Material Culture and Heritage Safeguarding in Southwest China: A Report on a Symposium Organized by the International Folklore Studies Center

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Abstract
A project report describes the symposium “Material Culture and Heritage Safeguarding in Southwest China” held online on September 16–17, 2021. Organized by the International Folklore Studies Center, a joint center of Beijing Normal University and Indiana University, the event centered on research presentations from a binational (United States, China) team studying craft and associated cultural heritage issues among ethnic groups in Southwest China and the impact of intangible cultural heritage policies on craft practices and craft producers. The research, and associated exhibition and programming activities, have been undertaken since 2013 under the auspices of a larger collaboration between the China Folklore Society and American Folklore Society.

Keywords
community museums; crafts; ethnic museums; ethnological museums; folk museums; intangible cultural heritage; international cooperation; open-air museums; China; United States; Bai; Dong; Miao; Yao.

Competing Interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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Introduction

The International Folklore Studies Center is a joint research center of the Department of Chinese Folklore Studies, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University and the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University. Established in April 2021, the Center coordinates collaborative activities linking the two departments. Yang Lihui of Beijing Normal University and Jason Baird Jackson of Indiana University serve as co-directors for this new center, which builds on a deeper history of partnership and exchange linking the two academic departments.
As its inaugural convening, the International Folklore Studies Center hosted an online symposium under the title “Material Culture and Heritage Safeguarding in Southwest China.” Staged online on September 16 and 17, 2021 the symposium summary description was as follows:

Drawing on six years of ethnographic investigation pursued collaboratively by U.S. and Chinese folklorists, museum professionals, and local cultural groups, this two-part symposium offers research reports on material culture and heritage policies in Southwest China. In keeping with the larger binational project from which the papers derive, some presentations will consider the intersection of these two topical domains. Cultural groups or nationalities (mínzú) whose circumstances will be discussed include the Baiku Yao people of Nandan County (Guangxi), the Dong people of Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County (Guangxi) and Liping County (Guizhou), and the Bai of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan).

The larger binational project referred to in the summary is the “China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project,” a joint endeavor begun in 2007 by the China Folklore Society (CFS) and the American Folklore Society (AFS). Many funders and partners have supported the work of this larger project, with a series of grants from The Henry Luce Foundation playing a keystone role (Lloyd 2017; American Folklore Society 2021). On the basis of earlier informal partnerships and neighboring projects, this CFS-AFS initiative was expanded to include a museums-focused sub-project beginning in 2013. Between 2013 and 2016, this sub-project carried out cooperation endeavors and programs under the title “Intangible Cultural Heritage and Ethnographic Museum Practice.” A very large array of outcomes derived from this phase of work, which was led by C. Kurt Dewhurst (Michigan State University) and Xie Mohua (Yunnan Nationalities Museum) (Dewhurst and Lloyd 2019). Most prominent among them was the major touring exhibition known in the United States as *Quilts of Southwest China* and in China as *Quilting Art and Tradition—People, Handcrafts, and Community Life,* together with an companion bilingual catalog (MacDowell and Zhang 2016; Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory 2020b).

From 2017 to 2019, and extending to the present in an interim period devoted to writing up the results of earlier work, the museums-focused sub-project continued in a new phase under the title “Collaborative Work in Museum Folklore and Heritage Studies.” Whereas the earlier phase emphasized professional development, binational cultural and professional exchange, and exhibition development activities taking place across varied locations in Southwest China and the United States, the following phase has emphasized joint ethnographic research investigations in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in Southwest China, although it retained exchange and conference elements as well (Jackson 2021). Wang Wei (Anthropology Museum of Guangxi) and Jackson co-directed this phase of work and, in partnership with Zhang Lijun (George Mason University), Jackson continues to guide it during the interim “writing” phase (Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory 2020a).

