

Cultural effects of authenticity: contested heritage practices in China

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In this study, I analyse how the Chinese Government imposes the concept of authenticity on local heritage practices in the process of heritage nomination, conservation and management. Rather than discussing authenticity as an objective criterion, I approach authentication as a social process in the heritage discourse that impacts on local cultural practice. Through illustrating two cases in China, I propose three cultural effects of authentication on local heritage practices, namely spatial separation, emotional banishment and value shifting. Moreover, the heritage practices in China have created space for dynamic negotiations between local and global value systems. When the concept of authenticity is imposed on local heritage practices by heritage agencies, local communities are not passive recipients; rather, they consume, contest and negotiate the concept of authenticity in various ways.

Keywords: authenticity; authentication; heritage practice; cultural effects; China

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased scholarly attention to the global effects of heritage on local traditions, cultural practices and daily life. The language of heritage and ethics written in international policies has contributed to redefine the meaning of culture. Local heritage is constituted as a product by the political dominance of what Michael Herzfeld called the ‘global hierarchy of value’ (Herzfeld 2004). This hierarchy, influenced by European colonial powers, is embedded in ‘all social life of things’, such as ‘living spaces, manners, gestures, talk, daily experiences and habits of the people’ (Herzfeld 2004, 11). In this process, new standards and norms have emerged as part of the hegemonic authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006) to constitute what people know about good, beauty and appropriateness. This value system becomes a formidable ‘tool of governance’ in constructing ‘identity, experiences, and social standing[s]’ (Smith 2006, 52). State agencies institutionalise the value system based on the knowledge of technical and aesthetic experts.

Authenticity is a case in point that plays an essential role in cultural heritage conservation and restoration planning, as well as the World Heritage Convention’s inscription procedures. After the Venice Charter in 1964,¹ the global heritage players such as UNESCO and its advisory boards (ICOMOS, IUCN and ICRROM) exercise

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their authoritative power in the process of evaluation, selection and conservation of the potential sites. To be included on the World Heritage List, site nominations must comply with official standards, including ‘authenticity’ through a rigorous documentation process (UNESCO 2005). These standards are ‘deeply rooted from the European cultural tradition, combing historical and aesthetic parameters that drive from classical philosophy’ (Cleere 2001, 24). This value system is a result of colonisation and imperial expansion and assumptions about the cultural and technological evolutionary achievements of the West (Byrne 1991; Smith 2006).

Authorised by international heritage agencies, authenticity acts as a tool that imposes Western ideological values on societies all over the world. However, like the process of globalisation, the value of authenticity is mediated and contested by local communities, and produces competing outcomes in different locations. Local appropriation of authenticity does not reflect the shift of hegemonic power from global to local; instead, it connects to the intersection of heterogeneous heritage discourses. Hence, following questions remain to be answered: What role does the authorised concept of authenticity play in the mediation of local cultural heritage? How is it appropriated by local authorities? What impacts does it have on cultural practices? How do local community negotiate and contest with these cultural effects?

After the Chinese Government signed the UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1985, the country started to communicate and cooperate with international organisations on heritage conservation. The concept of ‘authenticity’ has been adopted and interpreted by both central and local governments and heritage bureaucracies.² State authorities in China certify cultural heritage through legalisation, nomination and policy-making. As the main gatekeeper of cultural heritage, local authorities impose UNESCO- and ICOMOS-inspired value systems (such as authenticity) on heritage practices. In the meantime, investment companies, private agencies in the tourism industry and local people find their own ways to negotiate with the authoritarian actions on the ground.

In this paper, I will analyse how the Chinese Government imposes certain concept of authenticity on local heritage practices. Rather than discussing authenticity as an objective criterion, I approach authentication as a social process in heritage discourse that impacts on local cultural practices. Through illustrating two cases in China, I propose three cultural effects of authentication on local heritage practices. Moreover, local communities are not merely recipients of global forces, but are actively involved in their own transformation. The global movement of heritage conservation on authenticity becomes negotiable with respect to local conditions. The hegemonic ideology of authenticity on heritage conservation is thus contested and entangled within the complexities of local diversity.

