



Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding in Times of Crisis

A Case Study of the Chinese Ethnic Qiang's “Cultural Reconstruction” after the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake

This article discusses if and how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding is an effective means to recover local cultures after a major disaster by considering an example from China, a forceful newcomer in the recent global ICH safeguarding campaign. After the severe Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, the Chinese state initiated “cultural reconstruction” projects to rescue, restore, and recover the affected ethnic-minority Qiang cultures, for which the inscription, safeguarding, and promotion of Qiang ICH became major means. This article analyzes how state agencies and selected groups of scholars led and monitored the Qiang ICH safeguarding process and also how the knowledge of the newly heritagized cultural practices was produced. Informed by long-term fieldwork in the affected Qiang villages, the article critiques the complex impacts of the emergent, top-down, and yet problematic ICH safeguarding planning on the survival and sustainability of the noted cultural practices as well as the Qiang communities.

KEYWORDS: ICH safeguarding—disaster—cultural recovery—
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This article discusses if and how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding is an effective means to recover and protect local cultures after a major disaster by considering an example from China, a forceful newcomer in the recent global ICH safeguarding campaign. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines intangible heritage as the transmission of knowledge, performances, rituals, and skills, upholding it as a “mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development” (UNESCO 2003). When introduced to the Chinese public in the early 2000s, intangible heritage was a linguistically and culturally alienating concept. Translated into Chinese as *feiwuzhi wenhuayichan*, it starts conceptually with a negative initial determiner and contains an odd number of characters, a very rare and customarily unfavorable morphological structure for popular Chinese phrases (Gao 2017). Nevertheless, China is now the country hosting the largest number of UNESCO-inscribed ICH representatives and has named close to 1,300 national ICH elements since 2006.

On May 12, 2008, a severe earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale took place in Wenchuan County of Sichuan province, southwestern China. Causing a death toll of close to 70,000 and direct economic loss of over 800 billion yuan, the Wenchuan earthquake is the most damaging disaster with the widest impact since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Chinese State Council 2008). The Qiang are one of the officially recognized ethnic minorities of China. They took a hard hit in the earthquake, because 98.2 percent of the Chinese Qiang population, about 300,000 people, lived inside Sichuan province, according to data from the 2010 Chinese census. The earthquake affected almost all the Qiang-inhabited areas and destroyed hundreds of historic and contemporary Qiang villages and settlements.

After the 2008 earthquake, the Chinese government led swift, massive, and comprehensive disaster relief and recovery efforts, creating spectacular and officially celebrated “miraculous reconstruction” projects throughout the affected areas. For the first time in the nation’s history, the Chinese government implemented “cultural reconstruction” projects to rescue, restore, and reconstruct the affected local cultures in the process of recovery. The state policy resonated with the growing international consensus that culture is essential for the continuity, resilience, and sustainable development of communities and individuals in disaster contexts (UNESCO 2016a). Unprecedentedly, the Chinese state put heavy

emphasis on recovering Qiang culture, where the nomination, rescue, and promotion of Qiang ICH composed major parts of the state planning.

This article explores why and how the Chinese state upheld ICH safeguarding as a preferred means to recover the affected Qiang and their cultural life. Taking the nomination of the Qiang New Year as national and later UNESCO-inscribed ICH as an example, it discusses how the state- and scholar-driven heritagization process transforms the status, significance, and practice of ethnic cultural traditions. Identifying heritage as a “verb” rather than a “noun” (Harvey 2001), researchers have explored the sociopolitical complexity of the making of cultural heritage (see Bendix 2009; Hafstein 2009). Embedded in the campaign of Qiang ICH safeguarding was a complex contestation between state agencies and selected scholars to produce state-sanctioned representation of Qiang cultural practices. These actors considered such practices relevant to the national and local political, economic, and social life.

