuseums in China is still very rare (Yang, X. et al., 2019). In China, museums (including ecomuseums) are under the direct influence of the central government and the Chinese Communist Party. To create a map for understanding governance systems, a qualitative data analysis will help to gather more in-depth information from each case. Also, the research questions related to how ecomuseums reshape the local landscape from cultural and social perspectives are addressed mainly with qualitative data gathered from in-person interviews and participatory observation during the fieldwork. The content analysis, thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenological analysis are applied here accordingly. Statistics from local government's social and cultural work report are taken here to support and cross validate the analysis result as well.

1.5.3 Ethical and Epistemological Tensions

Social science research invariably raises dilemmas that challenges scholars philosophically and ethically (Allen and Baber, 1992). This study is not an exception and involves plenty of factors that may lead to epistemological and ethical tensions that need to be solved, including access and time, the identity of the researcher, the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, the availability of resources and data and so on.

Apart from the limitations brought by the external environment, the ethical and epistemological tensions mainly come from the issues of positionality. According to Bourke (2014):

The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process. Just as the participants' experiences are framed in social-cultural contexts, so too are those of the researcher.

Therefore, as an individual of Han Chinese background, which is the major ethnic group in China with dominant culture in multiple perspectives, it was of great importance to build rapport with the participants from ethnic minority groups located in rural area. For example, before conducting the formal data collection process, extra days were spent there to let the researcher be familiar with the environment and get used to the local customs. With the opportunity, the researcher has more chances to contact the local residents and can prepare for the later study.

To remedy this variance between researcher's own subjectivity and local culture, interviews will be conducted in the homes and workplaces of local community members. In addition, the researcher strives to ensure that local perspectives are interpreted as accurately as possible. Before the interviews, I spend some time alongside the villagers in their everyday routines rather than merely watching from the sidelines. As the Chinese saying goes, "民以食为天" (*mín yǐ shí wéi tiān*, "Food is the god of the people"), Chinese people think highly of dining by having lots of customs while eating food and tending to talk everything happened around them at the dining table. Therefore, eating with the local people greatly assists me to involving in the local community by understanding their customs and knowing the way they think. The aim is to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of the culture to be able to understand it in context. Accurate interpretation also requires follow-ups. After collecting the data, during the data processing and analysis stage, the researcher collaborates local community members and other Chinese scholars who is are familiar with interviewee's language and knowledge systems to make sure the results are realistic. Finally, reflecting on the research process and adjusting it continuously during the whole field trip is very important as well. It is necessary to properly gather the views of native residents on the development of local ecomuseums.

Admittedly, it must be acknowledged that the positionality and the researcher's subjectivity cannot be eliminated and that we can never describe the reality fully objectively. However, by continuously exploring my positionality and revising my perception on it and with time passing by, it is expected that subjectivity and bias existing in the study can be better considered.

1.5.4 Data Collection

Iterative Data Collection Scheme

The data collection process followed an iterative framework, consisting of 3 one-month trips in each site from mid-October 2022 to March 2024, with breaks in between for data processing. Iterative data collection has advantages over a single-period data collection method in various ways (Yin, R.K., 2009):

- Iterative data collection allows researchers to examine further into a topic, refining their understanding with each cycle of data collection and analysis. It enables the uncovering of details that may not be initially apparent.

- Iterative process allows for the identification and exploration of unexpected themes or findings that emerge during the research, which can be vital in coding practices in content analysis. Initial data collection might reveal unanticipated trends or variables that can be further probed in subsequent rounds.

- Multiple iterations can enable triangulation of data, where different types or sources of data are collected and compared to cross-verify findings. This can increase the validity of the research.

- Iterative data collection allows for the flexibility and adaptability to incorporate new research questions as the research moves forward.

- Iterative methods can help build a stronger rapport with participants, leading to more open, honest, and detailed responses over time, which is a great mitigation of the epistemological tensions as well.

Regular Data Collection Methods

Fieldwork and querying from documents and archival records are categorised in the regular data collection methods (compared with photovoice, which will be discussed

later). Documentation and archival records play an important role in the case study. They can be reviewed repeatedly in any stage of the analysis. Also, because these documents and archives are not created for the case study, it's more objective and unobstructive (Yin, R.K., 2009). The specific collection steps are described below. First, before the actual fieldwork, some online documents containing background information of the local community, either originally came from and maintained by the local governments or the second-hand information written by other scholars, were collected, and studied, for example, the history and famous intangible cultural heritage of the villages. This data collection step could help prepare for the fieldwork and calibrate the expectation. Also, archival data accessible online such as the regional GDP and other socioeconomic indicators is collected for the further analysis. And at the beginning of the fieldwork, those documents not available online and only kept physically in the local library or archives can be queried and examined. This can triangulate the data previously collected online. These archives and documents also benefit the researcher for preparing the questions of the semi-structured interview, mitigating the epistemological tensions and making the questions more relevant and specific. During the fieldwork, as establishing the trust with local people, potentially more documents and archives are available. Admittedly, information in documentations can be incomplete with various types of bias, The data collected from the methods stated below can be a good supplement.

During the fieldwork of this study, the researcher also uses direct observation, participant observation and interviews. First, direct observation happens when the researcher makes passive observations, i.e., has no interaction with the observed objects. One great example is that when social events and the ceremonies for traditional festivals in the villages are held. Direct observation can bring the most immediate evidence for the case study. Also, participant observation, acting as a special mode of observation, takes the most part of observation part during the field work. This method is often used to explore and interact with the activities and behaviours of research participants (Ten Have, 2003), which allows the researcher to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research participants and lead to deeper and richer data (Gregar, 1994). Participant observation is used during both quantitative and qualitative fieldwork. Participant observation involves taking field notes to detail the study site and the actions of individuals. Field notes are used to identify any similarities and differences through comparison with other data, providing further

validity to the study (Ten Have, 2003). Participant observation provides the researcher with more understanding on the local experience and culture and how these motivate participants' behaviours (Pereiro, 2010). The participant-observation method provides the researcher with the opportunity to analyse recent trends relating to the identified research problems. In this case, the credibility of this case study is improved. On the other side, interviews enable the researcher to record fresh and unused data for the study. The integration of participant-observation and interviews is reasonable because it can help collect primary data with qualitative techniques (Watson and Till, 2010). Three one-month trips in each site provide the possibility of revising the research process and utilizing ground theory method to do qualitative analysis. The settings of one-month research ensures that the researcher has sufficient time to get accustomed to the local lifestyle and the customs and collect enough data for following analysis. Also, the designed time of fieldwork covers lots of unique ethnic minority festivals. Doing fieldwork in those time periods can help the research better study their cultures and evaluate the cultural interaction between the ecomuseum and local community.

Stakeholder Map in Data Collection

During the data collection process, interaction with three aspects (social, cultural and economic) enables all stakeholder groups to have a voice. Through their respective perceptions, the 'reality' of the situation in relation to the research question is revealed. Their individual responses to the designated data collection techniques are recorded and analysed to explore any difference in perceptions on the development of local ecomuseums and how this might be improved.

In order to best capture each stakeholder group's perceptions about ecomuseums' work in their communities (Pan, 2008), the researcher conducts interviews with different stakeholders, particularly villagers and government officials, to compare their views on various aspects of the local ecomuseum projects as they impact on the lives of the poor in the area, and to understand their different perceptions of the benefits and costs of the projects. To understand which government officials should be reached and interviewed, the management hierarchy of the museum system in China and the management framework of United Front Work Department in China are made to support the decisions,

which are showed in Figure 1-4 and Figure 1-5, respectively. The United Front Work Department is a department that reports directly to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which gathers intelligence on, manages relations with, and attempts to influence elite individuals and organizations inside and outside China (Wang, R. and Groot, 2018). Its 2nd, 7th, 8th, 11th and 12th bureaus manage work of minority and religious issues. Therefore, the subordinated institutions of United Front Work Department have much interaction with ecomuseums, for which involve much content about the ethnic minority groups and their cultures and religions. From the graphs we can know which government institutions are involved in the management of ecomuseums such as county bureau of culture and bureau of religious affair. In this case, the interview questions are customised according to the interviewees' identities and their positions.
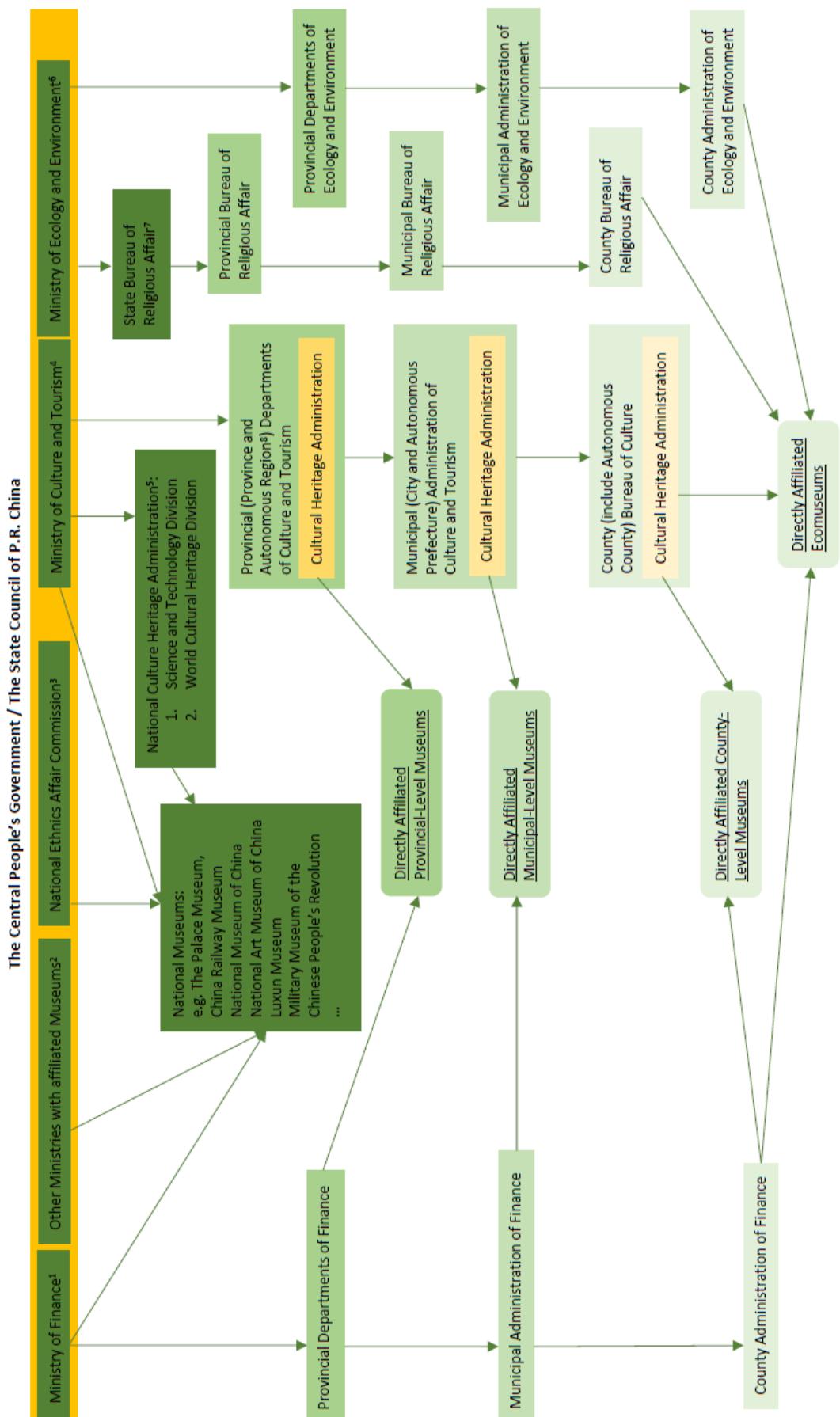
Figure 1-4 Management hierarchy of the museum system (Made by the author, 2021)
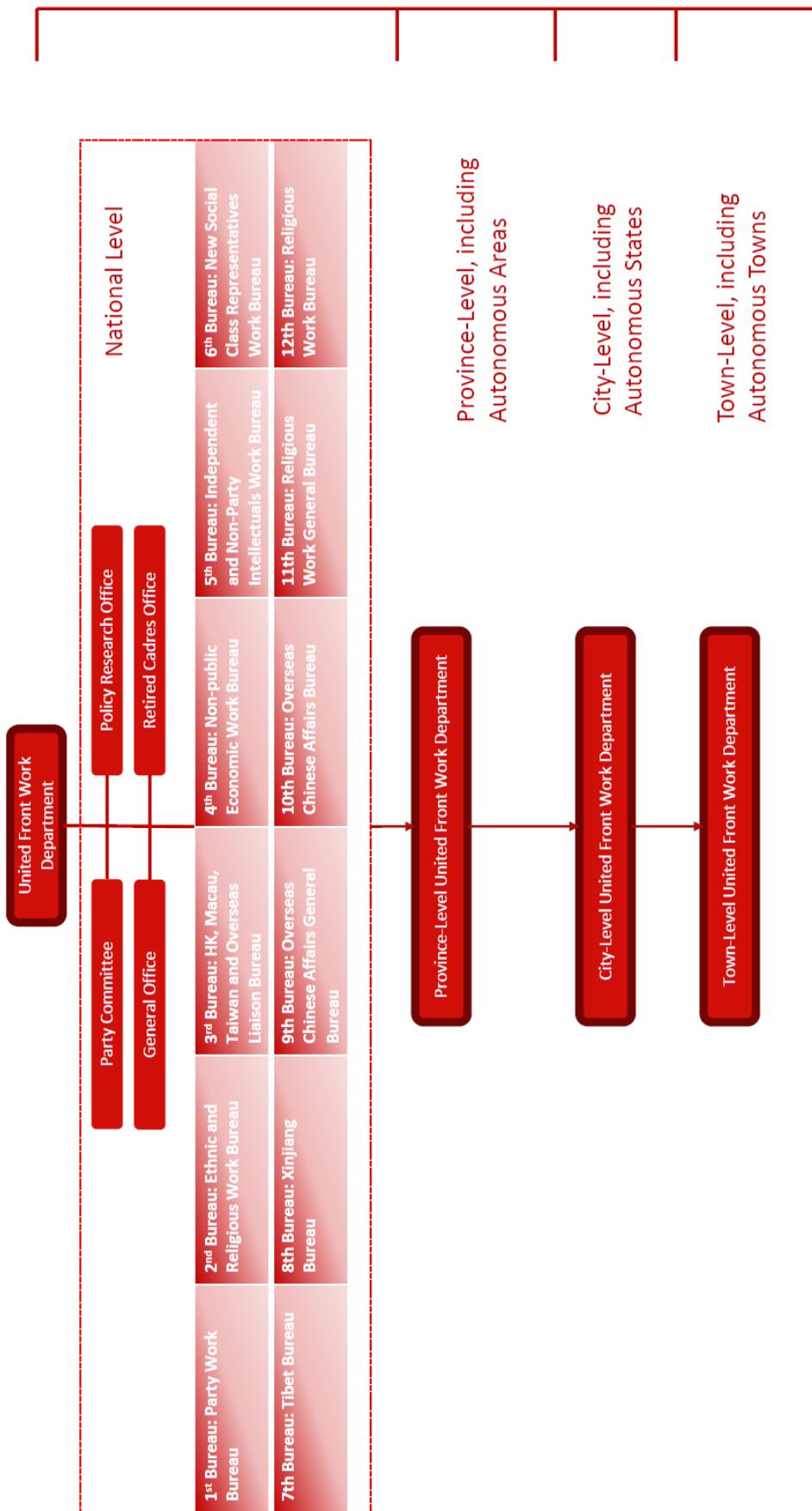
Figure 1-5 Management framework of united front work department (Made by the author, 2021)

Villagers were selected according to both stratified random selection and referrals. Also, government officials were selected by recommendation and by using proportional sampling. The interviews conducted for the purposes of this study are mainly in-depth, allowing qualitative information to be clarified and expounded upon, while providing more scope for obtaining in-depth answers. In this section, the interviews with local villagers and government officials are the main source of qualitative data. During the interviews, after getting the consent of interviewees, the whole interview process was recorded for future data processing. Apart from this, images and videos were collected from the field observation.

Data Collection for Photovoice (a.k.a. Participatory Photography) Project

Participatory Photography (PP) is a method or tool for getting community members to creatively make changes to improve their environment with photography; it blends grassroots methods and social action. Participatory photography is a form of participatory action research that asks community members to actively examine the current conditions they perceive as problematic to improve it. PP emphasises the active role of participants in the generation and interpretation of photographs and is understood as a research method in which the camera is handed over to people - individuals or groups - with the aim of stimulating information, informing research projects, and stimulating self-reflection and interaction with others (Gotschi et al., 2009). Giving the camera to the researched is a more inductive approach to research (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Asking people to take photographs of a particular research topic 'gives a degree of power back to the researched, as they can use photography as a means of representing and 'telling their own stories' through photographs'. Through this method, differences in the views from the 'external researcher' and the 'internal view' of the researched can be exposed (Stanczak, 2007). The use of photography is a way of 'seeking to act on the historical, institutional, social and political conditions that create problems for individuals and communities' (Wang, C. et al., 1996). These studies are therefore action-oriented, enabling people to define for themselves and others, including policy makers, what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed (Gotschi et al., 2009). This participatory research approach

is used to minimise the traditional power imbalance between researcher and participant and to generate new types of knowledge.

Wang, C. and Burris (1997) developed the concept of 'photovoice' as a participatory action research methodology designed to engage with the theoretical literature on critical consciousness education, drawing on feminist theory and non-traditional methods of documentary photography to challenge assumptions about representation and documentary authorship. Photovoice examines context-based meaning from an insider's perspective as a means of generating new insights into our socially constructed reality and culture (Sutton-Brown, 2014). As Wang explains, photovoice "is a process by which people can identify, represent and enhance their communities through specific photographic techniques" (Wang, C. et al., 1996). Photovoice is grassroots activist research rooted in problem-based inquiry. Researchers put cameras in the hands of individuals who are often silenced in the political sphere so that they can represent their communities and tell their stories. Photovoice uses participatory research methods to encourage participants to lead the research process as they visually represent and narrate their everyday experiences (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Sutton-Brown, 2014). Photovoice can also be conducted in a controlled, researcher-guided environment, which creates an authoritarian, rather than authoritative, model of research. As photovoice is participant-led, the preliminary questions guiding the study are amendable. The flexibility of the research design makes it highly adaptable and well suited to the specific needs of the participants, as well as the socio-political context of the community in which the project takes placed (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Wang, C., 2006).

The two ecomuseums involved in this research are in Tang'an and Zhenshan villages, so ten non-Han villagers were chosen for participatory photography in each of these two villages. Preference was given to residents who can make decisions to improve the situation and to those who have been involved in the construction of the ecomuseum or have interacted with the development of the community.

Also, for the implementation of this research project, the selection criteria for participation necessitates a certain level of educational attainment. As such, I focussed the recruitment on individuals who have acquired a basic-level education. This approach was chosen not to marginalize those without education but to ensure that all participants are equipped with a base level of literacy, which is a prerequisite for the tasks involved in this study. It is important to note that this does not suggest that the perspectives and experiences of those without formal education are less valuable. Indeed, their inclusion could yield rich insights in the appropriate context and methodology.

Regardless of the recruitment technique used, a size of seven to ten people is ideal to encourage in-depth conversation in the group (Wang, C. et al., 1996). The recruiting process for the participants in the photovoice project was scheduled at the middle of the fieldwork, after establishing the connections in the local community. After recruiting the participants for the photovoice project, firstly, the researcher introduces the participants to the Photovoice methodology and conducts a group discussion on cameras, power, and ethics. The initial themes of the photography are the landscape of the two villages and what the participants think needs to be enhanced and changed in the villages. Participants can brainstorm together about what themes they can pay attention to and then individually identify which ones they would focus on. The researcher prepared disposable cameras for the participants, each of which could take approximately 20-40 photographs. The participants could also choose to use their own smart phones to take the pictures. The researcher provided the participants with time to take photographs, and the participants agreed to do so within a specified period, approximately one week after the end of the first conversation. Participants give their photographs to the researcher for development or enlargement and then discuss their photographs. Each participant may be asked to choose and talk about one or two photos that he/she considers to be the most important or favourite. Participants can describe the story about their photo by answering the questions asked (Wang, C., 2006). Questions include, but were not limited to:

- What do you see here?
- What is really happening here?
- How does this relate to our lives?
- Why does this situation, concern or force exist?
- What can we do about it?

The themes of the participants' photos can be roughly summarised in three areas:

- What do you think best represents the village of Tang'an/Zhenshan?
- What do you think needs to be improved in the village of Tang'an/Zhenshan?
- Free to select a photograph that is relevant to the theme of the study

Then this process is iteratively conducted until the end of the data collection process. Particularly, even after the fieldwork or during the interval between fieldwork trips, advancements in information technology to maintain participant engagement beyond the temporal bounds of fieldwork, the participants can keep in touch with the researcher and keep providing the photos they take and communicate the rationales and story behind the pictures over the phone. This approach ensures sustained dialogue, enriching the data collected, and aligns with the iterative nature of qualitative research. The timeframe of this photovoice project has been deliberately extended in accordance with qualitative research principles, which prioritise in-depth and contextual understanding of a given phenomenon. Moreover, considering the nature of this community as an agricultural one, the elongated timeline allows for the capture of the community's distinct landscape variations across different seasons and solar terms. These changing landscapes, intrinsic to their heritage, provide another rich layer of data that photographs can effectively document. The extended project timeline, therefore, not only allows for a comprehensive capture of diverse perspectives and significant moments, such as local festivals, but also enables a dynamic portrayal of their ecological heritage. This approach enhances the depth and breadth of the qualitative data collected, yielding a more holistic portrayal of the community's lived experiences and heritage.

After photos were collected, each photograph obtained from the project was assigned a unique identification code upon acquisition, ensuring the traceability of each data point. These photos were then stored in their original format to retain authenticity, with any edits or enhancements saved as separate versions, rather than overwriting the original. This form of version control was critical for maintaining a clear record of each photo's evolution and facilitates easy retrieval of different versions for comparison or analysis. A crucial aspect of managing these photos is the diligent organisation of associated metadata, which includes information such as date and location of capture, participant identifiers,

and any associated narrative or interpretive text provided by the participants. This metadata was meticulously recorded and attached to each photo, serving to contextualise the image and inform further analysis.

1.5.5 Qualitative Data Analysis

In this study, several qualitative data analysis techniques are applied to different sources of data and different research questions, including:

- Content analysis
- Thematic analysis
- Grounded theory
- Interpretive phenomenological analysis (hereafter IPA)

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data (i.e. text and images). Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyse the presence, meaning, and relationship of those specific words, topics, or concepts. For example, researchers can evaluate the language used in the interviews to search for interviewees' bias or favouritism. Researchers can then make inferences about the information in the text, the author, the audience, and even the culture and time surrounding the text. In this study, the contents, including keywords and key concepts, of the interviews with the local community and government staff are evaluated with content analysis to analyse the concepts and emotion preferences within the transcripts. Also, the images from participatory photography are codified and analysed along with other data within the content analysis framework.

Thematic analysis is another good analysis tool for researchers to find out something about people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of qualitative data (Guest et al., 2011). Like content analysis that requires much qualitative data and is time consuming, thematic analysis, however, focuses on the different aspect by looking at patterns of meaning in a dataset. Thematic analysis, in this study, is mainly

utilised to answer the research questions from participants' interview transcripts. Typical overarching questions includes:

- What do native residents think of the local ecomuseum?
- What is the experience of local community in being a part of the ecomuseum?

Thematic analysis has great flexibility in explaining the data, allowing people to approach large datasets more easily by sorting them into broad themes. Also, by paying attention to what different interviewees say and don't say, the researcher can better understand the positionality and how different stakeholders in this study are connected.

Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach whose main purpose is to build theory from empirical data. The researcher generally begins with no theoretical assumptions before the study begins, starts directly with actual observations, draws empirical generalizations from primary data, and then moves up to a systematic theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). This is a method of building a substantive theory from the bottom up, i.e., searching for core concepts that reflect the essence of phenomena based on systematic collection of information, and then constructing a relevant social theory through the connections between these concepts. The grounded theory must be supported by empirical evidence, but its main feature is not in its empirical nature, but in the fact that it abstracts new concepts and ideas from empirical facts. In this study, with the appropriate design of the time arrangement for the fieldwork, new theories about the influence of the ecomuseums of local community are developed through a series of data collected by interviews and surveys. The research process starts with the overarching questions to the whole population.

In this study, IPA is conducted acting as the supplementary analysis method to the previous ones. IPA is designed to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social world (Smith, J.A. and Shinebourne, 2012). It is about the meaning of particular events, personal experience and situations to the participants. In this process, the researchers are required to play an active role and try to be closer to the inner world of the participants with an insider's perspective (Smith, J.A. and Shinebourne, 2012). In

contrary to the grounded theory and quantitative analysis methods that requires the researcher minimize the subjectivity and bias, IPA emphasises the participant's subjective feelings or descriptions. Here, IPA is applied to analyse the participants personal experience and stories with the ecomuseums and help the researcher understand what their personal attitudes are and what opinion they have towards the local ecomuseum. Participatory photography also provides a unique way to understand the landscape from the participants' personal experience by asking them the motivations for shooting certain scenes and the stories behind the photos.

1.5.6 Photovoice – Visual Analysis

For the visual analysis with the photos collected from the photovoice project, the direct content analysis is exploited. I follow the framework in direct analysis proposed by Collier (2001), dividing the whole process into four stages:

- "Initial Data Intuition and Inquiry" - This stage involves holistic observation of the visual data to perceive patterns, evoke feelings, and trigger questions. It includes trusting the intuitions and noting all impressions that could guide future analysis, framing the data as cultural statements.
- "Inventory and Categorisation" - This stage requires to catalogue all the visual images. The inventory is created with categories designed to aid and reflect the research objectives.
- "Structured Analysis and Quantification" - In this stage, the data is examined methodically, utilizing specific questions, measurements, comparisons, and potential statistical analysis. Detailed descriptions and visual representations of data (like graphs and tables) are generated.
- "Contextualisation and Conclusion" - This final stage involves returning to the complete visual record for a comprehensive understanding. Here, structured analysis details are placed in a broader context to determine their significance, leading to well-informed conclusions.

Within the framework above, some specific methodologies and analysis theory are applied here. Considering there are many themes whose specific meanings are within a certain cultural or historic context in the photos. During the content analysis, semiotic

and iconography analysis are conducted. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, including how meaning is constructed and understood. In semiotic analysis of photos, various signs within the image are looked up and decoded with their meaning. The methodology generally involves two layers (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2000):

- Denotation: Look at the basic, literal elements of the image. What are the straightforward, factual details included in the image?
- Connotation: Interpret the cultural or symbolic meanings associated with these elements. What feelings, ideas, or associations might they evoke in a viewer?

Iconography is more focused on identifying and interpreting visual symbols and themes, including:

- Identify symbols within the photo and their associated meanings, considering historical, cultural, or social contexts. Symbols could be objects, figures, colours, patterns, etc.
- Analyse how these symbols are used in the photo: Are they central or peripheral? How do they interact with other elements in the image?
- Interpret the broader themes or messages that these symbols contribute to. How do they help to convey the overall message or effect of the image?

In photovoice, the visual analysis is a slightly different from the regular analysis with only photos, the researcher can talk to the creators of the photos and discuss the rationale behind the photos and their sources of inspiration. In this case, when conducting thematic/content analysis to the pictures, the researcher can rely on the testimonials of the participants to code the contents, which mitigates the problem that the coding process for content analysis is too subjective with bias from the analyser.

Finally, apart from direct analysis approach mentioned above, indirect analysis is applied here as well. An indirect analysis here involves interviewing the other community members about their reactions to the photos. This is done individually or in a focus group setting, where participants could collectively respond to and discuss the images. In this process, open-ended questions like "What does this photo remind you of?" or "How does

this image make you feel?" are asked to elicit responses that provide richer, more insights into the community's experiences, perceptions, and values. The discussions and stories that emerge from these sessions would then become significant sources of data for the research, providing context and personal narratives that go beyond the visual content of the images themselves. Particularly, when the photographer of the photovoice project gather around and share their story and discuss with the participants (not the researcher), it is also can be regarded a process of indirect analysis. Besides, I also show the pictures taken from one village to the participants of photovoice from the other village to get more angles in understanding the visual representation.

1.6 Chapter Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research by presenting an overview, outlining the research background, detailing the research aims and questions, describing the theoretical framework through a comprehensive literature review, and summarising the methodological approach.

Chapter 2 investigates the impact of ecomuseums on both physical and cultural landscapes through the method of photovoice. It provides a detailed examination of landscape transformations within the villages of Zhenshan and Tang'an, focusing on both physical alterations and the landscapes' significance as symbols of cultural heritage and identity. The chapter includes a comparative discussion that highlights similarities and distinctions between the two villages, further exploring the dynamic interactions between cultural and physical landscapes.

Chapter 3 examines how ecomuseums influence cultural heritage and identity, particularly through heritage tourism. It discusses in detail the cases of Zhenshan and Tang'an, analysing cultural and heritage discourses surrounding ethnic minority heritage. By comparing findings from both cases, this chapter highlights broader implications for cultural heritage representation and identity formation within ethnic minority communities.

Chapter 4 explores social relations and representations of ethnic identity within the ecomuseum contexts of Zhenshan and Tang'an. It examines intra-community relations, shifts in local power dynamics, and how ethnic identity is presented to tourists. The chapter conducts a comparative analysis of these factors across the two villages and discusses the broader impact of cultural policies on community dynamics.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarising key findings from the research, outlining its theoretical and practical contributions to the fields of museum and heritage studies, and suggesting directions for future research.

Chapter 2   The Impact of Ecomuseums on Physical and Cultural Landscapes

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the transformations of physical and cultural landscapes resulting from the establishment and development of two ethnic minority ecomuseums, Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum and Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum, in Guizhou Province, China. The introduction of the ecomuseum model, originally developed in Europe and adapted in China since the 1990s (Rivière, 1985; Gjestrum, 1992), has precipitated significant alterations in local landscapes, particularly in areas designated for tourism development and rural revitalisation. While physical landscapes encompass the tangible modifications to village infrastructure, housing styles, and spatial configurations, cultural landscapes reflect the intangible associations residents maintain with their environment, including community identities, social meanings, and everyday practices.

The village landscapes of Zhenshan and Tang'an have undergone significant physical changes driven by government-led tourism development and infrastructure improvements. These transformations include the renovation of traditional houses, the construction of new public buildings, and the restructuring of agricultural practices and land use. At the same time, residents have continuously rebuilt the cultural landscape by giving new meanings to traditional spaces, reinterpreting local identities, and responding to external interventions, both positively and negatively. Through visual analysis based on photovoice, a participatory photographic method, this chapter explores local residents' perceptions of landscape changes. Photovoice allows villagers to visually document landscapes significant to their daily lives and provides insights beyond official narratives or planning perspectives (Wang, C. et al., 2004). Focusing on landscape transformation rather than the broader heritage discussion, this chapter critically examines how the ecomuseum has impacted the interaction between the physical and cultural dimensions of the landscape. It explores the extent to which physical changes driven by tourism and government policy have affected the residents' sense of place, identity and community cohesion. Furthermore, by comparing the different trajectories of Zhenshan and Tang'an, the analysis reveals how geography, each village's integration into the regional tourism trade, and local community responses have steered their landscape transformations in different directions.

2.2 Landscape Transformations in Zhenshan

2.2.1 Physical Transformations in Zhenshan

It takes about less than 40 minutes to drive from the city centre of Guiyang to reach Huaxi District where Zhenshan Village is located. Entering Huaxi District, it can be noticed that Zhenshan is surrounded by tourist attractions and theme parks, such as Qingyan Ancient Town, Huaxi Park, and Tianhetan Scenic Area. Zhenshan Village is located on a peninsula in the middle of the reservoir in Huaxi District, and there is only one stone road for pedestrians and cars to enter and exit the village.

Figure 2-1 Zhenshan Village and Huaxi Reservoir
Photographed by the author, 2022

One element that is hard to ignore in Zhenshan is the sculptures and display boards with political propaganda slogans placed all over the village. These sculptures are based on three main themes: the constitution and the legal system, village governance, and ethnic relations. No one in the village could give a precise answer as to when these sculptures appeared, but they are all very new and well-maintained. They all stand out with their bright colours and modern design, which is very distinctive from the stone houses of the Buyi people. Halfway along the road there is a corridor, which is a place for villagers and tourists to rest. The name of the corridor is "法制长廊" (*fǎzhì chángláng*, legal system corridor). A prominent sculpture stands by the legal system corridor (Figure 2-2). The sculpture emphasizes the theme of "法治文化" (*fǎzhì wénhuà*, rule of law culture), reflected in a decorative arrangement of Chinese characters, notably with the character "

法" (*fǎ*, law) prominently featured. Surrounding this central theme are additional textual panels providing explanations about the concept of rule of law and emphasizing legal awareness and compliance among the community.

Figure 2-2 Sculpture by the corridor
Photographed by the author, 2023

At the fork in the road before entering the village a detached building that has just been renovated can be seen, which is the information centre of the Zhenshan Buyi ecomuseum. It consists of two well maintained rooms, and the exhibits show signs of having been reorganised and rearranged. A prominent display board at the entrance explains the concept of the ecomuseum. When walking past this stone path and reaching the entrance of the village, some well-presented exhibition boards can be seen on the left side of the road. These exhibition boards provide detailed information about the history of Zhenshan Village, its ethnic composition, and the current staff of the village committee and party branch, as well as some of their evaluation results of annual cadre performance appraisal.

Three distinctive signs stand side by side along a stone-paved walkway at the village entrance. Each sign is designed in the shape of a traditional Chinese decorative motif, resembling a four-petal flower with a dark brown background and white diamond-shaped centres (Figure 2-3). Clearly displayed in red Chinese characters, the signs carry slogans

conveying specific messages: from left to right, "农村五治惠[13]民生，党群一心家乡美" (*nóngcūnwǔzhìhuìmínshēng dǎngqúnyìxīnjiāxiāngměi*, "rural areas benefit from the five governance initiatives, and the Party and the people are united in their efforts to make the hometown beautiful"), "提倡婚事新办、丧事简办、其他不办" (*tíchànghūnshìxīnbàn sāngshìjiǎnbàn qítābúbàn*, "advocate modern-style weddings, modest funerals, and no other ceremonial extravagance"), and "整治婚丧陋习，推进移风易俗" (*zhěngzhìhūnsānglòuxí tuījìnyífēngyìsú*, "rectify undesirable marriage and funeral customs; promote changing prevailing habits"). The signs are prominently placed against a backdrop of greenery and stone steps, clearly visible to passers-by.

Figure 2-3 Roadside slogan
Photographed by the author, 2023

Opposite these slogans is the small supermarket at the entrance to the village. A colourful sculpture has been installed in front of a supermarket at the entrance to the village (Figure 2-4). The sculpture, designed in shades of red, grey, and white, features stylised graphic elements resembling mountains, waves, and clouds, set against the backdrop of a traditional wooden building. The slogans displayed on the sign emphasize local

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[13] The term "农村五治" (*nóngcūnwǔzhì,* five treatments in rural areas) refers to a policy initiative in China aimed at improving rural living conditions through five key governance areas: garbage treatment (systematic waste collection and disposal to enhance cleanliness), sewage treatment (managing wastewater to prevent pollution), toilet treatment (upgrading rural sanitation facilities for better hygiene), housing treatment (renovating and maintaining rural homes for safety and aesthetic appeal), and appearance treatment (preserving traditional rural landscapes and promoting a harmonious living environment). These initiatives are part of China's broader rural revitalisation strategy, seeking to create sustainable, livable communities.

governance themes, reading: "大力治房" (*dàlìzhìfáng*, "Vigorously manage housing"), "大力治水" (*dàlìzhìshuǐ*, "Vigorously manage water"), "大力治垃圾" (*dàlìzhìlājī*, "Vigorously manage waste"), "大力治厕" (*dàlìzhìcè*, "Vigorously manage toilets"), and "大力治风" (*dàlìzhìfēng*, Vigorously manage local customs). Additionally, a vertical panel on the right side highlights: "创建美好家园" (*chuàngjiànměihǎojiāyuán*, "Create a beautiful homeland") and "推进农村五治" (*tuījìnnóngcūnwǔzhì*, "Promote the five areas of rural management"). At the base of the sign, another prominent slogan reads "共建文明村寨" (*gòngjiànwénmíngcūnzhài*, "Build a civilised village together"), reinforcing the overarching message of collective participation in enhancing community standards.

Figure 2-4 Sculpture by the supermarket
Photographed by the author, 2023

Figure 2-5 Pomegranate sculpture,
Photographed by the author, 2023

After entering the village, the most conspicuous location is an antique-style promenade. The promenade features a sculpture of a pomegranate in the centre (Figure 2-5). The largest part of the sculpture features a stylized, colourful pomegranate accompanied by the prominent phrase in red and white: "石榴籽精神" (*shíliùzǐjīngshén*, "Pomegranate Seed Spirit")[14]. Beneath it, there is another slogan clearly displayed: "民族团结" (*mínzú tuánjié*, ethnic unity).

On the left side of the installation, several rectangular panels feature additional political slogans in black and white text:

- "紧密相连" (*jǐnmìxiānglián*, closely connected)

- "不离不分" (*bùlíbùfēn,* never separated, never divided)

- "传承石榴籽精神" (*chuánchéng shíliùzǐ jīngshén*, inheriting the pomegranate seed spirit)

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[14] A metaphor popularized by President Xi in May 2014 to urge all ethnic groups to 'stick together like the seeds of a pomegranate.

- "石榴花开籽籽同心" (*shíliùhuākāi zǐzǐtóngxīn*, pomegranate blossoms bloom, seeds united in heart)

There's also a vertical line of text stating: "各民族像石榴籽一样紧紧抱在一起" (*gèmínzú xiàngshíliùzǐyíyàng jǐnjǐnbàozàiyìqǐ,* all ethnic groups hold together tightly like pomegranate seeds). On the lower front of the installation, partially obscured by plants, there is a red slogan stating: "民族团结一家亲 同心共筑中国梦" (*mínzútuánjié yìjiāqīn tóngxīngòngzhù zhōngguómèng*, ethnic unity is one family, working together to build the Chinese dream). In the background, signs in a traditional pavilion-like structure display additional messages emphasizing ethnic unity, traditional cultural heritage, and patriotic education. For example, "像爱护自己生命一样珍视民族团结" (*xiàng àihù zìjǐshēngmìng yíyàng zhēnshì mínzútuánjié*, cherish ethnic unity as you value your own life).

Figure 2-6 Sculpture at the end of the corridor
Photographed by the author, 2023

Another prominent sculpture installed at the end of the promenade, featuring a bold combination of red, white, and traditional Chinese decorative lattice patterns (Figure 2-6). At the centre is a large circular panel displaying the heading "民法典" (*mínfǎdiǎn*, civil code), beneath which is a detailed explanatory text briefly introducing China's Civil Code, including references to its adoption date and significance. Around the central panel

are several red rectangular panels, each displaying a slogan and symbol related to law and social order. The text includes:

- "弘扬法治精神" (*hóngyáng fǎzhìjīngshén*, promote the spirit of law)
- "法律面前 人人平等" (*fǎlü miànqián rénrén píngděng*, everyone is equal before the law)
- "国家长治久安" (*guójiā chángzhìjiǔān*, long-term stability and security of the country)
- "社会安定有序" (*shèhuì āndìngyǒuxù*, stable and orderly society)
- "人民安居乐业" (*rénmín ānjūlèyè*, people live and work in peace and contentment)

The symbols for these slogans include images representing justice, such as the scales and the judge's gavel. The sculpture blends contemporary slogans with traditional Chinese aesthetic elements, and is prominently arranged along the stone path, surrounded by low shrubs. These sculptures with political propaganda slogans stand very conspicuously around the traditional Tunpu buildings in Zhenshan.