From authenticity to authentication

The issue of authenticity has been a central point of discussion about heritage over the past four decades. The term ‘authenticity’ is originally from Greek and Latin, and means ‘authoritative’ and ‘original’ (Trilling 1972). It had been applied in the field of ethics, linguistics, material culture and arts. In the European Middle Ages, authenticity was used to illustrate political authority, reliability of religious books and the efficacy of magic (Comaroff and Roberts 1986). Later, the term has been applied in museums, where experts determine ‘whether objects of art are what they

appear to be or are claimed to be' (Trilling 1972, 93). The traditional meaning or common sense centres on the genuine, the real and the unique (Reisinger and Steiner 2006). Following this objectivist approach, Greenwood (1977) and MacCannell (1973) distinguished between authentic and inauthentic cultures based on absolute criteria authorised by expertise and scientific knowledge. Modern society drives people to travel elsewhere in search for an authentic life, which has become a prominent motif in mass consumption of tourism (Cohen 1988). The image of 'authenticity lost' has given anthropology a kind of romantic aura – a longing for a lost authenticity (Gable and Handler 1996).

The global scale of commodities, finance, media and population movement has transformed the discourse and raised questions about the continuing relevance of traditional concepts of authenticity. We live in an era of globalisation, migration and displacement; culture is constantly reformulated. Even simulacra like Disneyland, Hollywood movies or online games are subject to a high standard of perceived verisimilitude (Fillitz and Saris 2012). Authentic and inauthentic are no longer asymmetrical counter-concepts per se (Olsen 2002). They become fluid concepts that can be negotiated and are no longer an absolute property of anything (Cohen 1988; Squire 1994).

Several new approaches in sociological and anthropological theories have emerged in recent debates about authenticity, and convert the focus from scientific to humanistic perspectives. The rise of postmodernism, poststructuralism and constructivism have destabilised the idea that there is an actual, true, genuine or essentialist idea of authenticity (Reisinger and Steiner 2006). Authenticity is no longer a property inherent in an object, but a projection from beliefs, context, ideology or even imagination. Drawing on Heidegger's conceptual framework, Wang (1999) suggested a distinction between the authenticity of an object and the authenticity of an experience, and proposed the concept of 'existential authenticity'. As he stated, the authentic experiences of consumers emerge from intrapersonal sources (e.g. bodily feelings of pleasure, relaxation and self-making) and interpersonal sources (e.g. interaction between friends and family members). Wang's approach captures the personal dimension of authenticity that is associated with identity, individuality and self-realisation.

Recent scholarship has accordingly shifted the focus from the conceptual analysis of authenticity to the dynamic process of authentication (Ateljevic and Doorne 2005; Xie 2011; Cohen and Cohen 2012). Instead of asking 'what is authenticity' in ethnic culture, Xie (2011) questioned the power relations and dynamic nature of authenticity in terms of 'how it works' and 'who is involved'. Cohen and Cohen (2012) further proposed 'cool authentication' as a process of certification and accreditation by the authorities.³ As they argue, the power of authentication is generally conferred to some authoritative individuals, recognised as experts or having formalised and institutionalised positions. Heritage authorities have the power to confirm or certify a site, object or event as 'original', 'genuine', 'real' or 'trustworthy' based on scientific knowledge (Selwyn 1996, 26) or divine inspiration (Cohen and Cohen 2012). This explains why the nation state is often the powerful system that produces ideology and authentic form of cultural property (Appadurai 1996). Allying with transnational organisations such as UNESCO, states put the theme of authenticity into the legal framework for protection, conservation, documentation and exhibition.

However, the performative approach of authentication based on people's identity, memory and their bodily interaction with heritage objects has begun to be stressed in the literature (Knudsen and Waade 2010; Cohen and Cohen 2012; Zhu 2012). Performativity is concerned with practices through which we become 'subjects' decentred, affective, but embodied, relational, expressive and involved with others and objects in a world continually in progress (Nash 2000, 655). The performative approach emphasises the transitional and transformative process inherent in the action of authentication, where meanings and feelings are embodied through the ongoing interaction between individual agency and the external world (Zhu 2012, 1498). For instance, tourists enjoy ethnic dance performances even though they are commodity designed and provided by tourism operators and marketing agencies (Xie 2011). Different from the existential approach that relies on the state of being true, the performative approach focuses on the process of becoming authentic through embodied practices.