Although there is a single Chinese word, *baobu* (保护), for both “protection” and “safeguarding,” it is important to point out the areas where the Chinese state’s efforts to nominate and protect ICH tend to go against the UNESCO’s principle of letting the local communities select and safeguard their own ICH (An and Yang 2015, 284–85). I argue that the involved Chinese state agencies and scholars creatively yet contestably manipulated the UNESCO-initiated ICH safeguarding discourse in the “cultural reconstruction” projects. They became the monitors of the Qiang ICH safeguarding campaign, while partially adopting the UNESCO ideals. Though the safeguarding initiatives ironically cast out local actors and communities, the heritagization process greatly influenced local perceptions toward the related cultural practices. Consequently, local communities’ awareness and practices toward ICH safeguarding were fundamentally and variedly reshaped.

This research is part of an ongoing project of post-disaster recovery of local cultures since 2009 and is based on fifteen months of fieldwork in Longxi township, Wenchuan county. During this period of time Longxi township dramatically transformed from a marginalized Qiang-concentrated settlement into a Qiang heritage-tourism destination. Longxi was advertised as the “Qiang People’s Valley” after the earthquake, largely because it was believed to be one of the origin places of the Qiang *shibi*¹—ritual specialists who preside over and monitor important Qiang rituals including the New Year. I interviewed a number of officials, scholars, and *shibi* involved in the emergent Qiang ICH rescue and safeguarding campaign and participated in various celebratory events of the Qiang New Year in Longxi.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING AS A MECHANISM FOR CULTURAL RECOVERY

Several international agencies are the initiators and rule-makers of ICH safeguarding in times of crisis, promoting a deep understanding of and wide support for rescuing and preserving cultural heritage in such situations. UNESCO has been the main advocate. It managed projects in Afghanistan in 2002 (Manhart 2004); a post-tsunami rehabilitation program in 2006 (Office of the UNESCO Regional

Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific 2006); and assistance to Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, and Vanuatu in recent years (UNESCO 2016b). In 2015, UNESCO established the Heritage Emergency Fund for quick response to such crises and adopted a strategy to reinforce the organization's action for the protection of culture and cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict and disasters (UNESCO 2017). The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) has been involved in promoting risk management strategies for cultural heritage for more than a decade. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) has produced many reports and training pamphlets on protecting cultural heritage in emergent situations. The World Heritage Committee has also participated in this initiative.

Through documenting memories and cultural practices of the affected populations, folklorists and anthropologists analyze cultural practices as an essential factor leading to meaningful recovery (Horigan 2018; Anders and Kverndokk 2015, 357). Cultural heritage safeguarding can positively help recover the sense of community for affected populations, recognizing the social, psychological, and political importance of heritage preservation (Miichi 2016; Wijeratne 2008). Researchers on the post-2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami recovery, for example, pointed out how the continuation of folk performing arts and local rituals helped communities psychologically recover from and revive after the catastrophes (Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties 2017). Finally, heritagization projects and cultural heritage preservation programs are strategies for economic recovery and expansion, especially through the development of heritage tourism (Hartmann 2014; Amujo and Otubanjo 2012).

On a larger scale, the making of disaster sites and affected cultural practices as cultural heritage can be a powerful tool to stimulate national solidarity and patriotic emotions. For example, Kenneth Foote (2003, 265) argues that memorial sites and monuments of disaster events may become “emblems of national identity” where hundreds of such sites have been “enshrined with patriotic fervor,” producing varied versions of “common themes of sacrifice, valor, and perseverance.” Like the effects of the spectacular Wenchuan earthquake relief and “culturally sensitive” reconstruction of the Qiang settlements, the state-led urgent heritagization of the Qiang cultural practices was expected to promote national unity, state power, and social stability in China (Le Mentec and Zhang 2017).

Worth pointing out are the politics and complexities embedded in the ideal of “cultural recovery.” A. J. Faas and Roberto Barrios (2015, 292) caution that “local cultures are alternatively subjected to malign neglect, coopted, or scapegoated in efforts of disaster risk reduction, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery.” Ignoring local values and cultural practices in disaster recovery is key reason for many such projects to fail, where survivors continue to suffer economic deprivation, political discrimination, and cultural alienation in the recovery processes (Barrios 2014; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). Moreover, ethnographic analyses on the few “culturally sensitive” recovery plans demonstrate how local cultures were mistakenly treated as bounded, ahistorical, and homogeneous entities (Hoffman 2016; Maldonado 2016). The local cultural practices and expressions

were usually essentialized and stereotyped. Such projects ended up reinforcing the affected communities' marginality and inequalities, which were underlying causes of their tragic experiences (Browne 2015).