The village is divided into the upper and lower hamlet. The upper hamlet is called the ancient Tunpu district and is built on the hillside with large, regular stones and the gate is built with stone arches. The upper hamlet represents the historical core of Zhenshan and is architecturally distinct from the newer developments in the village. It is characterised by stone-built houses, many of which date back centuries and reflect a local building tradition that shares similarities with the Tunpu architectural style. The traditional architectural landscape of Zhenshan Village is defined as: the Zhenshan Tunpu site, one of the typical representatives of the Huaxi military Tunpu (Huaxi District Government, 2024). There have been many studies on Tunpu culture. Tunpu culture, originating from the Han Chinese military garrisons established during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), represents a unique blend of military, architectural, and cultural traditions preserved over centuries. The term "Tunpu" translates to "fort," reflecting the fortress-like structures built by soldiers stationed in regions like Anshun, Guizhou province, to secure the southwestern frontiers. These settlements were characterized by fortified stone houses

with small windows designed for defense, narrow winding lanes resembling the Bagua (Eight Trigrams) for strategic movement, and a communal lifestyle that has remarkably endured through generations (Lucas, 2012; Ge, 2014). After learning that I was researching ecomuseums, one interviewee (Z1) strongly recommended that I visit a flower bed. There is a flower bed with a stone tablet next to a B&B on the upper levels of the upper hamlet traditional residential buildings. In the flower bed is a commemorative tree and text tablet for Mr. John Gjestrum. According to the inscription, Mr John Gjestrum was a famous Norwegian ecomuseum scholar and scientific advisor to the ecomuseum cluster in Guizhou, China. In order to establish the Zhenshan Buyi ecomuseum, he visited Zhenshan Village three times in 1995, 1998 and 2000. On 6 April 2001, John Gjestrum passed away. To commemorate this foreign expert, the villagers of Zhenshan planted a cypress tree and named it the John Gjestrum Memorial Tree.

Figure 2-7 Stone road and stone wall in Zhenshan
Photographed by the author, 2022

The buildings in the upper hamlet were constructed using locally sourced large, precisely cut stone blocks, forming solid, durable walls that could withstand the region's humid climate. Roofs were made of layered stone slabs, creating a rugged yet functional covering that required minimal maintenance. Pathways and courtyards in the upper hamlet are similarly constructed from irregular stone slabs, blending seamlessly with the surrounding houses. This use of stone not only provides durability but also contributes to the village's distinctive visual identity, reinforcing its status as a heritage site. Zhenshan's

Tunpu has a history of more than 400 years. In addition to stone residential buildings and stone roads, it also includes a temple. The temple in Zhenshan is called '武庙' (wǔ miào, martial temple) and was built during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty (573-1620). The martial temple is also translated as the "military temple" or "warrior temple", and is a temple used in China to worship outstanding military leaders and strategists (Filipiak, 2014).

Despite this rich architectural heritage, many of the traditional houses in this section of the village have fallen into disrepair as younger generations moved to modern housing in the lower hamlet or relocated to urban areas for work.

In recent years, some of these abandoned buildings have been repurposed for tourism-related enterprises. Many have been converted into guesthouses, art studios, or cafés, catering to visitors who seek an immersive cultural experience. While these businesses have helped revitalise some of the deteriorating structures, their use has also introduced functional changes. Traditional homes that once housed extended families are now operated as commercial venues, shifting the role of these spaces from private family residences to public-facing businesses. The interior modernisation of these spaces has further altered the way they function. While government regulations require that exteriors remain largely unmodified, the interiors of guesthouses and studios have been retrofitted with modern amenities, such as plumbing, heating, and air conditioning, to accommodate the expectations of urban tourists. This juxtaposition of historic façades and contemporary interiors exemplifies the tension between heritage preservation and economic development.

In contrast to the historic upper hamlet, the lower hamlet consists primarily of modern, two-story concrete buildings, constructed to accommodate the changing residential needs of Zhenshan's population. In 1958, the Huaxi Reservoir was built, and almost all of the water fields in Zhenshan Village were submerged under the reservoir. The lower hamlet was originally built on the banks of the Huaxi River, but was moved under the village wall in 1958 due to the construction of the Huaxi Reservoir (Jin, 2016). In recent years, due to the Huaxi District's tourism development policy, the villagers' farmlands have been

completely planned by the government into tourist attractions. The villagers receive government subsidies every year and do not need to do any farming. Over the past 30 years, under the influence of rapid urbanisation, most of the traditional landscape and built environment of the rural community of Tunpu has faced the challenges of decay and destruction (Jia et al., 2021). Many villagers have moved from the upper hamlet to the lower hamlet, citing practical reasons, such as the difficulty of maintaining traditional stone houses under strict renovation policies and the desire for more comfortable, spacious living conditions. However, efforts to harmonise the appearance of modern housing with the historical character of the village have led to mixed reactions from local residents. As part of government-led renovation initiatives, the exteriors of some modern concrete houses have been painted white and decorated with artificial stone patterns, to create visual continuity between the Upper and lower hamlet. While these interventions were intended to reduce the aesthetic contrast between old and new, villagers have expressed dissatisfaction with the results. One resident remarked:

> *"It doesn't look good, it looks out of place, and I heard it cost a lot of money. I don't think it does our traditional Buyi architecture justice." (Interviewee Z2, 10/2022)*

Furthermore, the newly built houses in the lower hamlet do not adhere to the functional or spatial logic of traditional Buyi dwellings. Unlike the multi-generational stone houses of the upper hamlet, which feature courtyards and communal spaces, the modern houses in the lower hamlet follow an urban-influenced design, with individualised plots, enclosed layouts, and separate entrances. This shift in spatial arrangement reflects broader trends in rural-to-urban transition, where housing design is increasingly influenced by modern living standards rather than historical patterns of communal life.

The transformation of the physical landscape in Zhenshan reflects broader shifts in spatial organisation, architectural adaptation, and the incorporation of state-driven heritage and tourism policies. While these changes have altered the material fabric of the village, they are also deeply intertwined with the ways in which local residents engage with and interpret their surroundings. Beyond the visible modifications to housing, infrastructure, and public spaces, the evolving landscape also signifies shifts in cultural meanings, social relationships, and local identity. The introduction of political symbols, tourism-oriented

businesses, and adaptive reuse of traditional structures has influenced not only the physical environment but also the ways in which the village is perceived and experienced by both residents and visitors.

Among these transformations, the proliferation of political propaganda slogans and sculptures promoting themes of ethnic unity, governance, and legal awareness has further reshaped Zhenshan's cultural landscape. Placed in prominent locations such as the village entrance, promenades, and communal gathering spaces, these installations serve not only as ideological markers but also as interventions that redefine how heritage and identity are framed within the ecomuseum context. Their presence raises questions about the intersection of heritage preservation and political messaging, particularly in how local meanings of space are negotiated alongside official narratives. These transformations extend beyond the built environment into the realm of cultural landscape, where the meanings assigned to places, the relationships between individuals and their surroundings, and the negotiation of heritage, modernity, and governance shape daily life in Zhenshan. The following section examines how these cultural dimensions of landscape transformation unfold, exploring the ways in which space is imbued with symbolic, social, and historical significance within the framework of the ecomuseum.

2.2.2 The Landscape as Cultural Heritage and a Symbol of Identity

The transformation of Zhenshan's cultural landscape is shaped by shifting meanings, contested identities, and the intersection of heritage, tourism, and governance. Beyond physical alterations, the village has become a site where state narratives, local narratives, and commercial interests converge, influencing how spaces are perceived and used. Political propaganda slogans, tourism-driven reinterpretations of heritage, and the adaptive reuse of traditional structures all contribute to a changing cultural landscape where the past is selectively preserved, redefined, or repurposed.

The concept of 'cultural landscape' has historically served as a framework for bridging the divide between the understanding and practice of 'nature' and 'culture'. Nearly a century ago, geographer Sauer (2008, p.46) characterised a cultural landscape as a natural

landscape that has been transformed by a cultural community. This perspective underscores the dynamic interplay between human activity and the environment, highlighting how cultural practices shape and redefine landscapes over time. Taylor et al. (2022) argue that the very notion of a 'natural landscape' is misleading, as all landscapes are shaped by human activity, perception, and cultural meaning. Rather than existing as untouched or purely physical spaces, landscapes are dynamic and socially constructed, continuously transformed by cultural practices. Wylie (2009) similarly contends that landscapes are not merely products of nature but are actively produced and reinterpreted through historical and social processes. The concept of cultural landscape reinforces this perspective, highlighting the inseparability of nature and culture. Furthermore, cultural attachment plays a crucial role in shaping local identity, imbuing places with intangible value and meaning. In this sense, landscapes are not fixed entities but evolving cultural expressions, continually shaped by human interaction, collective memory, and shifting social practices (Taylor and Lennon, 2012).

The increasing presence of political propaganda slogans and sculptures in Zhenshan has significantly influenced its cultural landscape, embedding ideological narratives into the village's most visible spaces. While the ecomuseum framework originally sought to preserve and showcase the local Buyi heritage, the village's subsequent designation as a "National Civilised Village" in 2020, its shortlisting for "Model Village of Democracy and the Rule of Law" in 2022, and its formal selection in 2023 have introduced a new layer of state-driven messaging. These political installations, appearing alongside the acquisition of official recognition, are strategically placed at the village entrance and in central areas where tourists engage with the traditional Buyi stone houses, ensuring their omnipresence in the daily experience of both residents and visitors. The fact that they are absent from the more modern surroundings of lower hamlet reinforces their role as visual and ideological interventions into what is presented as the historical and cultural core of Zhenshan. The placement of these installations is deliberate, reinforcing a particular vision of Zhenshan that merges its heritage identity with broader political messaging. By positioning these slogans at the village entrance, where all residents pass daily, and in the central promenade, where most visitors experience the ecomuseum, their presence transforms these spaces into sites of ideological reinforcement. The village's most historically and culturally significant spaces are thus overlaid with narratives that extend

beyond heritage preservation, shaping how both locals and outsiders engage with the landscape.

The visual language of these propaganda slogans is carefully crafted to integrate state messaging with local cultural elements, re-contextualising traditional symbols to align with broader ideological narratives. Landsberger, S. (2018) highlights that despite competition from television and the Internet, propaganda posters remain a dominant medium in China's political messaging. Their educational function has been revitalised in recent years, reflecting shifts in communication strategies and societal priorities. The themes of propaganda posters evolve in response to historical contexts, political agendas, and economic transformations. From 1949 to 1976, posters focused on revolutionary ideals with militant slogans. The late 1970s and 1980s saw a shift towards free-market economic modernisation, while the 2000s emphasised social harmony. Since 2013, propaganda has increasingly promoted national aspirations and ideological cohesion (Landsberger, S.R., 2014; Landsberger, S., 2018). Contemporary Chinese propaganda slogans emphasise moral values, individual behaviour and the idea of collective national and cultural identity (the Chinese nation) (Cabras and Tynen, 2025).

Visual symbols, in many cases, have been shown to be more effective than written symbols in telling stories, conveying values, evoking emotions and persuading people (Messaris, 1996), and are therefore often used to promote ideas. The pomegranate sculpture, for instance, is a striking example of how ethnic unity is visually framed within the local landscape. While the pomegranate is an organic and familiar object, its symbolic meaning has been appropriated by the state to represent harmonious ethnic relations, with individual seeds metaphorically standing for different ethnic groups bound together within the Chinese nation. Cabras and Tynen (2025) view this metaphor as a predication strategy (Reisigl, 2017), conveying the idea that ethnic groups are both distinct and interconnected, much like seeds within a pomegranate. The decision to place this sculpture in the village's tourist centre, where Buyi identity is most visibly performed for external audiences, reinforces a unified national identity over ethnic distinctiveness. This reflects how heritage landscapes serve as sites for negotiating the balance between ethnic

diversity and national unity, visually and textually embedding Zhenshan into a broader discourse of cultural integration.

Another notable feature of the slogans is their reliance on cause-and-effect rhetoric, a linguistic strategy frequently employed in political propaganda to frame social behaviours within a moralistic or developmental trajectory (Cabras and Tynen, 2025). Slogans advocating simplified wedding and funeral customs, for instance, are structured around a contrast between outdated traditions and progressive, civilised behaviour. By juxtaposing what should be developed and what should be abandoned, these messages construct a linear narrative of social evolution, reinforcing the idea that rural modernisation is an integral part of national progress. The village's transformation is thus not only material but also ideological, positioning certain customs as remnants of the past while promoting state-endorsed practices as the correct path forward. The placement of governance-focused messages in public spaces where daily interactions occur and alongside the only road into and out of the village ensures that these ideological interventions are unavoidable and override the display of heritage in an ecomuseum setting.

The presence of legal-themed sculptures and slogans in Zhenshan reflects the village's transformation into a model site for governance education, aligning with its selection as a "Model Village of Democracy and Rule of Law" in 2023. Some related research also discussed the functional government discourse of beautifying the environment and public spaces, indicating that publicity needs to be grounded in locality-based orientation (*dìfāngxìng,* 地方性) and use local cultural markers to be better understood (Landsberger, S., 2018; Sun, Z., 2019). Promoting the concept of governance in China's constitutional and legal systems introduces the concept of governance into everyday rural spaces, combining legal discourse with local heritage. This is most visible in the legal system corridor, where the oversized character "法" (*fǎ,* law), paired with textual panels explaining the importance of legal awareness, dominates the surrounding environment. The choice of bold red and white lettering against the backdrop of grey stone houses creates a striking visual rupture, inserting a modern political aesthetic into a historically rooted landscape. The recontextualisation of legal discourse within an ecomuseum village frames governance as an integral part of local culture, despite its clear imposition from

outside. The strategic placement of legal-themed sculptures at village junctions and communal spaces reinforces the notion that law is not an abstract concept, but a physical, omnipresent force embedded into the daily environment. This transformation challenges the coherence of the ecomuseum's narrative by shifting its focus from heritage preservation to ideological instruction, altering the relationship between space, community, and historical representation. Rather than merely showcasing local traditions, Zhenshan is now a landscape in which the apparatus of governance has become highly visible, standing alongside historic architecture as a central exhibit.

The presence of political propaganda in Zhenshan has reshaped the cultural landscape of the ecomuseum, embedding ideological narratives into spaces once dedicated to heritage preservation. These efforts do not simply coexist with the existing landscape but actively redefine it, introducing new layers of meaning that align local heritage with state-led governance and national identity discourse. Through the integration of legal rhetoric, social behavioural directives, and ethnic unity narratives, the cultural landscape is transformed into an ideological space where heritage is selectively framed to serve broader political objectives. This shift alters the function of the ecomuseum, moving it away from its original purpose of community-driven cultural preservation towards a model village of governance, where public space is used to display state authority as much as local tradition. Rather than reinforcing a coherent representation of heritage, these ideological interventions disrupt and reconfigure the relationship between landscape, identity, and historical continuity, ultimately reducing the autonomy of the ecomuseum's narrative and subsuming it into a national framework of control and ideological projection.

Photovoice

To explore how residents of Zhenshan interpret and respond to transformations in their environment, this study employed photovoice as a participatory visual method. Rooted in community-based research approaches, photovoice enables participants to use photography as a means to document, reflect on, and communicate their lived experiences and perspectives (Wang, C. and Burris, 1997). In this project, villagers were invited to take photographs based on a set of guiding prompts designed to elicit both observational and reflective responses. To guide the process and promote thematic consistency,

participants were also asked to respond in different ways to three main questions: (1) What do you think best represents the village of Zhenshan? (2) What do you think needs to be improved in the village of Zhenshan? and (3) You may freely select a photograph that you feel is relevant to the theme of this study. Over forty photographs were collected through this process. The subjects of the photos surround these three categories: (1) outdoor architectural heritage, including traditional stone houses, alleyways, and public spaces; (2) interior domestic spaces, capturing household arrangements, ancestral objects, and artefacts of cultural continuity; and (3) everyday life scenes, depicting social gatherings, leisure, and other routine activities.

Given space constraints, this chapter presents one to three selected photographs from each category. These images were chosen not only for their thematic relevance but also for the richness of interpretation they generated during follow-up interviews. The purpose of this analysis is not to produce an exhaustive visual record, but rather to illuminate how residents perceive, value, and negotiate the changing landscape of Zhenshan in ways that may diverge from officially sanctioned heritage narratives. By combining participant-produced imagery with their own commentary, photovoice reveals alternative meanings embedded in the physical and cultural environment, and foregrounds local agency in the interpretation of place.

Topic 1: Traditional Architecture and Public Spaces

The stone houses and stone paths of upper village are the most frequently mentioned in discussions about community identity and the representation of Zhenshan.

Figure 2-8 Zhenshan ancient stockade gate
Photovoice participant Z1, 2023

This photograph, captured by a photovoice participant (Z1), shows the ancient city gate of Zhenshan Village (Figure 2-8). The gate is constructed from large, precisely shaped stone blocks forming robust walls and a distinctive arched entryway, reflecting traditional defensive architectural practices common in Bouyei settlements. The visible texture of weathered stone surfaces and the growth of vegetation within the stonework further highlight the age and historical depth of the structure. As indicated by signage attached to the gate, one plaque identifies the structure as "南古城门" (*nán gǔchéngmén*, "South Ancient City Gate"), while another notes "古城墙" (*gǔchéngqiáng*, "Ancient City Wall"), The participant is a middle-aged Buyi villager who also holds a position in the village committee. The participant described it by stating:

"This is our ancient stockade gate, which is no longer used as a gate. But I think it shows the history of our place as a former military stronghold. These large stones are carefully placed and very sturdy. And the fact that the building is made of stone is a characteristic of our Buyi architecture. And we are very special here. The descendants of the Buyi and Han peoples have built Tunpu buildings that are different from the ordinary Han-style Tunpu buildings in other places. Moreover, the upper and lower villages of Zhenshan are separated and divided by this southern city gate. The space to the north of the Southern Village Gate and the ancient city wall is called the 'upper hamlet'; the space to the south of the

Figure 2-9 Stone-paved road and houses along the road
Photovoice participant Z3, 2023

This photograph, taken by a participant (Z3), captures a narrow, descending stone-slab alleyway in Zhenshan Village, bordered closely by two contrasting residential structures. Z3 is a villager who works in the city and returns to the village to reunite with his family during the Spring Festival. In the photo it can be seen on the left is a traditional Buyi house, with its exterior walls made of a wooden frame and filled with lime plaster. The dark wooden beams have weathered over the years, and the sturdy stone foundation seamlessly connects to the uneven, damp, blackened stone slab road below. Architectural details such as finely latticed windows and projecting eaves hint at a longstanding vernacular aesthetic rooted in local material use and climatic adaptation. The eaves keep the summer sun off the walls and push the monsoon rain far enough away that the timber does not rot. Opposite this stands a more recent construction, built from concrete and faced with machine-cut stone tiles, its sharp angles and cement grouting clearly marking

it as a product of contemporary planning. Reflecting on these differences, the participant commented,

> *"I chose this photo because I think it clearly shows the two types of houses in our village today. On the left is the exterior wall of our traditional folk house, and on the right is a concrete house built according to a government plan. They say that the right house is modelled on the left, and that the project even spent a lot of money on such decorations, but I can't see the similarities." (Participant Z3, 02/2023)*

Figure 2-10 The John Gjestrum Memorial Tree
Photovoice participant Z4, 2023

This photograph depicts a modest commemorative site situated near the top of Zhenshan's upper hamlet (Figure 2-10). At the centre of a small, stone-bordered flower bed stands a young tree, its slender trunk rising among fallen autumn leaves. Flanked by low stacked stone retaining walls and backed by a bamboo fence, the setting has a quiet and respectful atmosphere. At the front of the plot, two engraved stone plaques are embedded in the ground. One, inscribed in both Chinese and English, identifies the site as "The memorial tree of Mr. John Gjestrum" (约翰杰斯特龙先生纪念树). The other offers a longer bilingual text titled "The memory of John Gjestrum Gjestrum", recounting the Norwegian

museologist's involvement in founding the Zhenshan Ecomuseum in the 1990s and his broader contributions to the ecomuseum movement in China. The participant who took this photograph explained:

> *"This tree was planted by our villagers. The ecomuseum was an international project in our village back then, and we were all very proud of it, so even now it represents our Zhenshan. If you're here to study the ecomuseum, then you should also learn about its history, and this tree should be included in your records."* *(Participant Z4, 02/2023)*

For the photographer, the tree is not only a memorial to John Gjestrum, but also a reminder of the time when the community took part in a project that brought outside attention and recognition. It represents a shared memory and a visible link to the beginnings of the ecomuseum in the village.

Topic 2: Interior Domestic Spaces

Figure 2-11 Ancestor altar in the house
Photovoice participant Z5, 2023

Among the photographs collected through photovoice, images of indoor spaces, especially altars and accompanying household tables, emerged as a recurring theme, even though such topics were entirely absent from general interviews. This contrast highlights the methodological value of photovoice in bringing forward silent or overlooked layers of the cultural landscape, particularly those embedded in the private domain. In the photovoice sessions, participants frequently chose to photograph and discuss the altar space, often centrally placed along the inner wall of the main room, as an important element of family life. These altars were typically arranged with ancestral tablets or framed photographs, incense holders, offerings of fruit or food, and decorative cloths or paper hangings. Nearby tables, often large and centrally positioned, served not only for meals or hospitality but also as part of the spatial and ritual structure surrounding the altar.

Figure 2-12 Ancestor altar in the house
Photovoice participant Z6, 2023

In the genealogy of cultural influence, kinship is considered an important factor in the formation of ancestral hall culture (Li, W. et al., 2024). As a member of the Ban Li family, any child or grandchild who sets up a household on their own will set up a shrine in their home and post a family ancestral tablet, worshipping their ancestors. This photograph, taken by a participant, shows the family altar in the Ban household in Zhenshan Village. The altar is set against a wooden interior wall, centrally positioned beneath a prominent display of red paper couplets and inscriptions bearing traditional expressions of reverence,

including references to "天地君亲师" (*tiān dì jūn qīn shī*, "heaven, earth, the sovereign, one's parents, and one's teacher"). Above the altar shelf are framed black-and-white photographs of deceased family members, placed alongside incense burners, cups, and small offerings, indicating the altar's continued ritual use. Beneath the shelf stands a square wooden table known as a Baxian table (*bāxiānzhuō*, 八仙桌) or "worship table". This table, equal in length on all four sides, is designed to seat two people per side, making space for eight in total. The name Baxian (*bāxiānzhuō*, 八仙, eight immortals) originates from Chinese folk usage. It serves both practical and ritual functions and is often positioned directly in front of the altar as part of the spatial and ceremonial arrangement within the home.

The most intuitive symbol of a Zhenshan family's identity is the shrine (*shénkān*, 神龛) in the main room of every household. Often installed along the central inner wall, the shrine typically consists of a narrow wooden shelf holding ancestral photographs or tablets (*zǔpái*, 祖牌), incense burners (*xiānglú*, 香炉), offering bowls, and red paper charms, framed by calligraphic banners expressing traditional hierarchies of moral and ritual authority such as "天地君亲师". As the participant explained,

> *"Every household in our village of Zhenshan has one of these in their home. When the ecomuseum was first set up, there was even a model of one in there, but it was later cancelled." (Participant Z5, 02/2023)*

Through this comment, the participant not only identifies the altar as a shared and meaningful household feature, but also draws attention to its early recognition within the ecomuseum project and its later exclusion from official display. Chinese family life has been structured around kinship groups, shaped in large part by Confucian ethical principles. These kinship units function as collectivist family networks, encompassing multiple generations bound together by ties of descent and familial obligation (Cohen, M.L., 1990; Hu, A. and Li, 2021). The text affixed to the Zhenshan shrine is the object of worship in Confucianism. In Confucian thought, the phrase "天地君亲师" reflects a hierarchical worldview that underpins both moral and social order. Heaven (*tiān*, 天) and earth (*dì*, 地) symbolise the cosmic forces that sustain life. The sovereign (*jūn*, 君)

represents political authority and the virtue of loyalty to the state. Parents (*qīn*, 亲) embody filial piety and the continuity of the family line, while the teacher (*shī*, 师) signifies respect for knowledge and moral cultivation. Together, these five elements convey core Confucian values such as order, loyalty, filial duty, and reverence for learning, which collectively shape individual conduct and the structure of social relationships (Xu, Zi 2006; Li, C., 2022). The 'ancestors' in the photo, or 'the ancestors of the Fufeng Hall', 'the ancestors of the Luling Prefecture', are also the immortals that appear in shrines, which reflects the firm position of ancestor worship in Zhenshan Village.

This photograph, taken by a participant, shows a household shrine in Zhenshan Village. While ancestral portraits and offerings occupy the upper part of the altar, the lower section is dedicated to the worship of the god of the land (*tǔdìshén*, 土地神), an important yet often overlooked part of domestic ritual practice. Set within the base of the wooden altar cabinet, this enclosed compartment features a central vertical plaque inscribed with the words "长生土地之神位" (*chángshēng tǔdìzhīshénwèi*, "seat of the long-life god of land"). Flanking the tablet are auspicious phrases painted in bold calligraphy: on the left, "地内出黄金" (*dìnèi chūhuángjīn*, "gold emerges from the earth"), and on the right, "土中生白玉" (*tǔzhōng shēngbáiyù*, "white jade is born from the soil"). These expressions convey a sense of reverence for the earth's generative and protective power, linking prosperity and well-being to the spiritual presence of local deities. The participant who took the photo explained:

> *"In addition to our ancestors, we also worship the god of the land. If you want to understand our village, I think it is important to understand what gods we worship. You can't see this outside our house." (Participant Z6, 02/2023)*

Their comment draws attention to how household shrines preserve layers of local belief that remain hidden from public view, offering insight into the spiritual dimensions of everyday life in Zhenshan.

The vertical positioning of these two shrines, with ancestors above and the Earth God below, reflects a moral and cosmological hierarchy. The ancestral realm oversees the

familial lineage, while the Earth God anchors the household in its relationship with the land and local environment. This configuration reflects more than ritual habit; it encodes a spatial expression of identity, cosmology, and social order that continues to shape how residents live in and make sense of their homes. While the ancestral altar foregrounds kinship continuity and filial reverence, the inclusion of the Earth God shrine beneath it expresses an enduring spiritual relationship with the land, signifying the household's embeddedness within both human and ecological domains. The care and consistency with which these spaces are maintained, even in renovated or modernised homes, suggest that such spatial practices continue to serve as quiet but powerful markers of cultural identity, linking the domestic interior to broader structures of meaning.

The access to intimate and implicit dimensions of the cultural landscape that photovoice revealed did not appear in general interviews. These shrines are not visible in the curated public image of the village, nor are they included in official representations of Zhenshan's identity. Yet they are central to how residents experience, order, and inhabit their everyday world. The domestic altar, comprising both ancestral and local spiritual elements, thus serves not only as a site of personal devotion but also as a microcosm of a culturally rooted and morally ordered landscape. It is quietly maintained within the home even as the village exterior becomes increasingly shaped by tourism and ideological narratives. Through these images, participants reveal a cultural landscape in which identity is lived, spatialised, and sustained in the texture of ordinary life, beyond the reach of public display or official recognition.

Topic 3: Leisure, and Other Routine Activities

Figure 2-13 Visitors taking wedding photos
Photovoice participant Z2, 2023

Back (2015, p.835) argues that paying attention to everyday life can foster a 'newfound fascination with the ordinary' and reveal how even the smallest details are connected to broader social change. Rather than treating the everyday as background, such an approach encourages us to recognise it as a site where meaning is produced, contested, and lived. These images offer a grounded counterpoint to official representations of heritage, prompting reflection on how daily life itself becomes a form of cultural expression and continuity.

This photograph (Figure 2-13), taken by a participant in Zhenshan Village, shows a narrow stone pathway on a misty, overcast day. The photographer is a villager from Zhenshan who works in a tourism-related occupation. The scene is enveloped in mist, with layered tiled rooftops of traditional wooden and stone structures descending along the hillside in the background. A couple stands near the wall, the woman wearing a white veil and the man dressed in dark clothing, positioned for a formal photograph. In the foreground, several figures in winter clothing, some holding umbrellas, are engaged in assisting or observing the photo-taking process. The participant remarked:

> "Since we no longer have any arable land, all our lives are related to tourism, so watching the activities of tourists is also part of our daily lives. These young people taking photos by the ancient city wall is also a new trend." (Participant Z2, 02/2023)

This photograph does not romanticise tourism; instead, it documents its normalisation within the community, showing how the spaces once used for farming, gathering and seasonal rituals have been repurposed for aesthetic consumption and tourist experience. Participants refer to this as 'everyday life', emphasising the new habitual landscape, which is no longer organised around subsistence farming or communal labour, but around the presence, movement and needs of outsiders.

Figure 2-14 Women embroidering by roadside
Photovoice participant Z1, 2023

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This photograph (Figure 2-14) shows a woman engaged in embroidery work by the roadside in Zhenshan Village. She is carefully stitching brightly coloured fabric cut-outs, shaped like birds and fish, onto a piece of blue cloth layered over a larger white base. Next to her, a charcoal brazier provides warmth as she works outdoors. The photo was taken by a member of the village committee, who is actively involved in local cultural heritage matters and concerned about the village's status as an ecomuseum. He (Z1) took this photo during a discussion about areas in the community that need improvement. He explained:

> *"This is the embroidery that the women in our village often do. They often chat while doing it by the roadside, and you can see it almost every day. But our village does not have any officially recognised intangible cultural heritage, which I think is a pity, especially as we are still an ecomuseum. This is our weak link."* *(Participant Z1, 03/2023)*

This photograph reveals that some cultural practices persist over time, but are not officially recognised. They are maintained not through institutional protection but through everyday habits and social transmission. From the photographer's perspective, the act of embroidery is not staged, commodified or performed for an external audience, it just exists there, as part of everyday life. This insight is consistent with discussions of everyday heritage, where culture is not only found in designated places or designated traditions, but also in the gestures, skills and relationships that shape everyday life (Mosler, 2019; Ireland et al., 2025). Like many photovoice photographs, its significance lies not in the dramatic or spectacular, but in what the villagers themselves chose to see and record as meaningful. By focusing on the mundane, this photograph draws attention to a visible yet neglected dimension of the cultural landscape: visible in the physical environment but overlooked in institutional narratives that prioritise formality, visual distinctiveness or economic potential.

The gap between lived experience and official recognition reflects wider tensions in the current management of ecomuseums. While the ecomuseum framework promotes community participation and holistic representation, in practice, certain aspects of local culture, particularly those that are informal and expressed through everyday life, are often excluded from institutional visibility. The embroidery scene in the photograph is situated

at the margins of such official narratives. Although it forms part of rural life, it is not fully acknowledged within the symbolic order shaped by conservation policies, heritage designations, and tourism planning. In this sense, the image becomes not only a record of a practice, but also a gentle criticism, a visual intervention that reaffirms the importance of ordinary people and ordinary actions in the construction of cultural space.

Discussion

The photovoice material gathered in Zhenshan not only reveals how villagers engage with their immediate environment but also offers a valuable lens through which to understand the shifting contours of the cultural landscape as interpreted from within the community. Unlike top-down visual narratives imposed through tourism development or political propaganda, which tend to fix space through selective symbols and ideologically charged imagery, the photographs taken by participants reflect a far more grounded understanding of the village's spatial and symbolic life (Raerino et al., 2025). Through their photography, cultural landscapes are no longer a well-preserved set of cultural objects or representative buildings, but a vibrant and evolving field where personal memories and social relationships find material and spatial expression. The villagers' photographic choices, including what they considered worth capturing, framing, and discussing, reveal a landscape defined by experiential significance rather than by external aesthetic or ideological priorities.

The image of the home altar, for example, is emblematic in this regard. As a feature that is not outwardly visible and is rarely mentioned in public discussions or general interviews, the altar's repeated appearance in participants' photographs signals its deep importance in the way villagers experience and organise cultural space. It embodies a spatial order rooted in ancestral connection, ritual obligation, and moral structure, situated at the heart of the domestic environment. The altar is not a decorative element; it is a site through which households continually engage with inherited responsibilities and values, and through which they position themselves within both familial and cosmological hierarchies. The inclusion of the Earth God shrine beneath the ancestral tablets further reflects a layered spatial logic, in which relationships between kinship, land, and the divine are arranged in physical space. The fact that these shrines are located in the most

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central and symbolically charged part of the home, yet are entirely absent from official portrayals of the village, highlights the disjuncture between externally imposed representations of Zhenshan and the intimate spatial practices that shape its lived cultural landscape. As the village's outward landscape becomes increasingly scripted through political slogans, beautification projects, and commercial conversions, the private spaces of the home remain zones where cultural meanings are maintained on different terms. By choosing to photograph altars, participants actively draw attention to a continuity that is neither celebrated nor displayed, yet remains central to how identity, memory, and place are negotiated. These images stand in contrast to the monumentalism of propaganda sculptures or curated tourist routes. They do not simplify or symbolise identity but situate it within the textures of domestic space.

Another significant theme that emerged through the photovoice material was participants' attention to traditional stone dwellings and newly modified or reconstructed houses, reflecting a critical engagement with the changing architectural landscape of Zhenshan. These photographs, often showing the contrast between crumbling stone houses, well-preserved ancestral homes, and newly constructed concrete dwellings with artificially applied "heritage" façades, reveal not just a record of structural change but a layered commentary on authenticity, aesthetics, and cultural value. While some images simply depict these structures, many were accompanied by narratives in which participants expressed ambivalence or dissatisfaction with the newer buildings. They questioned their visual coherence with the village's existing environment, critiqued their cost, and often highlighted their incompatibility with Buyi architectural traditions. Several participants observed that such buildings appeared out of place, lacked cultural resonance, and did not reflect the values embodied in traditional Buyi architecture.

This critical gaze, directed not at the past but at the present transformation of space, further demonstrates how photovoice enables villagers to articulate aesthetic and ethical positions within the evolving cultural landscape. These images are not expressions of passive nostalgia; they reflect an active engagement with the symbolic and material implications of spatial change. For participants, traditional dwellings are not merely remnants of the past but carry cultural authority, emotional attachment, and spatial

integrity. By contrast, the modified dwellings, often driven by policy mandates, tourism image-making, or external investment, are viewed with suspicion or at least with detachment. In this visual discourse, built form becomes a medium through which villagers register their perceptions of imposed development, offering nuanced, often ambivalent responses that resist being neatly categorised as either acceptance or rejection.

These insights are particularly relevant when situated within the ecomuseum model, which, in principle, prioritises authentic, community-driven representation of place (Su, D., 2008; Stefano, 2017). The photovoice images challenge the notion that the visual harmonisation of the village through cosmetic renovation contributes to cultural preservation. Instead, they suggest that such interventions may disrupt spatial meaning and cultural identification, replacing organically evolved structures with simulations that lack depth, memory, and moral resonance. Participants' attention to this distinction between forms that are lived and forms that are made to be looked at underscores a growing discrepancy between surface and substance in the construction of the ecomuseum landscape. In photographing traditional houses in varying states of preservation, villagers make visible the temporal layers of use, decay, and continuity, which the newly beautified exteriors often obscure.

A feature of the photovoice project in Zhenshan is that the participants' visual narratives include not only what is included, but also what is conspicuously absent from the frame. Despite the increasing presence of political sculptures, propaganda slogans, and ideological displays throughout the village, strategically positioned at entrances, central squares, and key thoroughfares, not a single participant chose to photograph these installations. In a setting where the visual field has been increasingly occupied by state messaging promoting legal education, village governance, and ethnic unity, the absence of these elements in the visual accounts produced by villagers suggests a disconnect between imposed spatial narratives and locally meaningful landscapes. This divergence points to a fundamental tension in the current implementation of ecomuseum principles in Zhenshan. Rather than functioning as a medium for the community's self-representation, the ecomuseum landscape is being reshaped into a display that aligns more closely with national ideological messaging than with local cultural logic. In this context,

photovoice does more than record participant perspectives; it reclaims the ecomuseum space as a site of cultural self-articulation. By choosing to exclude state-sponsored imagery and instead foreground familial altars, daily rituals, and intimate spatial arrangements, villagers implicitly assert that these are the elements through which cultural identity is genuinely rooted and reproduced.

The transformation of Zhenshan's cultural landscape has involved not only the visible reorganisation of space, but also a redefinition of meaning, identity, and authority within that space. Central to this transformation is the increasing presence of political sculptures and ideological slogans, which have become prominent features of the village's visual environment following its designation as a "National Civilised Village" and a "Model Village of Democracy and Rule of Law." These sculptures, with themes ranging from constitutional literacy to ethnic unity and local governance, are positioned at key visual and symbolic locations, such as the village entrance and the central promenade, where they intersect with both daily routines and tourist itineraries. While these installations may serve state objectives of visual governance and ideological communication, they also impose an external narrative onto the village, often at odds with the lived experiences and spatial sensibilities of residents. Their aesthetic prominence is not matched by local attachment. Instead, their presence risks displacing the moral and cultural coherence of the original ecomuseum vision by inserting top-down symbolism into spaces once defined by community practice, memory, and identity.

In contrast, the use of photovoice as a research method revealed how residents themselves perceive and interpret the cultural landscape, providing insight into the spatial practices and values that shape everyday life in Zhenshan. The photographs taken by participants did not focus on political sculptures or curated tourist infrastructure. Instead, they highlighted domestic altars, Earth God shrines, roadside embroidery, and scenes involving tourists posing for wedding photos. These are spaces and practices often overlooked in official accounts. Such choices reflect a cultural landscape understood not as a heritage display or ideological showcase, but as a field of lived and relational experience, where meaning is embedded in the ordinary, the habitual, and the socially embedded (Jones, S. and Yarrow, 2022). The method made it possible to surface layers

of the landscape that are rarely verbalised: the persistence of moral geographies in domestic space, the quiet concern about the disconnect between daily practice and institutional recognition, and the complex interplay between tourism and changing patterns of labour and land use.

The physical and symbolic reordering of space through ideological installations and tourism-oriented redevelopment has reshaped how the village is seen from the outside, while internally, villagers continue to engage with place through practices of care, memory, and routine in an implicit way. The cultural landscape that emerges from this analysis is not a static assemblage of heritage features, but a negotiated and contested field in which competing narratives of value, belonging, and representation intersect. Within the framework of the ecomuseum, these insights raise important questions about whose perspectives are included, what forms of knowledge are legitimised, and how everyday life is positioned in relation to heritage and development (Meskell, 2016; Giombini, 2020). Photovoice, as a research method, made it possible to access these lived and often marginalised layers of meaning. It revealed that the true cultural landscape of Zhenshan is not defined by its most visible elements, but by the subtle and persistent ways in which residents continue to inhabit, interpret, and quietly reshape their environment in the face of structural change.

2.3 Landscape Transformations in Tang'an

In recent years, Tang'an has been recognised by national heritage authorities as a "Traditional Chinese Village" and included in a number of conservation and restoration schemes. In 2022, it became part of the Traditional Village Restoration Project, a policy initiative aimed at preserving and enhancing the physical appearance of historic rural settlements while improving infrastructure. As a result, the village has experienced multiple forms of spatial intervention: the construction of new public buildings, upgrades to infrastructure such as roads and sewage systems, and aesthetic modifications to dwellings intended to reinforce a traditional architectural appearance. These interventions, while officially framed as preservation, have significantly reshaped both the visible and material dimensions of the village's landscape.

This chapter section provides a detailed account of how Tang'an's physical and cultural landscapes have been transformed, based on fieldwork conducted between October 2022 and March 2023. It draws on a combination of ethnographic observation, interviews, and the photovoice method to examine both material change and the perceptions of those who live through it. As in the case of Zhenshan, photovoice was used not as a display tool but as a research method, inviting participants to document and reflect on their immediate environments through photography. These images offered insight into how residents interpret and engage with ongoing transformations: what they choose to capture, what they emphasise, and what they leave out. Through this approach, the landscape is examined not only in terms of structural change but also as a site of memory, identity and negotiation.

Tang'an is a Dong village located 7.7 kilometres uphill from Zhaoxing Town. During the period of fieldwork, carried out while China's COVID-19 restrictions were still in place, all public transportation between the two locations had been suspended. As a result, access to Tang'an was limited to walking. The hiking route from Zhaoxing to Tang'an, which passes through three Dong villages—Zhaoxing, Xiage, and Tang'an—has been recommended by *Lonely Planet* as one of the most scenic walking trails in China. The walk takes approximately two hours and ascends steadily through a shifting landscape of forest, farmland, and traditional wooden settlements.

At the entrance to Tang'an stands a large village gate, constructed in imitation of the Dong Ganlan architectural style. A plaque bearing the name "Tang'an Dong Village" hangs in the centre of the gate, flanked on either side by couplets in poetic form, referencing local customs and Dong cultural heritage. Just inside the gate is a simple wooden structure that houses a hand-painted map of the village and a bilingual introduction. The signboard offers a brief explanation of the ecomuseum concept and notes that Tang'an and its surrounding environment form an open-air museum without fixed premises, encompassing everyday life, the built environment, and natural surroundings. The residential architecture in Tang'an is composed predominantly of wooden Ganlan-style houses, constructed on sloping terrain and arranged in concentric formation around a central drum tower. These dwellings are typically two to three storeys high and organised

into two or three rooms per floor. As described by Geary (2003), the lower storeys of these houses are divided, with one side enclosed for raising livestock, while the other is used to store firewood and harvested weeds for later use.