This paper builds on the notion of authenticity as a negotiated and performative process involving emotional, sensory and embodied interaction with the material world. I will look at how the authoritarian approaches of authenticity affect local cultural practices in China, and how local people respond to these effects based on their own motivation and interests. Before deliberating these case studies of heritage practices in China, I will give a brief historical review of the concept of authenticity in Chinese heritage discourse.

'Authenticity' in heritage discourse of China

The notion of authenticity did not exist in China until the early 1900s. Before the introduction of the Western ideology of architectural conservation, China appears to be 'a curious neglect or indifference (even at times downright iconoclasm) towards the material heritage of the past' (Ryckmans 2008). When Europe has an antique presence made of authentic objects, architectural conservation is practically absent in China not because of wars and natural disasters, but because of the different attitude towards the way of achieving the enduring monument (Mote 1973; Botz-Bornstein 2012).

Unlike the stone-made architecture in Europe, Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable and fragile materials, such as timber. Just like Japanese traditional architecture, Chinese buildings have a sort of 'built-in obsolescence' that the material decays rapidly and requires frequent rebuilding. The rooted wooden parts could be replaced so that the building would be constantly regenerated. China also has a tradition of destroying antiques associated with former emperors when a new dynasty emerges. This becomes a continuation of the periodic destruction of the material heritage of the past. The Forbidden City in Beijing is a good example. It has been destroyed and rebuilt countless times following the rise and fall of dynasties; however, this process has not changed the symbolic meaning of the place, providing a 'mandate of heaven' for the ruling groups.

From the perspective of the European heritage practices, eternity is constructed through stone material to overcome the erosion of time; however, the Chinese architecture inhabits the eternity in the immaterial part of heritage. In this sense, the Chinese civilisation is transmitted through documentation, human experience, and the relationship with social and cultural life and its spiritual meanings (Mote 1973; Ryckmans 2008).

The traditional Chinese attitude toward heritage dramatically changed when China's public awareness of cultural heritage preservation increased during the early twentieth century. At this time, Chinese architects and archaeologists expressed a Western-inspired interest in Chinese architecture, and this led to a cultural movement of heritage conservation and restoration (Zhu 2009). In the 1930s, Zhu Qiqian (1871–1964) founded the 'Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture' (*zhongguo yingzao xueshe*), the first academic institution for the conservation and restoration of historic architecture. Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), one of the pioneers of architectural conservation came back to China with his architect-trained wife Lin Huiyin (1904–1955) after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s. Adopting the methodology of European architectural history, Liang introduced the Western notion of 'authenticity' to China through creating the 'grammar and syntax' of ancient Chinese architecture. He thought old buildings should remain 'old', in terms of what he called the principle of *xiujiurujiu* (preserving or restoring the original state) (Lai, Demas, and Agnew 2004).

Since the 1980s, China has undergone profound political and socio-economic transformation after the country adjusted the mistakes made in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and recovered from the social and political chaos.⁴ The central government recognised the significant role of heritage conservation in nation building and economic development (Oakes 1998; Nyiri 2006). As the main heritage authority in China, the SACH has established legal instruments and national policies to spread the knowledge and control the practices of heritage management. The national government promulgated the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics in 1982. In 1985, China joined UNESCO's Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Since then, the Chinese Government has gradually incorporated the concept of 'authenticity' in its official conservation guidelines. The Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (shorten as the 'China Principles') was established in 2000 and issued by ICOMOS China in 2002. Supported by the Getty Foundation and ICOMOS, the 'China Principles' interpreted authenticity as a 'historic condition', which means the original condition of a site and its subsequent changes through historical time (ICOMOS China 2002). This connotation of the term complies with the present official legislation, and is linked back to international conservation standards formulated in the Venice Charter.

In 1999, a number of experts from ICOMOS met at the Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention in Nara, Japan, and formulated the Nara Document on Authenticity as an extension and revision of the Venice Charter. The Nara Document encourages stakeholders in different cultural contexts to arrive at their own interpretations on authenticity according to their different cultural, political and economic conditions.

Following the Nara Document, the concept of authenticity has been gradually introduced and accepted in documents on cultural heritage conservation and management in China. SACH uses the term *yuanzhenxing* as the official translation of authenticity. Composed of *yuan* ('original'), and *zhen* ('real' and 'trustworthy'), the term emphasises the importance of originality. Supported by ICOMOS China and the National Academy of Heritage Conservation Research, SACH integrated the term in its heritage documents and conservation practices at national, provincial and local levels.