The “Material Culture and Heritage Safeguarding in Southwest China” symposium was the latest in a series of research convenings aimed at sharing research reports and project reflections grounded in the work of the two phases of the sub-project, 2013-present (Bol et al. 2014; Gao 2015; Jackson et al. 2019; Jackson 2021; Jackson, Zhang, and Wuerxiya 2021).² Presentations delivered during the symposium reflected in-process manuscripts intended for publication. As suggested by the symposium...
summary and the constituent presentations, the focus of the research activities of the period 2017 to present—as well as the total set of sub-project activities begun in 2013—is on intangible cultural heritage practices associated with material culture among minority ethnic groups in Southwest China, particularly as craft practices and their associated cultural knowledge are modified in response to museum engagements and a range of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policies.

Symposium Participation and Presentations

While weighted towards students and faculty in folklore studies at Beijing Normal University and in folklore studies and ethnomusicology at Indiana University, attendees to the symposium came from a variety of institutions around China, around the United States, and internationally. One hundred and twenty-one individuals registered for Day One and ninety-seven registered for Day 2, with actual participations being just a bit below these numbers. There was a desire on the part of the organizers to preserve the BNU/IU character of the event and thus promotion was not undertaken globally with an eye toward maximizing attendance, thus the organizers feel particularly impressed by these attendance numbers.

As co-director of the International Folklore Studies Center and a leader of the research group, Jackson co-organized the symposium with Zhang. Planning was closely coordinated with Center co-director Yang of Beijing Normal University. Closing commentary was offered at the end of each session, with Peng Mu and Thomas DuBois of the Beijing Normal University faculty filling the discussant roles. A bilingual conference program with abstracts and a set of long (500 word) summaries, also in Chinese and English, were prepared with the assistance of Wuerxiya, a doctoral student at Indiana University and one of the symposium presenters. These bilingual documents helped to overcome language barriers for attendees to this bilingual event.

On the first day of the symposium, Zhang presented on “ICH and Community Crafting Practice: The Case of Commercial Basketry in Eastern Guizhou.” Based on studies in a Dong village in Liping County, Guizhou, her account emphasized local and regional complexity in the bamboo basketry trade and the ways that Dong basketry remains largely outside the ICH system.

In a second presentation on the first day, Jackson and Wuerxiya reported on a program of survey fieldwork undertaken in May 2019 among Bai craftspeople in northwestern Yunnan’s Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. They introduced specific makers in the disciplines of woodcarving, pottery, buzha (fabric sculpture), silverwork, basketry, and indigo dye work and made some observations on the impacts of formal ICH recognition on these “inheritors.”

In the third presentation, Carrie Hertz (Museum of International Folk Art) described and then identified commonalities in the circumstances of fabric artists among the Dong people of Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County and the Baiku Yao of Nandan County, both in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Her presentation emphasized diversity in the ways that different makers approach preservation, commercialization, and self-representation via fabric arts in a changing local, regional, and national context.

Reporting on studies among Dong people in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township and at the Longji Zhuang Ecomuseum in Longsheng Various Nationalities Autonomous County,
both in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Wang Yahao (University of Leicester) concluded the first day’s session with an account of the ways that the authorized heritage discourse in China plays out variably and is engaged differentially by groups and individuals in ethnic minority areas, with an emphasis on the heritage making activities of individuals operating outside formal ICH recognitions, both in terms of unrecognized practices and individuals without formal recognition as inheritors.

In the first presentation of the second day, Jon Kay (Indiana University) closely considered the case of a single textile artist, a provincial level inheritor from the Bai ethnic group living in Jinchuan County in Yunnan. His emphasis was on the socially and personally beneficial consequences of craft activity relative to what is known in the United States as “creative aging.” Concern with quality of life for senior adults offers an additional lens on Chinese ICH activities beyond reoccurring concerns with the safeguarding of inherited forms and advancement of poverty reduction efforts.

Reflecting on a core activity of the “China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project,” Marsha MacDowell (Michigan State University) discussed the work that produced the binational, bilingual, multi-institutional traveling exhibition Quilts of Southwest China, which circulated to four US museums before being presented at a number of additional museums in China under the title Quilting Art and Tradition—People, Handcrafts, and Community Life (MacDowell and Zhang 2016). This exhibition project, with associated programs and catalogue, presented the quilted textile practices of numerous ethnic groups from Guizhou, Yunnan, and Guizhou in Southwest China.