Tang'an's most iconic public structures, the drum tower and opera stage (戏台, *xi tai*) (Figure 2-15), are also concentrated at the centre of the village, anchoring a broad stone-paved square used for performances and collective gatherings. The road network of the village extends outward from this central space, with the main road running from the village gate to the public buildings, and narrower secondary paths branching off to connect individual households. The Dong pattern of using public architecture as spatial nodes around which the village is structured organises communal life and reinforces social cohesion (Ferretto and Cai, 2020, p.3).

Figure 2-15 Drum tower and opera stage
Photographed by the author, 2022

Above the main residential area, at the end of a steep and narrow footpath, lies the village's open-air altar (Figure 2-16). This elevated site is surrounded by a low stone wall with a locked entrance gate. According to a local Dong fengshui master, the altar is dedicated to Sa, also known as Sasui, the ancestral female deity revered across southern Dong regions as the first grandmother and ultimate protector. The altar is used for ritual offerings and seasonal ceremonies, and its restricted access reflects both religious

reverence and social boundaries. During an interview, the fengshui master advised against entering the site, particularly emphasising that I, as a Han Chinese woman new to the village, should not approach it out of respect.

Figure 2-16 Open-air altar
Photographed by the author, 2022
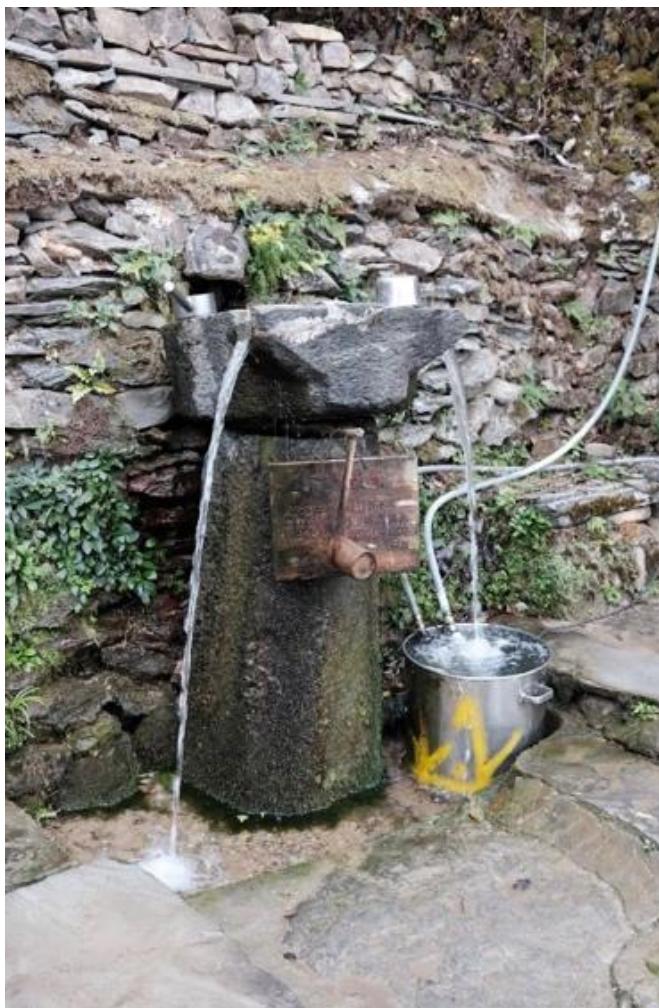
Figure 2-17 Dipper well
Photographed by the author, 2022

North of the drum tower, a stone-paved path leads upward to a perennial spring known locally as the "Dipper Well (Figure 2-17)". The spring emerges from a rock face carved in the form of a beast's head, and the water flows continuously throughout the year. A stone trough below the spring gathers the water, which then flows into two pools constructed by the villagers. The upper pool is used for washing vegetables and rice, while the lower one serves for laundry (Figure 2-18). The functions of the two pools are clearly distinguished, and villagers adhere to these rules with quiet discipline (Figure 2-19). Since mid-2022, due to extended drought conditions and limited hours of municipal water supply, restricted to just three to five hours per day, the number of residents using the spring has significantly increased. After passing through the washing pools, the water continues its descent through a ditch that runs through the village and eventually irrigates the terraced fields below.

Figure 2-18 Villager washing vegetables by the pool
Photographed by the author, 2022

Figure 2-19 Three-level water tank in the village
Sketched by the author, 2022

The surrounding rice terraces are carefully maintained and arranged along the contours of the mountain. These fields form part of the village's traditional rice, fish and duck farming system, which links agriculture to ecological management and seasonal labour rhythms. The drum tower, opera stage, altar, dipper well, and terraced fields together form a tightly interwoven material landscape shaped by resource management and spatial hierarchy.

In the central square of the village, above the entrance of the drum tower, a series of official plaques has been mounted, marking Tang'an's various titles and designations. These include "黎平堂安非遗村落" (*lípíng tángān fēiyícūnluò*, Liping Tang'an Intangible Cultural Heritage Village), "中国少数民族特色村落" (*zhōngguó shǎoshùmínzú tèsècūnluò*, Chinese Ethnic Minority Featured Village), "侗族大歌传承保护示范村" (*dòngzúdàgē chuánchéngbǎohù shìfàncūn*, Demonstration Village for the Preservation of the Grand Dong Songs), and "魅力侗寨" (*mèilì dòngzhài*, Charming Dong Village). These titles, rendered on metal plates and prominently displayed, illustrate the extent to which Tang'an has been drawn into the formal heritage and tourism system.

2.3.1 Recent Physical Transformations in Tang'an

Since the launch of the Traditional Village Restoration Project in 2022, Tang'an has undergone a series of visible changes in its physical landscape. These transformations have primarily involved the upgrading of infrastructure, surface modifications to private dwellings, and the construction of new public facilities. The works were coordinated with guidance from state planning institutions, including the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, as part of the broader rural revitalisation policy. Infrastructure upgrades included the replacement of dirt paths with concrete roads in key parts of the village, improving internal mobility and connecting residential clusters to the central plaza. Drainage ditches were cleaned and restructured to manage surface water. Power lines were rerouted underground, removing overhead cables from view, and street lighting was installed along main thoroughfares. A new sewage system was introduced, linking to both private homes and public buildings.

One of the most prominent new additions to the village landscape is the construction of the new village council building, completed and put into use in January 2023. (Figure 2-20). Designed in a form that references the Ganlan style but distinct in its scale and materials, this structure now houses the village council and serves as a central office space. Positioned adjacent to the drum tower, the building visually reconfigures the traditional layout of the central plaza, adding an element of formal institutional presence to the otherwise communal core of the village. The building includes a prominent porch, which, as villagers pointed out, is larger and more formal than those found on local residential houses. Its overall form echoes the Ganlan style, but the size, height, and symmetry distinguish it from surrounding dwellings. This building is also referred to locally as the "collective canteen," a term which references both its administrative function and its role in communal gatherings.
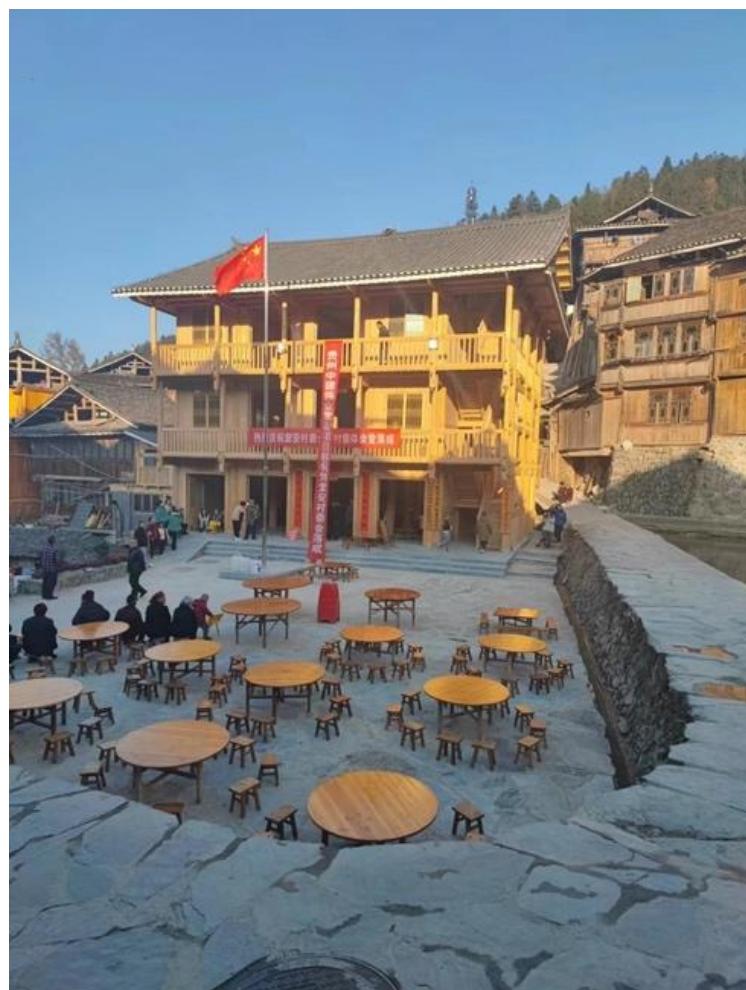
Figure 2-20 New village council
Photographed by the author, 2023

The completion of the village council was marked by a celebration ceremony in which the entire village was invited to a shared dinner held in the square in front of the building. This event, which I attended, brought together a wide range of villagers and served as both a symbolic opening and a community occasion. The placement of the new building, immediately adjacent to the central square and facing the drum tower, visually and spatially reconfigures the traditional centre of the village.

While the drum tower continues to stand as the traditional site of community deliberation and ritual discussion, the village council now introduces a new architectural and administrative presence into the same core area. The physical proximity of these two buildings underscores their parallel functions, and their contrasting forms mark a visible shift in the village's built environment. Residents note the distinction, pointing out that the drum tower remains a space where people gather to discuss village matters such as organising Sa worship ceremonies, standardising the prices of souvenirs or food, and coordinating voluntary rubbish collection teams. The village council, meanwhile, now accommodates formal village governance, meetings, and administrative duties. Residential buildings have also been modified under the restoration programme. The approach focused on encouraging homes, particularly those built or rebuilt in concrete after the 2007 fire accident[15], to adopt a more traditional visual appearance. This was primarily achieved by adding wooden panels, balconies, and decorative features to the exterior of concrete houses. These changes were often applied only to the parts of the buildings that faced main roads or areas visible to visitors, while side and rear walls were frequently left as they were.

Near the central square, wooden cladding was used to cover the front-facing parts of concrete homes. Timber balconies and lattice-style windows were added in order to evoke the traditional Ganlan architectural style. These wooden structures were often built on top of the existing concrete walls, with the original materials remaining underneath. In some cases, only the upper floors received wooden additions, while the ground floors remained

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[15] A local news report records that at 07:40 on 1 December 2007, a fire swept through Tang'an Dong Village (Zhaoxing Township, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao- and Dong-Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou), destroying 21 wooden houses (48 rooms in total) and affecting 27 households; no casualties were reported.

exposed or were only partially covered. Other houses displayed a combination of styles, with one side showing modern concrete and the other dressed in imitation-traditional features. In several instances, tiled roofs were added or extended to create a more unified appearance when seen from a distance.

In contrast, houses located further from the main pathways or outside the central viewing areas were less likely to be renovated. These areas retained a more diverse mix of construction materials and building styles. Some villagers noted that the renovation work seemed to focus on those parts of the village most likely to be seen by outsiders or by officials from cultural heritage agencies. In these less visible parts of the village, it was common to see bare concrete walls and exposed utility pipes, standing in stark contrast to the polished and uniform look of the central area. Together, these developments have reshaped Tang'an's material landscape. While its basic layout remains largely intact, new elements have been introduced to both central and peripheral areas. Infrastructure has been modernised, surfaces have been modified, and the built environment has been selectively restructured to produce a more unified and recognisably "Dong" appearance in places most likely to be seen by outsiders. These changes form the physical foundation upon which cultural meanings, daily routines, and perceptions of authenticity are increasingly negotiated. The following section turns to the cultural landscape, examining how these physical changes are experienced, interpreted, and contested by villagers themselves.

The physical transformations in Tang'an have altered not only the material fabric of the village but also the spatial relationships between tradition, authority, and everyday life. New buildings, exterior modifications to existing homes, and infrastructure upgrades have reshaped the appearance of central spaces, particularly around the drum tower and the recently completed village council building. These visible changes reflect broader shifts in how space is structured, governed, and presented. Yet beyond the physical reorganisation of the built environment lies a more complex and layered terrain of meaning. The cultural landscape of Tang'an is not simply defined by architectural forms, but by the values, memories, and everyday practices that residents attach to space. In the

next section, I turn to these cultural dimensions through a combination of ethnographic observation and the use of the photovoice method. Drawing on photographs taken by villagers and their accompanying reflections, I explore how local people perceive and interact with their surroundings, how they make sense of recent changes, and how space continues to serve as a site of identity, belonging, and negotiation.

2.3.2 The Landscape as Cultural Heritage and a Symbol of Identity in Tang'an

At the centre of Tang'an's evolving cultural landscape stand two buildings that symbolise competing spatial and political logics: the traditional drum tower and the newly constructed village council (Figure 2-21). Though situated only twenty metres apart, these two structures express fundamentally different understandings of authority, identity, and the social order. Their juxtaposition reveals a tension between horizontal, lineage-based self-governance rooted in the Dong worldview, and vertical, bureaucratic governance aligned with national policy and administrative procedure.

Figure 2-21 Village council and drum tower
Photographed by the author, 2023

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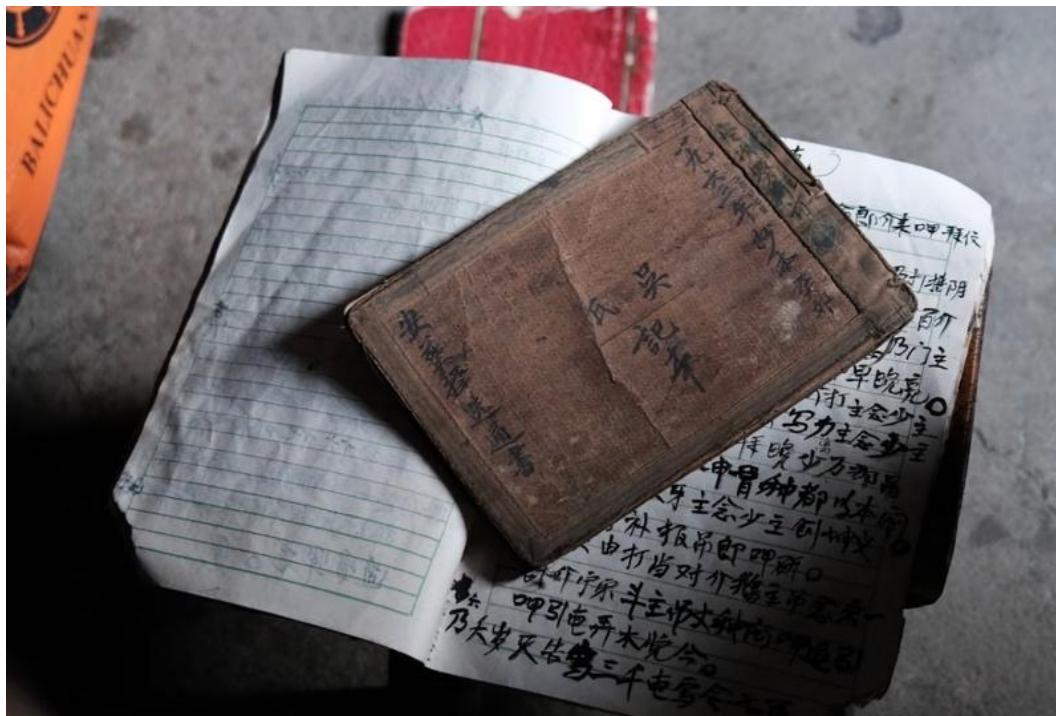
Figure 2-22 Handwritten notes and diagrams
Photographed by the author, 2023

The drum tower, historically and symbolically, is more than an architectural landmark. For the Dong people, it embodies ancestral continuity, ritual obligation, and the vitality of communal life. Built using fir wood, the tower draws on natural metaphor. As villagers often explain, the fir tree is valued not only for its strength, but for its regenerative quality: when an old fir tree falls, its roots send up new shoots that grow into a forest. The drum tower, in this worldview, is not merely a building but a symbol of lineage renewal, shared ancestry, and spiritual rootedness. In Dong belief, the village is understood as a living organism, its layout and built forms influenced by geomantic principles and cosmological alignment. As Li, X. et al. (2019) note, the Dong people interpret the natural environment through a culturally embedded belief system that informs the spatial organisation of village life. Fengshui masters[16] and zhangmoshi[17] (master builders) historically guided

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[16] Feng Shui is an ancient Chinese practice of arranging buildings, objects and spaces in the environment to achieve harmony and balance. Feng Shui means "the way of wind and water". It is believed that landscapes and water bodies direct the flow of cosmic energy through places and structures. A Feng Shui master is a professional with knowledge of Feng Shui who is entrusted with determining whether Feng Shui is beneficial or not, and modifying it if necessary. Fengshui masters of the Dong ethnic group usually have the knowledge of divining, reading faces and choosing dates for important ceremonies.

[17] In Dong community, the chief craftsmen in charge of building and repairing houses are called "掌墨师" (zhǎngmòshī, the master in charge of the ink (for building design)), highly respected by Dong people. They are experts of using mortise and tenon structure. Zhangmoshi are not only the best of carpenters, but must also have a great talent for design, and they do not need any sophisticated tools to design nearly perfect architectural drawings. Zhangmoshi is rarely

house and infrastructure construction according to these beliefs. One elderly fengshui master, now rarely consulted (Interviewee T5), spoke with concern about the loss of this knowledge and the declining status of local planning customs:

> *"Nowadays few people consult me, No one wants to be my disciple." (Interviewee T5, 11/2022)*

He showed his handwritten notes and diagrams compiled himself (Figure 2-22).

Despite shifting practices, the drum tower remains central to Tang'an's cultural and social order. It continues to serve as a site for spontaneous, community-led decision-making. A middle-aged female villager (Interviewee T3) who is enthusiastic about public service in the village told me

> *"We need to negotiate at the drum tower about who will lead the Sa worship ceremonies on important festivals. When we discuss the standardised pricing of tourist souvenirs or food, we come to the drum tower to meet and discuss together. Recently there have been more tourists and more rubbish, and our voluntary rubbish collection cleaning team also meets here." (Interviewee T3, 11/2022)*

These narratives demonstrate that the drum tower is not just a cultural heritage site, but also a vibrant site of informal governance where community negotiations are still ongoing.

Foucault (1986) posits that spaces are not neutral; they are imbued with power dynamics and can function as tools of governance and control. A "heterotopia," as described by Foucault, is a space that exists outside of all other spaces, yet reflects and inverts them, creating a sort of counter-site (Boedeltje, 2012). In the Tang'an context, the drum tower can be perceived as such a heterotopia. Although it stands within the geographical boundaries of the village, its significance transcends them. It embodies collective memory, cultural tradition, and ancestral wisdom. It is a spatial paradigm that both reflects and challenges the evolving identity of the village. The drum tower, as a heterotopic space, allows for community negotiation, contestation, and the reinforcement of cultural identity

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discussed in English publications, therefore, for More details, please see: 蒋凌霞.(2019).掌墨师:侗族木构建筑营造密码的解码人. 文化学刊(01),153-155. doi:CNKI:SUN:WHXU.0.2019-01-043.

even amidst modern pressures. The newly constructed village council building, by contrast, symbolises a different kind of power. Officially introduced as a grassroots self-governing institution, its presence in the central plaza and its architectural scale signals the extension of state authority into the heart of the village. While the drum tower may represent organic, community-driven governance, the village council embodies structured, externalised governance, shaped by policy objectives and administrative logic. The distance between the two structures is not merely a matter of spatial planning, but a material expression of the negotiation between traditional and modern forms of power. As Urbach (1998) observes, architectural juxtaposition often produces dynamic tensions that manifest broader sociopolitical transformations. In Tang'an, this juxtaposition becomes a tangible indicator of the village's evolving relationship with governance, heritage, and representation.

From the perspective of cultural landscapes, this juxtaposition has profound meaning. In the framework of an ecomuseum, cultural landscapes are not limited to physical elements or curated objects. It includes the relationships, meanings, and social practices through which people inhabit space and attach value to place (Davis, P., 2016). The drum tower embodies an emplaced, historically grounded relationship between the built environment and local identity. The village council, by contrast, introduces a top-down spatial order into this landscape. Though villagers were invited to its inauguration and shared a communal meal in the square, its everyday use remains limited.

> *"They built the council building, but most things, we still talk about at the drum tower." (Interviewee T3, 11/2022)*

The presence of the village council also reconfigures social dynamics within the village. Spatial hierarchy now intersects with cultural capital, as visibility and proximity to restored or centralised spaces increasingly shape one's ability to participate in village affairs. A villager engaged in a tourism-related industry reflected (Interviewee T2)

> *"In the past, in the village, if the family had only daughters without any boy, they had little right to speak in the drum tower. Now, it has become that if you do not live near the drum tower and the opera stage, you are too embarrassed to speak out on village policies." (Interviewee T2, 11/2022)*

This perception highlights a new form of marginalisation, shaped not only by kinship or gender but also by one's position within the spatial economy of cultural visibility. Those on the periphery, whether geographically or socially, risk being excluded from decisions that affect their everyday lives.

This experience in Tang'an echoes broader transformations in rural China. As Knapp (1992, p.50) observes in his review of landscape change from 1949 to 1990, traditional systems of spatial organisation such as *fengshui* have increasingly lost ground under modern planning regimes. In their place, standardised housing forms and administrative buildings have reshaped the rural landscape, often at the expense of local distinctiveness. The erasure or simplification of traditional landscape features has generated concern about the loss of identity and sense of belonging, leading to renewed academic and institutional interest in preserving a sense of place (Relph, 1976).

This concern is also at the core of the ecomuseum movement in China, which aims to capture and sustain the local identity through community-led heritage displays. Ecomuseums are not only places of conservation but also places of construction of local identity. They are usually built on visible and selected heritage landscapes that define the characteristics of local communities (Yin, K. and Nitzky, 2022, p.35). Yet as Mitchell, Don (2008, p.47) reminds us, "Landscape matters because it is really everything we see when we go out. But it is also everything we do not see." In Tang'an, this includes not only the preserved outer walls and central square but also the unspoken hierarchies, exclusions, and shifting authority structures embedded in space. The drum tower may remain visible and celebrated; however, the meanings it carries, such as ritual, kinship, and collective memory, are being reframed alongside the administrative logics of the village council.

From an ecomuseum perspective, the coexistence of these two structures illustrates both the potential and the limits of community-based heritage frameworks in China. On the one hand, the drum tower remains an enduring node of identity, resilience and self-governance. It is an expression of living heritage rooted in Dong belief systems. On the other hand, the construction of the village council building and its alignment with official

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planning demonstrates how, even within an ecomuseum, space can be restructured to serve institutional goals that may conflict with community autonomy. The cultural landscape becomes a site not only of preservation but also of contestation. It is a space where traditional meanings and modern interventions overlap, compete, and reshape one another. In Tang'an, the drum tower and the village council stand side by side. What they represent, however, is not simply a stylistic contrast. Rather, it is a spatial expression of a deeper negotiation between collective memory and administrative rationality, between cultural continuity and political authority. These tensions are not unique to Tang'an. Within the ecomuseum framework, they become particularly visible, as the very landscape intended to represent community heritage is also a space where power is asserted, reframed, and resisted.

The transformation of Tang'an's residential landscape has been a central element of the Traditional Village Restoration project initiated in 2022. While respecting the village's designation as an ecomuseum, the reconstruction programme focused on the rehabilitation of infrastructure, the establishment of a new village council, and notably, the restoration and modification of the villagers' houses. The residential environment, as a primary component of the cultural landscape, was subject to specific guidelines aimed at preserving the external appearance of traditional Dong architecture, while adapting to contemporary needs.

In Tang'an, the idea of adapting existing building types has long resonated with Dong cultural practice. As observed by Ferretto and Cai (2020, p.19), villagers often construct new buildings similar to their neighbours. If one family builds a concrete-framed house, others are quick to follow, attracted by the material advantages and modern conveniences the new structures provide. This organic pattern of imitation reflects a collective sensitivity to community cohesion and spatial aesthetics. In Figures 2-23 and 2-24, the

similarity between adjacent houses is apparent, with multiple households replicating building forms and materials.

Figure 2-23 A house under reconstruction
Photographed by the author, 2023

Figure 2-24 A house under reconstruction
Photographed by the author, 2023

In contrast, Figure 2-25 presents a view of the neighbouring village of Xiage. Here, a range of concrete houses dominates the landscape, with minimal attempts to integrate traditional Dong architectural features. The sharp lines, flat concrete surfaces, and absence of wooden exterior decoration in Xiage stand in marked contrast to the restored and stylised appearance pursued in Tang'an, highlighting the distinct pressures placed upon Tang'an villagers to maintain a traditional landscape aesthetic.

Figure 2-25 Xiage Dong Village
Photographed by the author, 2023

Within the Tang'an restoration project, the government introduced stricter requirements. According to official guidelines, older unrestored wooden houses were to be left untouched, while older concrete houses, particularly those built after the 2007 fire, were required to undergo renovation by installing wooden boards onto their external walls. Furthermore, any newly constructed houses had to include traditional features such as timber cladding and sloping tiled roofs, reinforcing the visual appearance of a Dong village. The villagers' reception of these requirements was mixed. Many residents criticised the approach of decorating the outer walls with wooden boards, arguing that these alterations preserved only an outward image rather than a true reflection of Dong culture. As one elderly villager explained succinctly, "侗不爱旧" (*dòngbúàijiù*, "the Dong don't cherish the old"), reflecting a pragmatic cultural attitude towards adaptation and rebuilding rather than sentimental preservation.

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Village council staff acknowledged that convincing villagers to comply with the reconstruction rules was a difficult task for the local management office. Villagers often questioned why they were subject to stricter regulations, while neighbouring Dong villages such as Xiage faced no such restrictions and were allowed to build freely in concrete. The management office had to emphasise Tang'an's designation as an ecomuseum and the importance of maintaining the landscape's traditional appearance, even though the villagers' comprehension of the ecomuseum concept remained limited. Despite these tensions, the villagers ultimately complied with the government's requirements. Nonetheless, many residents interpreted the restoration project as a face-saving project (*miànzi gōngchéng*, 面子工程), intended more to satisfy external expectations and official evaluations than to serve the needs or aspirations of the community itself (Oakes, 2016, p.752). This perception reinforced a sense of disconnection between the superficial restoration of appearance and the lived experience of the local population, suggesting that the visual maintenance of tradition did not necessarily reflect the realities of everyday life or cultural practice. Newly built houses, with the exception of those reconstructed after fires, incorporated elements of traditional Dong architecture in various ways. Based on field observation, the methods by which villagers restored or reconstructed their houses with traditional elements could be summarised into three main patterns.

First, some households rebuilt the lower floors of their houses in concrete for greater structural stability, while adding wooden decoration to the outer walls to restore a traditional appearance (Figure 2-26). The combination achieved a certain visual continuity with older wooden structures, although the contrast between the new and old timber was often visible.

Figure 2-26 First type of residential buildings modified
Sketched by the author, 2023
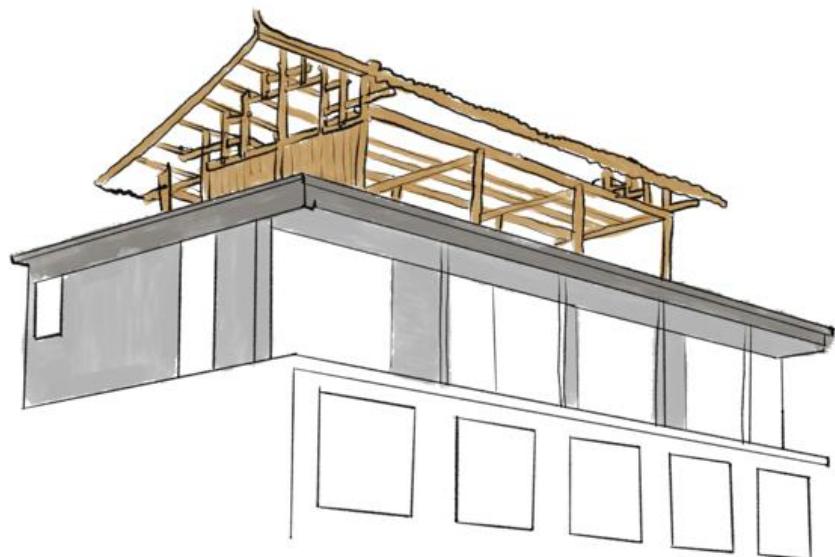
Figure 2-27 Second type of residential buildings modified
Sketched by the author, 2023

Second, a number of new houses were constructed entirely in concrete, but fitted with traditional-style wooden roofs to maintain the overall visual impression of the skyline (Figure 2-27). This hybrid form satisfied the requirement for traditional appearance without adhering to traditional construction methods.

Third, houses located along main public paths or near important tourist nodes, such as the drum tower, selectively applied wooden decoration only to the walls facing the public space, leaving the sides and rear walls exposed in bare concrete (Figure 2-28). This approach allowed compliance with landscape restoration regulations while limiting the financial burden on owners.

Figure 2-28 Third type of residential buildings modified
Sketched by the author, 2023

Figure 2-29 More active areas (highlighted with orange colour)
Sketched by the author, 2022

Most of the dwellings were repaired by asking the villagers to pay their own expenses. This is the main reason why there are no standardised criteria for restoration methods. The government allocated a limited amount of funds to villagers as subsidies for house renovations. However, villagers estimate that this represents less than one per cent of the total amount allocated by the government at any one time. Government subsidies covered part of the renovation costs, but villagers were often responsible for the majority of expenses themselves. As a result, the quality and extent of restoration varied, and the contrast between areas closer to the village centre and peripheral zones became more pronounced (Figure 2-29). This differentiation not only shaped the visual landscape but also reinforced new forms of spatial hierarchy.

Although the project succeeded in restoring a surface impression of traditional architectural character, it also introduced contradictions. The outward consistency often

concealed internal changes in materials, living standards, and social relations. In this way, the transformation of residential buildings in Tang'an contributed to a broader redefinition of the cultural landscape, simultaneously preserving certain aspects of tradition while introducing new dynamics of inequality and marginalisation.

The transformation of Tang'an's cultural landscape over recent decades reflects a complex interplay of changing spatial practices, shifting heritage discourses, evolving socio-economic dynamics, and broader theoretical tensions within heritage conservation. This transformation has not been driven by a single factor, yet the Traditional Village Restoration Plan initiated in 2022 has emerged as a particularly influential catalyst, accelerating changes in the built environment, spatial meanings, and community dynamics. Framed within the conceptual framework of the ecomuseum model, this restoration initiative aimed to maintain Tang'an's vernacular architectural characteristics and reinforce its image as a dynamic representation of Dong culture. The principles of vernacular architecture conservation widely advocate the adaptive reuse of heritage structures, maintaining original functions to address contemporary community needs while avoiding the pitfalls of static 'museumisation' (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel, 2011; Zhao and Greenop, 2019, p.1131). Yet in practice, the Tang'an project has been implemented through processes and outcomes that demonstrate significant deviations from such ideals, leading instead towards an uneven reconfiguration of space and deepening existing socio-economic disparities.

A critical analysis of Tang'an's restoration project reveals tensions inherent in the conceptual foundations of ecomuseum practice. The ecomuseum ideal stresses community ownership, decentralised decision-making, and an integrated approach to heritage management that transcends isolated sites, emphasising instead the collective significance of broader cultural landscapes (Davis, P., 2007; Corsane et al., 2008). However, in the context of Tang'an, implementation has primarily followed a top-down administrative approach, designed largely by local government agencies and cultural-tourism academic institutions. Although superficially participatory, evidenced by employing local villagers for manual construction labour and providing limited community spaces within administrative structures, the project has offered community

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members minimal genuine participation in decision-making processes (Wei, 2022, p.279). Herein lies a significant departure from the ideal of full stakeholder engagement, where authentic community involvement is considered fundamental to sustainable and equitable landscape planning (Jones, M., 2007; Balestrieri, 2013).

Within these broader socio-political transformations, specific elements such as the newly constructed village council building encapsulate both symbolic and practical tensions. Situated adjacent to the drum tower, traditionally the heart of communal and ritual life, the village council embodies state authority and administrative rationality, contrasting sharply with the lineage-based and cosmologically rooted governance practices historically represented by the drum tower (Li, X. et al., 2019). As Butler, A. and Sarlöv-Herlin (2019, p.272) articulate, landscape transformations profoundly influence local perceptions and cultural understandings. Previously, Tang'an residents considered their culture holistically, integrated into everyday natural and cultural environments without assigning disproportionate significance to particular built elements. The new administrative and heritage-centred developments, however, have prompted heightened awareness and scrutiny of individual spaces, particularly those emphasised within the restoration project and directed toward external tourism consumption.

Such selective conservation efforts, focused largely on iconic sites and visible infrastructure, reflect broader theoretical critiques within heritage discourse. Corsane et al. (2008) stress that ecomuseum practice should cultivate integrated cultural continuities rather than isolated heritage assets. Yet, the Tang'an restoration prioritises visually appealing heritage elements such as renovated outer walls and dwellings nearest the drum tower, shaping a landscape predominantly geared towards tourist spectatorship (Su, J., 2019; Yin, K. and Nitzky, 2022). Mitchell, Don (2008) warns that such practices, while rendering certain elements visually prominent, simultaneously obscure internal community diversities and social tensions, resulting in landscapes designed primarily for external consumption rather than internal continuity.

These selective heritage conservation practices have direct consequences for local socio-economic dynamics. Zhao and Greenop (2019) notion of 'semi-vernacular architecture'

points towards adaptive reuse strategies meant to serve local communities equitably. However, in Tang'an, the differentiated renovation of residential houses illustrates a significant departure from equitable practices. The degree of renovation achieved has heavily depended on villagers' access to personal financial resources and proximity to central tourist flows. Despite limited governmental subsidies, economic and symbolic capital has been concentrated unevenly, accentuating spatial and economic inequalities. Consequently, central village areas have become privileged nodes for investment and representation, while peripheral zones remain largely neglected. As Knapp (1992, p.50) cautioned decades earlier, state-driven modernisation and heritage policies frequently disrupt traditional spatial practices and community cohesion, aligning landscapes more closely with external imperatives than endogenous community meanings and relationships.

In addition, these spatial and economic transformations have generated noticeable social repercussions, reshaping intra-community relationships previously rooted in kinship, cosmology, and ritual practices (Li, X. et al., 2019). The Tang'an villagers' cultural and social worlds have become increasingly influenced by competitive access to tourism resources, heritage-related subsidies, and spatial prominence within village hierarchies. Although the drum tower retains significant symbolic and communal functions, its juxtaposition with the newly established village council underscores tensions between informal community negotiations and formal administrative governance. This duality reveals not merely a simplistic displacement of traditional practices by modern structures, but rather an ongoing coexistence and redefinition of multiple governance forms, cultural authorities, and participatory spaces.

Landscape scholars highlight that community engagement and participation form essential prerequisites for sustainable and culturally responsive landscape management (Jones, M., 2007; Borrelli, N and Davis, 2012). True participation implies the empowerment of community members as genuine stakeholders in decision-making processes, enabling them to become active 'guardians of the territory' (Borrelli, N and Davis, 2012, p.44). In contrast, Tang'an's restoration project has effectively positioned villagers primarily as passive recipients or implementers of external plans, restricting

meaningful participatory mechanisms. Consequently, local perceptions of the ecomuseum concept itself have narrowed significantly. Rather than viewing the ecomuseum as a holistic strategy for cultural sustainability, community members frequently perceive it merely as a governmental infrastructure cluster, including the village council and information centre, deployed for external representation and tourism.

In conclusion, the complex interplay of heritage conservation ideals, administrative practices, economic imperatives, and socio-cultural dynamics within Tang'an's landscape transformation exposes significant contradictions and tensions within contemporary heritage governance in rural China. While landscape and heritage conservation frameworks such as the ecomuseum model emphasise integrative, community-centred approaches, the practical implementation of such ideals in Tang'an demonstrates considerable divergences from their theoretical underpinnings. The resulting cultural landscape thus becomes simultaneously a medium for cultural identity, a site of state governance, and a field for socio-economic differentiation, illustrating broader anthropological insights into heritage landscapes as negotiated, dynamic, and inherently political spaces.

While the restoration project has reshaped Tang'an's physical and symbolic landscape largely through external planning and administrative frameworks, it remains crucial to consider how these transformations are perceived and experienced by community members themselves. The preceding analysis has demonstrated the structural and spatial consequences of heritage interventions. However, the internal narratives, meanings, and everyday interpretations produced by villagers form an equally important dimension of the evolving cultural landscape. To capture these perspectives, the research incorporated the photovoice method, inviting participants to document and reflect on their environment through their own photographic practices. Photovoice offers a valuable means of examining not only the visible material changes, but also the shifting relationships between people, space, memory, and identity in Tang'an. By analysing the images selected and the narratives shared by villagers, it becomes possible to explore the ways in which community members interpret heritage transformations, negotiate their sense of place, and articulate concerns or aspirations that are often overlooked within formal

heritage discourses. The following section draws on the photovoice material to provide an emic perspective on the dynamics of cultural landscape change, complementing and complicating the external narratives embedded in official restoration policies.

Photovoice

In this section, photovoice will be applied to analyse the transformation of the cultural landscape in Tang'an. During fieldwork, I collected over 40 photographs taken by villagers, documenting various aspects of their everyday environment. To guide the photographic process and promote thematic consistency, participants were asked to respond to three guiding questions: (1) What do you think best represents the village of Tang'an? (2) What do you think needs to be improved in the village of Tang'an? and (3) You may freely select a photograph that you feel is relevant to the theme of this study. Following collection, the photographs were reviewed, and their content was categorised in order to facilitate thematic analysis. The categorisation was based on the visual subjects and narratives presented in the photographs, rather than subjective preselection. Three major thematic categories emerged from the material. The first focuses on the agricultural landscape and farming activities, reflecting the villagers' view that agriculture remains the most fundamental and representative aspect of Tang'an's identity. Within this category, participants not only recorded images of terraced fields and agricultural labour, but also shared knowledge of traditional ecological practices, such as using the flowering of plants to guide farming activities. The second type centres on iconic buildings and community spaces, including the drum tower and other traditional buildings, which are key elements of the village's architectural heritage and social organisation. The third category encompasses aspects of daily life and village routines, capturing the rhythms of everyday experience within the broader context of landscape transformation. These thematic groupings provide the framework for the following analysis, which explores how community members perceive, interpret, and negotiate changes in their cultural environment through their visual representations.

It is important to note that the photovoice activities in Tang'an were initially conducted during the winter season, when many agricultural activities had not yet commenced. As a result, some aspects of farming life were less represented in the photographs collected

at that time. However, following the arrival of spring, several participants expressed a desire to contribute additional material, believing that new agricultural activities more fully reflected the cultural landscape they wished to document. Consequently, a number of participants voluntarily submitted new photographs taken in the spring, accompanied by further reflections shared through online communication. These supplementary contributions have been incorporated into the analysis where relevant, providing a more comprehensive representation of seasonal dynamics and community perceptions of landscape change.

Topic 1: Agricultural Landscape and Farming Activities

Figure 2-30 Tang'an terraced field
Photovoice participant T2, 2023

The photograph (Figure 2-30) shows a view of the terraced fields in Tang'an Village, taken during the late afternoon. The terraces follow the contours of the mountain slope, with layers of cultivated land extending across the hillside. Some of the fields are filled with water, reflecting the light from the setting sun, which is partially obscured by clouds above the mountains in the background. Village houses are visible on the left side of the image, positioned above the terraces. Vegetation occupies the foreground, partially

framing the view. In the distance, further terraced fields and clusters of buildings can be seen. In reflecting on the image, the photographer stated:

"I feel I must start by talking about the terraced fields in our village. I feel that the people of our village have been in this place for generations, farming here for generations and transforming this mountain. So, this is what best represents the identity of Tang'an." The photographer further explained: *"I saw that it was a rare sunny day, with the sun shining through the clouds on this high mountain, so I immediately took photos of the terraced fields." (Participant T2, 04/2023)*

Figure 2-31 Tung blossom and rice seedlings
Photovoice participant T3, 2023

The photograph (Figure 2-31) is a composite image, presenting two related scenes side by side. On the left is a close-up of blooming tung flowers[18]. The white petals, with red and yellow streaks radiating from the centre, are shown against a backdrop of green leaves. The flowers were carefully arranged by the photographer to obtain a clear view for the

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[18] The Tung flower is the blossom of the Tung oil tree, Vernicia fordii. Native to southern China, the tree is economically significant for the oil extracted from its seeds.

photograph. On the right is a bed of young rice seedlings, densely growing in a wooden frame inside a simple structure covered with translucent sheeting. The seedlings appear vigorous and bright green, indicating healthy early growth.