Diverse forms of practices, management and development have begun to emerge in relation to heritage sites in China. Since 2004, all construction- and heritage-related activities at national and provincial heritage sites have been mandated to follow a process of approval, planning and conservation. Government authorities accordingly dominate heritage discourse and practices. This domination has become one of the most effective strategies for both national and regional governments in claiming political legitimacy and economic benefits. However, many other stakeholders have started to participate in heritage making. Private investors set up cultural projects, such as museum exhibitions and theme parks (Oakes 1998). Scholars from universities and academic institutes develop research projects on heritage conservation and cultural promotion. These heritage practices are not the result of a 'passive' adoption of global and national ideas of authenticity; rather, they arose from different value systems, and these systems are competing with each other against the background of the country's political, social and economic transitions.

To illustrate these issues, I draw on two case studies from Xi'an and Lijiang with different perspectives on heritage and authenticity separately. In Xi'an, I conducted fieldwork in the Xingjiao Temple, and analysed the nomination process of the temple as a World Heritage Site. In Lijiang, I studied the local Dongba religious tradition, which has been prescribed by UNESCO on the Memory of the World Register,⁵ and reinvented as a cultural performance for tourism industry. I choose these two cases because they belong to two different categories of heritage – the first is tangible cultural heritage, and the second is intangible cultural heritage (ICH). They also illustrate two different perspectives of the process of heritage making. The case of Xingjiao Temple sits at the stage of heritage nomination and management, meanwhile the Dongba case in Lijiang relates to tourism industry and cultural commercialisation. Notwithstanding this, these two stories do share the same commonality of the interaction between state policy and the local interpretation of heritage practices. Such interactions exemplify the shifting and highly contested notions about authenticity in cultural practices in China.

Heritage nomination of the Xingjiao Temple in Xi'an

In China, it is local heritage agencies who prepare World Heritage nominations. These offices will manage the sites and oversee their conservation and promotion once they have been enlisted as World Heritage Sites (Zhu and Li 2013). As a requirement of heritage nomination, local officials need to develop a management plan and establish a clearly protected buffer zone around the site according to the Operational Guidelines by UNESCO. With support from heritage experts, officials often borrowed the term 'authenticity' to legitimise their conservation and construction plans in the nomination dossier for the World heritage nomination.

In 2006, several sites along the Silk Road in Shaanxi Province started to apply for UNESCO World Heritage. The Cultural Bureau of Xi'an took charge of the application and set up the local heritage office. As one of the most significant sacred temples of Chinese Buddhism, the Xingjiao Temple was included as part of the nomination plan to represent the glorious Buddhist history of Xi'an. The temple was the burial place of many historical celebrities including Xuanzang, a Buddhist monk and Chinese pilgrim of the Tang dynasty who had gone to India and brought back Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures.

The local heritage office has expertise and authoritative power to certify what is or is not heritage. The Cultural Bureau of Xi'an invited a heritage consultant from Beijing to help them develop the heritage management plan. Advised by this consultant, the local authorities decided to highlight the Buddhist pagoda of Xuanzang's relics and demolish most of the surrounding buildings, such as the temple's abstinence hall, canteen and the monks' living quarters. An official from the Cultural Bureau of Xi'an explained to me their decision to demolish:

The decision follows the international principle of heritage conservation, so called 'authenticity.' We need to highlight the significance of the Pagoda, the sacred heritage area. However, these 'illegal' (*weizhang*) buildings that were established after the 1980s are too close to the pagoda. These buildings are too intrusive and do not fit into the heritage area. They are not identified as authentic heritage sites and thus should be removed.

The buildings the official indicated were burnt during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) and then rebuilt during the Republic of China (1912–1949). Some of these buildings were established in the late 1980s. The officials and heritage experts had a clear understanding of what authentic heritage should be. Accordingly, they planned to move these buildings to the lower part of the hill, two kilometres away from where the temple is currently located. The decision of the Cultural Bureau reflects its endeavour to transform the Buddhist temple from religious site to heritage site, where religious space has to come to terms with authenticity to fulfil certain aesthetic standards.

