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Where there is Repression, there is Resistance: Asking Critical Questions in China's Stone Forest World Heritage Site

Introduction

In August 2011, I saw my long-time research site of Wukeshu for the last time. Bulldozers, anxiety and caution surrounded us amid homes marked with “cha 拆” to demolish, a sign repeatedly painted out by families still in residence. My closest Sani friend guided us along rubble-strewn paths to visit family living behind barred gates. It looked like a war zone.

Wukeshu was being destroyed in the name of tourism development. New facilities for tourists were planned for this prime piece of real estate by the entrance to the Stone Forest National Park. Never mind that it was home to hundreds of indigenous Sani families for centuries.

Many Wukeshu people have not moved on quietly, and that is the focus of this paper, exploring how in current repressive conditions, a young Chinese academic can pursue telling the story of Wukeshu through critical research, transnational networking, and soft power. This doctoral student, Shi Yanlan, and I co-authored a paper on *Tangible Removal and Intangible Renewal* for a UNESCO-focused conference in Taipei, April 2013. At the last moment, all PRC scholars were told they had been denied visas by Taiwan. Mike Robinson, one of the organizers, however had received an email message from Beijing officials that “your conference is banned.” Consequently I was unable to talk with Shi face-to-face, unguarded. Our report reflected her input, but regrettably I cannot provide much here about her experience. Another direction to be explored is this paper’s reception from UNESCO representatives at the meeting.

We interrogate the role of academics to build awareness when tourism brings despair as “world-taking” vs. “worldmaking” and hope. A conceptual framework based on cosmopolitan theory helped us build an understanding of the Wukeshu community’s situation and possibilities for their future. One of the conundrums encountered in heritage tourism development is the removal or relocation of local people and their tangible heritage, to enhance a site’s touristic value. At issue are multicultural rights and cultural diversity, versus state hegemony and the greater good of world heritage, a cosmopolitan conundrum that yields to power. We explored motivations for such actions as well as consequences for intangible cultural survival and reinvention in China’s Stone Forest, or Shilin, now part of a World Natural Heritage Site (WHS).

Wukeshu, a Sani Yi ethnic minority community whose ancestral lands comprised the gateway into Shilin National Park, has faced removal over several decades. In 1993 ancestral burial grounds were relocated for road and parking lot development, and village administration was changed to a corporate structure under the Tourism Bureau. By 2011 Wukeshu villagers were removed from their homes to a new townhouse community across the highway, although some folks resisted, staying on as the land was cleared for new tourist facilities. What is the changing value of Sani heritage in these conditions?

Tensions between local, nation and global claims are inherent in heritage industries. UNESCO’s WHS list reflects both national and cosmopolitan views through the combined forces of globalization that constructs a “common” world heritage while reinforcing local/ national identity (Barthel-Bouchier and Hui 2007). China’s stunning WHS development, adding more than forty sites since 1987 has fed intense competition between scenic spots to attain this most coveted classification, becoming “world-class” (Nyíri 2006), a term often applied to Shilin. How do the local Sani fit into this equation? Ideas about Chinese cosmopolitan values: *tianxia* (Confucian, heritage-based worldview) and *shijie zhuyi* (outward-looking engagement with the changing world), as well as indigenous cosmopolitanism (global indigeneity, supported by the UN), all

shape Wukeshu as a community balancing removal and renewal of their tangible and intangible heritage.

Shilin's Tourism Development History

Shilin Park was established as a public tourism attraction in 1931. After founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it became an important scenic spot promoted by the Chinese government when receiving foreign delegations from allied nations. Folklore productions teams in the 1950s published the popular Sani tale "Ashima" and patriotic Shilin culture shows were performed by Sani Yi youth in the 1960s. Both were precursors to Shilin tourism development following China's reform and opening up in 1978. Shilin National Park was established in 1982, when the government began to develop tourist facilities, and guide services for organized tours.

In 1987, officials began to draw up a comprehensive development plan. Legislation to shape Shilin's future was completed in 1990 and subsequently approved by the Yunnan People's Congress. County infrastructure improvements and Park expansion were carefully laid out. A series of reports written to inform the legislators (Zhang 1990), included discussions on legal issues over tourism development within an ethnic minority autonomous county and the local government's authority for scenic spot management. Another point of discussion was the need to strengthen Sani cultural production, using stereotypical language to emphasize that Sani people are great at singing, dancing, and wear colorful clothes.

The local Yi autonomous county Tourism Bureau administers Shilin Park. The county eventually changed its name to Shilin in 1998, despite some Sani protest. Typical of many autonomous regions, only about one third of the county population is actually Sani Yi minority. The government repeatedly sought designation of Shilin as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site, finally succeeding in 2007 as part of "The South China Karst World Heritage Site."