The photograph was taken by a villager as part of the photovoice project. In reflecting on the image, the photographer explained:

> *You see this is a flower, I see it is a clock. We use the blooming and falling of the tung blossom to determine whether it is time to plant the seedlings or transplant the rice. You see, the tung blossom is blooming now, and the rice plant has grown so tall. I have put these two photos together, because I think they should be viewed together (Participant T3, 04/2023)*

Figure 2-32 Ducks and barns
Photovoice participant T3, 2023

In this photo (Figure 2-32), a few ducks are standing in the foreground by the edge of a pond full of aquatic plants. The ducks are part of the integrated rice–duck–fish farming system practised in the village. Behind them, on a raised embankment, stands a wooden barn constructed in a traditional style. The barn is elevated and ventilated, allowing newly harvested grain to cool naturally without the need for cement structures. Surrounding the barn are other wooden buildings, with trees and hills forming the background of the image. In reflecting on the image, the photographer explained:

"This is our barn. It is built to be airy because new grain needs to release heat; there is no need for a cement house. The barn is also located outside the centre of the village, where it is cooler and more ventilated. When there is grain stored at home, you feel at ease. In the foreground are ducks, which play an important role in our rice–duck–fish farming system. Since the weather is cold now, we have not yet released the fish, so I have photographed the ducks first. The barn in the background represents the grain. Our paddy fields raise fish, the dry land grows vegetables, and behind it all are the clouds and mountains. Together with the barn, this scene represents our ideal life (Participant T3, 04/2023)."

The photographs collected in this section offer important insights into the continuity of traditional ecological knowledge and the enduring significance of agricultural landscapes in the Dong community of Tang'an. Figure 2-30, depicting the terraced fields under the late afternoon sun, captures not only a distinctive physical feature of the village but also a core element of cultural identity. The photographer's reflection that the terraced fields embody "the people of our village farming here for generations and transforming this mountain" underlines the historical layering of human-environment interaction, a central characteristic of sustainable agricultural cultural landscapes (Taylor and Lennon, 2012). Terracing, as practised in Tang'an, represents a sophisticated environmental adaptation to mountainous terrain, enabling intensive rice cultivation while preserving soil and water systems. The terraced fields are not simply economic resources but constitute a spatial archive of the Dong people's labour, social organisation, and environmental stewardship over time.

Figure 2-31 reveals the interplay between nature observation and agricultural practice. By linking the blooming of the tung flower with the timing of rice seedling transplantation, the photographer articulates a system of traditional ecological knowledge rooted in close environmental observation. The tung blossom serves as a natural calendar, synchronising human activity with broader ecological rhythms. This practice exemplifies the dynamic relationship between cultural beliefs, empirical knowledge, and sustainable farming practices, aligning with broader understandings of indigenous and minority peoples' ethnoecological systems (Berbés-Blázquez, 2012; Carroll et al., 2018).

Figure 2-32 further illustrates the embeddedness of sustainable practices within the Dong agricultural system. The barn constructed in traditional wooden style for grain storage, the ducks photographed near the pond, and the reference to the integrated rice–duck–fish farming system collectively highlight the Dong people's sophisticated environmental knowledge and resource management strategies. The location of the barn outside the village centre, for ventilation and grain preservation, reflects a detailed understanding of microclimatic conditions and post-harvest management. Meanwhile, the rice–duck–fish system represents a sustainable polyculture approach, reducing the need for chemical inputs and maintaining ecological balance in the fields. Such integrated farming practices demonstrate that traditional ecological knowledge in Tang'an continues to inform current ecosystem management practices, contributing to both food security and environmental resilience in the village context.

The skills involved in reading natural signs, managing diversified farming systems, and maintaining traditional structures are not codified in written form but are transmitted informally across generations. The interviewees said much of this knowledge was passed within families, especially from mothers and grandmothers, through daily observation, practice, and oral communication. In the participants' reflections, the presence of such knowledge is implied rather than explicitly articulated, embedded within descriptions of when to plant, how to manage water, and how to construct and use communal structures such as barns. However, the conditions for sustaining this transmission are increasingly precarious, as broader social changes such as out-migration, the prioritisation of formal schooling, and the restructuring of local economies introduce new pressures on

intergenerational continuity. The photographs thus not only document ecological practices but also indirectly reveal the dependence of local sustainability on living, familial modes of knowledge inheritance, which remain vital but increasingly fragile components of the contemporary cultural landscape.

These photographs and reflections demonstrate that for the villagers of Tang'an, the agricultural landscape is not simply an economic space, but a cultural landscape infused with memory, knowledge, and identity. Traditional agricultural practices, rooted in local environmental conditions and indigenous knowledge systems, remain vital to the villagers' sense of belonging and cultural self-definition. In the context of broader heritage transformations in Tang'an, these visual narratives offer a counterpoint to the external emphasis on architectural restoration and surface aesthetics. They reveal a living relationship between people and place, sustained through ecological knowledge, intergenerational transmission, and daily practice, that continues to anchor the Dong community's cultural landscape amidst processes of change.

Topic 2: Iconic Structures and Community Spaces

Figure 2-33 New village gate of Tang'an
Photovoice participant T1, 2022

While the agricultural landscape remains central to villagers' expressions of identity and continuity, the built environment also holds profound significance within Tang'an's cultural landscape. Participants' photographs and narratives relating to architectural structures and communal spaces reveal how material forms, such as the drum tower and residential dwellings, continue to serve as markers of collective memory, social organisation, and community life. The photograph (Figure 2-33) shows a newly built village gate at the entrance to Tang'an Village. The gate is constructed from timber and features traditional Dong architectural elements, including an elaborately layered roof with upturned eaves and decorative carvings. Two covered side structures, also made of

wood, frame the central passageway. The background reveals part of the village, with traditional wooden houses scattered across the hillside. In reflecting on the image, the photographer explained:

The old village gate was knocked down by some drunken villagers, and for seven years no one repaired it. Now that we have this new gate, I feel that people really respect Dong culture. The government paid for its construction. I had visited other Dong villages before and saw that they all had village gates, and I envied them. I used to worry about why we did not have one. After Tang'an became an ecomuseum, we could no longer simply discuss such matters at the drum tower and act on them ourselves. We had to wait for government approval to build anything large or to restore ancient structures. We were not able to repair the village gate on our own. As a result, it was only this year that the gate was finally rebuilt, and it has only been standing for about a month! (Participant T1, 11/2022)

Figure 2-34 New wind & rain bridge
Photovoice participant T4, 2022

The photograph (Figure 2-34) shows a newly built Wind and Rain bridge[19], commonly known as a "Flower Bridge," located next to paddy fields in Tang'an Village. The bridge

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[19] The wind & rain bridge, known as "风雨桥" (*fēngyǔqiáo*) in Chinese, stands as a testament to the architectural expertise of the Dong people. Distinctively, while many Wind and Rain Bridges in other regions are built over water bodies, those in Tang'an are constructed alongside terraced fields due to the village's mountainous terrain. The covered design of the bridge, which provides essential protection against the region's frequent rainfall and inclement weather, remains a constant and derives the name "Wind and Rain." The construction of these bridges employs sophisticated joinery methods, allowing the Dong craftsmen to avoid the use of nails or screws. For more details, please see: 邓玲玲.(2008).侗族村寨传统建筑风格的传承与保护. 贵州民族研究(05),77-82. doi:CNKI:SUN:GZNY.0.2008-05-017.

is constructed in the traditional Dong style, with a covered wooden walkway supported by pillars, and a roof with multiple pagoda-like towers. It serves as a place for villagers to rest, shelter from the rain, and gather socially.

The photograph shows a newly built Wind and Rain Bridge, located next to paddy fields in Tang'an Village. The bridge is constructed in the traditional Dong style, with a covered wooden walkway supported by pillars, and a roof with multiple pagoda-like towers. It serves as a place for villagers to rest, shelter from the rain, and gather socially. In the foreground, rice stalks remain in the water after harvest, while terraced hills and misty mountains form the backdrop. In reflecting on the image, the photographer explained:

> *This Wind and Rain Bridge, which we call the Flower Bridge, has finally been built. The Flower Bridge we have now was built by the government in 2001 and was recently restored. A long time ago, our ancestors had built a Flower Bridge here too, but it was later demolished. That was because some young people had died of infectious diseases, and our ancestors were afraid of angering the mountain gods. But without the bridge, something always felt missing in terms of feng shui, especially the role it plays in bringing good energy into the village. We finally rebuilt it in recent years. After all, how can a Dong village not have a Flower Bridge? Now that we have it, we can often walk in the fields, sit here and chat, and take shelter from the rain (Participant T4, 11/2022).*

Figure 2-35 The new village committee building under construction
Photovoice participant T5, 2022

The photograph (Figure 2-35) shows a new wooden building under construction in Tang'an Village, modelled on the traditional architectural style of the Dong. The three-storey structure stands beside a pond, and its reflection is clearly visible in the still water. Workers can be seen near the building, and scaffolding and construction materials are present along the pond's edge. The photographer commented:

I hope this place will become a school. It used to be an elementary school. I went to school here when I was young, but now it has been lent to the village committee. Every time I see it, I still hope our village will have its own school again. I think the village needs a place where children can receive an education, even if it is just a kindergarten. At the moment, the children from the five hamlets all go to the same

The photographs presented in this section provide significant insights into how community spaces and iconic architectural structures function as focal points within Tang'an's evolving cultural landscape. The newly constructed village gate (Figure 2-33) symbolises an important moment of recognition and cultural affirmation for villagers. The participant's narrative highlights a complex interplay between community autonomy and governmental control over heritage management. Historically, Tang'an residents maintained collective authority over communal infrastructure decisions, often discussed informally at the drum tower. However, as the village transitioned into an ecomuseum, decisions regarding substantial restorations or new constructions required governmental approval, effectively altering established local governance practices. The seven-year delay in rebuilding the gate represents a shift in decision-making structures, where local initiative has been partially replaced by formal administrative procedures. Yet, despite this change, the gate's completion represents a restoration of cultural pride, addressing longstanding concerns about Tang'an's representation among neighbouring Dong villages. In this sense, the new village gate reflects a dual narrative: cultural affirmation gained, alongside an adjustment of community initiative within a new governance framework.

Similarly, the reconstructed Wind and Rain Bridge, or Flower Bridge (Figure 2-34), embodies deeper layers of symbolic meaning related to community memory and traditional landscape management. The photographer's explanation reveals how villagers conceptualise the bridge not merely as functional infrastructure but as integral to local cosmology and feng shui, shaping village well-being and spiritual harmony (Li, X. et al., 2019). The original demolition of the ancestral Flower Bridge, due to fears of angering mountain spirits, exemplifies how past communal decision-making intertwined spiritual belief and spatial arrangement. In contrast, the recent rebuilding of the bridge, funded through government initiatives, reinstates a culturally significant structure but through a different mode of authority. Thus, while traditional forms are visually restored, the mechanisms by which these landscapes are managed have shifted, reflecting broader

transformations in how cultural landscapes are negotiated and maintained (Tian et al., 2023).

The photograph of the new wooden building under construction (Figure 2-35), envisioned by villagers as a potential school, further highlights the evolving relationship between community needs and spatial governance. The participant's aspiration to see the space restored to its former educational function underscores local concerns about demographic stability and access to essential services. The conversion of the original school into administrative offices exemplifies how heritage and infrastructure management increasingly prioritises institutional needs, sometimes at the expense of community-defined objectives (Qian, 2014; Xu, X., 2020). Villagers' reflections suggest a broader awareness that spatial transformations are not neutral, but embedded within shifting governance priorities that shape the everyday realities of village life.

Through these examples, a pattern emerges in which traditional spaces and structures are simultaneously preserved, reinterpreted, and reorganised under the influence of external heritage frameworks. The community's relationship to its cultural landscape has been reshaped, not only through material interventions but also through changes in authority and agency. Experiences of relative empowerment deprivation are evident in how villagers recall former patterns of self-managed spatial decisions compared to the present requirement for external approvals and funding (Sun, X. et al., 2013). Similarly, references to former conditions, where decisions about the bridge, gate, or school could be made locally, indicate an implicit comparison between past and present governance dynamics (Tian et al., 2023). However, these shifts do not constitute simple narratives of loss; rather, they reveal the complex adjustments communities make in negotiating cultural continuity within new administrative and institutional conditions.

Topic 3: Everyday Life and Village Routines

Beyond agricultural landscapes and iconic structures, villagers also recorded aspects of everyday life. The following section explores how daily activities and ordinary spaces are represented and how they contribute to the understanding of Tang'an's cultural landscape.

Figure 2-36 Two ancient trees by roadside
Photovoice participant T4, 2022

The photograph (Figure 2-36) shows two old trees standing beside a stone-paved road in Tang'an Village. Their tall trunks and spreading branches form a natural canopy, with village houses and terraced fields visible in the background. The path curves gently between the trees and the surrounding buildings, showing how the trees remain close to the everyday life of the village. The photographer recalled:

These are two old trees, right by the road, and we walk past them every day. In the past, the elders always said that old trees must never be cut down. But over the years, many were removed during road construction, and only these two were left, just

because they happened to be around the corner. We Dong people say, "老人护家，老树护寨" (lǎorénhùjiā lǎoshùhùzhài, the old people protect the family and the old trees protect the village). A village needs old trees. Only when there are old trees can the village's good fortune be kept from slipping away. These two trees are still seen as belonging to everyone. We are not allowed to say they are being cut down, and it is understood that even broken branches cannot be taken home for private use. They must be brought to the fire pit in the drum tower, to be used by everyone to keep warm. That way, the trees continue to give back to the whole village (Participant T4, 12/2022).

Figure 2-37 Interior of the drum tower
Photovoice participant T2, 2022

The photograph (Figure 2-37) shows the interior of the drum tower in Tang'an Village. The structure is built from large cedar pillars that support the heavy wooden roof. Sunlight filters in from the open sides, softly illuminating the wooden beams and the smooth floor.

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A child is seen standing by one of the pillars, while an adult sits nearby, working with a piece of timber. In the background, more villagers move about, and outside the drum tower, parts of the village are visible. The photographer explained:

The interior of this drum tower is made of cedar. I once counted the tree rings of the trees used to build it, and they were at least thirty years old. I think you have often looked at the drum tower from the outside, but maybe you have not been inside for a long time. I want to say that inside the drum tower, it is a cycle of generations. Someone also does woodworking here. The cedar tree used is right next to this pillar. When a Dong person dies, their body is placed inside the drum tower for the funeral rites. Children can also play inside the drum tower. It is a symbol of the life cycle of the cedar tree. (Participant T2, 12/2022)

Figure 2-38 Large stone in the field
Photovoice participant T1, 2022

The photograph shows a large weathered stone situated on a grassy slope in Tang'an Village, surrounded by terraced fields and scattered vegetation. The stone rests on several smaller rocks and appears well-worn, suggesting a long history of exposure to the elements. Its surface is marked with natural cracks and patches of lichen. The photographer explained:

The stone in the photo is one that the villagers pass by almost every day when they go to work in the terraced fields, but I do not think you have ever noticed it. In the

Dong language, we call this stone the "big white stone." This stone is one we worship on the eighth and fourteenth days of the first month of the lunar year. Almost every household in the village worships this stone, praying that their children can grow up healthy. When I was a child, I had an ear infection, and after I went to worship, I recovered. I still go to worship every year. Even now, when I see this stone, I feel a sense of reverence. I want to say that even though it may not seem able to heal me in today's society, I still feel it is my support. I will still take my son to worship it, even though he is healthy. Every day, some villagers let their children eat and play near it. It is like an old man in our village. Some villagers do not worship this stone because the feng shui master has calculated which household should worship which stone, and everyone has a designated stone. But this one is the most famous. (Participant T1, 12/2022)

The photographs collected under the theme of everyday life and village routines reveal dimensions of Tang'an's cultural landscape that would not necessarily emerge through conventional observation. Participants' images and reflections draw attention to material and symbolic features that, while appearing ordinary, are embedded within the collective memory, social order, and cultural practices of the community.

The photograph of the two old trees beside the village path (Figure 2-36) exemplifies the integration of natural elements within vernacular systems of belief and governance. The trees, described as communal guardians, illustrate how environmental features are positioned as active participants in maintaining social cohesion and spatial protection. Their survival, largely the result of incidental circumstances rather than systematic preservation, highlights the fragility of traditional ecological knowledge within changing land management regimes. The fact that only these two trees remain, whilst others were removed during infrastructure development, reflects the extent to which contemporary landscape planning has disregarded customary principles such as the Dong understanding that "ancient trees cannot be cut down." This loss signifies not only physical transformation but also a weakening of culturally embedded territorial ethics that once governed village-environment relations. Nevertheless, the villagers' continued practices, including the communal usage of fallen branches and the cultural taboo against

unauthorised cutting, demonstrate the persistence of local governance structures rooted in shared spatial understandings.

The interior view of the drum tower (Figure 2-37) not only shows the craftsmanship of the building, but also the cosmic and material views embedded in the structure. The participants' reflections established a direct connection between the life cycle of the cedar tree and the life cycle of humans in the village. The tree once lived in the surrounding landscape and is now transformed into the pillars of the drum tower, but continues to exist symbolically in the built environment. The reference to the tree rings, which represent the age and experiences of the tree, and the children playing next to the pillar that would later become the place for funeral rituals, position the drum tower as a material embodiment of intergenerational continuity. The drum tower is therefore not just a public building, but a spatialised expression of circular existence, where life, death and renewal are intertwined in both material and ritual terms. The continuity between natural materials and social function reflected in the drum tower points to a broader principle behind the Tang'an cultural landscape: the belief that natural elements are not passively utilised, but rather incorporated into community life through a cycle of care, transformation and reverence. This provides a model of how material culture and ecological awareness mutually constitute one another in traditional Dong society.

The photograph of the "big white stone" (Figure 2-38) further reveals the deep integration of belief and daily life within Tang'an's cultural landscape. Although the stone appears unremarkable to the casual observer, the participant's reflection makes clear that it occupies a central role within the village's collective spiritual practice. As a site for annual worship, particularly concerned with the health and well-being of children, the stone embodies the continuation of vernacular belief systems that link human life to natural forms through ritual action (Boissevain, 1996). The persistence of worship practices associated with the stone demonstrates how cultural meanings are inscribed into everyday spaces, not as abstract symbols but as practical, lived relationships. The fact that the stone is part of daily pathways, encountered regularly by villagers as they move through the terraced landscape, ensures that spiritual practice is interwoven with routine life rather than being confined to designated religious sites. This continuity between

movement, visibility, and ritual underscores the principle that spiritual meaning is not separated from ordinary environments but embedded within them.

Discussion

The transformation of Tang'an's cultural landscape must be understood within the broader tensions characterising contemporary ecomuseum practices. As de Varine (2006, p.227) emphasises, the ecomuseum model is premised on interaction, knowledge exchange, and the collective construction of cultural understanding between community members. However, the case of Tang'an reveals how the operationalisation of the ecomuseum concept under state-led heritage frameworks has altered the foundational balance between community agency and external intervention.

Tang'an's physical landscape has undergone significant material change through government-led traditional village restoration projects, largely focused on visual harmonisation, infrastructure upgrades, and the creation of a coherent, marketable image of Dong ethnic heritage. These interventions, while restoring certain architectural forms and improving surface aesthetics, have often overlooked the everyday landscapes that villagers perceive as central to their identity and way of life. As Ingold (1993) argues, rural landscapes are not merely backdrops to human activity but dwelling places, continually shaped by lived practices. Yet the renovation process in Tang'an has prioritised iconic visual markers and standardised architectural elements, leading to a landscape that, although visually unified, risks becoming estranged from the daily experiences and cultural practices of its residents.

The tensions between official priorities and community values are evident in the responses of Tang'an villagers. Whereas official projects have concentrated on restoring prominent structures, constructing tourist-friendly spaces, and enhancing the visibility of "authentic" Dong culture, residents consistently foregrounded elements of the landscape that are integrated into daily life: terraced fields, ancient trees, sacred stones, communal gathering spaces, and agricultural rituals. These elements, often deemed insignificant in

expert-led heritage assessments, are deeply intertwined with local memory, environmental knowledge, and social organisation. The disjuncture between what is restored and what is valued reflects a deeper epistemological gap between state-driven heritage frameworks and vernacular understandings of landscape.

Allowing participants to document and express their experiences through photovoice revealed deep connections to place and heritage that might otherwise remain undocumented. Photovoice enabled villagers to express the values and meanings they attached to spaces often overlooked in official narratives, such as everyday farming practices, intangible knowledge, and spiritual relationships with landscape elements. This participatory approach fosters a sense of cultural agency, even in a context where top-down governance structures dominate heritage interventions.

However, the photovoice material also reveals subtle fractures. For instance, the delayed reconstruction of the village gate and Flower Bridge was interpreted as a symbol of relative disempowerment. In the past, the Dong villagers could independently organise repairs through community consensus at the drum tower. Now, all actions require external approval, which participants perceive as a curtailment of their former autonomy. This disjunction between past self-organisation and current dependency on governmental processes reveals how heritage practices have shifted agency away from the community towards administrative structures (Sun, X. et al., 2013; Tian et al., 2023).

Moreover, the different levels of investment and visibility in various parts of the village have intensified spatial inequalities. The areas close to the drum tower and village council have been extensively renovated, while more marginal zones have received little attention. This spatial differentiation not only reflects unequal access to resources but has also reshaped intra-community dynamics, as proximity to 'heritage core zones' increasingly correlates with social standing, economic opportunities, and decision-making power (Wu, B. et al., 2002; Feng et al., 2020). The transformation of the cultural landscape, thus, has been accompanied by subtle processes of social re-stratification.

In this context, the symbolic significance of the drum tower has become even more vital. It stands not merely as a material relic of Dong identity but as a heterotopic space (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1986; Boedeltje, 2012), embodying memories of ancestral self-governance and collective negotiation. Yet its position is now juxtaposed with the newly constructed village council, a material manifestation of state-administered authority. Together, these structures encapsulate the contradictions and negotiations at the heart of Tang'an's evolving landscape: between collective memory and bureaucratic rationality, between lived experience and curated heritage, between internal belonging and external representation.

2.4 Comparative Discussion of Physical and Cultural Landscapes in Two Villages

This chapter comparatively examines the transformations in physical and cultural landscapes at Tang'an Dong ecomuseum and Zhenshan Buyi ecomuseum in Guizhou Province, China. Building upon the earlier case studies, the discussion identifies broader patterns regarding how ethnic minority communities participate in, respond to, and negotiate processes of landscape transformation and heritage representation.

The methodological approach distinguishes between general ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, informal discussions, and semi-structured interviews, and the specific insights offered by the participatory visual method, photovoice. By integrating these ethnographic and participatory visual data, this chapter analyses the public representations and private practices that shape the cultural landscape of each village. Through the comparative examination of Tang'an's more subtle negotiation of heritage narratives, oriented largely towards tourism development, and Zhenshan's explicit ideological interventions through political slogans and state-driven heritage management, this chapter highlights the contested nature of cultural landscapes. It further explores how communities navigate questions of identity, authenticity, and representation within these complex contexts. Consequently, the findings not only deepen scholarly understanding of landscape transformations in ethnic minority settings but also inform broader considerations for community participation and governance within ecomuseum practices and heritage management policies.

2.4.1 Comparative Analysis of Physical Landscapes

The comparative analysis reveals distinct differences in the physical landscapes shaped by tourism development and state intervention in Tang'an and Zhenshan villages. In Zhenshan, significant government-driven transformations have introduced modern infrastructure, prominently featuring decorative sculptures, political slogans, and installations promoting ethnic unity, governance, and legal awareness. These interventions visibly alter the village's traditional spatial organisation and aesthetic coherence, creating an explicit ideological landscape that contrasts sharply with local architectural traditions. Villagers frequently express ambivalence towards these modifications, particularly the modern concrete buildings adorned with artificial stone patterns intended to mimic heritage aesthetics, which are often viewed as disconnected from traditional Buyi identity. In contrast, Tang'an village displays more restrained physical modifications, primarily emphasising the careful restoration of existing wooden structures consistent with traditional Dong architectural methods. Notably, Tang'an's public spaces largely lack the political slogans and explicit ideological interventions seen in Zhenshan. When asked about the absence of political propaganda slogans in Tang'an, a village leader involved in negotiating local government projects explained:

> *'We have considered this issue. Since the majority of the people in the village are now middle-aged and elderly, and they are unable to read or write Chinese characters, even if we put up a lot of slogans, they may not be able to read and understand them'. (Interviewee T5, 12/2022)*

This statement underscores the pragmatic considerations guiding Tang'an's less intrusive approach, highlighting how differing demographic factors and community consultations directly influence the degree of government-led visual and ideological transformations in village landscapes . Such differences illustrate how varying intensities and methods of state intervention and local responses produce distinct physical landscapes, shaping residents' everyday experiences and perceptions of cultural heritage and authenticity in both villages (Zhang, Y. et al., 2019).

2.4.2 Comparative Analysis of Cultural Landscapes

The transformation of cultural landscapes in Tang'an and Zhenshan reflects not only different external pressures but also internal differences rooted in the ways ideology and government control are exercised within the ecomuseum framework. landscapes in China are actively produced as ideological devices, embodying the state's shifting goals from revolutionary struggle to stabilising and disciplining society through controlled urban environments(Oakes, 2019). Although both villages are officially designated as ecomuseums, the processes through which their landscapes have been shaped diverge significantly, suggesting that the ecomuseum concept has been subjected to varying degrees of ideological reinterpretation and political utilisation.

In Zhenshan, the cultural landscape has been heavily reconfigured to serve broader political objectives beyond heritage preservation. The introduction of political propaganda sculptures, slogans advocating legal reform, and installations promoting ethnic unity has fundamentally altered the symbolic structure of public space. These ideological markers are not peripheral but are positioned at strategic points where villagers and tourists must pass, such as the village entrance, communal corridors, and central squares. As Oakes (2019, p.401) observes, built environments and landscapes are often strategically reconfigured by the state to promote official histories, creating what he terms "state-induced amnesia". In Zhenshan, such reconfigurations seek to overwrite local memory with state narratives, subordinating the original community-driven ethos of the ecomuseum to the imperatives of governance and national unity. However, despite these interventions, the material traces of past lives and memories often resist complete erasure, rendering landscapes "messy ideological devices" where different histories and meanings coexist (Oakes, 2019). The residents' reluctance to engage with these public installations, as observed through photovoice material, further illustrates this complexity. While villagers maintain traditional practices such as ancestor worship and domestic rituals in private spaces, these dimensions of culture are systematically excluded from the public, curated image of the village, creating a fractured cultural landscape.

Tang'an's cultural landscape, although also shaped by external pressures, presents a somewhat different configuration. Public spaces are primarily occupied by traditional

Dong architectural forms and cultural markers associated with tourism, with overt political symbolism being far less visible. Rather than serving predominantly as an ideological showcase, Tang'an's cultural spaces suggest a greater emphasis on preserving cultural distinctiveness in ways that resonate with both community memory and tourist expectations. This aligns with the argument that remembering history is no longer the exclusive domain of the state, and that culture today is increasingly constituted by "unofficial memories" produced within society itself (Wu, S., 2011). Although tourism development introduces its own forms of commodification and standardisation, the public landscape in Tang'an appears to maintain a closer connection to the village's historical and social fabric compared to the more heavily politicised landscape of Zhenshan.

The internal difference between the two cases lies in the intensity and purpose of governmental engagement. In Zhenshan, the ecomuseum model has been appropriated as a vehicle for demonstrating successful governance and ideological conformity, with heritage spaces repurposed for political messaging. In Tang'an, while government influence is present, it has been moderated by local strategies aimed at preserving cultural distinctiveness and ensuring the village's cultural presentation remains more closely aligned with everyday practices. This reflects a broader point made by Rose-Redwood (2006), who argues that governance agendas are never fully comprehensive but are inherently contradictory, contested, and continually reshaped by the actions of subjects responding to government initiatives in diverse ways. In both villages, but particularly in Tang'an, villagers' strategic negotiations reveal the fractures and negotiations embedded within the governance of heritage landscapes. As Madsen (2014) similarly observes, the Chinese state frequently seeks to justify its rule by claiming to support a form of cultural heritage said to be rooted in everyday life and transmitted through centuries of tradition, even as ordinary people continue to construct their own versions of heritage that ignore, evade, or sometimes directly contradict state initiatives. This tension is particularly evident in Zhenshan, where private cultural practices endure beneath a public veneer of ideological conformity, whereas in Tang'an, the everyday reproduction of culture remains more visibly connected to the lived environment.

Thus, the experiences of Tang'an and Zhenshan reveal that the ecomuseum, intended as a model of community participation and self-representation, remains highly vulnerable to political instrumentalisation. Where ideological control is intense, as in Zhenshan, heritage becomes an instrument of state messaging, leading to a fractured cultural landscape in which public space and private practice diverge. Where negotiation remains possible, as in Tang'an, the community retains greater influence over how heritage is defined, displayed, and transmitted. These findings suggest that the viability of ecomuseum initiatives as genuinely community-centred models depends crucially on the political environments in which they are situated, and on the ability of local actors to sustain autonomy over the meanings embedded within their landscapes.

2.4.3 Comparative Insights through Photovoice

Photovoice provides additional perspective for comparing cultural landscapes in Tang'an and Zhenshan, offering insight into how villagers perceive and experience transformations that official narratives and external interventions seek to shape. In Zhenshan, photovoice participants directed their attention toward domestic and familial spaces. Their photographs captured ancestral altars, household artefacts, and intimate home-based practices, while images of public political sculptures and slogans were conspicuously absent. This visual pattern reflects a displacement of cultural significance from the public sphere, heavily reconfigured by state intervention, into private, less regulated spaces. In accompanying interviews, villagers often spoke of family histories, religious traditions, and the importance of kinship, but seldom referred to land, agriculture, or farming activities. The absence of references to agricultural practices is telling, reflecting the broader loss of cultivated land that accompanied tourism-driven spatial reorganisation. Deprived of their farming fields, Zhenshan villagers experienced a disruption of the material foundations of traditional life, leading to a cultural landscape where memory is increasingly framed within the domestic sphere rather than through active engagement with the environment.

In Tang'an, photovoice materials and interviews reveal a continuing and direct relationship with the agricultural landscape. Many participants chose to photograph paddy fields, plants growing at different times of the year, and the visual changes in the

fields that marked the farming seasons. Interviews further elaborated on the rhythms of planting and harvesting, highlighting an ongoing attachment to traditional agricultural cycles. These references to farming activities were not presented merely as economic practices but were deeply embedded in cultural life, structuring the village's social organisation, community festivals, and collective memory. In Tang'an, the paddy fields and their seasonal transformations remain central to the experience and meaning of the landscape, illustrating a form of ecological continuity that has withstood the pressures of tourism development. This divergence between the two villages highlights deeper structural differences in how landscapes are experienced and understood. In Tang'an, the persistence of farming activities sustains a living connection between cultural practices and the land, reinforcing cultural resilience through embodied, seasonal engagements with the environment. Villagers' perceptions of landscape are shaped by ongoing practices that integrate livelihood, social relations, and cultural identity (Zhang, Y. et al., 2019). In Zhenshan, the severance from agricultural life has contributed to a fragmentation of the cultural landscape, where collective memory and cultural reproduction are confined largely to private, household-based domains. Without the anchoring of land-based activities, the experience of landscape becomes more symbolic, disconnected from the rhythms of cultivation and ecological interaction.

Yet despite these differences, photovoice also reveals an important commonality between Tang'an and Zhenshan. In both villages, there is a marked indifference towards the new initiatives and projects introduced by external authorities. Villagers consistently prioritised the documentation of traditional practices, familiar landscapes, and elements of daily life, while rarely choosing to represent newly constructed public installations, tourist facilities, or government-promoted symbols. Whether through images of ancestral spaces in Zhenshan or paddy fields and agricultural cycles in Tang'an, villagers' visual narratives demonstrate that what is officially emphasised often holds limited resonance within their lived experiences. The cultural landscapes as perceived by the communities remain anchored in enduring traditions, rather than in the emerging structures and narratives projected from outside. This selective focus suggests a quiet but persistent assertion of local values and memory against the backdrop of ongoing transformation (Back, 2015; Lee, C.-H., 2020). Photovoice therefore offers insight into villagers' perceptions and suggests how material changes in the environment may be reshaping

cultural memory and local agency (Liu, Y., 2021). In Tang'an, the continuity of agricultural practice provides a framework for negotiating cultural change while maintaining a sense of authenticity rooted in the land. In Zhenshan, the erosion of agricultural foundations makes cultural continuity more precarious, relying instead on fragmented and privatised forms of remembrance. These findings illustrate that the processes of landscape transformation are neither uniform nor purely imposed from above; they are actively inhabited, contested, and reshaped by communities in ways that reflect their shifting material realities and historical experiences.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the transformations of physical and cultural landscapes in Zhenshan Buyi Village and Tang'an Dong Village, drawing on participatory observation, interviews, and photovoice materials. The findings reveal how external interventions, community practices, and historical experiences have shaped distinct trajectories of landscape change under the framework of the ecomuseum initiative (Corsane, 2006).

In Zhenshan, state-led interventions have fundamentally reshaped the physical environment through ideological installations and infrastructural developments. However, these external impositions have failed to resonate deeply with villagers' lived experiences. Photovoice material and interviews reveal that cultural expressions have retreated into private, domestic spaces, sustained through family traditions and everyday life rather than through engagement with new public symbols. The loss of cultivated land has further fragmented the cultural landscape, severing the material basis for agricultural and ecological continuity (Carroll et al., 2018). Tang'an, while also subject to tourism-driven development, has preserved a stronger connection between everyday life and the agricultural environment. Villagers continue to engage with paddy fields, farming cycles, and seasonal rhythms, maintaining a living landscape closely tied to traditional practices. Public spaces largely reflect Dong cultural forms rather than ideological propaganda, and villagers demonstrate agency in negotiating the terms of heritage representation. Nevertheless, even in Tang'an, the process remains shaped by external tourism markets and selective adaptation.

Across both villages, a critical tension is evident between the official objectives of the ecomuseum initiative and the villagers' responses to government-driven changes. Although the ecomuseum concept emphasises community participation, collective memory, and the integration of living cultural landscapes, the actual practices observed reveal a significant gap. Villagers showed limited enthusiasm or engagement with official changes to the landscape, focusing instead on sustaining their own traditions and everyday routines. Newly introduced government projects, ideological symbols, and tourism constructions rarely appeared in villagers' photographs or narratives. This selective attention indicates that many official interventions failed to meaningfully integrate into the cultural frameworks of the communities themselves. External interventions often run parallel to or against the cultural practices of the village, rather than creating a landscape of complete mutual participation and collaboration. The villagers' relative indifference to these changes highlights the difficulty of aligning state planning with community-based heritage principles (Li, J. et al., 2020). The cases of Tang'an and Zhenshan illustrate that landscape transformation under the ecomuseum framework remains a negotiated and often incomplete process, shaped by material conditions, historical experiences, and the strategic choices of local communities.

Chapter 3 The Impact of Being an Ecomuseum on the Cultural Heritage of the Local Communities

Zhenshan and Tang'an are both government-established heritage institutions within the framework of authorised heritage discourse. The earlier chapter focuses on landscape change within the framework of ecomuseums. Focusing on how the ecomuseums become involved in heritage tourism, and on the discourses of heritage in each village, this chapter reveals the unequal power dynamics and shows how ecomuseum practices interact with minority groups to create new connections.

3.1 The influence of being an ecomuseum on (heritage) tourism

Within the framework of the ecomuseum, and the responses from interviewees landscape and heritage are difficult to clearly strip away for separate analyses. As local people begin to recognise the value of their cultural and environmental resources and interpret them, ecomuseums encouraged people to value the significance of ordinary things (Borrelli, N and Davis, 2012). Heritage conservation should view objects as dynamic process embedded in social practices, rather than static physical materials associated with conservation (Quang, 2022). People give meaning to these places through their practices and customs, and any form of heritage conservation should always be linked to the participation of 'living' communities (Chirikure and Pwiti, 2008; Katapidi, 2021). This is also reflected in Li, J. et al. (2020), although community participation is generally limited, sites still closely linked with everyday human activity, such as working agricultural landscapes or inhabited ancient villages, often achieve relatively strong involvement, even in decision-making processes.

The new museology was adapted from community museology in non-English-speaking countries (e.g., South and Central America) and evolved from the shortcomings of the original museology (Wang, Yahao, 2022). It initially placed museums under critical enquiry and raised considerable concerns about the development of disadvantaged communities. In response to criticisms of its problematic relationship with communities, some scholars believe that incorporating the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage into museum studies requires the implementation of museum practices within a participatory framework (Kreps, 2008; Witcomb, 2015; Alivizatou, 2021). In addition, museums can promote greater inclusion by designing activities or programmes in partnership with individuals and communities engaged in living traditions. The concept

of ecomuseums is seen as an effective framework for the safeguarding of ICH (Stefano, 2021).

Additionally, ecomuseums in China are a development strategy adopted by the government to alleviate poverty and promote tourism. When considering the use of the ecomuseum approach, it is important to redefine the nature of cultural tourism - it is not about high culture, but about material culture and intangible heritage, which symbolise the specificity of places and are cultural touchstones defined and chosen by local people (Davis, P., 2007). Ecomuseums in China have been included in the government's work from the beginning. Therefore, in the role of ecomuseums in heritage tourism and are determined by the government's strategy. When tourism policies change, the status of ecomuseums inevitably changes.

3.1.1 Zhenshan Case

The transformation of Zhenshan into an ecomuseum has significantly influenced its tourism development, integrating heritage preservation with economic growth. This designation has elevated Zhenshan as a key site for heritage tourism, promoting local cultural heritage while stimulating regional economic activity. Reflecting broader trends in China's museum sector, the growth of heritage tourism is driven by post-1990s reforms that fostered a new middle class and heightened interest in pre-communist cultural history. The Huaxi District, where Zhenshan Village is located, is now implementing a policy of 'Whole Region Tourism' in terms of tourism. This refers to the development of the natural and cultural heritage of the entire district into several tourist destinations with different features. However, this development also raises the issues of impacts on rural landscapes and traditional practices. Zhenshan's ecomuseum emphasises community participation and dynamic heritage management, but challenges such as social stratification and debates over cultural authenticity remain. These dynamics of Zhenshan as the only first-generation ecomuseum on the urban fringe highlight the complex interaction between heritage conservation, tourism development and community engagement in China's growing peripheral urban areas.

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The urban periphery in China is an unstable and dynamic boundary between the city and the rural hinterland, rather than a line that coincides with formal administrative boundary. And the most drastic urban transformations take place in the urban peripheries of China (Fan, P. et al., 2017). Since the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the deterioration of agriculture has required many rural communities to explore alternative methods of industrial transformation to strengthen economic development (Byrd et al., 2009). Tourism has become a leading mode of industrial transformation, which leads to the rapid development of rural tourism and recreation in China's urban-rural areas. 84% of rural tourism sites are concentrated within 100km of cities, and the further the distance from the city, the fewer rural tourism sites are distributed (Wu, B. et al., 2004, p.762). It also raises concerns about the impact of such tourism developments on village landscapes. The heritage value of rural landscapes is increasingly being recognised and heritage tourism is being used as a critical strategy for rural economic development. Heritage tourism activities include cultural tours, participation in festivals and other cultural events, visits to ancient monuments and archaeological sites, viewing folk performances, crafts demonstrations, and other traditional arts; and experiencing the traditions of the destination community and their expressions of life (Yang, L. and Wall, 2022). The main landscape and heritage types in China's urban periphery are dominated by farmland and ancient villages with unique natural or cultural characteristics. While heritage-led tourism seems to be a new trend, it is difficult to see an appreciation of the heritage value of agricultural landscapes in China. After the Chinese government recognised the urgent need to extend the legal protection of cultural heritage to the rural hinterland, "historic villages" became a new heritage category in the national heritage legislation from 2003 (Wang, Yiwen, 2016). Short trips around the city have been growing in popularity due to the travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years. Ancient villages located in the periphery of cities become destinations for heritage tourism for city residents. Unlike archaeological or architectural relics, these villages constitute living heritage, settlements that are still inhabited, actively used, and continually evolving. In this process, traditional villages located on the periphery of urban areas are under threat of being "urbanised" (Tao and Wang, 2014).