When the monks from the Xingjiao Temple received the official notification from the Cultural Bureau in December 2012, they felt angry because the relocation plan would separate the pagoda from the functioning area of the temple. One of the leaders of the temple, Master Xuanshu told me:

For us, the pagoda is an important spiritual symbol of our belief. We are not against the government's decision to include the Xingjiao Temple in the World Heritage nomination. However, we think other buildings are also authentic, since they are our home where we live, eat and pray. They should stay. If they demolish these buildings and relocate us to a lower part of the hill, the temple will lose its sprits. They will turn our home to a business enterprise only for money.

Master Kuanshu's voice represented the monks' idea of 'what is real or not'. Their judgement of authenticity is framed through their daily religious practices of living, eating and praying in the temple. These monks' voices have shed light on the Chinese traditional attitude towards authenticity that relies on the interaction between daily life and belief. It is different from the Western-inspired notion of 'authenticity' that emphasises objective or material value. Just as a professor from the Buddhism Studies Department of the Northwest University in an interview with me emphasised, 'demolishing the residential area of the Temple and resettling these monks will turn the pagoda into a dead relic'.

The monks initially attempted to negotiate with the local government. As the representative of the temple, Master Kuanshu asked the heritage officials to revise the heritage reconstruction plan so their buildings could be maintained; however, his request was rejected. In January 2012, after discussing with other monks from the temple, Master Kuanshu contacted the media to increase public awareness against the demolition project. In early 2013, scholars and Buddhists all around the country launched a national campaign to safeguard the Xingjiao Temple. Several national

media sources, including *CCTV* and *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported this event in both the Internet and newspapers. Allying with the monks, most of the media criticised the local government's plan to remove the residential area from the temple.

In April, 2014, the Chinese Buddhist Association announced their response to the event, 'the reconstruction of Xingjiao temple will indeed change the nature of the temple as a sacred religious space. Without the consent from local monks, any demolishing activities are illegal. We are strongly against them'. During the same month, the State administration of Religion noticed the news and initiated the investigation. One month later, the local government cancelled the reconstruction plan. The temple was successfully nominated as a World Heritage Site without any relocation of these 'inauthentic' buildings in June 2014.

Since the last decade, commercialisation of temples has often been questioned by the media and scholars. The Xi'an government attempted to reconstruct the temple in the name of heritage nomination; however, the event has still generated a public outcry. Most of the media expressed sympathy to the monks and their religious belief regardless of the official interpretation of authenticity.

Wedding ritual performance in Lijiang

The adaptation and interpretation of the World Heritage system in China not only applies to architectural and monument conservation, but also to what is considered as 'intangible' cultural heritage. In 2004, China was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003. With the promulgation of the Law of ICH of PRC (*feiwuzhi yichanfa*) in 2011, the central state of China expanded the concept of ICH to the whole country. The notion of authenticity has not been applied in the International ICH Convention. However, the Chinese Government adapted the term in ICH discourse to legitimise its cultural and social control, particularly over ethnic minorities. Local authorities establish the authenticity of local culture by defining and formulating local folklore, performing arts, rituals and social practices, and transform them into a unified body of knowledge.

Located in Yunnan Province in the southwest China, Lijiang was nominated as a World Heritage site by the UNESCO in 1997. In recent years, the local government started to promote the indigenous religion 'Dongba' as a form of ethnic culture, which had been classified as 'superstition' during the Cultural Revolution. Scholars from the local Dongba Culture Research Academy translate religious scriptures into Chinese texts to represent the authentic sources of indigenous knowledge. Meanwhile, Dongba ritual texts are redefined as a form of scholarly encyclopaedia and exhibited in the Dongba Culture Museum. According to the director of the Dongba Cultural Museum, Mr. Li, 'Dongba culture is not only shamanism and naturalist worship. It represents local culture. Without Dongba culture, there will be no Lijiang.' Mr. Li's statement echoes the authoritative view of local government and scholars, that is transforming the Dongba religion into a new form of Dongba culture for the building of the Lijiang ethnic identity and prestige.