This article examines why intangible cultural heritage safeguarding becomes a critical mechanism for recovering local cultures after crises or disasters. More precisely, the question to investigate is why, in the context of the Wenchuan earthquake, preserving ICH was equated with protecting culture. The discourse of endangered heritage requiring urgent safeguarding reminds us of the implications and limitations of the "salvage ethnography" once popularly accepted in the early 20th century (Gruber 1970). Both strategies share a well-intended concern of the loss of diverse human knowledge and varied cultural expressions. Informed mainly by feminist and colonial studies, anthropologists have critiqued the imbalanced power relations and problematic "othering" of the targeted cultures in such campaigns.

Agencies that assume the authority and resources to rescue, collect, represent, and present "salvaged" cultures are critiqued for their hegemonic and oftentimes biased position in representing and understanding the "others" (Asad 1973; Katz 1992). At the same time, such salvage and representation of the endangered cultures tend to confine the latter in a time-space that is both archaic and isolated, perpetuating the "primitive," "vulnerable," and unchanging imagination of them (Clifford 1989). The suspended preservation of such cultures in museums and schools also dismisses the historical and ecological context where the cultures originate (Katz 1992). It is therefore interesting that UNESCO purposely emphasizes safeguarding rather than preserving ICH, aiming to give community members more resources to guard their own cultures for themselves. However, powerful and usually outside agencies still play an overwhelming role in manipulating the affected cultures for specific political ends in emergent ICH safeguarding campaigns.

Moreover, I argue that ICH rescue and safeguarding resonate with the politics of disaster aid as well as heritage regimes in emergent situations. Admittedly, disaster aid interventions, including initiatives of ICH rescue and safeguarding, are acts of well-intentioned people "doing good." Instead of merely challenging the so-called "moral untouchability" of such acts, researchers contend that the politics, intention, and implementation of the "good work" need comprehensive analyses. Anthropologists and scholars on NGOs, through their long-term interaction with humanitarian workers and aid receivers, have discerned the "photo-op" nature of disaster aid. In his multi-year research on what he terms the "humanitarian aftershocks" in Haiti since 2010, Mark Schuller explains, "Humanitarian staff, particularly those engaged in public relations or fundraising, are acutely aware of this: their organizations live (none have died so far) from media coverage. Therefore, decisions about particular courses of action on the ground are guided at least in part for the opportunity to stage a photo op" (2016, 208). I argue that post-disaster ICH safeguarding and the Chinese case in particular follow a similar logic. As shown in the ethnographic details in later sections of this article, ICH and especially ICH of the disaster-stricken, ethnic-minority Qiang became an ideal photo-op cultural recovery project. It immediately attracted wide media attention and shaped the public impression of the state-led disaster relief work.

The logic of photo-op consequently prompts aid agencies to implement quick, easy-to-set-up, and short-term relief and reconstruction projects that are both accountable and manageable. A striking example is the expensive private water trucks rented by NGOs as a “solution” to the post-quake water crisis in Haiti. The trucks appeared in the temporary camps for only a short time until the aid money dried up. The pre-existing public taps were not repaired, although repairing the permanent water lines was a much cheaper and more sustainable solution than the water trucks (Schuller 2016, 209). Researchers also call attention to the audit culture that overshadows the functioning of humanitarian agencies and the working of bureaucratic power in general (Schuller 2016; Strathern 2000). Humanitarian agencies are expected to produce accountable numerical results, such as the number of shelters built in a particular period of time, the number of private water trucks rented, and the number of people who lined up for the water provided. The agencies can then share such numbers with beneficiaries and release them to the wider public as trustworthy evidence for subsequent support. In the case of emergent ICH safeguarding, I am concerned with the similar tendency to tally “rescued” ICH items as accountable numeric results to showcase the effectiveness of state-led cultural relief work.