Historical evolution of Zhenshan as an ecomuseum

Zhenshan Village, with its long history and well-protected cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, was approved as an "Ethnic Culture Protection Village" in 1993 and was authorised as an ecomuseum of the Buyi Ethnic Group in 2000 in collaboration with the Chinese and Norwegian governments. In China, ethnic minority heritage preservation and tourism development are closely related. Ecomuseums are also given the responsibility to serve the two major tasks of minority heritage preservation and tourism development as a new model (Li, Ying, 2015). Unlike other ethnic minority villages in Guizhou located in mountainous areas that serve as ecomuseums, Zhenshan Village, as a heritage site around the city, is more evidently affected by heritage tourism.

Ecomuseums are proposed to engage local communities in museums and to adopt territories that are not necessarily defined by traditional boundaries. The ecomuseum is a dynamic concept (Donnellan, 2023) in terms of the heritage that requires focusing on tangible and intangible heritage and collective memory into the context of the local community (Corsane et al., 2008; Li, Ying, 2015). In the Chinese political context and within the framework of the ecomuseum, the definition of heritage in this research is guided by the idea that "heritage should be regarded as a 'verb'", which means that heritage should be regarded as a process that is constantly being constructed according to conditions, places, and times (Crooke, Elizabeth, 2016, p.423). Under this definition this study addresses the local political context in heritage tourism and the influence of local participants in the heritage industry. This is a recurring theme in heritage tourism. Since China is a united multi-ethnic country (Fraser, R., 2022), heritage plays a fundamental role in balancing unity and diversity in the context of minority and majority (Boniface and Fowler, 2002).

Contributions of "New Residents" and Community Integration

Due to the convenient transportation, strategic location near the city, and its reputation as an ecomuseum, the area attracts many designers and artists. The magnificent natural environment and well-preserved traditional buildings further enhance its appeal. Consequently, these artists frequently rent abandoned traditional structures from local

inhabitants at a low cost to renovate them into studios. This attracted a lot of entrepreneurs from the city to invest massively in the hospitality sector in Zhenshan.

There are no hotels in Zhenshan, and all the commercial venues that offer accommodation are positioned as B&Bs at various price points. The residents have limited funds to invest so the B&Bs open only in the summer at a more affordable price and have no reception capacity in the winter. Unlike the local operators, the lodges in Zhenshan Village that can receive tourists all year round are owned by outside Han Chinese investors. The owner of the most prestigious B&B in Zhenshan (the largest investor in the village, interviewee Z7) told me:

> *"I chose to invest here because it's next to the reservoir and the scenery is great. People from the city would want to come here for a short holiday, and I found that the hardware facilities of the accommodations run by locals are too basic, so I invested in an upscale accommodation. My guests are basically regular customers from Guiyang. Because Zhenshan Village is very small, tourists who only come to see the ecomuseum rarely overnight in the village." (Interviewee Z7, 02/2023)*

This commercial venue has a modernised interior with an original Buyi stone building exterior that blends harmoniously with the cultural landscape of the area. Although the operator's reasons for choosing Zhenshan did not include any reference to culture or cultural heritage, his renovation and use of traditional buildings is recognised by government officials and local residents. The official recommendation and description of this B&B can be seen on the bulletin board at the entrance of the village. Another widely recognised commercial example of the implementation of this traditional building renovation standard is the studio run by a designer (Interviewee Z8). She rented some of the oldest traditional buildings in the village including an old pigsty. The motivation of the designer is to sell her traditional clothes based on the culture of the local ethnic minorities, as she described:

> *"I am a fashion designer who uses the traditional crafts of ethnic minorities as my making method. Zhenshan is an ethnic minority village close to the city with well-preserved traditional architecture. The heritage resources here give me a lot of inspiration for my creations. I even could not dismantle the pigsty; I just cleaned and remodelled it. I also developed two guest rooms in my studio for my*

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guests, hoping that they could experience the unique cultural heritage of Zhenshan." (Interviewee Z8, 02/2023)

Another artist (Interviewee Z9) expressed the same motivation:

"My motivation for moving here is not to earn money, it's to find a place to create art. The house was completely abandoned when I came here because the original owner said he was moving out because he didn't have enough money to carry out repairs to traditional homes and the government wouldn't allow it to be demolished. I thought it would be a waste to leave the house vacant, so I rented it as my studio. I use the local cultural heritage as my inspiration to create new works that I hope will become a new cultural feature of this village in the future." (Interviewee Z9, 02/2023)

Overall, these business practitioners possessed a positive view of tourism. They also expressed the support for certain preservation of local cultural heritage and traditional cultural elements or preserved them in their own way. The operators of some commercial establishments are recognised by local villagers and the government. From the perspective of the government, heritage management involves a collaborative effort between the village council and the town government to implement and enforce policies set forth by the municipality. Government staff have also expressed their support for tourism and for villagers to find a niche for themselves in this industry.

The Zhenshan Buyi ecomuseum is managed by the village council and the town government, which is responsible for implementing the policies issued by the municipality. The town government cooperates with the village council in enforcing the regulations on cultural heritage and tourism in accordance with the policies and requirements of the municipal government. The township officials who managed and were interviewed are relatively young and highly educated (with postgraduate degrees). One interviewee (Interviewee Z10) revealed:

"I think the aspect of economic development in Zhenshan village, especially the income of the villagers, is no longer a significant challenge. Although the villagers have lost their arable land, the developer of the scenic spot that occupies

the arable land pays compensation to the villagers every year, which is a fixed income, and most of the villagers are also very satisfied with such an arrangement. Huaxi District is developing a " whole region tourism", which means that the whole district dominates in the tourism industry, so we also encourage residents to find/create jobs that suit them in this process." (Interviewee Z10, 02/2023)

Challenges in Balancing Tourism, Heritage Conservation, and Community Dynamics

The effective management and collaboration between the village council and the town government have facilitated Zhenshan's economic development and integration of tourism, linking heritage conservation with modernity. Tourism seems to be a bridge between heritage and modernity (Maxwell, 2012, p.154). The completion of the Huaxi Reservoir in the 1960s submerged some of the arable land on both sides of the Huaxi River causing a change in the livelihoods and landscape of the Zhenshan Village. In the 1990s, Zhenshan started to be developed for tourism, from an open-air museum organised by the villagers voluntarily to the Buyi ecomuseum established by the government. The implementation of the 'whole region tourism' in Huaxi District in 2016 has transformed Zhenshan and the surrounding area into a destination for different types of tourism. In the process, the government funded the construction of various modern infrastructures to meet the needs of tourists The modernisation of the village has been also enhanced. The reputation of Zhenshan as a heritage site in the urban periphery brought tourism to the village, which attracted practitioners in tourism industry and creative industry from the city to settle in the village, becoming "new residents" and gaining a voice equal to the local people in the development of the community and the preservation of the heritage. Tourism is an agent of change, with different stakeholders bringing different, and in many cases, opposing values and having different authority on future decisions.

The first to be discussed is the interaction among heritage preservation, tourism, and modernity in the framework of the ecomuseum. The locals have realised that the unique stone architecture, the ancient temples, the ethnic culture of the Buyi people, and the convenient location all contain a huge potential for tourism. And they found their positions in heritage tourism, which is gradually developing in a fixed pattern. As a result, almost all respondents were supportive of the development of tourism. The villagers

regard the ecomuseum as a powerful tool to help them pursue tourism. But in recent years, due to the prevalence of peri-urban tourism, people have come to Zhenshan for food and relaxation rather than to "visit the museum" and experience the Buyi culture. Therefore, the villagers chose to practise their Mandarin and use the proceeds to refurbish their houses or to build a new house in the lower hamlet to make it more attractive to tourists. Due to the government's strict alteration and maintenance requirements for traditional buildings in the village, they had to keep some of the original features. Consequently, Zhenshan presents a hybrid modernity. Tourism not only implies economic benefits but also involves the development of infrastructure in the village. With the improvement of the infrastructure, Zhenshan village residents also think that the difference between their lives and those of urban residents is diminishing.

In addition to the advantages, heritage tourism also brings changes and distortions to the traditional culture. Firstly, according to villagers' evaluations, the reworking of folklore activities in the context of tourism constitutes the most visible form of change. In the past, the folk activities related to the festivals in Zhenshan were a collaboration between several villages in the area. However, this was integrated into the tourism campaign as a distinctive ethnic festival event and was developed into a tourism product specifically of Zhenshan and the local Buyi population. Traditions were recreated and the theatricality of the performances was enhanced to meet the interests of tourists. Secondly, the artists and investors in Zhenshan who have been recognised by the government and the villagers as "new residents", demonstrate their affinity for heritage by renovating and refurbishing the old Buyi stone houses that are abandoned by the villagers. In terms of the interaction between the new residents and the local heritage, government officials consider that the cultural products they recreate based on the local heritage are indicative of Zhenshan. For example, there is a designer in the village who makes custom clothing. She transforms the clothing and crafts of Buyi embroidery and other ethnic minority groups' techniques into clothes that she sells in the village, and has turned these clothes into a cultural brand for Zhenshan. Villagers felt that their creations provided more "elegance" and fulfilled the expectations of tourists.

When heritage is reimagined as a way to gain profit, it threatens to be distorted into an artificial history (Urry, 1992). The residents of the community have passively accepted the intervention of modernity, actively embraced the development of tourism and its impact on their lives but passively maintained their traditions. In China, heritage tourism is dominated by economic consumption and profit, favoured by the more powerful in a hierarchical social and political environment (Ababneh, 2015). The commercial operators or "new residents" in the village have the right to decide what to display and what to develop if they meet the government's basic requirements for the ecomuseum and heritage conservation. Their interpretation of local culture is also based on the desires of tourists and their own cultural background, which to some extent undermines the authenticity of cultural heritage. For example, one artist who moved to the village specialises in root carving, using thick tree roots to create various exquisite sculptures. He suggested to some village committee staff that his works be displayed as part of Zhenshan Village's cultural heritage. The village committee did not reject his suggestion and said it was a feasible proposal.

This cannot be seen as an outright negative manifestation if the definition of heritage and the perceptions of people in the community are reconsidered. Heritage is a dynamic, rather than a fixed, cultural process, changing with the environment and being reinvented to suit better the needs of the new circumstance (Smith, L., 2006; Crooke, Elizabeth, 2016). As from the ethnic minority villages in the urban periphery, the residents of the local community understand or appreciate these changes. They believe that these newcomers to the community represent the tastes of the city dwellers and that the local culture is taken into consideration in the recreation of these heritages, which both represent the cultural heritage of Zhenshan and make it more palatable to tourists. Villagers can rent their old stone houses to those outsiders who can afford to make alterations that meet the government's requirements and use the payment to build a modern and comfortable home. This has also provided some alleviation for the villagers in the conflict between the government's strict policy of protecting cultural heritage based on the principles of the ecomuseum and the desire for a more comfortable and modern life.

The chairman of the village council in Zhenshan told me that almost all the people in his village support the development of tourism, since they believe it means more improvement in their lives. In this case, they can not only show tourists the locality of their community, but also integrate into the urban life of Guiyang after earning enough money and achieve the transformation for themselves from 'hosts' to 'tourists', an identity that they are prouder of, by travelling around. If local ethnic minorities want to engage in heritage tourism development, it's essential to understand how they can align with the principles of the ecomuseum. Next, I will explore and analyse the potential issues coming from the dialogue between the local participation and government authority in the context of heritage conservation.

3.1.2 Tang'an Case

The eighth day of the first month of the lunar calendar （*zhēngyuè chūbā*, 正月初八） is the busiest and liveliest day of the year in Tang'an and is known as the "踩歌堂" (cǎi gē táng). The leader of the village council said, 'Although [nearby village] Zhaoxing has many festivals, this is the only one that we really celebrate with the whole village. ' This festival is one that all my interviewees in Tang'an insisted that I attend and record. This is also the most optimal time when outsiders can experience the most famous cultural heritage of Tang'an, the grand song of Dong. This is because Tang'an does not have a fixed time to perform Dong songs for tourists. Cai ge tang is a commemorative festival. It is a way for the Dong people to pay tribute to the ancient heroine Sasui (see Section 2.3) with folk songs and dances. Before the ceremony begins, firecrackers are set off and animals are slaughtered in preparation for the evening feast. All the men, women and children of the village, dressed in full costume and led by the village's highly respected elders, enter the aforementioned "Sa tan" to pay homage according to strict rituals. After the prayer the young people would go to the drum tower to hold hands, form a circle around the bonfire, sing and dance. On the theatre stage opposite the drum tower there would be two leaders, each leading the men and women of the village in a duet of songs. Unlike the worship of Sasui, this singing and dancing process villagers would enthusiastically invite visitors to join in. On this day I could not only see the villagers of Tang'an praying to the traditional Dong deities but also see them venerating and worshipping the whole land and even all the elements of the village. Figure 3-1 presents how people wearing traditional clothes gathered in the drum tower to celebrate the festival.

Figure 3-1 Cai ge tang
Photographed by the author, 2023

Figure 3-2 Yellow paper on the rock in Tang'an
Photographed by the author, 2023

Yellow paper and cooked meat and glutinous rice placed on top of the yellow paper can be seen everywhere in Tang'an (see Figure 3-2). This is because villagers choose an object in the village to worship in their daily life, some families choose natural features such as trees or stones, while others choose old buildings such as stone bridges that have been in

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place for a long time. The yellow paper and food are the villagers' way of appreciating these elements. The villager (Interviewee T6) who invited me to join in the singing said

> *'This is the biggest festival in Tang'an and you can learn about all aspects of Dong culture. And we organise this festival ourselves, it's not the government making us perform for tourists.' (Interviewee T6, 02/2023)*

Before the villagers told me about it, I had never seen any information about the dates and customs of Cai ge tang either in the information centre or the local tour company. Other than its vibrant cultural festivals such as 'Cai ge tang', Tang'an's heritage management and community engagement are deeply influenced by its integration into tourism development, reflecting both opportunities and challenges within the ecomuseum framework.

The Tourism Development in Tang'an

In China, minority heritage preservation has been closely related to the development of tourism. Ecomuseums have also become a new model to serve minority heritage preservation and tourism development (Li, Ying, 2015, p.157). Therefore, the management of Tang'an is also based on the approach of focusing on the ethnic cultural heritage for the purpose of tourism. In an interview with the old village leader, it emerged that Tang'an has experienced the management of two different tourism companies. The first is a Hong Kong based company, this company focuses on the ecomuseum identity and the benefits that can be derived from the unique local culture. Therefore, the company regularly organised embroidery workshops and grand song rehearsals for the villagers. During this period, villagers are highly motivated to participate in the governance of the community and to learn about the ecomuseum.

The village leader told me that people in the village thought that this company from Hong Kong had managed in a very positive way. The girls in the village were organised by the company to study embroidery and make embroidery crafts. This HK company sold the embroidery they made and set them embroidery tasks every month. In this case these girls both improved their embroidery skills and earned money at the same time. However, after a competitive bidding process, Tang'an has been transferred to a Guiyang-based tourism company for management. The company's management strategy is to treat Tang'an as a static heritage site, with many security guards stationed at the village gates. The previous programmes of Dong embroidery and Dong songs were cancelled entirely. Due to strong opposition from the villagers, the Guiyang-based tourism company was driven out of Tang'an by the collective opinion of the villagers. In recent years, it has been the government that has taken the lead in tourism and heritage management in the village.

Figure 3-3 A Dong woman is making Dong cloth
Photographed by the author, 2022

As a Dong village, handicrafts have a long history in Dong culture, especially textile crafts such as embroidery, batik and weaving. Women repeatedly soak, steam and pat the cloth with a dyeing solution mixed with indigo, white wine, cowhide juice and egg white to give the Dong cloth a metallic sheen (Figure 3-3). The dyed cloth is made into traditional clothing or sold to tourists. In Tang'an, middle-aged women or elderly people wear traditional costumes everyday, and young people only wear them during festivals. However, traditional handicrafts in Tang'an are not recognised as Intangible Cultural

Heritage by the government and therefore Tang'an is not promoted as a speciality in terms of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The villagers also make Dong cloth or embroidery for their everyday use, and only a very small part of them is sold to 'culture enthusiasts' who come to research Dong culture or to tourists. That is why there is only one handicraft shop in Tang'an. This shop not only sells Dong handicrafts but also includes many Miao batiks or costumes.

Interactions Between Heritage Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage

All of the first-generation ecomuseum projects in the Chinese Norwegian partnership have a building called the Documents and Information Centre (*zīliào xìnxīzhōxīn*, 资料信息中心). The four ecomuseums of the first generation represent one ethnic minority each (Su, D., 2008). Therefore, the Information Centre is a demonstration and overview of the traditional culture and life of the local ethnic group. The information centre is an ideal place for outsiders to get a quick glance at the cultural heritage and daily life of the local minorities. The information centre in Tang'an is fully integrated into the local traditional houses of the Ganlan style in terms of appearance and is in a small, quiet courtyard. This small courtyard is hidden by many tall cedar trees, and I found it after asking three villagers for directions. This may reflect the ingenuity of the design and planning that accompanied the establishment of the ecomuseum. When I asked villagers where the information centre was located, they referred to it as "that museum". The most common description given by local villagers was:

> *'It was a museum built for us by foreigners and the government, and some scholars came to study it, but it's basically not used anymore. ' (Interviewee T4, 11/2022)*

When I entered the information centre, I could see a lot of bamboo tubes hanging from the eaves, which made a chiming sound when the wind blew over them. Next to these bamboo tubes that make pleasant sounds is a small library. But it is clear to see that this library has been abandoned. Villagers living near the information centre said:

> *'A few years after the information centre was built, some scholars built a village library project here and brought a lot of books to encourage our local children to*

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come and read more, but then there was no one to maintain it and it fell into disuse.' (Interviewee T5, 11/2022)

"No maintenance" can be found in all aspects of the information centre. At the corner of the stairs is a large electronic display with a screen that has been switched off, and there are only four or five panels on the wall to briefly introduce the Dong culture and traditional handicrafts. In the only remaining panels, the cultural heritage of Tang'an was once officially categorised, and traditional agricultural tools and musical instruments were once collected and organised, but they have all been lost. It is not feasible for outsiders to try to understand the Dong culture represented by Tang'an through the materials of the information centre.

The information centre does not have an accurate classification and description of the cultural heritage in Tang'an. There are some signboards on the wall which only give a general description of the Dong culture and the daily life of the people of Tang'an. The most famous intangible cultural heritage of Tang'an is the previously mentioned the Grand Songs. However, Tang'an has not organised any daily performances of the Grand Songs for tourists. Only when the villagers collectively agree on a time (which is not announced to the outside of the village) or on a day such as the eighth day of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar, a performance of The Grand Song would be held at the opera stage in the centre of the village. In terms of music, the Dong Lusheng is a Dong musical instrument and a national intangible cultural heritage. The villagers also informed me that the village sometimes plays Lusheng and makes new Lusheng every year. However, there is no scheduled time for the playing of the Lusheng in Tang'an, and since my field period was during Covid-19, I did not see any performances or making process of the Lusheng in Tang'an.

Impact of External Stakeholders on Cultural Representation

The previously mentioned tourism companies have made commercial market-oriented construction and management of the cultural heritage of Tang'an. A venue called the "百鸟巢" (*bǎiniǎocháo,* hundred birds' nest), which features a performance of the grand songs, was built in Tang'an by the tourism company of Guiyang. According to the introduction of this place, it is an extension of the ecomuseum. This is a transformed

Dong courtyard hidden in traditional dwellings. In the introduction, you can see that this venue has been given many functions, including a display area for the ancient living objects of the Dong people, an area for Dong folk culture and art performances, a dining area for long-table banquets (*chángzhuōyàn*, 长桌宴), and an area for experiencing the cultural life of the Dong people. There is a sign on the wall showing the different folk performances scheduled at the different times of the day. But I found the place completely deserted and forgotten. This compound has been used by the villagers to raise chickens and dry clothes. Many would even park their tricycles (*sānlúnchē*, 三轮车)[20] in it. When I asked villagers why they had not gone there to see the show, they said that it was designed for tourists, whereas local people usually watched the show in the drum tower next to the opera stage. But this is the government's face project. As tourists do not come, this place is completely abandoned now. The villagers said that no one would come to Tang'an specifically to experience the cultural heritage, as Zhaoxing already offered a very comprehensive experience in this aspect. Tang'an is generally regarded as an "appendage" of Zhaoxing (Figure 3-4). It is often referred to by tourists as a museum on the hill next to Zhaoxing.

Figure 3-4 Zhaoxing Dong Village
Photographed by the author, 2022

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[20] San lun che refers to the adult-sized pedal- or motor-powered tricycles widely used in rural China for moving people, produce, and building materials.

At the heritage preservation aspect, it is also obvious that Zhaoxing has more capital investment and stricter renovation standards than Tang'an. In Zhaoxing, there are no concrete houses, but standardised traditional Dong houses. There are also more cultural heritage activities. The streets are lined with old people selling their exquisite Dong embroidery and many workshops of different scales to experience the intangible cultural heritage of the Dong people. Although an important function of the ecomuseum is economic development, the advantages of Tangan's cultural heritage in terms of tourism are limited.

In the traditional village restoration programme, the government has also made attempts to promote traditional handicrafts in Tang'an. Firstly, a new house called Batik Centre was built in the village, but it has never been opened, and the development of this building can be followed continuously. Secondly, two rooms in the new village council were used as a place for villagers to learn embroidery and batik. However, no villagers used them, and villagers borrowed these rooms to hold banquets for weddings and funerals.

The completion of the Tang'an ecouseum has also attracted a lot of attention from home and abroad. An elderly villager (Interviewee T7) said:

> 'In the years when the ecomuseum was just built, we had a lot of cultural exchange programmes with Norway, they used to make a lot of short films in our place, and many singers from our village were invited to perform Dong songs in Europe. ' (Interviewee T7, 11/2022)

However, after this, the ecomuseum did not significantly contribute to the expansion of the local cultural industry. Its establishment has made the management of the cultural heritage of the local community and the development of tourism more complex and unpredictable. Before the ecomuseum was built, tourism in Tang'an was boosted by the fame of Zhaoxing. Zhaoxing has been regarded as the centre of Dong folklore and culture since the turn of the century and is the largest Dong community in China. In terms of cultural heritage, Zhaoxing has the most obvious advantages. Zhaoxing has five drum towers, which is also listed in the Guinness Book of World Records and is known as the

"Township of Drum Towers Culture and Art". When visitors enter the village through Zhaoxing's main gate, local people play the lusheng to greet them. As a UNESCO-recognised intangible cultural heritage, the Grand Song of Dong has also been fully utilised by Zhaoxing's tourism companies with the encouragement of the government. The Grand Song performances are frequently arranged in Zhaoxing, and a detailed programme would be available for tourists' reference during festivals.

In the centre of Zhaoxing is a large museum called "Dong Culture Exhibition Centre". In this cultural centre there is a well curated and systematic exhibition around the life of the Dong people. This exhibition not only includes Zhaoxing, but also details the Dong villages around Zhaoxing, including Tang'an. The staff (Interviewee T8) of this exhibition told me:

> *'The information centre at Tang'an is now under renovation and I don't know when it will be fixed, so all the exhibits have been transferred to us.' (Interviewee T8, 11/2022)*

In this exhibition I witnessed the process and history of how Tang'an became an ecomuseum, as well as a delicate wooden model of the Tang'an Drum Tower and a description of it, all of which could not be explored and comprehended in Tang'an. One of my interviewees is the owner of a handicraft shop in Tang'an (Interviewee T2, also participated in photovoice). She is one of the few female university students in Tang'an, and she studied intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. She told me:

> *'Handicrafts and traditional crafts in Tang'an are something few tourists would be interested in. Because Zhaoxing has more government-certified intangible cultural heritage workshops tourists have been offered a more complete and considerate experience of Dong culture. I basically don't run the shop now, my mother does. I'm going to look for another job.' (Interviewee T2, 11/2022)*

In the local government's approach and projects to develop tourism, Tang'an as an ecomuseum has not turned into a prominent cultural brand or a popular heritage tourism destination. Tang'an is now known to outsiders as one of the "Eight Villages of

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Zhaoxing[21]" scenic areas newly developed by the government. In the promotion of this hiking trail, the local government and tourism companies use the terraced rice fields of Tang'an and the neighbouring villages as a gimmick. Tang'an, as an " ecomuseum ", is a relatively important stop on the trail.

Current Issues

In recent years, after the government took over the management and development of Tang'an completely, the status of Tang'an in heritage tourism has tended to become more of an adjunct to Zhaoxing, and even the exhibits in the information centre have been used as an extension of Zhaoxing's Dong cultural centre. As I mentioned earlier the village representative of Tang'an (Interviewee T1, also participated in photovoice) who went on a cultural exchange to Norway she still lives in the village. The "local ecomuseum expert" said that

> *'Now that tourism and folklore activities are organised by the government and tourism companies, we no longer need to deliberately put on any performances for tourists. We now only perform for ourselves, because it is not a performance but part of our lives.' (Interviewee T1, 11/2022)*

In relation to the management and development of traditional villages in China, Gao and Wu (2017) point out that national and local authorities usually intervene and take over development rights, designating villages as tourist attractions and charging admission fees. This is also evident in Tang'an. As Zhaoxing has been planned as a scenic spot by the government therefore visitors to Tang'an are buying Zhaoxing scenery tickets. A ticket is valid for three days. Villagers in Tang'an need to prove to the security guards at the entrance that they are residents in order to return to their homes without purchasing a ticket if they are returning home from the outside. The ticket income belongs to the town government and does not get shared with the local villagers. This results in the marginalisation of local villagers regarding benefit distribution and decision-making authority, creating a potential for conflict in future developments.

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[21] Zhaoxing Dong Village Cluster is a cluster of Dong villages within Zhaoxing. In recent years, Zhaoxing Town has linked Zhaoxing Dong Village and other villages within the town, such as Tang'an, Xiage Shangzhai, Xiage Xiazhai, Jitang, Shangdiping, Dengjiang, and Jilun, to create a scenic spot called "Zhaoxing Eight Villages". After arriving at Zhaoxing, tourists can reach the surrounding villages by hiking.

The residents of Tang'an believe that in terms of heritage tourism, Zhaoxing has largely met the needs of tourists when they want to experience the culture of ethnic minorities. Buses run between Zhaoxing and Tang'an every hour. The bus driver (Interviewee T9) said:

> *'Tourists who do not stay in Tang'an usually stay in Tang'an for only one hour, so the hourly arrangement is very sensible.' (Interviewee T9, 12/2022)*

When I asked the villagers what cultural heritage was, community members would say they needed to think about it. Most people, after a pause and reflection, would mention the Drum Tower, and "that museum (information centre) organised by foreign experts" and suggest that I visit the terraced rice fields. The above quotes from the interviews suggest that the influence of the ecomuseum as a heritage institution on heritage tourism and the transmission of Dong culture has been diminishing under the government's tourism plans in recent years. This has also led to villagers not being motivated to combine ethnic culture with tourism for economic benefits. From the heritage tourism plan provided by the local government, the whole plan is purely about tourism. All the trails are designed for tourism. This is paradoxical for Tang'an as a village that develops and manages within the framework of an ecomuseum.

In the last five years, the attraction of Tang'an as a tourist destination has gradually shifted to hiking and terraced rice fields to view the sunrise. Awakening tourists' appreciation for the terraced rice fields of Tang'an began when the government planned the entire town of Zhaoxing as a scenic spot. The Tang'an ecomuseum and the Tang'an Terraces were rigidly separated as two attractions in the scenic area. Surrounding the terraces are stone walkways and fences invested by the government. The terraced rice fields of Tang'an, a quintessential feature of the local landscape, serve as the physical foundation for the rice-duck-fish agricultural system, a practice deeply embedded within the traditional folk life of the Dong community. Recognised as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, this system exemplifies a sophisticated integration of ecological processes and human ingenuity (FAO, 2011). GIAHS are described as "exceptional land use systems and landscapes, characterized by globally significant biodiversity, which have developed

through the co-adaptation of communities to their environment, meeting their needs and aspirations for sustainable development" (Koohafkan and Cruz, 2011). The terraces, meticulously constructed to follow the natural contours of the mountainous terrain, optimise water distribution while creating a habitat ideally suited for the simultaneous cultivation of rice, fish, and ducks. This interdependent system transcends agricultural efficiency, embodying a way of life intimately attuned to the rhythms of the natural world.

The rice-duck-fish system is interwoven with the seasonal cycles of traditional farming, shaping the temporal structure of communal life. During planting and harvesting seasons, the terraced fields become sites of collective labour, fostering social cohesion through shared responsibilities. Ducks are released into the paddies to manage pests, while fish inhabit the same waters, enriching the soil with nutrients. While GIAHS recognition has brought international attention to Tang'an's rice-duck-fish system, local implementation has struggled to translate this recognition into tangible benefits for the community. The integration of this agricultural heritage into the Tang'an ecomuseum framework has been insufficient. The 'scenic area development' approach employed in Tang'an has prioritised the visual commodification of the terraces over their functional and cultural significance. This model, which emphasises tourism revenue, often excludes local farmers from decision-making processes, relegating them to passive participants in heritage management (Sun, Y. et al., 2019).

In the process of scenic planning, the government only optimised the terraces in terms of infrastructure and did not introduce any specific policies that would affect the residents' engagement in agricultural production or encourage the villagers to join the heritage tourism projects related to the terraces. The villagers said, "*Everything about the terraces depends on farmers like us, the government is not concerned at all*." A key aspect of heritage management is the use of heritage as a resource for achieving political and economic objectives. Although the terraced rice fields of Tang'an have gained some international renown, they are also outside the scope of AHD in the contemporary framework of heritage management. Terraced fields have continuity in time and space, connecting people and places, and are built by villagers in close interaction with their daily lives. Under the current community development policy, terraces are not included

as a heritage type in the heritage management framework of the ecomuseum, but are instead spun off as a new attraction.

It is common to neglect the importance of the farming communities that form the heritage landscape. The tourism development of the Hani Terraces in Yunnan Province is a typical example that has been discussed many times (Qu et al., 2023; Su, M.M. et al., 2023). Heritage reflects values that often go beyond simple commercial viability and marketability. The commodification of heritage often meets with resistance as it conflicts with perceptions of the sanctity of heritage and the market value of some heritage is often limited due to the lack of compelling narratives. There is other potential, longer-term forms of functioning of local and regional history, heritage practices and life values that are important for the promotion of democracy, diversity and social well-being. These longer-term forms are difficult to represent or visualise, as they exist mainly in the more intangible aspects of everyday life (Aronsson, 2005; Svensson, E. et al., 2018). Although the Tang'an terraces gradually begin to overtake the reputation of an ecomuseum to play an increasingly important role in heritage tourism, the concept of this heritage type and community orientated tourism and the relation to ecomuseums is not fully understood by regulators and policy makers and community residents of agricultural heritage.

The heritage management framework of the ecomuseum is characterised as an ideal container for the effective management of a wide range of heritage types, but it is noticeable in Tang'an that only tangible cultural heritage is the focus of management at this stage. Intangible cultural heritage and agricultural heritage are not taken into conservation and sustainable development of heritage tourism. This demonstrates not only that heritage categorisation is a flexible category, tied to changing political and economic circumstances, but also that multiple stakeholders are involved in deciding which practices become heritage and how they are exhibited (Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018, p.21).

3.2 The influence of cultural and heritage discourses on ethnic minority heritage

In the framework of Foucault's heterotopian theory, Pagani points out that the efforts of ethnic museums to compile extensive collections of minoritized communities can be compared to "predatory activities" (Pagani, 2017). The deliberate to compile and troll representations of ethnic communitie is evident in ethnic museums' endeavours to safeguard the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. Ethnic museums and ethnocultural theme parks are platforms for showcasing the cultures of ethnic minorities in distant regions. These venues emphasise the exotic and authentic portrayal of minority communities through the "abuse" of heritage (Fiskesjö, 2015). The acquisition of minority artefacts by minority museums is not entirely rooted in unequal colonial power dynamics. Minority communities have the autonomy to decide whether and what objects to sell or donate to these museums. This process highlights the active participation and agency of minority groups in contributing to the formation of museum collections, underscoring their significant role in shaping the representation of their cultures within these institutions (Pagani, 2017). Heritage and exhibition practices play a pivotal role in defining and representing ethnic minority cultures, serving as key elements in how these cultures are understood and portrayed (Wang, Yahao, 2021).

In China, the process of heritage creation involves a variety of participants and interested parties, such as academics, museum curators, government officials, and NGOs. This also includes networks of heritage conveyors like artisans and religious leaders, as well as local communities (Silverman and Blumenfield, 2013; Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018). In contemporary World Heritage site conservation and management practices, there is an increasing focus on assessing the extent to which local communities based within or adjacent to these sites are engaged as active participants and benefit from site designation (Dragouni and Fouseki, 2018). Ultimately, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dictates China's heritage, grounding it primarily in the nation's political strategy rather than solely in the acknowledgment of ethnic diversity. Although China has embraced numerous norms and values from international heritage conventions, it is evident that a unique form of "heritage with Chinese characteristics" is also developing. As Harrell (2011) points out, heritage is always produced by a combination of global and local forces.

3.2.1 Zhenshan Case

There is a great deal of diversity in the social and spatial dynamics of peri-urban areas. The Huaxi district's "Whole Region Tourism" policy means that the entire Huaxi District must be planned as a tourist destination with different functions. In this process, many of the new attractions and commercial lands being developed have taken over the farmland of the Zhenshan villagers. Consequently, the villagers have completely abandoned their agricultural livelihoods. Apart from residents who go out to work, those who stay in the village can only work in tourism-related jobs. Zhenshan Village, as a historical ethnic minority village, is constantly under the scrutiny of the government's heritage management policy.

The transformation of Zhenshan Village into an official heritage site occurred through several key milestones. In 1993, the Bureau of Culture of Guizhou Province and the Huaxi District Culture and Broadcasting Bureau initiated research and allocated funds for preserving Zhenshan's ethnic cultural heritage. In 1994, the villagers established an open-air folklore museum, which was later certified by the government. By 1995, Zhenshan was recognised as a provincial heritage preservation unit, with Norwegian experts involved in discussions for ecomuseum development. In 1998, the village was officially included in the Guizhou ecomuseum project as part of Sino-Norwegian cultural cooperation. In 2012, Zhenshan was designated a "Chinese Traditional Village" through collaboration between the Bureau of Culture of Guizhou Province and experts. Finally, in 2017, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission recognised Zhenshan as an "Ethnic Minority Characteristic Village," completing its formal recognition as a heritage site.

This gradual process also reveals how frequently the Zhenshan village has been honoured with various official heritage site designations. Although the whole village is recognised by the official heritage discourse, only the traditional stone buildings and roads of the upper hamlet and the ancient temples are strictly governed by the heritage policy. In spite of the many official titles given to Zhenshan, the village council leader said that '*Zhenshan still follows the heritage management policy of the ecomuseum. And this is one of the reasons why the Information Centre has been invested in and renovated.*' This observation reveals a central tension in Zhenshan: official heritage labels shape

investment priorities, yet their actual impact depends on how village authorities interpret and implement them in day-to-day governance

Governance and the Role of Local Leaders

In November 2022 upon arrival, I was greeted by Director Ban who is the leader of the village council of Zhenshan, a Buyi person. This was because he was a friend of my interviewees in Tang'an, and they travelled together to Norway for a study of the ecomuseum concept. He was told by my Tang'an interviewee that I was here to do research related to the ecomuseum, therefore he offered help and drove me directly to the information centre at the entrance of the village. In 1999, under the auspices of the ecomuseum project, the Norwegian and Chinese governments jointly funded a 3-million-yuan (approximately £215,000 in 1999) project to establish the 'information centre' of the ecomuseum in Zhenshan. The Information Centre is a brand new two-storey house modelled on an ancient building and had just completed a refurbishment and exhibition rearrangement a month before. Director Ban stated

"Everyone in this village thinks I know the most about ecomuseums so I set up all the exhibits in this information centre."

Figure 3-5 The entrance of information centre in Zhenshan
Photographed by the author, 2022

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At the entrance of the Information Centre (Figure 3-5) is a detailed introduction to the concept of ecomuseums and how Zhenshan became an ecomuseum. The 'Liuzhi Principles' are detailed on the display boards. After walking past a few display walls that told of Buyi knowledge, I found the exhibition room meticulously organised, with the material arranged in a logical sequence that made the content easy to follow and understand. Buyi clothes and traditional crafts as well as musical instruments were placed in glass cases on the walls, illuminated by bright spotlights (Figure 3-6 and Figure 3-7).

Figure 3-6 Buyi spinning wheel and musical instrument
Photographed by the author, 2022

Figure 3-7 Buyi clothes and musical instruments
Photographed by the author, 2022

The walls facing them were filled with photographs of traditional Buyi festivals and customs. Next to the photographs is a large oil painting depicting how the Han generals of the Ming Dynasty entered this minority village. When Director Ban saw me taking photos of the Information Centre, he enthusiastically told me that the information centre had been made into an AR version and took out his phone to show me. Although on the surface this appears to be a state-led initiative, with the local government earmarking funds for the upkeep of the ecomuseum, in reality the planning, design and presentation of the information centre was led by local Buyi village cadres. When the government decided to re-plan the renovation of the information centre, the Director Ban was asked to prepare a detailed proposal in terms of the renovation approach and the exhibition planning.

Because of Zhenshan's location on the urban periphery, the ecomuseum's management is officially under the direciton of Guiyang City, and the town government and village council work together to implement the policy. Director Ban is not only given independence in the design of the information centre, but he is also regarded as an expert by the government and local villagers on how to realise the concept of the ecomuseum. This is because he went to Norway to study as a member of a grassroots village committee, and his mother was a member of the ethnic minority cadre in the Zhenshan village. They are highly respected in this community. He is free to decide on the cultural content of the information centre and which elements represent the Buyi community in Zhenshan. In recent years, as artists and designers have moved to Zhenshan many have consulted with director Ban when they were renovating traditional houses and before they started their business. As Director Ban explains,

> *"These newcomers to the village ask me if this is against the guidelines of the ecomuseum and if it is destroying the traditional architecture."*

Director Ban is proficient in the use of terms such as cultural heritage and ecomuseum. He told me that many visitors from outside said that they came to Zhenshan to see the museum and then only the information centre, which was wrong at the conceptual level. This gave more authority to determine heritage narratives and strengthened their position in the politics of local representation. For Director Ban, the ecomuseum is an important

principle in the relationship between heritage tourism and heritage conservation. The role of the ecomuseum is to present the culture of the Buyi people and to improve Zhenshan's participation in heritage tourism.

The planning of the Open-Air Folk Museum and the ecomuseum almost coincided in 1999, but they advocated different concepts. The 'Open Air Folk Museum' emphasised more economic development and planned to turn Zhenshan village into a theme park. The concept of the ecomuseum emphasised more on the preservation of the cultural heritage and the ecological environment. As the ecomuseum is an international project, it enjoys a higher status in terms of both concept and status. The development of the Open-Air Folk Museum was suspended. During this time, the ancient temples of Zhenshan were considered as important cultural heritage and were thus invested in reconstruction. About 10 metres into the village from the village gate, an old temple sits at the fork in the road. This temple, known locally as the "martial temple" (see Secion 2.2), was originally called the Zhenshan Temple and was built in 1635. Although in official discourse Martial Temple is given a prominent place, for local villagers, martial temple is a place where Han Chinese tourists and entrepreneurs from the city would go to worship. Before Zhenshan was developed for tourism and the government invested in it, it had been deserted or given other functions such as a primary school. It has always been seen as a business opportunity for heritage tourism by foreign businessmen and official institutions.