A key activity throughout the museums sub-projects of the China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project has been professional exchange among workers at Chinese and American ethnographic museums. This emphasis led to visitation to, and study at, a large sample of ethnographic museums of various scales and including Chinese ecomuseums and US-based Native American “tribal” museums. Synthesizing the lessons of these visits in a third paper on the second day, C. Kurt Dewhurst (Michigan State University) offered an overview of the ways that Chinese museums of ethnography are responding to new needs in society and to new global trends in museum practice.

Concluding the research presentations, Fan Miaomiao (Anthropology Museum of Guangxi) presented results from her material culture studies research on women’s dress among the Baiku Yao (Nandan County) and Hong Yao (Longsheng Various Nationalities Autonomous County). While considering the deeper history of dress among these Yao groups and tending to the current impacts of ICH interventions on local dress practices, Fan drew upon close study of objects and on ethnographic interviews stressing the ways in which Yao dress practices are not only distinct but closely connected to local cultural, economic, and ecological contexts, with an emphasis on sustainability manifest in a frugal approach to materials.

Conclusion

Symposium participants are working to develop their studies and reports for full publication and thus we postpone offering overarching conclusions on the substance of the symposium beyond noting that, together, the papers presented at the symposium complexify conventional understandings of heritage policy and heritage policy.
impacts found among both Anglophone and Chinese folklorists, ethnologists, and heritage studies scholars, suggesting a greater and more variable range of on-the-ground outcomes and the value to be found in adopting a wider range of approaches and of exploring varied conceptual concerns. For the study of material culture, particularly research on handmade craft in the contemporary era, the upland regions of Southwest China were again revealed to be a rich and rewarding zone not only for engaging with talented makers, rich expressive practices, sophisticated craft technologies and techniques, and dynamic social contexts but also for assessing general global issues of continuity and change, structure and agency, and commonality and difference. For the project of building and sustaining international scholarly cooperation during pandemic conditions, the online symposium again suggested the fruitful ways that new technologies can be used to bring scholars and students together across space and differences of language and national tradition.

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Notes

1. A Chinese language report of the conference was prepared by Wang Xinyi in consultation with Yang Lihui (Wang 2021). This English language report represents the assessments of the authors and does not necessarily represent the viewpoints of other symposium presenters or co-organizers. We thank all of our colleagues for their contributions to the substance and organization of the event. This version was approved for publication by Editorial Board Member Kelley Totten on October 15, 2020.

2. In addition to the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Forums on China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage held in 2014 (Santa Fe, New Mexico), 2015 (Guiyang, Guizhou), and 2019 (Beijing), three project panels have been presented at annual meetings of the American Folklore Society for the purposes of reporting on programming and research work. These are: “Museum Folklore and the China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project: Retrospects and Prospects” in 2017 (Minneapolis, Minnesota), “AFS China-US Collaboration in Museum Folklore: Material Culture Studies among the Baiku Yao of China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region” in 2018 (Buffalo, New York) and “Material Culture and Heritage Studies in Northern Guangxi, China: Ethnographic Reports from the China-U.S. Folklore and Intangible
In the United States, the Quilts of Southwest China exhibition was circulated by the Michigan State University Museum, appearing first there (September 27, 2015 to May 1, 2016) and then travelling to the International Quilt Museum (June 3 to September 28, 2016), the Mathers Museum of World Cultures (January 21, 2017 to May 7, 2017), and the Museum of International Folk Art (July 9, 2017 to January 21, 2018). With the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (Guangxi Museum of Nationalities) as the organizing museum, the exhibition (as Quilting Art and Tradition) was presented at the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (July 15-August 31, 2018), the Yunnan Nationalities Museum (November 15 to December 28, 2018), Yulin Museum (in Guangxi, March 16 to June 3, 2019), and Chongzuo Zhuang Museum (in Guangxi, October 20 to December 20, 2020).

References Cited


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