This article problematizes how the heritage regime impacts ICH safeguarding. The nation-state often plays a key role in mediating and producing heritage, “both as a form of governance and as an experiential domain for citizens on the ground” (Geismar 2015, 72). Heritage regimes legitimize a particular articulation of the ownership and objectification of a culture and its past.

More importantly, heritage is managed, circulated, and consumed as a resource for particular economic, political, and social agendas in such regimes (see also Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013). In China, heritage-making and promotion become top-down mechanisms of political recognition and economic entitlement for the development of related material culture and cultural practices (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013; Bodolet 2013). As a “technology of government” (Oakes 2013), heritage entangles with rural development, tourism, urbanization, modernization, sustainability, and nationalism projects in various parts of China. Cultural practices of ethnic regions are incorporated into official heritage and tourism policies, mainly helping to reinforce the political construction of a multi-ethnic nation, as well as to promote heritage tourism-based development (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013).

Intangible cultural heritage is a nascent, culturally alienating, yet politically energizing concept within the contemporary Chinese campaign for heritage protection and promotion. China joined the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter Convention) in 2004. The National Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage was launched by the Chinese Ministry of Culture in 2005. Since 2006, China Cultural Heritage Day was celebrated on every second Saturday of June, where ICH played a major part in a wide array of activities and other public displays. Since 2017, it is called Cultural and Natural Heritage Day. An increasing number of formerly “traditional” cultural practices were listed as national ICH (1,219 items in 2011). China currently

possesses thirty-nine UNESCO-inscribed intangible heritage culture elements (including several in “Need of Urgent Safeguarding”).

In China, ICH safeguarding emphasizes protecting the “living” culture and integrating it into everyday lives. Chinese folklorists and anthropologists have played an essential role in explaining and applying the UNESCO-supported ICH discourse to the ongoing tradition-reviving practices in contemporary China (An and Yang 2015). Because of the work of the scholars, collaborating with the state’s participation in the UNESCO Convention, some folk arts, folklore, or folk cultures long regarded as “disparaged” and officially banned for a long time are inscribed as national ICH (Gao 2014; You 2015; Liang 2013). Folklorist Juwen Zhang (2017) observes that the ICH safeguarding campaign reflects the “cultural self-healing mechanism” throughout the prolonged transformation of Chinese culture. Zhang (*ibid.*) rightfully points out how the campaign not only redefines “folk belief” in relation to “heritage” (Zhang 2017, 208) but also enhances the state’s as well as community members’ consciousness of the folk cultures in everyday practices (see Gao 2017; Zhang and Zhou 2017).

Dorothy Noyes (2015, 167–70) analyzes the political framework and capacities of the state in “the monopoly of the intellectual resources required for producing a nomination.” The discourse of cultural heritage, tangible and intangible alike, bestows these folk cultural practices a new significance of belonging to the “cultural categories that could be approved by superiors” (Gao 2014, 558), putting the focus on their susceptibility to management and approval by officials. This process, however, is also disempowering in the sense that local knowledge and authority might be largely diluted (see You in this issue).

THE HERITAGE REGIME AND “CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION” PROJECTS

The Qiang communities’ reconstruction after the Wenchuan earthquake was officially praised for being sensitive to local cultures. On May 22, only ten days after the earthquake, in an interview among the earthquake ruins of a Qiang-concentrated county the then Chinese premier Wen Jiabao firmly proclaimed that Qiang culture must be well protected after the disaster (Cheng, Li, and Chen 2008). Given the Qiang’s relatively small population and meager economy, Qiang culture has long been ignored and invisible. Ironically, the earthquake brought the affected villages as well as the Qiang to the national audience’s attention for the first time. Soon in the *Overall Planning for Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Restoration and Reconstruction* report (hereafter *Overall Planning*) issued by the state council in August of the same year, one of the basic principles was to “inherit and carry forward culture and protect ecology” (Chinese state council 2008, 13).