Tensions Between Heritage Narratives and Local Practices

Figure 3-8 Shrines in villagers' homes in information centre photographs.
Photographed by the author, 2022

Ancestor worship is the main religious belief of the Buyi in Zhenshan village. Interviewee Z1 emphasised:

> *'The Buyi people do not enter the temple, and this temple is visited by the Han Chinese residents of the surrounding villages.' (Interviewee Z1, 02/2023)*

When Director Ban was showing me the traditional dwellings and buildings in the village, he also told me about the history of the temple just standing at the entrance. Interviewee Z1 has said '

> *When this temple was under the sole management of a tourism company, we would not even consider it as part of our village, only as a separate and distinct attraction.' (Interviewee Z1, 02/2023)*

While villagers do not visit the temple, every house has a shrine with couplets on it. On the top of the couplets are the names of the gods that each family believes in and pictures of their ancestors, and the shrine is worshipped during festivals, weddings, and funerals. The government and the local community have completely opposite attitudes towards the temple as a heritage site. The Guiyang Municipal Government attempted to mitigate the conflict. When the Information Centre was built, the government asked the experts to build a shrine in the style of a villager's home in the lobby of the information centre. This shrine was only used as a place of display and did not serve the purpose of actual ancestor worship. But when the information centre lost its popularity among the local villagers and was managed inadequately by the tourism company the shrine was withdrawn from display. During my field period the shrines were only shown in photographs (Figure 3.8). After the first attempt failed, the government made a second attempt. The second movement of the shrine was the placing of the shrine in the martial temple during the Ancestor Festival, the result of the combination of ritual space and tourism.

The government created a 'Festival of Ancestors' on 9 September of lunar calendar and created a set of rituals for the festival. The village committee placed ancestral tablets in the martial temple to honour the 'ancestors of the Ban Li clan'. Villagers queued up to

pay homage at a specific time at the martial temple. However, some old people and experts related to the ancestor worship ceremony in the village believe that placing the ancestral shrine in the temple is very inappropriate, because on the one hand, the Buyi people have never worshipped their ancestors in temples, and on the other hand, there is no such ceremony in which the whole village lines up at the same place to worship their ancestors. Because of the villagers' opposition, the Ancestral Festival has not been held since 2009. During my fieldwork I saw that many entrepreneurs from outside the village would come to pay their respects at the martial temple, which now tends to function as a separate attraction in an ecomuseum.

The government's efforts to integrate local traditions into the use of temples, for example through the establishment of the 'Ancestor Festival', are another indication of a top-down approach to heritage management. These initiatives seek to integrate the functions of the temple with the cultural practices of the Buyi in order to accommodate the tourism framework. Despite these efforts, there has been resistance from the Buyi community, which considers these practices inauthentic and inappropriate. This resistance highlights the limitations of state-led heritage policies in adequately capturing and respecting local cultural differences. Global heritage organisations tend to define authenticity based on supposedly objective criteria and evidence, with minimal public participation and little reference to the emotional involvement of local people in heritage objects (Cohen, E. and Cohen, 2012). The process relies on the authority's credibility while overlooking the interaction of local people with the heritage. Authorities and heritage experts frequently disregard the emotional factors significant to cultural practitioners or residents, and certification often neglects local acknowledgment of cultural values. Zhu (2015) defines this oversight as 'emotional banishment'. In addition, the government's emphasis on the heritage value of the martial temples in the Buyi community reflects the nation's broader economic strategy of integrating ethnic minority areas into the national heritage discourse. This often comes at the expense of the specificity and authenticity of the local Buyi traditional culture, resulting in heritage landscapes that are contentious.

Respondents working in the official sector believed that tourism development in Zhenshan was already mature with a certain pattern. The status of Zhenshan as an ecomuseum was not emphasised as a focus for community development. Some of the

contradictions between heritage and tourism development were thus avoided and they applauded the participation of "new villagers", such as designers and artists, and the recreation of Buyi culture. However, the general lack of comprehension of the concept of ecomuseums and the loss of traditional handicrafts (such as some embroidery and farm tool making techniques) as intangible cultural heritage in the villages constituted a concern for the officials. Another interviewee from the government made some comments about the new investors and practitioners in the village and heritage (Interviewee Z11):

> *"There are not many villagers who insist on doing traditional handicrafts or intangible cultural heritage in our village now, but these newcomers cherish our heritage and would make new cultural products using our village's heritage. For example, the pigsties in the old houses in our village that were despised were converted into tea rooms, and old timber that was dumped was made into sculptures." (Interviewee Z11, 02/2023)*

Director Ban also expressed his concerns:

> *"Zhenshan is very small compared to other newly developed tourist attractions in Huaxi heritage resources are not very large scale. New investors or artists to the village do not quite understand what an ecomuseum is. Traditional architecture is our speciality, but there is no government-recognised intangible cultural heritage in our village, which would be our shortcoming as an ecomuseum."*

All villagers interviewed have family members or relatives involved in tourism or tourism-related businesses. All interviewed residents expressed support for tourism development and agreed that tourism is an important form of livelihood if they remain in the village to live. Respondents claimed that the advent of tourism improved the standard of living and that some people have built larger modern concrete houses in recent years. They also noted improvements in village infrastructure, such as the road construction, tap water supply and the erection of streetlights. Some complained that they had limited authority to maintain their homes and must comply with government-mandated maintenance protocols:

> *"Our houses are protected by government regulations, and the criteria for renovation as cultural heritage are so strict that we don't have that much money*

for renovation. We all built new houses in the lower hamlet." (Interviewee Z2, 02/2023)

As a heritage site in the urban periphery, the urbanisation process notably led to the economic development of Zhenshan. After the basic livelihoods were satisfied, the residents of Zhenshan Village began to realise the importance of heritage conservation. Local villagers are proud of Zhenshan Village as an ecomuseum. One respondent said:

"Before the government set up this village as an ecomuseum we spontaneously organised our village into an open-air museum. We preserved and repaired old buildings and organised folklore activities. Then the government and Norwegian experts chose Zhenshan as an ecomuseum because it is well preserved." (Interviewee Z2, 02/2023)

Villagers expressed concerns about the potential harm of tourism to their heritage but also said that their participation was limited:

"In the past, we had various folklore activities, but now we rarely organise them. The only purpose to show them to tourists is to satisfy tourists' enthusiasm for the local culture. We find such intangible traditions are fading, like those unrestored ancient stone temples and buildings. But we can only do things according to the government's requirements." (Interviewee Z3, 02/2023)

Many contradictory elements can be seen in the residents' words. Some traces of bottom-up development are visible in the tourism development and heritage conservation in Zhenshan. For example, after livelihoods were not a significant problem, they voluntarily considered heritage conservation and had some knowledge and ideas about the types and management of heritage. They are very much in favour of the introduction and development of tourism, even though they feel that their heritage can potentially be undermined. The villagers hoped that the government would respect and protect the authenticity and integrity of the heritage while promoting tourism, rather than just focusing on the buildings. They felt that they had no control over the development of their community or were given only limited ways to participate.

In terms of the distribution of management authority, the principle of ecomuseums indicates local community participation and management as an effective way for local communities to preserve their cultural heritage and landscape, placing cultural preservation at the forefront and helping local communities to find a way to develop their culture in a sustainable way. In Zhenshan Village, when I spoke to villagers who work in grassroots tourism services, such as cleaning and selling street food, they generally felt that the changes in their village did not concern them significantly and that they were just following the instructions of the village government to do their job. In China, ecomuseums primarily serve to develop the local economy, with cultural preservation taking a secondary role. But thanks to the development of travel in the Zhenshan villages and the significant improvement in the living standards of the villagers, some villagers began to realise the value of cultural heritage conservation and no longer simply chased profit. Aside from Director Ban, the "new villagers" previously discussed have been approached by senior government officials. These officials hope that the studios and reception venues operated by these new villagers can effectively showcase Zhenshan's cultural heritage and distinct local features to visitors.

These "new villagers" are also expected to develop new cultural heritage for Zhenshan. Their dialogue with the government plays a more straightforward role with the preservation of heritage and the development of tourism. The government values their opinions and actively seeks their involvement more than that of the original villagers. They also represent a portion of the views and common interests of the native villagers in heritage conservation. Some artists regularly visit the homes of elderly Buyi people to learn about the traditional culture of Buyi, with the hope that they can better interpret the heritage. This has also inspired the Buyi elders to organise classes and attracted many young people in the village to learn the Buyi language. This new group, united by the government, can be seen as a team of elites that can lead the development of the village. On the one hand, they can help the villagers to shape the cultural landscape of the ecomuseum in a more rational way. On the other hand, their presence encroaches on some of the local community residents' opportunities to participate in the governance of the local community.

Challenges and Opportunities in Heritage Management

According to the policy documents, the whole development process from the local government-led village development plan is for tourism and economic growth only, causing a major contradiction between the ecomuseum paradigm and heritage management for tourism purposes. Ecomuseums always emphasise cultural preservation and community participation in the forefront, while economic factors such as tourism development come second (Corsane, 2006). In China, however, every museum and heritage facility must be recognised and supported by the government (Nitzky, 2012; Fraser, R., 2022). Consequently, the extent to which local communities, particularly in ethnic minority areas, have a real influence on the design, management and visitor experience of museums is questionable (Fraser, R., 2022). Despite the proliferation of museum construction in ethnic minority regions, the benefits to ethnic minority communities remain ambiguous.

Nevertheless, the divergence in state and local perspectives on heritage sites such as the martial temple underscores ongoing tensions. While the temple is a focal point in official heritage narratives, it is not traditionally significant to the Buyi villagers, who view it as an attraction for Han Chinese tourists. This coincides with Smith's (2006) assertion that heritage is not only a tool of governance, but also a means of resistance and contestation. In Zhenshan, the relationship between the community and the government is deeply intertwined due to the small population and the increasing influx of 'new residents' where explicit political resistance is less visible. This enables ethnic cadres like Director Ban to be included in community participation and bottom-up decision-making. It is clear from my interviews that the 'heritage middlemen', represented by Director Ban, are adept at utilising funding channels to improve their communities and implement heritage policies. And they can consult with a variety of cultural and hospitality practitioners in their communities. This flexibility not only gives them greater power to shape heritage narratives but also enhances their influence in the politics of local representation.

Within the framework of the management of Zhenshan's heritage as an ecomuseum, ICH is absent, which Director Ban describes as 'one of the shortcomings of this ecomuseum'. This has been noticed by the new artists and designers, who also see ICH as a potential

for Zhenshan to attract more tourists in the future. They will assist the village craftsmen to apply for the title of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritor' issued by the government. These new residents have been involved in the development and management of heritage in Zhenshan for a short period of time, and their long-term impact on heritage and the ecomuseum is not yet clear. However, at this stage, they have become an increasingly prominent part of community participation as an elite from the city, which clearly crowds out the participation of marginalised local residents. Perhaps the catalyst for 'whole region tourism' and heritage-led urban regeneration and urbanisation in Huaxi District will have gentrification effects for Zhenshan, which will need to be continuously observed.

In the context of a general lack of participation, the residents of Zhenshan, as villagers of a heritage site located on the urban periphery, are clearly educated, and show traces of bottom-up participation in community management, with a significant proportion of the residents having their own views and actions on heritage management and conservation. This is a rare case in China. Although the existing system is inevitable in the framework of Chinese heritage management, it opens the possibility of presenting a relatively authentic minority culture and realising genuine community participation.

3.2.2 Tang'an Case

My first interviewee at Tang'an was an expert in the concept of ecomuseums (Interviewee Z1). As my first visit to Tang'an was under the strict control due to the pandemic, there were no other tourists in the village. Therefore, my presence in Tang'an seemed very "unexpected". The interviewee approached me and asked if I was here to study the ecomuseum, and when she received a positive answer, she invited me to sit on the porch of her house and introduced herself. She had travelled to Norway three times on representatives of the villagers of Tang'an, for training in ecomuseum management and to introduce Tang'an to museological experts. She told me that she had been passionate about building her hometown and wanted to put what she had learnt in Norway into the management of the ecomuseum. But she soon realised that, although the ecomuseum's administrators at various stages respected her knowledge, no one really listened to or took on board any of her suggestions. When she tried to teach the concept of ecomuseums to ordinary villagers, she found that what the cultural departments and scholars regarded as

precious cultural heritage or conservation ideas did not have much value or interest enough for the villagers, as it had little immediate relevance for residents whose priority was raising household income. Therefore, she realised that it was unrealistic to ask the villagers to actively participate in the conservation of the village's heritage until they got their own satisfactory standard of living.

When I asked if she had any official position in the village or in the information centre of the ecomuseum she denied it. She told me that because she is a woman married to a Han Chinese outsider, she has no position to speak in the village. She said that:

> *'Some museum experts have come and advised people in the village council to ask me if they have any questions about the ecomuseum, but there is no one to ask. Now those who are managing the ecomuseum in the village council are elders or some men in our village, I have no position or right to express my opinion.' (Interviewee Z1, 02/2023)*

As one of the few women in the village who went to university that year and was able to communicate in Mandarin at Tang'an, she was very proud to have the opportunity to go to Norway to study the ecomuseum concept. She could clearly retell what she had learnt close to thirty years ago and showed me the notes she had taken at that time. When I invited her to be an interviewee for my photovoice as well, she indicated that she had received similar training from Norwegian museum experts when she was in Norway to see the Norwegian ecomuseum. On this basis, she volunteered to help me train other interviewees in the local Dong language. There are no staff dedicated to the planning or development of the ecomuseum in Tang'an now. Only the village branch secretary[22] of the village council who conveys some policies of the higher government. The village secretary is an educated local Dong youth. Along with him in the village co-management responsible for daily negotiations with the villagers is the village head[23]. The village head is a prominent elder in the village who has a certain degree of authority in traditional

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[22] The lowest level of party leadership in the Communist Party of China (CPC). The village branch secretary must be a member of the CCP and is elected by village party members, although in practice it is usually a pro forma election and appointed by a higher branch.

[23] The management policy in rural areas of China is called "villagers' autonomy", and the governing institution is the village council, with the head of the village council being the main person in charge of the work. Village heads are elected by local villagers.

Dong society, is the elder of the village branch secretary and has more fluent Mandarin communication skills than his peers. Despite the formal fact that they are communal cadres, they are enmeshed in a network of social relations that encompasses traditional age and respect structures.

Heritage 'Middleman'

In the case of Tang'an, where the population is sparse and blood ties between families are common, these ties also affect how the grassroots work carried out by village committees is perceived and how ethnic minority cadres carry out their work. Beardslee (2016) defines this type of role, which is rooted in the community and has a close relationship with the inheritors of the heritage but works for the government, as a "heritage middleman". In Tang'an, the role of this "middleman" in the application and negotiation of AHD in ethnic minority communities cannot be neglected. Because the prevailing situation at heritage sites in China is government-led, the community can only participate in the operation of the project after its completion and is not involved in decision-making (Su, M. and Wall, 2012). The situation is even more pronounced in Tang'an. Even at the level of operation of the ecomuseum after its completion, villagers' participation is limited. The villagers almost exclusively relied on the communication of this middleman to express their opinions. When Tang'an became an ecomuseum, local residents expressed scepticism and opposition. According to the village head (Interviewee Z14):

> *'The villagers felt that if there became more tourists in the future it would affect the feng shui of Tang'an and disturb the gods and goddesses in the mountains, but with my comfort and persuasion they felt that it was a project that would help the residents' income. But they still don't understand what an ecomuseum is and what the village has to do with it. ' (Interviewee Z14, 02/2023)*

The people most affected and connected by the ecomuseum project had virtually no say in the whole process. Critical Heritage Studies (CHS) argues that heritage practices dominated by government and experts result in the interests of local communities being ignored and the public being seen only as recipients (Smith, L., 2006). On the other hand, some scholars have argued that the locals will only take responsibility if they can get economic benefit from heritage practices (Qu et al., 2023), which is not the case in Tang'an.

Heritage embodies a meta-cultural narrative, a story about a practice, a place or a group of people, but separate from the actual practice. But the production of meta-culture demands a specific set of skills and pathways that are not common to those who regularly engage in relevant cultural practices (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). The capability to influence the discourse surrounding heritage critically relies on one's literacy and the mastery in crafting the appropriate genre of prose, including the creation of inventory descriptions, dossiers, educational brochures, and funding applications. Furthermore, the possession of pertinent credentials, typically encompassing academic degrees or other forms of official acknowledgment, substantially enhances access to authoritative entities such as UNESCO, national ministries of culture (Beardslee, 2016). Moreover, due to the low level of literacy in Mandarin in the local community, the villagers cannot express their views or negotiate with the government without the assistance of these " middlemen". This is not to suggest that ethnic minority grassroots leaders who participate in decision-making on the behalf of the grassroots are totally passive. Villagers are also more prepared to share their views with the "middleman" than with grass-roots cadres (mainly Han Chinese) appointed directly by the Communist Party branch. However, benevolent action in the name of an individual is not the same thing as community members having true agency (Beardslee, 2016). At the same time, the cadres of the local ethnic village committees do not have any decision-making power or independence. Their main role and duties are more like a "buffer" for the downward extension of the government's power to help the local villagers accept the government's policies more smoothly, or to help the government formulate policies that are more in line with the actual situation of the local community.

Community Participation on Safeguarding ICH

The inscription of intangible cultural heritage items on the representative list is part of China's cultural "soft power" (*wénhuà ruǎnshílì*, 文化软实力) strategy, which is a means of developing tourism and national ideology. The Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage, promulgated in 2011, establishes a system for identifying and managing lists of intangible cultural heritage and bearers from the national to the county level. The law emphasises the leading role of the Government in safeguarding ICH. The effectiveness of ecomuseum conservation ICH in China faces many challenges

and depends greatly on the actual complexity of individual villages. The evidence that the ICH in Tang'an has been preserved or developed in the framework of an ecomuseum is difficult to detect. Folkloric intangible cultural heritage, such as "cai ge tang", on the one hand, is not made into commodities that can be sold as tourist souvenirs as handicrafts production. On the other hand, there is no clear inheritor; only government-recognised intangible cultural heritage programmes and their inheritors are eligible for special funds.

Although the current policy framework recognises the importance of community involvement in heritage conservation, it only mentions the responsibility of the government and ICH inheritors for cultural heritage. In addition, the discourse on Chinese harmony tends to provide a unified account of heritage values, and even aligns itself in this way with the criteria for the nomination of heritage identification. Due to the lack of an officially recognised ICH in Tang'an, the grassroots government does not pay much attention to the preservation and inheritance of the local ICH, as well as the low awareness of community residents to participate in heritage preservation, potential traditional crafts or traditional songs that are closely related to the local traditional culture can easily be disregarded. This can be attributed to the government's heritage management and increased emphasis on the tangible heritage.

The government's focus on heritage preservation is mainly on its political and economic significance. After the same Dong ICH was successfully created as a cultural tourism product in Zhaoxing, the ICH in Tang'an lost government funding and attention. According to several interviewees, officials now see Tang'an's heritage as having little remaining political value, and therefore no longer prioritise its support. The government's selective prioritisation of one heritage site over another, driven by political and economic agendas, illustrates how authorised heritage discourse operates to legitimise certain heritage values while marginalising others (Smith, L., 2006; Harrison, R., 2012). Yet other ecomuseum experiments suggest that bottom-up initiatives can succeed when effective cultural middlemen are in place. For example, in an ecomuseum in Orochen, north-east China, villagers were persuaded by heritage 'middlemen' to display some of their handicrafts in the community's purpose-built exhibition building (Fraser, R., 2022). These intermediaries translate policy jargon into locally meaningful goals and coordinate

small grants, thus bridging the gap between state frameworks and village agency. Tang'an lacks such brokers. Its information centre is in a state of abandonment, and no comparable figure has emerged to mobilise artisans or negotiate resources. Without that mediating layer, limited community participation and an implicit bottom-up management design remain largely on paper. Besides, outsiders have no access to effective ways of understanding or observing the community's interpretation of traditional culture. In the framework of heritage management of the ecomuseum focusing on community participation, the sustainability of the ICH is very limited. And only ICH that is recognised by the government has an economic value in heritage tourism, which promotes the priority of the grassroots government and the motivation of community residents to participate.

The narrative around the ecomuseum in Tang'an outlines the challenges of heritage management and the significant gaps in community participation. As can be seen in the case of Tang'an, heritage management in China remains largely within the realm of authoritative discourse, where local voices are marginalised in the decision-making process and in the formation of cultural narratives. The government encourages participation simply by allowing local villagers to craft and learn at the newly built heritage education venue. Moreover, Tang'an is gradually becoming one of the attractions of Zhaoxing scenic area, losing its integrity and independence. While Tang'an is built on a framework that promotes community participation as the mainstay of the conservation process, the policies of the government in recent years largely impose a top-down approach to management, limiting community activism. The persistence of local practices such as the "Cai ge tang" festival underscores the community's dedication to their cultural identity and heritage beyond the confines of formal recognition and commodification.

3.3 Comparative Discussion

3.3.1 Conceptualising the Ecomuseum in Practice

The ecomuseum, as a conceptual framework, promises to foster participatory heritage preservation, sustainable development, and the reinvigoration of local cultural identities. It is designed to empower communities to act as custodians of their heritage, ensuring that both tangible and intangible cultural assets are preserved in ways that align with the

community's own values and aspirations (Davis, P., 2007). However, when these ideals are translated into practice, they often face significant challenges, particularly in contexts influenced by state-driven heritage policies, uneven development, and the commodification pressures of tourism (Graham, 2002; Verdini et al., 2017). The cases of Zhenshan and Tang'an reveal striking contrasts and commonalities in how ecomuseums function when idealistic frameworks intersect with practical realities.

In theory, ecomuseums aim to shift the traditional, static museum model toward a more dynamic, community-centred paradigm (Rivière, 1985; de Varine, 1996). The "Liuzhi Principles" adopted in the Sino-Norwegian partnership underpin the ecomuseum's mission to emphasize the integration of natural and cultural heritage, promote community participation in heritage decision-making, balance heritage preservation with socio-economic development, and adapt to the unique local characteristics of each site, thereby rejecting a one-size-fits-all approach. Both Zhenshan and Tang'an's designation as ecomuseums was meant to fulfil these principles by safeguarding the heritage of the Buyi and Dong ethnic minorities, respectively, while fostering community well-being through sustainable tourism. Yet, the divergence in their outcomes illustrates how local contexts and external pressures mediate the realization of these ideals.

Zhenshan's proximity to Guiyang, an emerging urban centre, has shaped its ecomuseum's trajectory in profound ways. As part of the "Whole Region Tourism" strategy, Zhenshan's heritage has been integrated into a broader tourism framework aimed at economic development. This urban proximity has fostered accessibility, attracted external investors, and transformed the village into a peri-urban tourism hub. However, this has come at a cost to the participatory ideals of the ecomuseum. The influx of "new villagers"—artists, designers, and urban entrepreneurs—has redefined Zhenshan's cultural landscape. While these actors have brought innovation and investment, their reinterpretation of Buyi heritage often overshadows the voices of local residents. Instead of empowering the community to lead heritage narratives, the ecomuseum framework in Zhenshan has largely facilitated external appropriation of cultural assets.

The emphasis on tangible heritage, particularly the preservation of Buyi stone architecture, aligns with the tourism sector's preference for visually appealing assets. Zhenshan's governance remains predominantly state-led, with community participation relegated to low-level tourism roles, such as operating food stalls or maintaining accommodations. While residents express pride in the village's heritage, their agency in shaping its future is constrained by the overarching priorities of municipal and district authorities.

By contrast, Tang'an's remoteness and its subordinate position within the Zhaoxing scenic area have hindered the ecomuseum's ability to function as a transformative framework. While Zhenshan benefits from urban proximity and external investment, Tang'an struggles to sustain its ecomuseum concept in the face of neglect and marginalization. Unlike Zhenshan, Tang'an's ecomuseum has received limited funding and attention from government authorities. Key facilities, such as the Information Centre, have fallen into disrepair, reflecting the low priority given to Tang'an's heritage within regional tourism plans. This neglect undermines the ecomuseum's role as a catalyst for cultural preservation and economic development.

Tang'an's relative isolation has shielded it from the overt commodification seen in Zhenshan. Community-driven festivals like "Cai ge tang" retain their authenticity and reflect organic cultural expression. However, the absence of external investment or institutional recognition limits their scalability and potential economic benefits, leaving the village reliant on subsistence agriculture and sporadic tourism (Wang, H. et al., 2010; Li, Ying, 2015). The participatory ideals of the ecomuseum framework remain unfulfilled in Tang'an. Governance is dominated by village elites and state-appointed cadres, while ordinary residents have limited involvement in heritage management. The reliance on "heritage middlemen" to mediate between the community and government highlights the structural barriers to meaningful grassroots participation (Wu, B. et al., 2002; Fraser, R., 2022). The comparison of Zhenshan and Tang'an highlights a fundamental tension in the implementation of ecomuseums: the conflict between aspirational goals and practical constraints. Although the framework aims to promote bottom-up heritage preservation, the realities of state-led governance, market pressures, and uneven resource distribution

frequently result in compromises that undermine its intended objectives (Oakes, 2005; Luo, 2018). In Zhenshan, this manifests as over-commercialization and reduced local agency, whereas in Tang'an, it takes the form of stagnation and marginalisation.

3.3.2 Community Agency in Cultural Preservation

In Zhenshan and Tang'an, the interplay between top-down governance and community participation within the framework of an ecomuseum reflects a subtle struggle over control, priorities and institutions. This tension stems from the fact that governments, driven by economic and political objectives, impose systems that often do not correspond to the needs, values and traditional practices of local communities (Oakes, 2016). These different factors affected the situation in Zhengshan and Tang'an differently, leading to a complex negotiation between state-led policies and local participation. The interactions between government agencies, local communities and other stakeholders in an ecomuseum project are not static or uniform. They are influenced by political hierarchies, local power dynamics and heritage management negotiations. This interaction needs to be understood by analysing the relationships and interactions between the various parties, as well as the power and influence mechanisms that empower decision-making within heritage institutions (Svensson, M. and Maags, 2018, p.20; Zhu, 2019). The cases of Zhenshan and Tang'an reveal how these dynamics play out in practice, with different outcomes for community engagement and cultural conservation.

Ecomuseums operate within a multi-layered political system, with national, provincial and municipal authorities setting priorities and allocating resources. These government actors often see heritage as a tool for achieving broader policy objectives (Varutti, 2014; Zhang, F. and Courty, 2021). For example, in Zhenshan, the government's 'whole-territory tourism' strategy has positioned the village as part of a wider cultural tourism network, and the town has been awarded various prestigious official heritage site titles. While these interventions have brought investment and visibility to Zhenshan, they have also reinforced hierarchical structures, with decisions made at a distance from the locality. Tang'an's status as an ecomuseum has been diluted by large-scale tourism strategies and is also affected by hierarchical governance.

Within these hierarchical structures, local key players, including village leaders, influential families, and appointed heritage 'middlemen', mediate between government authorities and the broader community. These individuals often hold a disproportionate level of influence, acting as intermediaries who negotiate the implementation of heritage policies and initiatives (Harrell, 2011). In Zhenshan, local key figures, including community leaders and prominent 'new villagers' such as urban entrepreneurs and designers, have become key agents in shaping the trajectory of the ecomuseum. While these figures have brought resources, expertise and connections, their influence has almost drowned out the voices of ordinary residents. For example, external actors reinterpreting the culture of the Buyi people for tourism often place their creative visions above community narratives, creating tensions between innovation and authenticity. Local leaders tasked with balancing these external influences with community interests can be aligned with government or external priorities. In Tang'an, local elites such as village cadres or influential farmers also play a pivotal role, mediating between the community and external agencies. However, compared to Zhenshan, Tang'an lacks significant external investment and the local population is unfamiliar with Mandarin and Chinese characters. These local actors have a greater responsibility to maintain cultural practices and negotiate with higher authorities to communicate directives from the central government to the local community in a more comprehensible manner (Beardslee, 2016). This creates additional pressure on these individuals to prioritise certain heritage elements, such as the terraced fields, based on the perceived economic or symbolic value of these local actors. Oakes (2016) indicates that some local leaders have appropriated cultural heritage and control the narrative of cultural change. This reveals how cultural heritage is in the hands of a few elites who decide which cultural elements can be incorporated into the tourism infrastructure.

3.3.3 Ecomuseums and The Cultural Heritage of Ethnic Minorities

Ecomuseums operate at the intersection of heritage conservation and power, where the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities is simultaneously promoted and constrained by the binary relationship between ethnic minority communities and the state (An and Gjestrum, 1999; Henderson et al., 2009). In addition to this binary relationship, the process of cultural conservation and expression is complicated by the dynamics within ethnic minority communities. These relationships are deeply rooted in structural inequalities,

competing priorities, and negotiations over identity, governance, and cultural ownership (Cohen, E. and Cohen, 2012). The relationship between minority communities and the state in China is shaped by a long history of centralised governance that has sought to incorporate diverse peoples into a unified national identity. In this context, the cultural heritage of minority groups has often become a tool of the state-led narrative, celebrating 'diversity' to enhance the image of a harmonious multi-ethnic nation. However, this process often conceals deeper power asymmetries (Oakes, 2016; Zhou, 2016). In Zhenshan, the Buyi cultural heritage has been incorporated into government-led tourism initiatives. The state's role in defining, protecting and promoting the Buyi cultural heritage is reflected in the emphasis placed on tangible cultural elements. These state-sanctioned elements are selected because they align with the government's agenda of promoting ethnic diversity as a landscape. By focusing on the aesthetic and symbolic markers of Buyi culture, the government commodifies heritage for consumption, rendering it static and decontextualised. While state involvement brings visibility and economic opportunities, it also limits the ability of the Buyi community to have a say in the composition of their heritage. This creates a dichotomous relationship, with the state holding power over heritage and the community in a passive position (Sofield and Li, 1998).

However, the Tang'an presents a contrasting yet complementary dynamic. The state's recognition of the Dong's rice-fish-duck agricultural system as a GIAHS exemplifies its approach to promoting minority cultures within a global framework. However, this recognition primarily serves to demonstrate the state's commitment to sustainability and biodiversity on the international stage, rather than to fulfil the needs or desires of the Dong community itself (Lee, J., 2020). McCarthy (2011) also emphasises that the Chinese government's development of minority cultures is not only intended to achieve unity among the Chinese people, but also to achieve modernisation. The government has exploited the visual and ecological aspects of the terraced fields as a tourist resource, ignoring the cultural and functional significance of the agricultural system for the local community. In both cases, the state prioritises external narratives, whether tourism or international diplomacy, over the lived experiences and cultural agency of minority communities.

3.4 Conclusion

The development of the ecomuseums in Zhenshan and Tang'an reveals a pattern of superficial pluralistic attention that serves broader political and economic agendas rather than fostering a deep engagement with the cultural heritage of minority communities. Both cases reflect a tendency to emphasize the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of cultural diversity while sidelining the more complex, lived realities of the communities involved. This phenomenon underscores the limitations of the ecomuseum framework when it is implemented within a hierarchical heritage management system that prioritizes external narratives over local authenticity. The ecomuseum framework promises to celebrate the pluralism of cultural heritage, emphasizing the unique contributions of minority groups to national and global cultural landscapes. In practice, however, this pluralistic attention often manifests as a superficial focus on visually appealing and commodifiable aspects of minority heritage. The institutionalisation of the heritage industry through scale politics consolidates the state's authority over cultural heritage. By embedding local practices within national and global frameworks, the state centralises decision-making and representation, reducing the role of local communities to that of participants in pre-defined heritage narratives. This centralisation reflects the state's broader political agenda of using heritage as a tool for nation-building, economic development, and international diplomacy.

Research on ecomuseums provides a valuable framework for addressing historical inequalities in heritage management, particularly in post-colonial and multi-ethnic contexts. By championing the decentralisation of heritage governance and emphasizing grassroots participation, the ecomuseum concept inherently responds to calls for more inclusive approaches. Although its influence in China has been relatively limited, it demonstrates an important effort to empower local communities, enabling them to shape heritage narratives that are authentic, inclusive, and reflective of their lived experiences. Integrating both tangible and intangible heritage, ecomuseum management offers a holistic model that can be applied globally. Such an approach ensures that cultural dimensions are preserved in ways that resonate with the communities themselves. The study also highlights the necessity of reconciling global and local dimensions of heritage management, arguing for a framework that respects cultural diversity and complexity while meeting international standards. By illustrating the potential of an ecocultural

strategy to empower communities, promote authenticity, and balance conservation with sustainable development, this research helps reimagine global heritage management as an inclusive, dynamic, and environmentally sensitive practice.

Chapter 4 Social Relations and the Representation of Ethnic Identity in the Ecomuseum

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the evolving social dynamics within the communities of Zhenshan and Tang'an, emphasising the complexities of intra-community relationships, shifts in power structures, and their transformation over time. It explores how ecomuseums both shape and are shaped by these dynamics, focusing on the negotiation of power, representation, and identity within minority communities. By analysing the interactions among traditional kinship bonds, modern influences, and external stakeholders such as tourists, government authorities, and new residents—this chapter seeks to understand the intricate interrelationships between traditional practices, cultural policies, and broader socio-economic forces.

4.2 Tang'an

4.2.1 Village Governance and Social Hierarchies in Traditional Dong Communities

The social fabric of Tang'an Village is deeply rooted in traditional customs, kinship networks of the Dong people, forging a strong sense of community identity. These relationships are the cornerstone of decision-making, conflict resolution and the preservation of cultural traditions. The Dong originated from the ancient Yue ethnic group in the Central Plains of China, and gradually migrated southwards due to various social and political upheavals, including the conflicts at the end of the Tang Dynasty and the beginning of the Song Dynasty (roughly late 800s to early 900s CE) (Guo et al., 2014). This migration resulted in their settlement in remote mountainous areas. Due to environmental constraints, they had to be self-sufficient and establish close-knit communities based on kinship ties.

Kin group structure became a key system for survival in this environment, and the primary organising principle of social, economic and cultural life. The Dong developed a clan-based system that reinforced family ties and collective responsibility, which still influences the social dynamics of Dong villages today. Dong society is organised around patrilineal clans (*zú, 族*), with membership determined by descent from a common male ancestor. Clans are fundamental to identity and governance, forming the basis for social

order within villages (Cornet, 2010). Each clan is typically composed of several extended families. Clans serve as the primary social units, regulating interactions within and beyond the village. Clan membership determines access to resources, social support, and participation in rituals. These units play a central role in organising labour, managing conflicts, and maintaining cultural continuity.
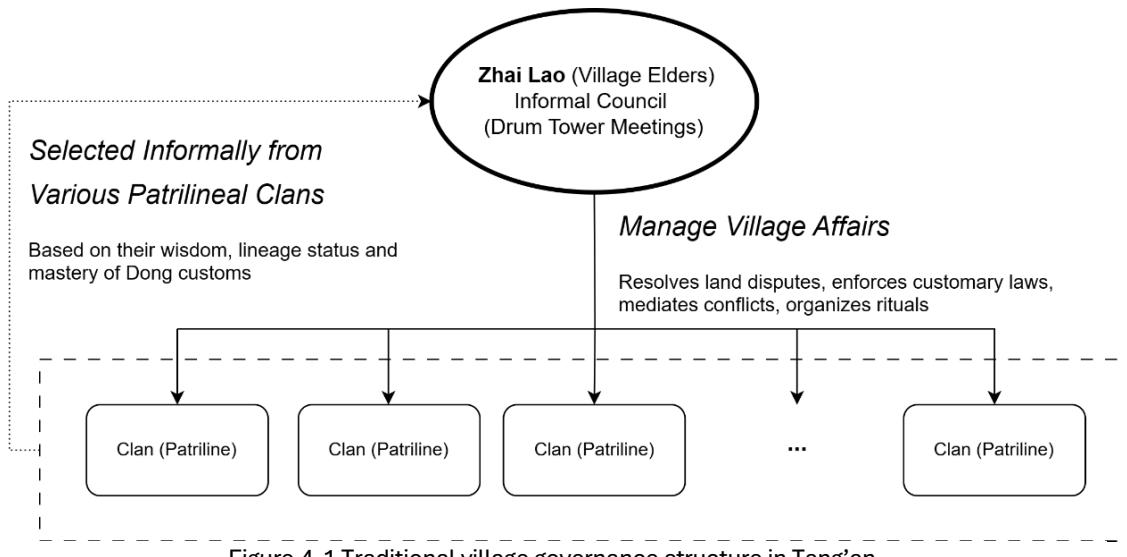
Figure 4-1 Traditional village governance structure in Tang'an
Created by the author, 2024

As shown in Figure 4-1, village elders hold a pivotal position in traditional Dong society, functioning as the primary decision-makers and negotiators in communal affairs. The elders in the community are often called "寨老" (*zhàilǎo*, village elders) and have informal but widely recognised authority (Cornet, 2010). Their role is based on the community's appreciation of their wisdom, experience and deep understanding of customary laws and rituals. These elders are usually selected based on their age, lineage and level of knowledge of Dong traditions. Clans play a critical role in shaping the authority of elders. Each clan typically appoints its own senior representatives to participate in governance discussions, ensuring that the interests of all kinship groups are represented. These clan representatives collaborate with the broader council of elders to make decisions that affect the entire village. Elders in the Dong community serve multiple roles, ranging from mediators and cultural custodians to organisers of social and religious activities. As mediators, they are the people of first resort when it comes to resolving disputes, from land boundaries to interpersonal conflicts and violations of community norms. Their decisions are perceived as fair and binding because they are based on precedents, shared moral principles and a thorough understanding of the people involved.

In Dong communities, the elders usually hold their meetings in the drum tower, which is a symbol and the practical centre of village life. The number and size of the drum towers are a visual representation of the population and size of the village. There is only one drum tower in Tang'an, which also means that Tang'an is a small Dong village, and this drum tower is the meeting place for the village elders. During my fieldwork, I discovered that village elders still met frequently. However, I was unable to observe this personally as outsiders are not welcome at these events. After a meeting, a participant said to me,

> *'Usually, only men are allowed to speak in the drum tower. Women rarely have the right to speak, and only if they have a son. If you only have daughters, you have a weak position in the drum tower.' (Interviewee T10, 11/2022)*

The Modern Transition of Village Governance

In recent years, the role of elders in Tang'an has shifted from being central decision-makers in traditional governance to primarily symbolic figures whose influence is limited to cultural matters. This change can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the increasing influence of state-led rural management policies, economic modernisation, and shifts in local power dynamics. Their influence is now limited to cultural events and negotiations with some villagers about conflicts in daily life. In their role as cultural custodians, elders are responsible for transmitting oral histories, traditional songs such as the *Grand Song*, and ritual practices that define Dong identity. They ensure that these traditions are passed down to younger generations, maintaining the cultural fabric of the community. Furthermore, as organisers, they oversee major festivals, agricultural rituals, and communal labour projects. The Zhai Lao in the village also played an important role in preparing for the establishment of the ecomuseum. During my field research, I interviewed several elders in Tang'an, including one who held multiple significant roles within the community (Interviewee T12).

This elder was not only a *Zhai Lao,* but also a Feng Shui master, a maker of the traditional *Lu Sheng* musical instrument, and one of the few literate elders in the village. The Dong people have no written language, so he mastered the reading and writing of Mandarin Chinese characters and used the Mandarin Chinese readings to replace the Dong language to record in detail some traditional cultures such as the Grand Dong Song and some rules in traditional rituals and ceremonies. He is highly proficient in both making and playing

with Lu Sheng, an essential instrument in Dong music and festivals, and he imparts this knowledge to the younger members of the village. His expertise offers valuable insights into the musical traditions that constitute a crucial component of the community's heritage. His ability to document cultural knowledge in writing provides a rare tool for preservation, enabling Tang'an to retain a remarkably complete repertoire of ancient musical pieces, in contrast to the loss of traditional music in many other Dong villages. He once showed me his notebook recording the traditional musical repertoires of Tang'an and remarked:

> *"All the domestic and international experts involved in establishing the museum in Tang'an required my guidance." (Interviewee T12, 11/2022)*

When asked about his views on the village being designated as an ecomuseum, he explained,

> *'I only know that the government and foreign collaborators have set up a museum (information centre) in the village. But I don't know what it is for.' (Interviewee T12, 11/2022)*

Despite his limited understanding of the concept of an ecomuseum, the ecomuseum's interpretation of traditional Dong culture comes from the knowledge of local elders. This elder's diverse expertise contributed to the cultural material incorporated into the ecomuseum. As a Feng Shui master, he was involved in advising on spatial arrangements and practices that are integral to the Dong worldview. These elders served as key sources of information for the external stakeholders involved in the ecomuseum's development, providing details about rituals, artefacts, and practices that would otherwise remain undocumented. Their contributions ensured that the cultural content of the ecomuseum reflected the traditions of the Dong people, even though the elders themselves often viewed the ecomuseum as an external project rather than a community-led initiative.