After nearly three decades of development, Shilin tourism is taking off. The core scenic area has expanded from 4 to 12 square kilometers, at the cost of expropriating farmers' land. In 2010, the total number of domestic and foreign tourist arrivals was 2.75 million for the Park, and 3.5 million tourists for all of Shilin County. That year, the county received 2 billion yuan in tourism revenues. Its 45 hotels held over 3,000 beds. Current plans call for five-star hotels, a shopping mall, golf courses and other commercial centers to be built in the next several years around the Shilin core scenic area.

Wukeshu Village Response to Tourism

Sani communities in Shilin County have experienced distinct response to tourism. Some, like Danuohei, which is far from the Park, have thrived as ethnic-eco villages, with local Sani stakeholders involved in planning and production supported by county legislation and funding. The small village of Wukeshu 's recent history is intimately tied to Shilin National Park. What became the park entrance district was cultivated by earlier generations of Wukeshu people. In the 1960s a few tourists visited Shilin, but they had no interaction with Wukeshu villagers who were occupied farming within the kasts. By the 1970s some international tourists entered Wukeshu and showed great interested in Sani traditional embroidery, asking the villagers to sell to them. Many retail vendors began doing business in the scenic area during the 1980s.

The Tourism Bureau first limited handicrafts selling within the Park to rented stalls, then in 1992 limited stall access only to Wukeshu citizens, marking a major shift in the village and bureau relationship. As their land base shrank, acquisitioned for Park expansion, so did the community's ability to function. In late 1993, the village was legally transformed under the Tourism Bureau, with all 760 indigenous residents becoming corporation members (Swain 2001:186). Not every plan went smoothly. Before the village pathways were concreted over for tourists and the locals, there was a major campaign to contain Wukeshu's pigs in 1993. For the

short run, the pigs and villagers won. However, as the 1990 legislature reports indicted (Zang 1990), the long-term plan was for Wukeshu to be museumized, the people to be moved out to create a model ethnic village populated by guides and other tourist services.

By 1995, many villagers changed to wholesaling their embroidery to Sichuan migrants who had moved into Wukeshu. These Han tailors made “ethnic” goods for the tourist trade. In the meantime, villagers built small retail spaces near the Park entrance that were leased to outsiders, especially the Sichuannese, for restaurants and craft sales. In addition, Wukeshu villagers were employed in the Park to rent ethnic costumes and take tourists’ photos, provide guide services and performances, and menial service work. A few became administrators. By the 2000s more than 90% of the adult-age labor force works within the scenic area tourism business.

2007-1013 Change and Conflict

In the 2005 Shilin Management Plan, submitted to UNESCO for WHS consideration, the future of Wukeshu was clearly spelled out (p. 57): “permits [will be made] only for dismantling in Wukeshu Village and not for new construction, i.e. demolish buildings and architectures which would spoil the values and integral attraction of the zone, retain those characteristic of local ethnic settlement and architectural style and change them for ethnic tourism and tourist service, reduce the population.” Ironically tourism development (p.22) was expected to stimulate “development and renaissance of the [Sani] local culture.” Once Shilin was designated as part of the South China Karst WHS, it was only a matter of time before the village would be removed. A 2007 news report entitled “UNESCO status tough on Yi” (China Daily) quoted the indigenous village leader that “all structures will be dismantled and people moved out by 2008.” This was not the case, as many Wukeshu residents decided to not go quietly.

Shi Yanlan reported the following from her field research. On May 17, 2010, people from 43 Wukeshu households jointly filed a lawsuit demanding that the Shilin County government revoke their decision to relocate the whole Wukeshu village. They lost. Before this, the villagers had organized an attack against the Agriculture, Industry, and Commercial (AIC) Group, the village corporation, which they believed has miss-used company funds paid by the local government for land acquisition, and facilitated village removal. Villagers mobilized a sit-in in the Shilin Park parking lot and went on strike in order to gain attention from higher levels of government. They also locked up government officials including the AIC Group company leaders for over 12 hours, sparking a battle between the police and villagers. More than 40 people were sent to prison for their actions. Now most Wukeshu villagers have been moved to a new Wukeshu minorities-style villa community, within sight of their old home. A few remain, even though their electricity and water supplies are cut off. Some folks who willing moved are now trying to rent out their new houses. For one thing, there is little room for even a kitchen garden, while their shoddily built townhouses come with garages and sidewalks.