Qiang cultural rescue and preservation thus became the first officially ordered experiment of recovering an ethnic culture after a major disaster. Echoing the critiques of “salvage ethnography,” Qiaoyun Zhang and Roberto Barrios argue (2017) that an act of care for the severely injured “younger brother” of the multi-ethnic “Chinese family” serves far-reaching political, economic, and social impacts desired by the paternalistic state. The cultural recovery helped strengthen

the unifying power of the Chinese state, challenged both by several natural disasters and social unrest during China's Olympic year. Here, I specifically analyze how the Chinese heritage regime made Qiang ICH a celebrated sought-after agenda for "cultural reconstruction" programs. The emergent heritagization of the Qiang traditional cultural life revealed the particular "heritage emotions" (Fabre 2013) stimulated by tragic events. The act of safeguarding cultural heritage not only helped salvage hard-hit cultural practices but also highlighted the state's "loving care" for a vulnerable ethnic group.

The Chinese state's promise to rescue Qiang culture brought about emergent yet brand-new challenges for policymakers, scholars, and other parties interested in China's cultural present and future related to ethnic and regional diversity, continuity, and creativity. Since the beginning, state officials and selected scholars were leaders of the safeguarding initiatives. High-level officials, including Jia Qinglin, then Chairperson of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and Hui Liangyu, then Vice Premier of the Chinese State, gave instructions to the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China (SEAC) to start related research and implementation work as soon as possible. On May 30, 2008, the first state-level symposium discussing post-Wenchuan Earthquake Qiang cultural rescue and protection was held in Beijing. SEAC, the state managing agency on ethnic affairs, published an official report after the symposium, revealing the agency's main interests in emergent rescue work on Qiang cultural relics and other material culture, as well as in Qiang ICH and its inheritors (SEAC 2008).

A select group of Chinese scholars from distinguished Chinese universities and research institutes were responsible for directing this ICH-centered Qiang cultural rescue and safeguarding. A team of geographers at the Chinese Academy of Sciences first advocated for rescuing Qiang culture two days after the earthquake. However, at that time, an urgent problem for all researchers was that "Qiang culture was devastatingly attacked by the earthquake before we [scholars] were able to systematically understand it," said Feng Jikai, then president of the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association (Xu 2008). Feng Jikai soon became the leader of the campaign for "relieving the disaster in terms of culture." He chaired the "Emergency Qiang Cultural Rescue Symposium" held at the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, in May 2008. He also took a team of scholars to conduct field research in the earthquake-stricken zones between late May and early June.

Within just a month's time, Feng Jikai, renowned Qiang ethnologist Li Shaoming, and other scholars wrote the *Proposal for Qiang Cultural Heritage Protection in Post-Wenchuan Earthquake Reconstruction Work* (hereafter *Proposal for Qiang Cultural Heritage Protection*) and delivered it to the Chinese State Council. As a result, the *Overall Planning* states the following concrete points for the Qiang's "cultural rescue project" (Chinese State Council 2008, 49):

Establish a national experimental zone for the ecological protection of Qiang's culture, repair severely damaged Qiang's cultural relics and valuable intangible cultural heritage and materials, rescue cultural relics and classical books and intangible cultural heritage in disaster areas, set up a folk cultural database and compile reading books for the popularization of Qiang's culture.

In China, the urgent Qiang ICH safeguarding campaign took advantage of a willing and omnipotent state to react quickly to the immediate need of ICH rescue and recovery. The Chinese state's major attention to this matter was revealed not only in the involvement of high-level officials but also by the significant venues where the symposiums and related activities were held.

LISTING QIANG ICH AS AN "EMERGENT" AND "SPECIAL" RECOVERY STRATEGY

Although ICH safeguarding was included in the state planning, at that time there was little and oftentimes incorrect knowledge of what constituted ICH, let alone how it could be preserved. For example, in the *Overall Planning*, the intangible cultural heritage to repair included only museums and institutes, with a focus on saving and collecting material cultures. The Qiang Custom Museum in Beichuan City was the one and only "Qiang ICH" item on the list.