The transformation of village governance in China has led to a significant shift from traditional elder-led decision-making to formalised administrative structures. Historically, village elders held substantial authority, guiding communal affairs through their experience and societal respect. However, with the implementation of the Organic Law

of Village Committees (Trial) (*cūnmīn wěiyuánhuì zǔzhīfǎ,* 中华人民共和国村民委员会组织法[试行]) in 1987, a new governance model was introduced, establishing elected village committees to manage public affairs, mediate disputes, and oversee collective property (Xu, Y., 2019). This policy aimed to promote grassroots democracy and standardise rural governance, aligning local administration with national objectives (He, B. et al., 2021). As a result, the traditional authority of village elders diminished, as formal governance structures took precedence in decision-making processes. The shift reflects China's broader efforts to modernise rural management and integrate local governance into the state's administrative framework (Qian, 2014) . The introduction of these formal structures has led to a redefinition of roles within the village, with elders' influence becoming more symbolic and cultural, while administrative authority is exercised by elected committees (Xu, X., 2020). The new village governance structure is shown in Figure 4-2 below.
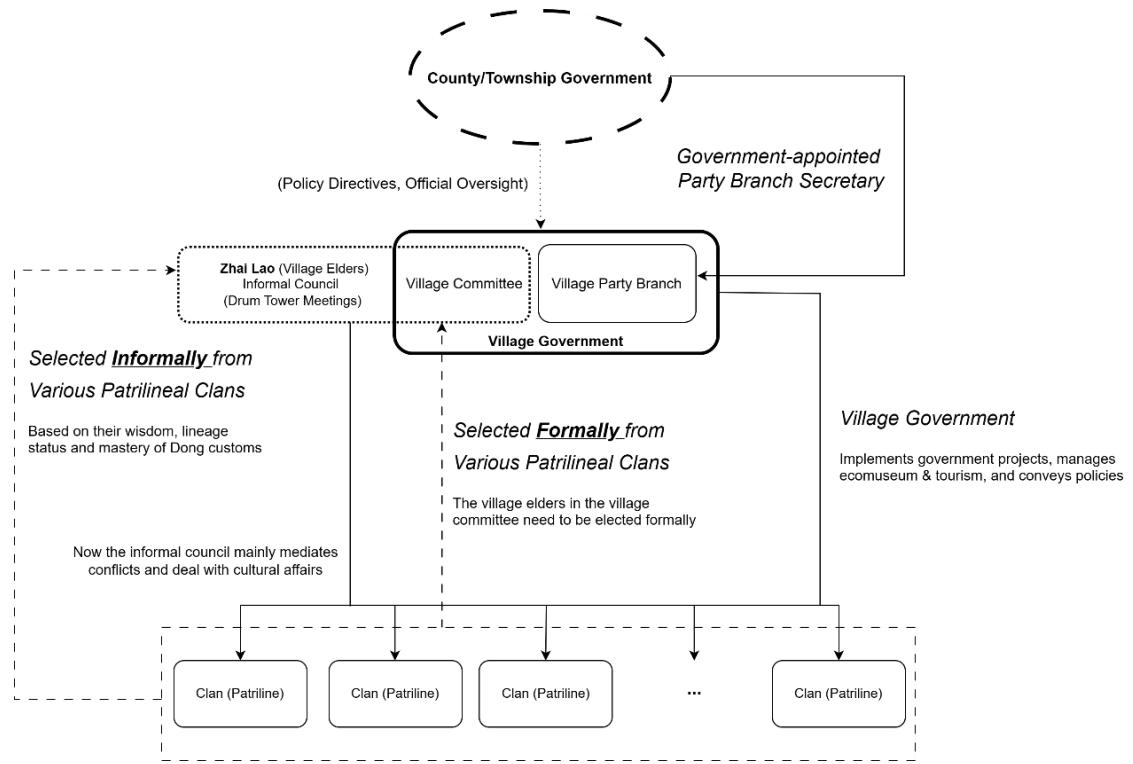
Figure 4-2 Current village governance structure in Tang'an
Created by the author, 2024

The establishment of the Tang'an Ecomuseum, while drawing on the elders' cultural knowledge, was primarily an externally driven initiative involving government and foreign stakeholders. The planning and implementation processes were often managed by external experts, limiting the elders' ability to shape the project's direction or goals. Their

contributions were largely confined to providing cultural knowledge, rather than participating in strategic decision-making about the ecomuseum's role or management. Meanwhile, generational change within the community has greatly contributed to the diminished role of the elderly in village governance. Young villagers are often educated in the formal system or exposed to urban lifestyles through migration and rely less on traditional authority structures. The previously mentioned young minority cadres' authority as a "heritage middleman" in the village is also increasing. This shift has created a disconnect between the traditional knowledge held by elders and the aspirations of younger generations, weakening the elders' influence in village affairs. As noted in research on rural governance, younger generations increasingly "privilege economic pragmatism over cultural continuity," altering the dynamics of power within rural communities (Jing and Zhang, 2019). Although state-led policies and governance have weakened the decision-making position of the elders in traditional societies, in many Chinese minority communities, the election of official positions is also intertwined with the hierarchical system of clan lineage.

When I interviewed the aforementioned interviewee T1 who had gone to Norway to study the ecomuseum concept, I asked her if she had considered taking up an ecomuseum-related position in Tang'an, and she answered in the negative. She said:

> *'The work related to the ecomuseum in our village is all handled by the village committee, and the head of the village committee, the village chief, is my elder. I can call him grandpa. The other village party secretary is a young man appointed by the county. Although we are from the same generation, I am a woman, so it is even less likely that I could participate. The expert from Beijing also advised the villagers to consult me on issues related to the ecomuseum, but no one has ever asked me.' (Interviewee T1, 02/2023)*

When I said that she, as one of the few female university graduates in the village, should be able to find a suitable position, she said,

> *'I once wanted to work for the women's federation, but one of my female elders ran for the position. Although she was not older than me, she held a higher*

seniority in the family, and my clan would not allow me to compete with her, so I gave up too.' (Interviewee T1, 02/2023)

This emphasises the dual constraints of clan affiliation and gender. Despite her educational background and exposure to modern heritage management practices, her narrative underscores the enduring influence of traditional social structures in Dong society, where clan dynamics and generational hierarchies continue to play a decisive role in determining access to governance roles.

The ecomuseum is managed by the village committee and the village party branch. In contemporary China, villages are formally "self-governed" by villager committees. Although these committees are not incorporated into the state bureaucracy, they operate under the direction of the village Communist Party branch and the township Party committee and government above them (Organic Law, 2010). Although the Organic Law portrays the villagers' committees as "self-governing" entities, none of the cadres or villagers we spoke to mentioned self-government. None of the villagers I spoke to had heard of self-government and were unable to explain the meaning of the term. Although the villagers in Tang'an could not clearly distinguish between the village committee and the village party branch, they could clearly distinguish between the responsibilities and work of the village head and the village party branch secretary. The village head (Interviewee T13) said:

> *'There are very few opportunities to involve ordinary villagers in decision-making or to solicit their preferences or needs. We can only help villagers better understand policies and implement them after conveying government requirements.' (Interviewee T13, 02/2023)*

As Jing and Zhang (2019) observe, village heads were influenced by both the government and the villagers, yet they were not entirely manipulated or absorbed by either. They did not completely transform into wheeler-dealers solely pursuing personal interests; however, nor were they able to fully perform their duties as patriarchs of the villages.

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In the 20 years since Tang'an became an ecomuseum, the village head has always been the same person. All the villagers interviewed could recognise their village head, and their formal and informal interactions with the village head are closer and more frequent than those with other village cadres in the party. The village head and the village elder I mentioned earlier, who possesses a lot of traditional knowledge, also belong to the same family and are closely related by clan lineage. In this Dong village, he is both the village head, one of the heads of the village committee elected by the villagers, and an elder from an authoritative clan, which carries a lot of weight in traditional society. The villagers consider one of his important responsibilities to be communicating the decisions of the village party branch. One of the heads of the village party branch is a young man from the same family, and his position is directly appointed by the party. Therefore, it can be seen that within the same clan, there are three leadership roles covering traditional society and official government institutions: the elderly, the middle-aged and the young. I have interviewed a young female villager from this family. She said,

> *'People in my family have been relatively well-educated since ancient times, and there are still many college students. Therefore, they have always been involved in village affairs.' (Interviewee T4, 02/2023)*

Although local differences and the influence and decline of subtle forms of kinship need to be recognised, rural Chinese kinship continues to be influential (Potter and Potter, 1990; He, B., 2007). This phenomenon reflects the overlapping roles of clan structures and formal governance in Tang'an.

Social Changes and the Dynamic Evolution of Power Structures in Tang'an Village

The concentration of leadership roles within a single clan suggests a high degree of continuity in Tang'an between traditional and modern systems. The elder provides cultural and historical knowledge, the village head bridges traditional and administrative roles, and the young cadre represents the state's influence within the village. In villages with a strong sense of kinship, villagers can easily be highly mobilised, and village committee elections become even more fierce. This is because in such villages, it is very difficult for the township government to manipulate the elections (He, B., 2007, p.194). Villagers often want a hamlet leader who will represent their interests, but two factors

complicate this preference. First, family and clan ties are central in rural life, influencing both election outcomes and the allocation of resources afterward. Second, despite the modern state's strong disapproval of favouritism, these negative views on partiality have also become deeply embedded in village politics (Kennedy et al., 2004; Jacka and Chengrui, 2016).

In Tang'an the dominant position of the authoritative clan is perpetuated by its relatively high level of education and its established position in formal and informal governance systems. This dynamic has created a system in which governance is bound not only by traditional norms but also by modern institutions and resources, further limiting the opportunities for individuals (and particularly women) from other clans to assume leadership roles. The interplay between the ecomuseum concept and traditional clan governance adds another layer of complexity to the local power relations and decision-making about heritage management. The establishment of the Tang'an ecomuseum was largely driven by external factors, such as government officials and international heritage experts. While these stakeholders relied on the cultural knowledge of local elders to design the ecomuseum, the implementation and management of the project were integrated into a governance structure dominated by the authoritative clan. This integration reflects a broader trend in which external heritage initiatives adapt to local power structures when they are entrenched and strong, rather than disrupting them. Accordingly, while the ecomuseum was defined as a modern heritage management framework, it became another venue for the demonstration of traditional power structures. For the interviewee who had studied in Norway, this created a conflict. Her training in Norway had equipped her with knowledge and skills that were directly relevant to the framework of the ecomuseum. The government had sent her to Norway to study with the aim of applying the Western concept of the ecomuseum to the management of the ecomuseum in Tang'an. However, the deeply-rooted governance system prevented her from applying this expertise. Her marginalisation reveals how traditional social hierarchies negate the transformative potential of external heritage practices, limiting their ability to empower individuals or diversify leadership. The ecomuseum did not significantly become a platform for wider participation or innovation, but became an extension of existing power structures, perpetuating exclusion based on clan affiliation and gender.

The shifting social relations and power dynamics in Tang'an Village, particularly in the context of its designation as an ecomuseum, reveal the complexity of incorporating an external heritage framework into traditional governance systems. Historically, Dong society has heavily emphasised kinship ties and a clan hierarchy, with power concentrated in the hands of older male figures and reinforced through intergenerational and gendered norms. These traditional power structures persist and influence both formal and informal governance roles in the village. The establishment of the Tang'an ecomuseum introduced modern heritage management practices, but the project did not break with entrenched hierarchies, but rather generally aligned with them. Leadership roles in the ecomuseum and broader village governance remained concentrated in a single authoritative family. This reinforced exclusion based on family, gender and generational hierarchies, limiting wider community participation.

Building on the exploration of social dynamics within Tang'an Village, the next section examines how the ecomuseum represents Dong culture to external audiences, focusing on the choices made in cultural presentation, the balance between community agency and tourist expectations, and the broader implications for local identity in a tourism-driven context.

4.2.2 Minority Representation for Tourists

After being designated as an ecomuseum, Tang'an became a site for presenting Dong culture to external audiences, especially tourists. Through exhibitions, performances and interactions, the ecomuseum became a site for understanding Dong traditions and customs. However, the process of presenting Dong identity to tourists involved deliberate choices about what cultural content to display, how to present it and who decides these narratives. These decisions were influenced by a combination of local agency, external expectations and practical considerations, which raised questions about the authenticity and inclusivity of what was portrayed. As the ecomuseum becomes a space for cultural exchange, it also highlights the tension between preserving the community's way of life and catering to the interests and perceptions of outsiders. This section examines these dynamics, focusing on the processes of selection, framing and representation of various aspects of Dong culture through display mechanisms.

Since the 1980s, China's national government has promoted tourism as a key strategy for developing border regions and showcasing the cultural diversity of minority groups (Davis, S.L., 2005). Although minorities are encouraged to participate in tourism by promoting themselves, they are expected to do so in ways that align with official preferences (Davis, S.L., 2005) . Ultimately, the state retains control over the boundaries of ethnic self-expression (Yang, L. et al., 2008). The Tang'an ecomuseum was established to protect and showcase the Dong culture in an organised manner for tourism purposes. The cultural elements chosen to be showcased in the China-Norway ecomuseum project were based on the local lifestyle and village landscape, and at the time of selection, Tang'an was still deeply rooted in traditional Dong agricultural practices. This almost immediately attracted the attention of Chinese and foreign experts. The village head said:

> *'At that time, there was no road to Tang'an, and it was very difficult for people to leave the mountains. There was only a small, muddy and dangerous path. I was waiting at the entrance to the village for the leaders and experts. They arrived, looking tired, and after just watching the terraced fields for a while, they immediately said that they had come to the right place.' (Interviewee T13, 02/2023)*

Chinese and foreign experts worked together and negotiated with the party secretary, the village head and representatives of the villagers in Tang'an Village to identify the main cultural elements considered to be representative of Dong culture. These elements include traditional wooden Ganlan house architecture, Dong embroidery, traditional costumes and the grand song.

The official designation of Tang'an as an ecomuseum by the government not only marked formal recognition of the village's cultural and historical significance, but also brought about profound social and economic changes within the community. For the villagers, the designation symbolised an elevation in status, distinguishing Tang'an from neighbouring villages and making it a focal point for cultural tourism. The social implications of the designation were especially pronounced. As expressed by one villager (Interviewee T4):

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> *'At that time, it was easier for young people in our village to find a partner and get married than in other villages! Young people in our village became more popular!' (Interviewee T4, 03/2023)*

This reflects how the establishment of the ecomuseum, with official government recognition, has enhanced Tang'an's status in the local and wider region, fostering a sense of pride and optimism about the future in the villagers of Tang'an. Government recognition and growing attention from outsiders have reinforced the impression of Tang'an as an attractive and prestigious place to live. A villager who works in the tourist vehicle business (Interviewee T9) said,

> *'At the beginning, our village was really popular with foreigners! The village was full of foreigners with high noses! We don't stare at foreigners anymore because we're used to it.' (Interviewee T9, 02/2023)*

It has provided the Dong community with a platform to showcase their traditions on the national and international stage, as well as bringing tangible social and economic benefits, at least in the early stages of the project.

Changes in Tourism Management and the Representation of Culture

Following the establishment of the ecomuseum, the management and presentation of Dong culture transitioned to the hands of tourism companies. The initial choice of a Hong Kong-based tourism company emphasised participatory engagement with local traditions. This company supported the active involvement of villagers in cultural preservation through workshops and programmes centred on embroidery and music. These activities allowed villagers, particularly women, to enhance their traditional skills, earn income, and actively contribute to the representation of their culture. The villagers also feel that this is basically in line with the policies and requirements originally proposed by the government.

In contrast, the subsequent Guiyang-based tourism company adopted a more preservationist approach, treating Tang'an as a static heritage site. The emphasis shifted from dynamic cultural practices to the protection and display of physical heritage, such

as the village's architecture. Programmes related to Dong embroidery and the *Grand Song* were discontinued, and security measures, including guards at the village gates, were introduced to manage the site as a controlled tourist destination. These changes significantly altered the way Dong culture was framed, moving away from community participation toward a more passive representation designed for tourist observation. Both approaches selected specific aspects of Dong culture to present to tourists. The Hong Kong company emphasised participatory cultural elements such as embroidery and music as positive expressions of Dong identity, while the Guiyang company prioritised the visual and built heritage of the village. These choices reflect different strategies for presenting Dong culture to external audiences and highlight the multiple ways in which Dong culture can be curated and presented. This process illustrates how tourism management decisions can help to shape tourists' perceptions of Dong identity and ethnic culture.

After the withdrawal of the Guiyang-based tourism company, the government assumed full control over the management and development of Tang'an. This transition marked a shift in both the regulation of cultural heritage and the way Dong identity was framed for tourism. One of the most immediate changes was the implementation of strict regulations on the transformation of residential buildings. These policies, justified under the goal of cultural preservation, aimed to maintain the architectural integrity of Tang'an's traditional wooden stilt houses (ganlan). While the government sought to retain the village's authenticity as an ecomuseum, the restrictions also placed limitations on villagers, preventing them from modernising or adapting their homes according to their practical needs.

At the same time, the government restructured the village's cultural presentation by shifting the focus towards the grand song. This musical tradition was positioned as the primary cultural asset for tourism development. Various Grand Dong Song competitions were introduced, establishing formalised platforms for performance while promoting Dong music as a key attraction. Among these Grand Dong Song performances, the introduction of the Spring Song Festival is noteworthy. This event is modelled on Rongjiang County's Cunchao. Cunchao is a large-scale festival that has successfully

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attracted widespread attention to Dong culture. In Rongjiang County, Cunchao originated as a community-led celebration of the Dong New Year, featuring traditional song performances, rituals, and football games. Over time, it has evolved into a county-wide event sponsored by the state government and has morphed into a tightly organised festival that attracts large numbers of tourists and media attention. Its success is largely attributed to its ability to combine authentic Dong traditions with engaging and compelling programmes that are easy for tourists to participate in. Recognising its potential as a tourism model, Tang'an has adopted a similar structure, adding stage performances and competitive elements to enhance audience participation. Figure 4-3 presents the scene when a lusheng competition was going.

Figure 4-3 Lusheng competition in Tang'an, Photographed by Interviewee T6, 2019

Another key transformation was the evolution of the Grand Gong Song Festival, traditionally referred to by the Dong as the Grand Dong Gong Song Festival. This festival, which had been held every two years for about five or six sessions, was initially an important cultural gathering for different Dong communities, providing a space for musical exchange and collective celebration. However, under government management,

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the event was no longer maintained in its original form. Instead, it was replaced by the Spring Song Festival, aligning with the broader tourism strategy that prioritised the performative aspects of Dong music.

The transformation of these festivals reflects a recurring pattern observed in other parts of Guizhou. For example, Tang'an once had a Ponkan Festival linked to local orange cultivation, but when ponkan farming declined, the festival was replaced with the Grand Dong Song Festival. Similarly, Rongjiang County previously hosted a Watermelon Festival, which was later repurposed into the Sama Festival, a government-organised celebration of Dong heritage. These examples illustrate how festivals that originated from agricultural or community-based traditions have been restructured into state-led cultural events designed to attract tourism and promote regional identity. Some of these activities were originally organised by the Dong community residents spontaneously, but when these activities gained recognition and became larger in scale, the government would take over the right to organise these activities.

The locals have developed an awareness that their way of life and landscape are of special interest to foreign guests. Although it was mentioned earlier that there used to be many foreign tourists in Tang'an, I did not meet any during my fieldwork due to the pandemic and border controls in recent years. However, my interviewees showed me photos of them wearing traditional Dong costumes with various foreign tourists before the pandemic. These foreign tourists included several influencers from European countries who are very active on social media and have a keen interest in documenting and disseminating information about China's ethnic minority cultures. Many of my interviewees emphasised the welcome that foreigners receive in the village. Locals feel that foreigners show respect for their lifestyle and their culture and have a genuine interest in it. One of the villagers interviewed said:

> *'Most of them come to listen to the Grand Dong Song and try on our Dong clothes. But they come to our mountain just to visit Zhaoxing. They only come here after hearing that there is a Norwegian-built museum on the mountain. Usually they only stay here for an hour or two.' (Interviewee T6, 03/2023)*

Although foreign tourists only stay for a short time, their presence in the village is symbolic. The villagers say,

> *'Compared with domestic tourists, foreign tourists better reflect that Tang'an is a Dong village with international projects, which makes us even more proud.'* (Interviewee T6, 03/2023)

Foreign tourists have enhanced the villagers' sense of pride and made them more aware of Tang'an Village's unique and important position in China's ethnic tourism sector.

The Governance Transition of the Ecomuseum and the Reshaping of Cultural Identity

Tang'an reveals how the management of ethnic tourism and heritage by the state within the framework of an ecomuseum affects the values, behaviours and identities of local communities. The establishment of Tang'an as an ecomuseum initially provided a platform for cultural preservation, making the village a symbol of Dong heritage. However, the subsequent transition to government-led management transformed this preservation into a more regimented and outward-facing mode of cultural expression. This shift was in line with broader state objectives to control and regulate representatives of ethnic minorities to ensure that minority cultures were constructed in a way that supported national unity and economic goals. Within this framework, the formation and expression of Dong identity has shifted after the government took over full management of Tang'an's culture. Under government management, the selection of cultural elements to prioritise is not just about heritage preservation; it is a strategic decision that influences how Dong culture is understood, expressed and consumed within local and national contexts.

Under private management, the Dong culture had relatively diverse forms of expression, including embroidery, agricultural traditions, and intergenerational knowledge transmission through oral traditions and music. After the government took over, the focus narrowed to a single dominant cultural element, the Grand Dong Song, while other aspects of cultural expression were marginalised. In Foucault's view, power is not merely exercised through direct political control, but also in the way knowledge is constructed and disseminated (1991). The restructuring of festivals into government-organised events

exemplifies this dynamic. While these festivals still serve as markers of ethnic identity, their transition from community-led celebrations to state-sponsored, tourism-oriented spectacles indicates a shift in power over cultural expression. By institutionalising these activities, governments can reshape the representation of minority cultures, aligning them with broader ideological and economic objectives. Tang'an's official status as an ecomuseum initially brought a sense of pride and identity, but the increasing institutionalisation of cultural practices has changed the way villagers interact with their own traditions. The development of tourism in minority regions of China often leads to the restructuring of local spaces to accommodate external narratives of cultural authenticity. Cultural practices are often restructured according to the expectations of external audiences, sometimes even leading to a redefinition of traditions themselves (MacCannell, 1973; Oakes, 2005).The replacement of the Grand Dong Gong Song Festival with the Spring Song Festival illustrates this transformation. While the former was a community-led event that served as a gathering for multiple Dong villages to share music in a relatively informal setting, the latter has been structured into a state-managed, competitive festival designed to attract tourists and showcase Dong culture in a controlled environment.

The presence of foreign tourists in Tang'an, though limited in number, plays a distinct role in shaping local identity and the perception of cultural heritage. Their visits, even if they are only fleeting, reinforce the global dimension of the village's identity and elevate its status above that of the several nearby Dong villages. The villagers' emphasis on foreign tourists' interest in Dong culture, along with the pride associated with their visits, highlights how external validation shapes the self-perception of cultural significance. Prestige and recognition, particularly from external authoritative sources, play a crucial role in defining the value of cultural practices and places (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013). In this context, foreign tourists serve as a form of symbolic capital, reinforcing the notion that Tang'an is not a remote Dong village but a site of international heritage and cultural exchange. Ethnic villages are often constructed as sites of cultural consumption, where cultural heritage is displayed to meet the expectations of external audiences (Oakes, 1992; Li, Yajuan et al., 2016). The villagers recognise and value the role of foreign tourists in affirming Tang'an's position in the global sphere. This fact indicates their awareness of how their cultural identity is positioned within broader tourism narratives. This view is

further supported by the fact that the 'Norwegian-built museum' is a key attraction for foreign tourists. Internationally recognised heritage projects have enhanced the cultural status of the village, moving it beyond being just a tourist attraction on a domestic Chinese tourist route. However, their awareness does not necessarily mean they have control over this positioning. Instead, the village's cultural identity is continuously shaped by the interactions between local aspirations, government policies, and external perceptions of authenticity.

The mention of European influencers who document and share information about China's ethnic minorities highlights the growing role of digital media in shaping tourism narratives. Social media influencers, who capture, edit and distribute their experiences online, play a key role in extending the representation of Dong culture beyond the immediate tourist encounter. Despite the symbolic importance of foreign tourism, the villagers' comments also revealed the limitations of this form of participation. In fact, most foreign tourists only stay for an hour or two (while Han tourists usually stay longer for photography purpose or better cultural experience), usually as an incidental part of a tour of Zhaoxing, which shows that Tang'an is still a minor attraction on the wider ethnic tourism circuit. This further confirms that ethnic tourism in China generally follows a hierarchy, with certain minority areas (such as those with large-scale tourist infrastructure) able to sustain international interest, while others like Tang'an are on the periphery. The villagers' comments indicate that they are aware of the transient nature of foreign tourists. While they appreciate the recognition and prestige that international tourists bring, they also acknowledge that these tourists come here primarily because of Tang'an's connections with outside institutions, rather than for in-depth engagement with Dong culture. The villagers recognise that, within the cultural showcase, they occupy the role of the observed and that their own narratives are embedded in a larger political-economic context. The villagers' attitudes towards foreign tourists illustrate how cultural identity is continuously negotiated within the ecomuseum framework. Although the ecomuseum was originally conceived as a community-driven initiative, the representation of Dong culture is shaped by multiple actors, including government authorities, the tourism industry and global audiences. Foreign tourists contribute to this process by reinforcing the prestige of Tang'an's cultural heritage, yet their visits also reveal the limitations of

external recognition, where global interest does not necessarily lead to sustained engagement or local control over cultural narratives.

4.3 Zhenshan

4.3.1 The Ban and Li Clans: Foundations of Zhenshan Village's Social Structure

Zhenshan Village, a Buyi ethnic community, has a long history shaped by the interplay of lineage, power, and identity. The village's traditional social structure is deeply rooted in the historical migration and settlement of two dominant clans, the Ban and Li families. According to genealogical records, the origins of these two families can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty, when a military officer, Li Renyu, originally from Luling County in Jiangxi, arrived in the region as part of the Ming government's military expeditions.

Li Renyu's settlement in the region marked the beginning of a social transformation. Following the death of his Han Chinese wife due to acclimatisation issues, he married a local Buyi woman, often referred to as the "Buyi Ancestress". This union created a unique sociopolitical structure in Zhenshan, as their two sons were given different surnames. One inherited the Li name, while the other took on the Ban surname. This division led to the establishment of a dual-surname system that shaped the village's internal social organisation for generations. The village's genealogical records indicate that, despite maintaining separate surnames, the two clans operated as a single kinship group, reflected in the common phrase among villagers: "班李一家" (*bānlǐ yìjiā*, Ban and Li are one family). This identity was reinforced by marriage customs, land ownership, and communal governance. However, despite this unity, intra-clan relations were characterised by both cooperation and competition, particularly in matters of leadership and authority within the village.

The genealogical records of Zhenshan establish strict lineage rules. The Ban and Li families are considered one extended family and are forbidden from intermarrying.

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Marriage practices follow exogamous principles, ensuring that internal clan relationships remain stable. As noted in the genealogical records:

"Ban and Li are of the same origin and must not marry within the clan."

In traditional Buyi society, this rule was absolute:

"People of the same clan could not marry each other. If you are Ban or Li, you must find a spouse from outside. Even if you live in different parts of the village, if you share the same ancestry, marriage is forbidden."

This principle extended beyond the Ban and Li families and applied to the broader village. Historically, intermarriage with the Miao ethnic group was also rare. According to older residents, the Miao population in the region did not own land, leading to a social and economic hierarchy in which Miao people often worked for Buyi landowners.

Kinship and Identity Recognition

Kinship in Zhenshan extends beyond immediate families, forming multi-tiered structures of social organisation (Jin, 2016). Villagers distinguish between different layers of kinship:

- <u>The Large Clan</u> – This includes all members of the Ban and Li families, even those who migrated to neighbouring villages such as Lichun Village across the Huaxi Reservoir.
- <u>The Middle Clan</u> – Descendants of the 11th-generation "Cai" (彩) ancestor form distinct sub-lineages within the Ban and Li families, each maintaining collective responsibility for rituals and ceremonies.
- <u>The Small Family</u> – Individual nuclear families within the larger lineage system, often maintaining direct inheritance lines.

Through these kinship structures, social and economic relations within the village are tightly regulated. Land and property are inherited along patrilineal lines, and family members rely on one another for labour and financial support. During important life events such as weddings and funerals, the extended clan gathers to offer collective assistance and perform ancestral rites. Historically, the social structure of Zhenshan was

built around patriarchal clan authority, with elders playing a crucial role in decision-making and dispute resolution. The Ban and Li clans controlled village affairs through lineage councils, in which the heads of prominent families convened to settle disputes, allocate land, and organise collective labour efforts. Social mobility was largely determined by one's lineage position, with descendants of influential elders holding a privileged status within the community. Figure 4-4 presents the traditional village governance structure in Zhenshan.
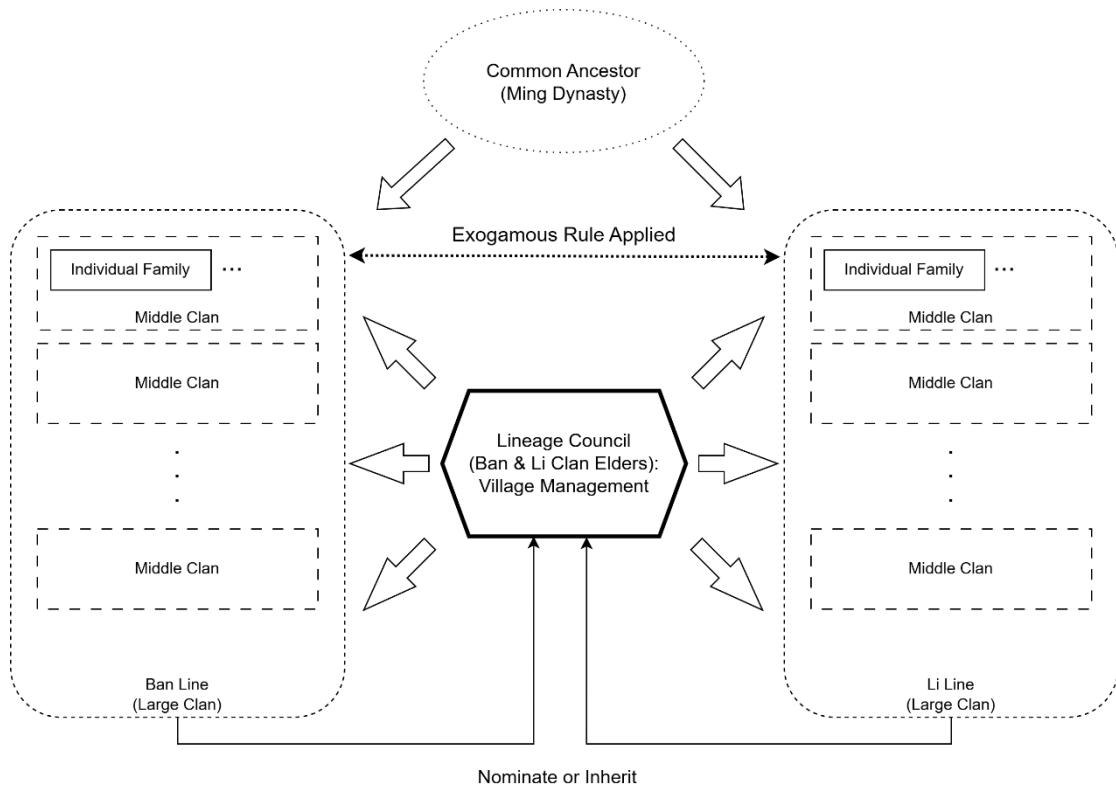
Figure 4-4 Traditional village governance structure in Zhenshan
Created by the author, 2024

The Ban clan, as the earlier settlers, initially held a dominant social position within the village. Their control over land and resources gave them an advantage in communal leadership. However, the arrival of Li Renyu and his subsequent rise in influence altered the balance of power. As a former military officer, Li Renyu and his descendants leveraged their political connections and martial background to establish their own authority, eventually achieving a level of parity with the Ban clan. A unique feature of Zhenshan's social organisation was the flexibility in surname adoption. While lineage typically dictated one's surname, in some cases, individuals switched between Ban and Li surnames depending on social or economic circumstances. Some villagers would use

the Li surname when engaging in official or external affairs but revert to the Ban surname within the community. This practice reinforced the idea that Ban and Li were fundamentally a single extended family, with surname distinctions existing on a surface level rather than reflecting deep divisions.

Genealogy plays a central role in shaping identity in Zhenshan (Jin, 2016). Villagers maintain detailed ancestral records and establish lineage through both oral tradition and written texts. The importance of ancestor worship is reflected in the village's architecture and rituals. Every household maintains a family shrine where ancestral tablets are displayed, accompanied by offerings. Men are responsible for maintaining lineage continuity. Upon marriage, a man is expected to establish his own household shrine, marking his transition into an independent family unit. The village genealogy also establishes a strict naming system, assigning specific generational characters to each successive lineage. This system ensured that every male descendant could find his place in the family hierarchy. Even today, villagers follow this tradition when naming their children. This practice strengthens kinship ties and maintains continuity in social organisation. Clan identity is also physically marked in burial practices. Even though Ban and Li are recognised as one extended family, villagers still differentiate between the burial sites of their respective ancestors. As one villager (Interviewee Z4) explained:

> *"Our ancestor is Jinshan, and his tomb is in the Ban family's cemetery. During Qingming, we visit his grave. The Li family's ancestor is Heshan, and they go to their own cemetery." (Interviewee Z4, 02/2023)*

This distinction reflects both unity and separation within the village's dual-lineage system. While Ban and Li share historical origins, their social identities remain distinct in ritual and spatial organisation.

Shifting to The Intersection of Modern Governance and Clan Power

The mid-20th century brought radical shifts in Zhenshan's social structure. The establishment of the People's Republic of China and the implementation of land reform policies in the 1950s dismantled the historical dominance of the Ban and Li families. Under the new socialist government, land and resources were redistributed, and class-

based divisions were redefined. Members of the traditional village elite, who had once controlled large swathes of farmland, saw their power significantly diminished as collectivisation policies were enforced. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), ancestral halls were demolished, genealogical records were destroyed, and clan authority was replaced by state-appointed village cadres. The traditional governance model was broken because political ideology took precedence over the clan. Although these changes reshaped formal leadership structures, informal clan networks persisted. Even as the state redefined governance, kinship ties continued to influence economic cooperation and social relations.

Zhenshan has undergone a change in management, from a family leadership system dominated by clan elders to a structured governance model influenced by government policies and administrative supervision (see Figure 4-5). The previously mentioned village director, Director Ban, remains a key figure representing both traditional authority and modern governance. Director Ban, the leader of the Zhenshan Village Council, occupies a unique position that bridges both traditional Buyi clan authority and contemporary governance under the Chinese state. His influence extends across multiple domains, from heritage management to government relations, making him a pivotal figure in the local implementation of the ecomuseum model. Director Ban plays a dual role in Zhenshan village. As a member of the Ban family, he enjoys respect and influence within the village's traditional kinship structure. At the same time, his long-standing collaboration with government officials, heritage experts and international scholars has made him a key figure in Zhenshan village's modern governance framework.
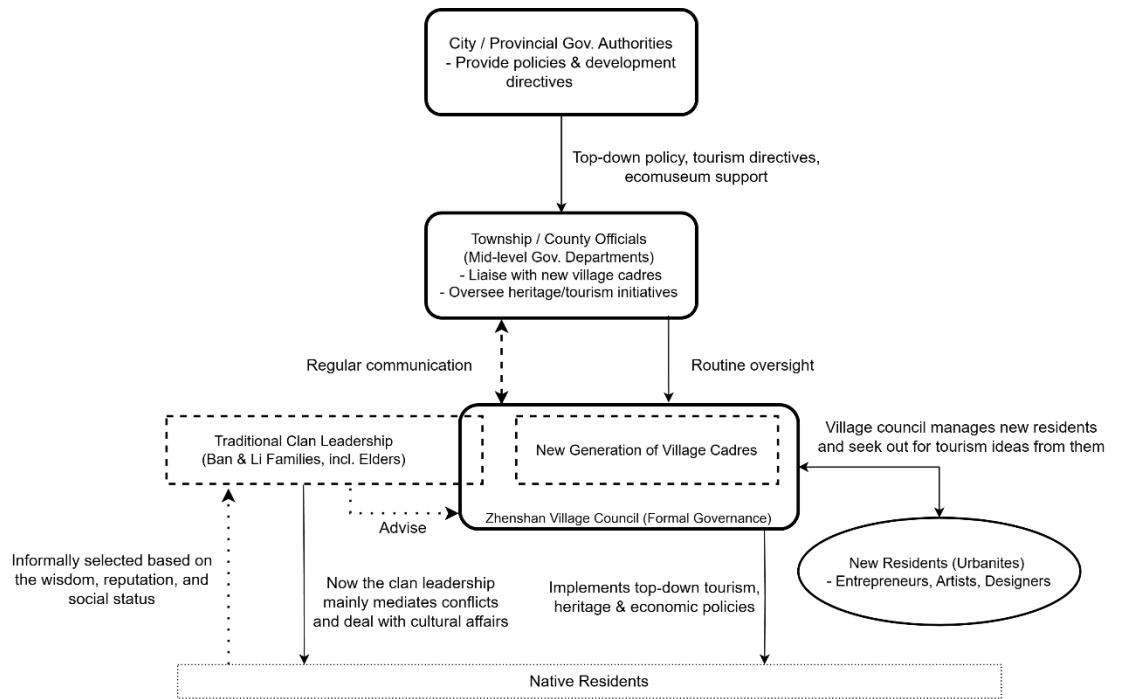
Figure 4-5 Current village governance structure in Zhenshan
Created by the author, 2024

His leadership responsibilities extend beyond traditional clan affairs. He is deeply involved in the management of Zhenshan Ecomuseum, both as information centre curator and village committee director, and as a liaison between the village and the government. His dual authority allows him to navigate between local and national governance structures, making him an indispensable figure in the village's evolving administrative system. A key factor in his ability to coordinate is his overseas experience in Norway. He was trained in the concept of ecomuseums in Norway. This experience gave him first-hand knowledge of international heritage management practices, which he has applied to local governance. During my fieldwork in Zhenshan, when I asked villagers about the ecomuseum, they all unanimously recommended him to me, saying,

> *'You should ask Director Ban. He knows everything about the ecomuseum.'*
> *(Interviewee Z5, Z6, 11/2022)*

This underlines his role as the main knowledge holder and interpreter of the ecomuseum concept, both for locals and outsiders. His ability to articulate the heritage concept in a way that is consistent with government policy, while resonating with local cultural narratives, further reinforces his leadership position.

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One of Director Ban's most important responsibilities is to act as an intermediary between local villagers and government authorities. He has long-standing relationships with government officials involved in the ecomuseum project, which gives him influence in policy discussions.

Different from other village leaders who only deal with local township officials, Director Ban maintains close connections with city and provincial government leaders. Whenever these officials return to Zhenshan for inspections or visits, he is responsible for receiving them and ensuring that their interactions with the village are in line with the official heritage tourism agenda. A local resident commented on this dynamic:

> *'When government personnel come to visit, he is responsible for receiving them. He speaks their language and knows how to deal with them.' (Interviewee Z2, 02/2023)*

Through these interactions, Director Ban has integrated the Chinese government's grassroots governance strategy into the management of Zhenshan County, ensuring that national policies are combined with local needs.

However, a new generation of highly educated young cadres has emerged, reshaping the village's decision-making process and aligning governance with the broader regional policies of Guiyang's Huaxi District. Huaxi District is known for its urban development and cultural tourism planning, which provides policy guidance for the governance of Zhenshan. This administrative structure is different from that of villages in remote rural areas, where local autonomy is stronger and governance is largely unaffected by urban planning strategies. In recent years, a new generation of young cadres from Zhenshan Village has begun to take on important village leadership roles. Unlike previous village leaders, who were selected from prominent local families, these cadres are highly educated professionals with postgraduate degrees who previously worked in big cities, especially in the economically developed coastal areas of southern China. Their urban upbringings and academic training have given them a different perspective on governance from that of traditional rural leaders.

The turnover of governance personnel has brought new decision-making styles, blending academic theory, policy-driven development strategies and a more technocratic approach to village management. Unlike in the past, when consensus was based on clan ties and informal leadership networks, governance in Zhenshan now incorporates systematic planning, statistical analysis and policy coordination with higher-level administrative bodies in the western Huaxi region.

One villager pointed out the difference between the old and new leadership styles:

> *'In the past, decisions were made by the elders based on past practices. Now, the young leaders bring ideas from the big cities.' (Interviewee Z2, 02/2023)*

This generational shift is evident in the way governance plans are proposed and discussed. Young cadres regularly evaluate policies, propose detailed governance plans, and integrate village projects with the broader urban development strategy of Guiyang City. Unlike previous decision-making processes, which were based primarily on collective discussions among older villagers, the new governance model is more structured, data-driven, and aligned with the overall tourism policy of Huaxi District.