In 2003, UNESCO listed Dongba religious scripts in the Memory of the World Register. The brand names of 'World Heritage Site' and 'Memory of the World' pushed the old town of Lijiang onto the global stage of heritage tourism. The proliferation of a commercially constructed tourism development has increasingly become popular, where Dongba culture is manufactured and stimulated for tourism

consumption. A number of dongbas,⁶ the Dongba religion specialists, were employed by tourism companies and souvenir shops to satisfy tourists' curiosity of the authentic ethnic culture. In my early work, I presented the life story of a dongba. He came from a remote Naxi village near Lijiang, got trained in the Dongba Culture Research Academy and is currently working in the Naxi Wedding Courtyard, a heritage project in Lijiang (Zhu 2012). The Naxi Wedding Courtyard was established by a local private company, and provides the Dongba marriage service hosted by the dongba to tourists who would like to experience the ethnic wedding and celebrations in Lijiang. Due to the limited time and space, the dongba shortened and simplified the scriptures of the traditional ritual in his performance. However, he still believes that his ritual is powerful. Using the notion of 'performative authenticity', I illustrate that his defence to the revised ritual is a performative act that is based on his belief, and a continuity of performing his dongba identity (Zhu 2012).

However, many scholars from the Dongba Culture Research Academy viewed his performance as a commodity without any religious value. In contrast to the dongba's five minutes of chanting, these scholars collected and translated six scriptures into books for a complete wedding ritual. Prof. Ming told me that,

His [the dongba's] performance serves as an exotic cultural show that has nearly no other purpose but to entertain people and generate cash. It's only for fun. The simplification of the chanting texts for commercial purpose has eradicated the original meaning of the religious messages. These exterior modes of representation lead to the loss of ritual efficacy in the participants.

Prof. Ming's judgement of the dongba's ritual is based on the standard ritual that is recorded and authorised by the Dongba Culture Research Academy. However, dongbas in early times never learned their ritual skills from books, but through a long apprenticeship under the guidance of senior dongbas. Indeed, the systematic training in the Dongba Research Academy stresses on technical aspects of Dongba rituals, including textual tradition, but neglects 'the nuances of the genuine human interactions' (McKhann 2010, 197).

Tourists have different understandings of the wedding performance. Many participants do not solely regard it as pure entertainment. Even they know that the dongba reconfigure the content and the context of the ritual performance, tourists can still have meaningful experiences. For instance, Tony and Kitty from Shanghai attended the wedding ritual during their honeymoon trip in Lijiang in 2012. Both of them thought that the ritual was the most sacred part of the ceremony, even though they had not clearly understood its meaning. The ritual impressed them. As Kitty recalled, 'we were really embedded in the ritual. I could feel that the chanting was sacred and that the magic power entered my body. I believe that the dongba's ritual will bless us and bind our soul.' At the end of the ritual, both of them cried. When I asked why they cried, Tony said, 'it is hard to say, I feel overwhelmed with a lot of emotions, a mix of happiness, sadness, and hope for new life.'

Nowadays, young Chinese (such as Tony and Kitty) dissatisfaction with the urban mundane, leads to their romanticised interests in the natural, ethnic, spiritual and aesthetic. Accordingly, they search for the authentic and traditional culture away from their home. Participating in the ethnic wedding in Lijiang gives them an alternative way of wedding in the form of consuming romance. They are enthusiastic about this new form of marriage; it allows them to experience a sense of personal freedom and romantic love in ways that differ from those in the cities.

Besides young tourists, some of the local residents also partake in the wedding service. The local Naxi Hegang, the owner of local guest house, arranged his wedding in the Naxi Wedding Courtyard in 2010. He invited over 200 guests from local villages, including family members and friends. Most of his guests were happy about the ritual performance, Naxi dancing and singing. As Hegang recalled, ‘This was a unique opportunity to experience our own culture. My guests enjoyed relearning our tradition through the ceremony. Even my grandmother told me that the ritual was a bit different from those when she was young, she was still happy.’

The dongba’s religious belief and the experience of honeymoon couples and the local residents illustrate a different interpretation of authenticity from that of officials’ and experts’. The performance itself is an embodied practice that involves both bodily sensation and emotion. Their interpretation thus is not based on the expertise from the Dongba Cultural Academy; instead, it is constructed from and influenced by their practices during the wedding ritual and their emotional responses to it.

Cultural effects of authentication

How does the certification of authenticity affect local heritage practices in these two cases? To answer this question, I suggest that there are three cultural effects that result from the process of authentication on local heritage practices, namely spatial separation, emotional banishment and value shifting. Authentication establishes both cultural and physical boundaries between certified heritage sites and mundane everyday life. The process of certification employs logical and rational ways of processing without consideration of actual participants’ emotional responses. The hegemonic value system of standardisation also affects our moral and aesthetic judgement of cultural practices. The process of authentication is carried out in three stages.