Their village was destroyed, despite their revolt protesting how Sani built cultural landscape has disappeared and Wukeshu people's 500 years of traditional lifestyle has been damaged. The villagers must balance their life to suit new surroundings next to their homeland. In order to maintain the reputation of a world natural heritage site, the local government has promoted construction in the Shilin Scenic Area, based on normalized standards and homogenized management in exchange for the removal of local cultural heritage. Compared with the protection of natural heritage, Wukeshu Sani culture is unimportant. We increasingly see a park-like estate, rather than a natural heritage site.

Generic Sani minority culture is important in the promotion of Shilin scenic tourism, To establish a world-class tourist attraction, the government uses many Sani cultural elements For example, all Shilin tourism guides, who are of different ethnic identities, must wear Sani clothing to

construct a local minority landscape. The scenic guides' descriptions must use many Sani national legends and Sani art motifs in their performances, building park images as "natural." While the Wukeshu Sani people's homes have changed, they developed their own cosmopolitanism, a kind of indigenuity or global indigenous identity that may help them adapt, assert their rights and form new intangible Sani culture.

Chinese Cosmopolitanism, imagining Wukeshu's future

Competing discourses on cosmopolitanism, about being world citizens, shape China's ethnic/ecotourism destinations (Swain 2013). We can see *tianxia* and *shijie* aspects, as well as indigenous, Western, and other cosmopolitanisms at work in these destinations. *Tianxia* cosmopolitanism promotes minority nationality unity in diversity and the common good of China's national cultural and environmental resources. It upholds China's soft power and hierarchical order from the center. The same logic extends to the imprimatur of a World Heritage Site onto a particular scenic spot, like Shilin, that not only honors the location but ultimately reconfirms China's cultural superiority (Nyíri 2006:76). *Shijie* thinking engages indigenous, Western, and other cosmopolitanisms. It is used to indicate modernity, international branding, global collaboration, equity, appreciation for cultural and ecological diversity, as well as a drive for change.

Tourism marketing of cultural commodities provides one location where indigenous cosmopolitans engage changing livelihoods, strategizing with their varied sets of tools to assert their rights in local communities, their nation states, and the world at large. Re-configurations of indigenous communities for tourism development can lead to disenfranchisement and relocation of the very people whose heritage is being represented, as we have seen. Wukeshu has become a flashpoint for unrest, and a test case for negotiating the cosmopolitan visions of China, UNESCO, and Sani people for WHS designations and sustainable tourism development.

UNESCO guidelines (online) for stakeholders call for “increased participation of local communities in the planning, development and management of sustainable tourism at and around World Heritage properties.” As the story of Wukeshu unfolds, we can see that villagers were bought out, rather than brought in as stakeholders. The Chinese state is motivated to preserve and protect, natural and cultural heritage, and is willing to sacrifice some, in this case Wukeshu claims to ancestral lands, for the greater good. This is *tianxia* logic. UNESCO promotes cosmopolitan values for human rights, social justice and cultural heritage while also accommodating a WHS application that, in the case of Wukeshu, allows for the removal of a community from their homeland. While their family homes and lands are Sani, people of Wukeshu have been motivated to re-identity as people with specific rights within their autonomous county, and renew their intangible heritage as the indigenous people of Shilin.

Conclusions

Because of these multiple discourses on cosmopolitanism within Chinese WHS, reflecting a range of values in contemporary China, it is possible for Shi Yanlan to conduct her research and form opinions. Yet, what can be done with this knowledge? For example, when she sent me some photographs of “new” Wukeshu, there was a warning in English on the file sharing site stating “If the resource includes information that violates national law Please click here, and Report.” Yanlan is making the Wukeshu situation known within academic circles, engaging grassroots activists on the ground. Her understanding of distinct ethical bases for cosmopolitanism embraces patriotic and global concerns, as well as indigenous rights. As the Sani of Wukeshu struggle to recuperate their tangible heritage, creating garden spaces, repairing their faux-ethnic townhouses, they make their own adaptations to modernity, not living some fantasy of how Wukeshu should look as a model minority village. At the same time they face huge challenges to their intangible heritage- language, aesthetics, celebrations, norms. UNESCO representatives at the Taipei conference were shocked to understand that approval had been given to demolish a living village to make way for tourist facilities as part of a

successful WHS application. Other than expressions of remorse, there were no firm suggestions for recourse or UNESCO rules evoked, to make reparations to the people of Wukeshu, perhaps by supporting their cultural renewal. Certainly the current plans now moving forward will have farcical results. Where the old village of Wukeshu once stood, a Shanghai firm has designed construction of an “intangible heritage cultural theme park” complete with Sani-themed rides, in “the most important tourism service cluster for Shilin world heritage park” (ebuarchitects 2011).

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