The Integration of New Residents and Changes in Social Relations in Zhenshan

As governance in Zhenshan shifts from traditional clan authority to a more bureaucratic and policy-driven model under young government-appointed cadres, another significant factor shaping local social relations is the growing participation of new residents, including urban entrepreneurs, artists, and business owners who have settled in the village. Their presence adds a new dimension to community dynamics, as they engage in economic ventures, cultural reinterpretation, and social interactions that further reshape power structures within Zhenshan. These new residents are highly valued by the official staff in the village. When I asked some questions about the ecomuseum and the traditional culture of Zhenshan, these young government staff members suggested that I ask the artists or designers living in Zhenshan. They believe that these new residents have a high level of cultural attainment and a new interpretation of traditional culture, hence they can inspire me. However, during my fieldwork, I observed that these new arrivals were

capitalising on Zhenshan's tranquil and picturesque environment, traditional architecture, and convenient access to the city centre to establish their own studios and develop businesses or artistic projects, rather than engaging with or exploring Buyi culture in the village.

While the young cadres primarily focus on policy implementation and economic planning, these new villagers influence daily life, tourism development, and the evolving representation of Buyi heritage, introducing greater complexity into village governance and social relations. The arrival of new residents in Zhenshan Village has significantly impacted intra-community social relations, introducing new economic, cultural, and governance dynamics that have reshaped traditional social structures. Historically, social relations in Zhenshan were primarily structured around kinship networks, with the Ban and Li clans maintaining control over village affairs. However, as governance has shifted from clan-based authority to state-led administration, the presence of urban migrants, including artists, designers, and business owners, has further complicated the social fabric. These newcomers, although initially outsiders, have gradually established their own roles within the community, influencing local economic patterns, cultural narratives, and interpersonal relationships.

The Decline of Villagers' Power and the Rise of Market-Driven Decision-Making

A profound change in the exercise of power is quietly taking place in villages in China (Sun, X. et al., 2013). The change of power and social relations in Zhenshan reflects the restructuring of contemporary rural governance in China, with the intertwining of official state power, economic forces and heritage protection. Traditionally, kinship networks and clan leaders structured the relationships within the community, but these are now gradually being replaced by policy-driven governance, led by young cadres appointed by the government and influenced by new urban settlers, who have integrated into Zhenshan's evolving social and economic landscape. This transition is centred on the advent of young, highly educated cadres who now oversee the development of the village. Unlike traditional local leaders (e.g. the Director Ban) who symbolise the integration of Buyi authority with top-down governance, these cadres do not view the ecomuseum model as a valid governance tool. Local governments in China are at the bottom of a

pressure-based system and bear the brunt of dealing with most collective conflicts and local socio-economic development (Hu, J. et al., 2018). They are primarily concerned with implementing higher-level government policies that align the village's pathway with the Huaxi District's urban and economic development agenda. Their performance is assessed based on economic indicators, infrastructure expansion, and integration with the broader regional economy, rather than cultural heritage protection or community-led initiatives.

While Director Ban retains cultural influence, particularly in heritage curation and government relations, his role in economic governance is increasingly overshadowed by young cadres who prioritise modernisation and revenue-driven initiatives. Unlike historical governance structures, where elders and lineage leaders exercised authority over village affairs, these officials derive their legitimacy not from community relationships but from their bureaucratic roles and administrative expertise. In China's officially designated historic and cultural villages (*lìshǐwénhuà míngcūn*, 历史文化名村), the failure to achieve community empowerment has largely resulted from ineffective mechanisms for protecting the public interest, as well as the unequal power relationship between Village Committees and villagers, leading to further power imbalances within the community (Weng and Peng, 2014). One of the notable aspects of this transformation is the cadres' preference for consulting new residents, including urban entrepreneurs, artists, and business owners, rather than long-standing Buyi villagers. In my conversations with officials, it became clear that these urban newcomers are regarded as valuable stakeholders due to their economic investments, business expertise, and ability to connect the village to larger urban markets. Unlike local villagers, whose perspectives are shaped by localised concerns, kinship ties, and traditional livelihoods, new residents offer solutions that align more closely with policy-driven governance models. A government worker noted:

> *"We need to develop the village in a way that makes economic sense. The artists and business owners understand market demand and tourism trends better than the local people." (Interviewee Z10, 02/2023)*

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As Haywood (1988) argued, resort enclave tourism planning in developing countries, despite being described as "integrated," often restricts community involvement. The lack of financial resources and social support among local villagers, as well as the strong networks of political and economic elites, limits local participation in tourism activities (Tian et al., 2023). This selective consultation process reinforces the emerging economic hierarchy in Zhenshan, where the voices of wealthier, urban-connected individuals carry more influence than those of local Buyi villagers, many of whom have limited involvement in broader economic planning. This shift reflects broader trends in China's rural governance, as market-driven actors gain greater influence in decision-making processes while local autonomy continues to diminish. Tourism enterprises are frequently controlled by external capital, and their economic autonomy plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which community interests are acknowledged or overlooked, directly influencing local participation (Reggers et al., 2019; Xu, H. et al., 2019).

As Zhenshan engages with the ecomuseum framework, the representation of Buyi culture is increasingly shaped by interactions with tourists (Luo, 2018). Travel not only provides a setting for ethnic identity to be displayed but also influences how it is constructed, adapted, and negotiated in response to visitor expectations. The ecomuseum serves as both a space for cultural presentation and a mechanism through which identity is selectively framed. The following section explores how Buyi culture is presented to tourists, examining the processes of curation, performance, and reinterpretation that shape minority representation in Zhenshan.

4.3.2 Minority Representation for Tourists

The integration of Zhenshan into Huaxi District's holistic tourism policy has significantly transformed its tourism model, shifting the focus from heritage and cultural tourism to a leisure-oriented destination. While originally established as an ecomuseum aimed at preserving and showcasing Buyi culture, Zhenshan now functions primarily as a weekend retreat. A local villager (Interviewee Z6) who runs a restaurant in Zhenshan told me:

> '*Most tourists in Zhenshan come from downtown Guiyang or nearby provinces, and they mainly go on short recreational trips. They usually stay for 2-3 days.*' (Interviewee Z6, 02/2023)

As Huaxi District is dotted with several well-known historical ancient villages and sites of ancient civilisation, Zhenshan is mostly used as a weekend getaway in terms of tourism, providing tourists with a leisurely escape from city life rather than an immersive cultural experience.

From Cultural Showcases to Leisure Tourism

The boat rowing activity in Zhenshan has become one of the most popular attractions for tourists, particularly during the summer months. Situated on a peninsula within the Huaxi Reservoir, the village provides visitors with a scenic water experience, allowing them to explore the reservoir while enjoying the natural surroundings (see Figure 4-6). The activity is operated by local villagers, who manage small wooden boats and ferry tourists across the calm waters in a relaxed, leisurely manner. A local villager overseeing the rowing activities (Interviewee Z12) explained,

> *"Tourists who come here really like this activity. It takes about an hour each time, and after looking at the reservoir, they have a barbecue." (Interviewee Z12, 02/2023)*

Figure 4-6 Boat rowing business in Zhenshan, Photographed by the author, 2023

Each trip lasts approximately one hour, during which tourists sit in the boat while the villager rows, giving them time to take in the view, enjoy the cool breeze, and take photos. The boats are simple but well-maintained, and the experience is designed to be slow-paced and relaxing, offering visitors a chance to escape the city and immerse themselves in nature. In contrast to previous decades, when tourism focused mainly on Buyi cultural exhibitions, folk performances and heritage tourism activities, the current model gives priority to nature and leisure activities that are largely unrelated to the Buyi identity (Luo, 2018). Buyi festivals are an important symbol of community identity, but they have now almost completely disappeared from the public life of Zhenshan. Apart from ancestor worship ceremonies, which are still an internal, family-centred custom, the village no longer holds any major community celebrations or public Buyi cultural events.

Another key element of the Zhenshan tourism economy is the accommodation sector, which has developed into a two-tier system that reflects both local and external influences. More basic and cheaper accommodation options are run by local Buyi villagers to serve the needs of tourists seeking affordable accommodation. Investors, designers and urban

artists from outside the village have established high-end boutique B&Bs, cultural studios and well-designed guesthouses, incorporating elements of traditional Buyi architecture into the design to attract wealthier customers. These accommodation facilities take local stone houses as the visual basis and incorporate modern interior designs that cater to urban aesthetic preferences, stylistically interpreting Buyi traditions.

This transformation is closely linked to government conservation policies. Due to strict heritage conservation regulations based on the ecomuseum approach, the Buyi villagers, who lacked the financial resources to properly maintain their traditional stone houses, gradually relocated to newly built houses in the lower village. This led to external investors and urban entrepreneurs renting or buying these traditional dwellings and renovating them into tourist-friendly spaces that meet government conservation standards. These renovated houses are no longer used as local residences, but as tourist accommodation, cafes or boutique commercial spaces (such as a root carving studio) where tourists can stay, take photos and participate in curated cultural experiences.

Urban investors, designers and artists are having an increasing impact on Zhenshan's tourism and cultural landscape, and they are actively reshaping the display and ownership of the Buyi heritage. These newcomers are no longer just economic players; they are now key drivers in curating, modifying and commercialising cultural elements, influencing how the Buyi traditions are preserved and presented to tourists. This shift has brought about a transformation in which traditional cultural practices and built spaces are repurposed to suit the preferences of urban consumers, often prioritising aesthetics and marketability over authenticity. I consider the gentrification of rural tourism in China to be an adequate concept to describe the current trends in Zhenshan. The influx of these middle-class rural tourism gentry not only brought economic revitalisation, but also triggered a shift in representation and control of the ethnic heritage (Chen et al., 2024).These newcomers bring with them aesthetic preferences, market-driven strategies, and government-backed development models that progressively alter how Buyi identity is framed and commodified in the ecomuseum setting.

The term "gentrification" originally referred to the process of middle-class newcomers renovating homes, displacing working-class residents. As the concept has been applied to various contexts and evolved into various forms, however, its classic definition has also been widely debated (Glass, 1960). It initially focused on the restoration of residential buildings, and later expanded the scope to include a wide range of land uses in both urban and rural environments (Ley, 2003; Waley, 2016). Clark, E. (2004, p.263) broadens the concept to include transformations in various forms of land use. He defines gentrification as "a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital".

A national policy issued by the China National Tourism Administration introduced the term Rural Tourism Maker (RTM) to describe a new group of urban-rural migrants (Chen et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2024). Although the policy document does not offer a precise definition of RTMs, it provides examples of those who may fall into this category, including teams of graduates, urban-to-rural return migrants, professional artists, and young entrepreneurs. By attracting these groups to areas with abundant rural tourism resources, a strong foundation for tourism development, and significant growth potential, local governments seek to establish an innovative model for rural tourism. In practice, this approach primarily involves the creation of folk custom homestays and cultural studios, which has contributed to the gentrification of rural tourism. Rather than limiting gentrification to residential buildings, the gentrification of tourism in developing countries plays a significant role in driving local tourism development. The primary participants in this process are the urban middle class, who simultaneously act as consumers of the idealised rural landscape and as creators of the transformed rural tourism environment (Chan et al., 2016).

Gentrification and Changing Social Relations

The concept of displacement is one of the key concepts in gentrification studies. It was originally used to describe the eviction of local residents from gentrified neighbourhoods due to rising housing prices (Phillips, 1993). Some researchers have criticised the narrow definition of displacement, arguing that gentrification's impact extends beyond direct displacement (Marcuse, 1985; Davidson, 2009). Marcuse (1985, p.207), observed in New

York that 'displacement affects more than just those who are actually displaced at a given moment', and proposed an expanded definition to include 'exclusionary displacement' and 'displacement under pressure'. The former prevents certain population groups from moving into gentrified areas, while the latter refers to changes that make a place no longer suitable for long-term residents. These two forms are collectively referred to as indirect displacement in gentrification research. Unlike the classic Western model of gentrification, which often leads to the direct displacement of original residents due to rising property values, the process in China, particularly in Zhenshan, unfolds in a more negotiated and gradual manner. China's rural land use policy is a special homestead system. As full members of the village, rural residents have the right to use rural homesteads to build homes, but they do not have the right to legally sell them to outsiders. This is why some rural residents in China actively revitalise real estate and capture the value of land by renting out their homes to newcomers. Several people I interviewed who rent out old stone houses said,

> *'We are very glad that someone is willing to take over this house. Now that the government has such high standards for renovations, we can't just demolish it and build a new one. It's cold and dark in there. This way, we can get money and move into a new house. And look how nicely they've fixed it up, even making use of the pigsty.' (Interviewee Z5, Z6, 02/2023)*

Local villagers showed that they could be active agents in gentrification, rather than victims. To explain why this process is often negotiated rather than openly contested in Zhenshan, I now turn to human relationships (*rénqíng*, 人情) as a key social mechanism through which gentrification is locally mediated.

The negotiation of cultural identity and economic roles in Zhenshan's gentrified tourism economy is shaped not only by market forces and external investment but also by the dynamics of rénqíng. Rural Chinese society is explained as being 'largely influenced by people's embedded hierarchical social relations networks (*guānxī*, 关系), the public nature of obligations, and the long-standing practice of obliging through the conscious manipulation of face and related symbols (Hwang, 1987, p.944)'. Fei et al. (1992) conceptualised villages through the idea of a 'differential order structure,' describing them as communities connected by kinship ties. This social system is not founded on

equality but instead follows a hierarchical and differentiated model, creating a bounded network of relatives and acquaintances. Local villagers have already integrated into local social networks and practise human relationships in their daily lives, while new residents need to adapt to these networks. In this sense, rénqíng helps clarify how gentrification is practically organised in everyday life, through obligations, reciprocity, and recognition of local authority rather than only through market logics.

The peaceful relationship between locals and newcomers in Zhenshan's tourism-driven transformation is deeply rooted in a rénqíng-structured social order, where interpersonal relationships, social obligations, and long-term reciprocity shape interactions. Unlike cases of gentrification where tensions emerge from economic competition and cultural displacement, Zhenshan demonstrates a model in which locals and newcomers negotiate their roles in a way that fosters mutual accommodation. One of the key reasons for this stability is the village's demographic structure. With most young people having migrated to Guiyang City for work, Zhenshan is now largely inhabited by middle-aged and elderly villagers, who serve as the primary bearers of traditional Buyi cultural knowledge. The new residents, including entrepreneurs, artists, and designers, recognise the prestige and authority of these elders and actively seek their advice and guidance on cultural matters rather than imposing changes unilaterally. This deference to traditional figures reinforces a system of respect and consultation, ensuring that the arrival of newcomers is not perceived as disruptive but as an extension of existing social networks. Instead of resisting the influence of these new residents, older villagers acknowledge their role in sustaining elements of Buyi heritage that might otherwise decline, even if its representation is adapted for tourism purposes.

Another key factor in the smooth integration of newcomers is the absence of direct economic competition between local and external homestay operators. Zhenshan's hospitality sector has evolved into a dual-tiered system, where local villagers continue to run simple, budget-friendly guesthouses that attract tourists seeking a low-cost, community-based experience, while newcomers operate higher-end boutique accommodations catering to middle-class and affluent urban visitors. When I was eating

at a restaurant run by a local villager, the villager, hearing that I was there to research the ecomuseum, enthusiastically told me,

> *'I also have a place to stay, but it's very simple and I'm afraid you won't be used to it. You should go to the B&B run by the artist in upper village. The environment there is beautiful and comfortable, and there are many ethnic minority embroideries. And they can tell you about the museum!' (Interviewee Z13, 02/2023)*

Since these two accommodation types serve different market segments, there is no financial conflict between them, and local villagers do not feel that their businesses are being undermined or displaced by wealthier outsiders. Instead, they view their businesses as complementary to the broader tourism economy, which continues to attract new visitors, creating additional opportunities for local employment and small-scale entrepreneurship. The absence of overlapping economic interests further reduces the potential for social tensions, ensuring that the economic relationship between locals and newcomers remains rooted in cooperation rather than competition. Clan elders were happy to see their old houses rented out with additional income. Beyond economic compatibility, government support has been instrumental in facilitating the acceptance of new residents in Zhenshan. Unlike in other cases of gentrification, where outsiders move into rural areas independently and often face resistance from local authorities, entrepreneurs and artists in Zhenshan have been actively welcomed by government officials.

This rare convergence, where both clan elders and government officials actively welcome newcomers, rests on two interlocking sets of rules: the village's informal, kin-based norms and the formal state regulations that govern land and business access. The informal institutions have their roots in the clan-based family system, which is widely accepted in rural communities in the form of natural law (Liu, Q. et al., 2023). The formal institutions are established by the authoritarian bureaucratic system that extends to rural communities. They are all promulgated by the state or local governments and have collectivist characteristics, so their regulatory effectiveness is mainly reflected at the land level (Ho, 2017). China's rural areas today are in a complex environment where formal and informal

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institutional factors are intertwined. This arrangement is tolerated by the state because it significantly reduces the cost of grassroots management. While maintaining the autonomy of rural communities, the Chinese government has gradually strengthened its control over the dynamics of population, land, industry, etc. through coercive institutional forces (Creel, 1974; Huang et al., 2024). The government views these newcomers as contributors to the village's tourism strategy, recognising their role in attracting investment, strengthening the village's identity, and linking Zhenshan to wider urban markets. By presenting them as part of the village's development, officials have ensured that local residents do not see them as outsiders taking away opportunities but as partners in economic growth. This official backing has strengthened the position of newcomers in the community, preventing resistance or resentment from traditional Buyi society. However, despite the apparent balance, underlying structural inequalities may influence the long-term direction of Zhenshan's tourism economy. While locals continue to hold cultural significance in the community, their economic influence is gradually declining as the most profitable areas of tourism, such as boutique accommodations, cultural venues, and heritage branding, are increasingly controlled by newcomers. Locals remain involved in the tourism sector but often as service providers rather than key decision-makers, allowing them to benefit financially while having limited influence over the representation of Buyi identity within the ecomuseum framework.

Despite ongoing transformations, local social norms help ease tensions, allowing gentrification to be negotiated rather than contested. With most young villagers working in Guiyang, Zhenshan is now mainly home to middle-aged and elderly Buyi residents, who hold cultural authority but little economic power in tourism. Newcomers seek their approval when incorporating Buyi elements into tourism ventures, maintaining traditional social relationships. Economic conflict is also minimised, as locals run budget accommodations while newcomers focus on high-end boutique stays. Government support further legitimises their presence, framing gentrification as part of development rather than an external imposition. However, while these social accommodations sustain short-term harmony, they do not prevent the gradual erosion of local cultural agency. The next section builds on this negotiated form of gentrification by examining its effects on cultural representation within the ecomuseum framework.

Ecomuseum Challenges and the Future of Buyi Identity

Building on the discussion above, this section considers how negotiated gentrification reshapes the representation of Buyi identity and the terms of cultural authority in Zhenshan's ecomuseum. The representation of Buyi identity for tourists in the ecomuseum of Zhenshan has undergone significant transformations, shifting from an initial emphasis on cultural preservation to a model increasingly shaped by leisure tourism and commercial interests. While the ecomuseum framework was originally designed to empower local communities in the curation and management of their own heritage, the contemporary tourism model in Zhenshan reflects a growing detachment from this participatory vision. This shift raises critical questions about the authenticity of cultural representation, the role of market-driven tourism in reshaping ethnic identity, and the extent to which the ecomuseum can still function as a meaningful heritage-preservation mechanism. Today, the most popular tourist activity in Zhenshan is a boat trip on the Huaxi Reservoir, often with a barbecue on the shore or on the boat. While these activities bring economic benefits to the locals, they also mean that theyare becoming increasingly alienated from the cultural heritage of the Buyi people, as the experiences most valued by tourists have barely any connection with the traditional way of life that the ecomuseum is trying to preserve.

Gentrification has also had a profound effect on the authenticity of Buyi culture, creating a version of heritage that is selective, commodified, and shaped by market forces. While Zhenshan still retains some traditional cultural markers, such as Buyi architecture and folk motifs, these elements are often presented in ways that prioritise tourist expectations rather than community realities. The interiors of traditional homes, for instance, have been redesigned to fit modern urban aesthetics, with contemporary furnishings and carefully arranged decorations that appeal to wealthy city dwellers seeking a nostalgic yet comfortable rural experience. This reflects what scholars of tourism gentrification describe as the paradox of heritage preservation under market capitalism, where material culture is preserved in form but hollowed out in meaning, serving as a visual spectacle rather than a lived tradition (Gill-Robinson, 2007; Schmitt, 2022). While Buyi villagers may still live in the village, the cultural landscape they inhabit is increasingly shaped by external forces, making their role in defining their own heritage increasingly peripheral.

The case of Zhenshan's minority representation within the ecomuseum framework highlights a fundamental paradox in China's rural heritage tourism model. While the ecomuseum was originally intended to support community-led heritage preservation, its role in Zhenshan has largely been absorbed into a broader tourism economy that prioritises leisure and aesthetic appeal over cultural authenticity and sustainability. This raises critical questions about whether ecomuseums in China can still fulfil their original role as cultural preservation mechanisms or whether they have become instruments of branding and economic development at the expense of community agency. As Zhenshan continues to develop as a leisure tourism destination, it remains uncertain whether Buyi villagers will retain a meaningful role in shaping their own cultural representation or whether their heritage will become further detached from its original context, existing primarily as a curated spectacle for external consumption. If current trends persist, Zhenshan's ecomuseum may lose its original identity altogether, transforming into a heritage-themed tourism village that retains only the superficial markers of its cultural past rather than serving as a living representation of Buyi heritage as it was originally intended.

4.4 Comparative Analysis of Social Relations and Ethnic Identity Representation

The transformations of Zhenshan and Tang'an under the framework of ecomuseums, rural gentrification and state-led tourism policies demonstrate how ethnic minority villages in China have responded to changes in governance, cultural representation and social relations. Both villages were initially intended to become community-led models of heritage conservation, but their development diverged due to differing state interventions, external investments and the resilience of traditional social structures. While both underwent significant power restructuring and cultural adaptation, the way these changes unfolded reveals broader patterns of ethnic heritage management and rural tourism development. A comparison of Zhenshan and Tang'an provides insights into the ongoing transformation of ethnic minority heritage sites, in which external forces increasingly influence governance, cultural identity and social interaction.

Under the influence of the ecomuseum policy and tourism-driven development, the restructuring of power in Zhenshan and Tang'an reveals two distinct governance tracks, reflecting broader tensions between grassroots governance, state intervention, and market forces. In both villages, the traditional leadership structure, historically rooted in kinship networks, ritual authority, and community consensus, has been challenged by formal state governance and the demands of the tourism economy. However, there are key differences between the two cases in terms of the strength of local institutions, the role of external investors, and the degree of control that grassroots governance has over cultural representation.

A central question arising from this comparison is whether the weakening of traditional power in both villages is accelerating the decline of the ecomuseum model, leading to its transformation into a generic, resort-style tourist destination. The ecomuseum was originally designed with a bottom-up approach to cultural conservation, allowing local communities to actively shape the representation of their heritage. However, the redistribution of power in both villages suggests that local institutions have been undermined to varying degrees. This has resulted in a shift away from the ecomuseum's original objectives towards a more market-driven and state-controlled model of tourism development.

Zhenshan: The Dissolution of Traditional Authority and The Transition to A Market-oriented Resort

In Zhenshan, the erosion of traditional leadership, and the subsequent growth of state-appointed governance, and the rise of external investors have diminished the village's role in shaping its own heritage representation. Tourism, now the primary economic driver, has transformed the ecomuseum from a cultural preservation initiative into a commercial tourism product aligned with national economic strategies rather than community-led governance. The removal of hereditary authority figures, such as Director Ban, accelerated this shift. Previously, such figures mediated between traditional governance and state policy, ensuring some local input in heritage management. However, as Zhenshan became more embedded in regional tourism planning, traditional governance structures were replaced by state-appointed cadres focused on economic growth, investment, and national heritage policies, sidelining cultural sustainability.

This shift in governance has led to several key consequences. The formal governance system, now dominated by government officials, controls major decisions regarding land use, conservation policies, and tourism development, with little input from the local community. At the same time, the informal social system based on clan decision-making has weakened, reducing villagers' ability and motivation to negotiate cultural authenticity in tourism development. Additionally, economic power has shifted to external investors, reinforcing a gentrification model where the most profitable sectors of the tourism industry are controlled by urban entrepreneurs rather than the local community.

The impact of this shift in power was not only a change in governance, but also a fundamental redefinition of the ecomuseum. Instead of serving as a platform for the community's cultural expression, the Zhenshan ecomuseum increasingly took on the character of a general rural resort, with heritage elements retained only if they contributed to the economic survival of the village's tourism industry. The cultural expressions of the Buyi people were no longer integrated into everyday life as traditions, but rather commercialised attractions curated by external actors, undermining the authenticity of the cultural expressions that the ecomuseum was originally intended to protect. The management transition in Zhenshan demonstrates the gradual unravelling of the ecomuseum model as a tool for cultural sustainability. Rather than empowering the local community to protect their traditions, state control and private investment have turned heritage into a consumable product, divorced from the social and ritual contexts in which it once existed. As the village continues to function more as a leisure tourism destination than a heritage conservation site, its Bouyei identity risks becoming increasingly superficial, existing primarily in curated aesthetic symbols rather than as a living practice.

Tang'an: The Role of Traditional Governance in Maintaining Sociocultural Stability

Compared to Zhenshan, Tang'an has retained stronger traditional leadership structures, particularly in terms of managing social relations and cultural representation. While family-based governance remains a positive force in mediating local interests and state policy, it is increasingly being incorporated into formal governance frameworks, raising questions about whether traditional leaders are truly autonomous or merely extensions of state power. The interaction between Tang'an's formal governance system, informal clan

networks, and the expanding tourism economy represents a different kind of transformation. Rather than completely replacing local leadership, it integrates it into a broader state-driven cultural heritage industry. This hybrid governance model helps maintain social cohesion and preserves a degree of cultural authenticity, yet it also restricts the autonomy of communities in shaping their own cultural narratives.

There are several differences between the governance experiences of Tang'an and Zhenshan. The continued presence of village leaders ensures that local voices remain involved in governance, even though their influence is constrained by national policies. While the Tang'an ecomuseum retains some aspects of community-led heritage conservation, these efforts operate within the boundaries set by official heritage management strategies. Additionally, social relations continue to be rooted in clan-based authority structures, which has helped maintain traditional hierarchies and minimised the extent to which tourism development has disrupted existing social structures. Despite these differences, Tang'an Village is not immune to the forces that are transforming Zhenshan Village. The increasing bureaucratisation of cultural governance, combined with the selective commodification of the Dong cultural heritage, suggests that the village's long-term trajectory may still lead to increased external control over its cultural economy. While the traditional powers in Tang'an Village currently act as stabilising variables, preserving local distinctiveness, their incorporation into the state-defined cultural heritage narrative may render them symbolic figures rather than active decision-makers. In this trend, the roles of the Tang'an Village leader and the village elders may become more performative than functional, becoming symbolic representatives of local governance rather than genuine instruments of self-determination.

Zhenshan and Tang'an illustrate two very different paths of reshaping social relations and group identities within the framework of an ecomuseum. Zhenshan's traditional governance has been undermined by strong market drivers, and community relations have disintegrated, shifting towards transactional relations. Tang'an still governs on a clan basis, and despite being within the boundaries imposed by the state, it maintains a stronger social cohesion. In Zhenshan, local Buyi villagers are forced to play a subordinate role in the tourism economy controlled by external investors and government planners. The

result is a service-based social structure in which villagers work as labourers in a system that defines Buyi identity according to tourist expectations rather than community institutions. Without stable traditional leadership, there is no mechanism for negotiating cultural representation, resulting in the transformation of the ecomuseum into a commercial tourism label rather than a community-driven heritage space.

Tang'an provides a stark contrast, where traditional clan structures still mediate social relations and cultural representation. The presence of clan elders helps maintain cultural continuity, ensuring that certain elements of Dong identity remain rooted in village life. However, these leaders must operate within the parameters of state-defined heritage policy, meaning that what is preserved and presented is filtered through a national narrative rather than purely local agency. Social relations remain community-driven, but are increasingly constrained by external constraints. The fundamental difference is how governance structures shape national identity within the ecomuseum. In Zhenshan, the lack of local leadership has allowed economic forces to shape the Buyi identity, erasing its social depth. In Tang'an, traditional governance has slowed this process, but cultural representation is still shaped by state policy rather than complete community autonomy.

4.5 Conclusion

The cases of Zhenshan and Tang'an exemplify the broader changes taking place in ethnic minority villages in China, where social relations and cultural expression are increasingly shaped by national heritage policies, economic imperatives and changes in governance structures. Although both villages began as community-led heritage sites within the framework of an ecomuseum, their divergent paths highlight a central question: to what extent are local institutions sustained or eroded in the face of tourism-driven development and state-led cultural narratives? In Zhenshan, where traditional leadership has waned, the erosion of local governance has led to social division and the commodification of ethnic identity. In contrast, Tang'an has retained stronger clan authority, allowing for greater community participation in cultural preservation, albeit within a national-controlled heritage framework.

The transformation of social relations and ethnic representation in the ecomuseum model is not just a local phenomenon. It reflects deeper structural shifts in the governance of China's ethnic heritage. As rural communities become increasingly integrated into national tourism strategies, the dynamic between local traditions, government authority and market interests determines how ethnic identities are redefined, preserved or commercialised. The erosion of traditional governance structures, particularly in cases such as Zhenshan, has resulted in heritage becoming a curated product rather than a lived experience, as economic forces dictate which aspects of culture are retained and which are discarded. Even in cases where traditional leadership remains in place, such as in Tang'an, government intervention ensures that heritage remains a controlled narrative rather than an autonomous cultural expression.

More extensively, this chapter reveals a fundamental problem in heritage management: the ecomuseum, initially conceived as a community-led model of cultural sustainability, struggles to fulfil its intended role when local governance structures are replaced or subsumed into state-prescribed frameworks. The interplay between formal governance mechanisms, grassroots institutions and external market forces ultimately determines whether ethnic identities are proactively shaped by communities or passively catered to by external consumers. The evolving role of ecomuseums in China raises pressing questions about the long-term sustainability of minority cultural institutions, the risk of heritage being instrumentalised as a tourism brand, and the future of social cohesion in minority communities undergoing rapid economic and political transformation. If heritage governance continues on this track, the ecomuseum may become a symbolic label or leisure tourism resort rather than a meaningful cultural conservation tool that reinforces national and market priorities rather than empowers local communities.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary

This thesis has examined how the ecomuseum model, when transposed into China's governance framework, becomes a powerful lens through which to understand the transformation of ethnic minority villages. Through a comparative analysis of the Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum and the Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum, two early pilot cases in Guizhou, it has explored how heritage management, landscape transformation, and social reorganisation unfold under overlapping pressures of cultural policy, tourism development, and administrative authority.

While the ecomuseum emerged globally as a decentralised, community-led approach to heritage, its implementation in China has been defined by a dual logic: the adoption of participatory language and the consolidation of control through top-down mechanisms. In both case studies, the management of heritage has served not only as a means of preserving cultural expressions but also as an instrument for advancing broader state objectives, including poverty alleviation, ethnic unity, and rural modernisation. In this process, the ecomuseum becomes not only a cultural institution but also an administrative apparatus for integrating minority communities into national development agendas.

Despite these shared institutional frameworks, Tang'an and Zhenshan reveal important variations in how this model has been enacted on the ground. Tang'an, situated in a relatively remote setting with strong lineage structures and locally embedded ritual practices, has maintained a greater degree of community cohesion and cultural continuity. Its relative distance from urban economic zones has delayed some external pressures, allowing traditional forms of cultural authority to retain partial influence in heritage interpretation. In contrast, Zhenshan's proximity to Guiyang has facilitated rapid urban expansion, real estate speculation, and bureaucratic restructuring. These forces have eroded traditional social institutions, reshaped land rights, and introduced competing narratives of development and identity, often controlled by actors external to the community.

These differences reflect broader patterns in the transformation of rural communities with official ethnic minority designations in China. While state recognition of minority status brings certain symbolic and economic advantages, such as inclusion in heritage projects, tourism branding, or targeted development funding, it also introduces regulatory oversight, selective cultural framing, and administrative discipline. In practice, official recognition often entails a narrowing of cultural autonomy, as state-approved representations of ethnic identity are promoted at the expense of lived diversity and local interpretive agency.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the realm of cultural expression. In both villages, residents participate in the performance and visual display of heritage, yet the terms of participation are shaped by external expectations. Cultural practices are validated when they align with state narratives of harmonious multiculturalism and touristic appeal. Rituals, dress, architecture, and festivals are selectively promoted or aestheticised, while less visible or politically sensitive aspects of local culture remain marginalised. Although some villagers find pride or economic benefit in these forms of recognition, the degree of autonomy in shaping their own cultural narratives remains limited. Expression is enabled, but within structured boundaries.

Nevertheless, these processes are not entirely deterministic. As this study has shown, community actors navigate heritage policy through strategic accommodation, subtle resistance, or creative reinterpretation. In both Tang'an and Zhenshan, individuals and groups have mobilised their knowledge, social networks, and institutional literacy to influence heritage practice in ways that reflect local concerns and aspirations. This uneven agency underscores the importance of examining heritage not merely as a top-down project but as a contested space of negotiation between formal institutions, community interests, and shifting cultural values.

Moreover, this thesis argues that the ecomuseum in China functions as both a cultural and political device, reconfiguring village space, reshaping social relations, and redefining identity. It embodies a vision of heritage that is simultaneously participatory in form and directive in function. The case studies of Tang'an and Zhenshan reveal how such

institutions mediate between global heritage discourse and local realities, and between ideals of empowerment and the practicalities of governance. By tracing these dynamics, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural policy, heritage practice, and ethnic identity intersect in the remaking of rural society in contemporary China. More than twenty years after their establishment, Tang'an and Zhenshan represent not static models but evolving fields of interaction, where memory, power, and place continue to be co-produced. Their trajectories offer insights into how heritage models travel, how they are transformed through political and spatial conditions, and how they generate both new possibilities and new constraints for the communities they aim to serve.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that heritage management in contemporary China cannot be understood merely as a matter of cultural preservation but must be examined as part of a broader apparatus of statecraft, spatial governance, and identity regulation. The comparative study of Tang'an and Zhenshan reveals how the ecomuseum, as an imported participatory model, becomes refracted through the institutional logic of Chinese heritage policy, which is closely intertwined with ethnic classification, rural governance, and territorial development. The designation of communities as ecomuseums, and as ethnic minorities more broadly, does not simply protect tradition but often reorganises village life around officially sanctioned forms of visibility and marketability. While framed as participatory, these heritage initiatives frequently serve to reinforce state authority, redistribute cultural representation through selective recognition, and legitimise state presence in the name of multicultural harmony and development.

At the same time, the uneven distribution of power across different communities, reflected in varying degrees of spatial intervention, administrative control, and cultural autonomy, reflects patterns of the differential integration of rural minority areas into the national political economy. Tang'an and Zhenshan exemplify two distinct, yet interconnected, trajectories of how rural communities in China are being reconfigured under heritage governance. One is sustained by strong local cultural infrastructures that enable negotiated forms of participation. The other is increasingly absorbed into urban planning regimes in which official discourses override grassroots claims. These processes are not isolated but indicative of wider transformations in the Chinese countryside, where

cultural policy, ethnic politics, and state-led development projects converge to reshape the contours of everyday life. In this context, the meaning of heritage for minority communities cannot be reduced to preservation alone. It is entangled with questions of voice, legitimacy, and authority, including who defines heritage, who benefits from it, and how it reshapes social relationships. By tracing the evolving intersections between landscape, heritage, and social relations in two ecomuseum villages, this thesis contributes not only to the study of Chinese heritage politics but also to broader discussions about the localisation of international models, the tensions between participatory ideals and state control, and the transformation of rural governance in post-reform China.

5.2 Limitations and Future Studies

In Section 1.5 Methodology, the limitations of the methodological design have been identified and discussed, which was written before the completion of the fieldwork. During the fieldwork, however, I encountered some additional limitations that were not anticipated at the design stage.

First, in both field sites, the exploration of official discourse relied primarily on interviews with the interviewees from the village committee due to a series factors including the limited time in fieldwork and travel restrictions caused by the pandemic lockdown. This approach limited the breadth and depth of the official perspectives gathered. Considering the significant influence higher-level government officials have on cultural and heritage policies affecting the ecomuseum, the absence of input from senior officials responsible for cultural affairs and heritage governance restricts the thoroughness of the analysis of official narratives. This limitation reduces the study's ability to fully understand the complexity of tensions and interactions between community experiences and government-led heritage initiatives. Future research should try including insights from higher-level government officials involved directly in cultural heritage policy and the supervision of ecomuseums. Engaging officials from different administrative levels could offer additional context regarding policy goals, bureaucratic decisions, and political motivations behind heritage projects. This approach would strengthen the research by providing a clearer picture of the connections between local community practices and

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national heritage strategies. Furthermore, incorporating these higher-level voices could provide another valuable comparative perspective, allowing researchers to evaluate variations in heritage policies across different ecomuseums and assess the consistency and coherence of heritage policy implementation.

Besides, this research employed the participatory visual method known as photovoice, aiming to reduce epistemological tensions and provide alternative narratives that emphasise community perspectives and experiences. The method successfully enabled villagers to represent their own experiences, highlighting aspects of local life often overlooked in dominant discussions. However, the limitation associated with this methodological approach need to be acknowledged and suggest possibilities for future research. Although photovoice effectively captures personal experiences and authentic daily life, its interpretative approach remains essentially qualitative and subjective. While qualitative analysis provides depth and detail, it also introduces potential biases shaped by participants' individual viewpoints and the ability that the participants can articulate themselves. Participants chose images based on their personal values, priorities, and feelings, which, although meaningful, might not fully represent broader or less obvious cultural phenomenon within the landscapes studied. Consequently, the findings largely reflect explicitly expressed narratives and openly recognised changes, potentially missing subtle but significant transformations. To address this limitation, future research could incorporate quantitative analysis with the help of computer vision and artificial intelligent. Such techniques could help identify underlying patterns in visual data collected by participants, highlighting those commonly appeared object and object pairs as well as revealing implicit spatial dynamics or changes not clearly recognised or being aware by villagers themselves. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative methods could offer a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of landscape transformations, while also reducing potential biases and improving the reliability of the findings.

Toward the end of the photovoice project, while walking along a narrow path beside the terraced fields, one participant in Tang'an quietly said to me:

> *"We have been farmers for generations, our life is all about this terraced rice fields. What others see as cultural heritage and an ecomuseum is, to us, simply*

our everyday farming life. What we hope for, in cooperating with these cultural policies, is simply a better harvest and a better life." (Interviewee T1, 03/2023)

Her words lingered with me long after the conversation ended. It prompted me to reflect more deeply on the position of agricultural heritage within cultural policy and heritage research. For this farming community, the terraced landscape is not just a symbol of heritage or a curated attraction, it is their lifeworld, livelihood, and legacy. Their engagement with the land is embedded in seasonal rhythms, ritual practices, and generational knowledge. Activities such as irrigating rice terraces, performing harvest ceremonies, or maintaining field boundaries are not staged cultural displays but vital acts of sustenance. Compared to other forms of intangible cultural heritage such as traditional grand song or artisanal crafts, which often require external support or institutional staging to survive, agricultural practices in these communities are sustained organically through daily necessity and communal interdependence.

Notably, villagers show a high degree of spontaneous participation in agriculture-related heritage practices, driven not by external incentives but by intrinsic motivations rooted in survival, kinship, and cosmological beliefs. These practices are resilient even when formal institutional involvement is minimal. This observation suggests that agricultural heritage may represent a distinct mode of heritage-making, one that is less reliant on institutional framing but no less worthy of recognition, documentation, and safeguarding. Future research, therefore, should pay greater attention to the epistemic and political significance of agricultural heritage. This includes exploring how agricultural landscapes operate as both ecological systems and cultural archives, how rituals and labour practices encode environmental knowledge, and how community agency in sustaining such heritage challenges dominant heritage paradigms. A deeper focus on agricultural heritage could also contribute to a broader reconceptualisation of what constitutes "heritage" in policy discourse, moving beyond object-based or performative definitions to embrace lived, functional, and embodied relationships with land. Moreover, as climate change and rural transformation intensify, understanding the adaptive capacities embedded in agricultural heritage may offer crucial insights for sustainable development and heritage resilience.

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