Firstly, heritage authorities use authenticity as a tool to create a conceptual and physical clarification of spatial boundaries – what I have called ‘spatial separation’. When a site, object or event is certified as authentic, heritage objects are collected, isolated, decontextualised and displayed (often in a particular place) for inspection and appreciation by the visiting public (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 1303). The process of authentication has a fossilisation and museumisation effect to make objects frozen in time and space as exotic spectacle for consumption.

In the case of the Xingjiao Temple in Xi’an, the decision of the local heritage management office to relocate the residential buildings of the temple aimed to create demarcation between public space (for heritage and tourism purpose) and intimate private life (for religious practice). To highlight the significance of the pagoda, the local government aimed to create a large open space around the pagoda to imply ‘eternity, monumentality, and the disappearance of temporality’ (Herzfeld 2006) of heritage objects.⁷ In the case of Lijiang, local scholars endeavour to invent the Dongba culture through transcribing the ritual texts into publications and exhibiting them in museums. These scholarly work neglects connection with actual religious practices.

Secondly, global heritage agencies tend to define authenticity as based on so-called objective criteria and evidence, with very little participation from the public and little reference to or acknowledgement of their emotional engagement with heritage objects. The process of certification, defining and making things authentic often depends on the credibility of the authority (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 1301)

regardless of any performative interaction with heritage objects. This is what I refer to as ‘emotional banishment’. Authorities and heritage experts tend not to consider the emotion factors of cultural practitioners, while authentication tends to ignore the local identification of cultural values. However, people such as the monks living in the Xingjiao Temple, and the dongba and tourists in Lijiang, do not make their judgement of authenticity based on standards, norms or laws, but on their embodied practice, a state of being, a sensuous feeling or a personal experience (Wang 1999; Bagnall 2003; Smith 2006; Zhu 2012).

The third stage, ‘value shifting’, the global value of authenticity results in a shift in the value judgements about cultural practices. The question of whether the cultural work complies with the standard of authenticity often becomes a language of universal morality that conceals local practices. The language formulated by authorities and experts creates a local universe of common sense that affects our moral and aesthetic judgement of cultural work. Officially authenticated heritage is usually regarded as being of high aesthetic value, while inauthentic objects are doomed to be disrespected and devalued. This is the reason why heritage experts and officials in Xi’an nominated the Xuanzang pagoda in the Xingjiao Temple as World Heritage, and named the rest part of the Temple as an ‘illegal’ construction. Naming something as heritage does not only change the economic value of the object or place, but affects the moral judgement of the public as well. Similarly in Lijiang, Dongba scripts become treasures after its nomination as Memory of the World Register. However, scholars from the Dongba Culture Research Academy view the commercialised wedding rituals as cheap tourism products that have no religious value.

These three effects are not universally applied, but they share the same common dimensions of ‘authentication’ in different heritage practices in China. The first effect signifies the eternity of heritage with new boundaries. Archaeologists keep and exhibit objects in museums; conservationist restored ruined churches in the centre of cities with large open space. Cultural performances of dance, music and singing are staged in specially allocated spaces with admission fees. Through calling something ‘heritage’, such as monuments, churches or old towns, heritage experts separate the spaces of heritage and people’s daily life. They create zoning laws, safety standards or establish physical boundaries of walls or fences to complete this process.

The second effect, emotional banishment, applies to the certification of both tangible and ICH in China. While many ICH-related policies are derived from national directives, local heritage offices justify and legitimise their heritage practices with the help of scholarly expertise. The scholarly support and government-led approach becomes a governance strategy of heritage nomination and management that establishes standards of inclusion and exclusion. However, this approach often lacks the consideration of the voices of actual participants or a consideration of local values linked to tangible heritage. This raises the question of who has the power to authenticate: officials, experts or cultural practitioners and local communities.

The third effect of value shifting relates to diverse categories of heritage sites, natural or cultural, tangible or intangible. The admission fees for heritage sites in China (such as ruins, national parks or scenic areas) are increased once the sites are listed as National or World Heritage Sites (Shen 2010; Zhu and Li 2013). Cultural tradition, such as folklore, food or cultural performances is widely used in a commercialised way to increase economic income. Promoting heritage sites allows local governments to gain both political and economic capital. In this ‘new form of

social-cultural movement (*yundong*)' (Peng 2008), local governments and related agencies participate in heritage activities for the purpose of maximising local economic benefits and maintaining state control of heritage resources.

However, as the case studies illustrate, the 'global hierarchy of value' of authenticity in China is competing with local interests. Local individuals or institutions bring their own interpretation of authenticity to the heritage discourse. They do not appropriate authenticity declarations, scientific knowledge or legal definitions. Rather, their engagement in authentication is often rendered possible through practices. People act as participants, rather than rule-makers, authorities or observers in heritage-related activities.

When global value of authenticity affects local heritage practices, the local participants are not passive recipients of these effects, as evidenced by the response of the monks in the case of the Xingjiao Temple in Xi'an. In the case of Dongba ritual performance, the dongba and tourists had a different response to the cultural effects of authentication. Instead of directly confronting or challenging elite norms, people develop their own meaning about the ritual through their participation of the cultural events. The public regards the performance as a tourism commodity in the production of the dominant narrative of authentication; however, for both tourists and the dongba, whether the religious scripture is authentic or not is no longer of great importance. They produced and perceived new values and meanings during their bodily participation of the wedding rituals as a performative act.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrate how the Western-inspired notion of authenticity is borrowed, interpreted and practised in China. When China embraced the global regime of World Heritage industry in the 1990s, both its central and local governments adopted a particular understanding of 'authenticity' to standardise, certify and legitimise their heritage practices. Chinese authorities and professionals reinterpret the principle of authenticity, and apply to national and local heritage activities. As Kipnis (2012, 731) stated, the nation-building process in China results in 'an increased degree of commonality in lived experience and communicative practice'. Authenticity in heritage management and conservation thus becomes such agents that assist the process of nation building.

The three effects – spatial separation, emotional banishment and value shifting – are central to the authenticity work in the process of nation building and identity construction. Heritage management and preservation does not only define what is or is not legitimate heritage through 'spatial separation', but also marginalise and fossilise the community with very little consideration of their emotion and voices. Authentication becomes a governance strategy to legitimise inclusion and exclusion and to allocate economic, moral and aesthetic values.

This study also illustrates that local communities are not passive recipients of the imposed value of authenticity; rather, they consume, contest and negotiate with these cultural effects in diverse ways. Their responses do not always reflect classical means of resistance such as meetings or strikes, but can also be embedded in everyday life. Actions among heritage authorities, local communities and tourists reveal the pluralistic and contested nature of the heritage phenomena in China. When people meet and clash confronting with the dominant heritage value, they are able to open up new spaces where they can negotiate and assert their own rights.

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Notes

1. The Venice Charter has developed since 1960s as one of the foundational texts for the conservation and preservation movements. It underlines a philosophical basis of heritage conservation that was initiated in most European countries as a legal and policy-making process.
2. In China, cultural sites are mainly managed by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH). Natural sites and national scenic areas are managed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development.
3. Cohen and Cohen (2012) proposed two types of authentication of attractions, 'cool' and 'hot'. 'Cool' authentication is conceptualised as certification of object as original or real, contrasting with a copy or fake. Contrasting with 'cool' authentication, 'hot' authentication lacks an authorised agent. It is an affective self-reinforcing process, in which the genuineness of sites, objects or events is confirmed or reinforced.
4. The Cultural Revolution is a cultural movement that imposes Maoist orthodoxy and removes all capitalist and feudalistic elements from the Chinese society.
5. This is another UNESCO cultural programme. By creating a compendium of the world's documentary heritage – manuscripts, oral traditions, audio-visual materials, library and archive holdings – the programme aims to tap on its networks of experts to exchange information and raise resources for the preservation, digitisation and dissemination of documentary materials.
6. The word 'dongba' is of Tibetan origin, meaning wise man and teacher. Local community regarded the dongbas as a group of village-based, part-time religious specialists (McKhann 2010). By memorising the scripts, they were able to perform varied religious rituals and rites by chanting and dancing.
7. As suggested by Michael Herzfeld from his term of 'spatial cleansing', the proposed newly built environment creates 'the intrusive presence of regimentation and aesthetic domination'.

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