This reveals two problems within China's decade-long ICH safeguarding campaign. First was the "museumization" of cultural heritage that de-contextualizes such heritage from the community-based socio-ecological traditions and then re-contextualizes it into static displays in museums (Kuutma 2007). According to the *Overall Planning*, museums and institutes were the only venues for ICH safeguarding. Costumes and instruments of the ICH transmitters became the main targets of protection managed by appointed institutions. However, the state-initiated planning dismissed the actual skills, transmitters and, most importantly, cultural contexts in the safeguarding campaign. The second problem was that incomplete information concerning the ICH of the marginalized groups, such as that of the Qiang, was collected by agencies drafting such state planning. For example, two Qiang ICH elements, the Qiang Wa'er'ezu and Qiang Flute Playing and Making Skills, were in the first batch of the Chinese ICH representative list published in 2006, yet neither of them was mentioned in the *Overall Planning*.

After the Wenchuan earthquake, listing representative Qiang cultural practices as national and international ICH became a priority. "Emergent" and "special" strategies, as advocated in the *Proposal for Qiang Cultural Heritage Protection*, were adopted to quickly nominate Qiang disaster sites (such as the ruined old Beichuan county seat), tangible heritage (such as Qiang watchtowers and historical villages), as well as ICH (including Qiang epics, embroidery skills, and New Year) as national and world cultural heritage and ICH. Selected Qiang traditional cultural practices were urgently nominated as ICH at the provincial, national, and UNESCO levels. Most of these items did not follow the usual nomination procedure, which requires each element to be first approved at a lower hierarchical level for several years before being upgraded to the next hierarchical level. Thus, it usually takes a long time for a county-level ICH element to make it onto the national list. Thanks to the "urgent" and "special" strategies stated in the rescue plan, Qiang ICH items went rapidly through the steps.

As a result, in June 2008, four Qiang cultural practices were included in the national ICH Representative List: Sheep-Skin Drum Dance, Qiang Embroidery Skills, Qiang New Year, and Polyphonic Singing. In 2009, the Qiang New Year was

inscribed by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The Qiang Cultural Ecological Experimental Conservation Area, the third of its kind in China, was established by the Ministry of Culture in November 2008. The establishment of a national experimental zone accords with the Chinese “integrated conservation” principle for safeguarding ICH, which aims to protect not only the ICH itself but also its dependent natural and human ecology. In 2011, three more Qiang items were inscribed as national ICH: the Legend of Yu the Great, the Qiang epic story named Ge Great War, and the Watchtower Construction Skills. Similar “special treatment” also applied to national-level ICH transmitters. Governments of different levels were encouraged to “discover and promote” outstanding provincial- and county-level ICH transmitters. Accordingly, a group of Qiang *shibi*—ritual specialists—were selected as national and provincial ICH transmitters of the Qiang New Year and Sheep-Skin Drum Dance, respectively. These Qiang *shibi* began to receive an annual subsidy to promote and teach the related Qiang ICH after the earthquake.

As the Chinese experience shows, cultural heritage was selected as a convenient and convincing agenda when “cultural reconstruction” became state policy and recovering culture a pressing political task. In terms of its speed and quick impact, ICH safeguarding is a laudable means for calling attention to cultural practices endangered by disasters. An unusually rapid inscription of Qiang ICH into the Chinese national and UNESCO lists displayed the swift response and impactful results of the state-organized post-disaster cultural rescue. Arguably, the heritagization of selected Qiang cultural practices was a convenient method. Chinese state agencies identified and implemented the Qiang ICH safeguarding practices in a short time-frame. On the UNESCO level as well, the inscription of ICH in need of urgent safeguarding as well as funding for cultural heritage rescue in emergency situations go through fast-track decision-making to ensure timely protection (UNESCO 2017).

This emergent planning plays into the ICH’s representativeness in the heritage regimes with limited resources and strong political incentives. Not all cultural practices can be safeguarded, and therefore not everything can be valued equally (Hafstein 2009; Kuutma 2007). If we understand “heritage as a category and the [Representative List] as instrument” (Hafstein 2009, 108), heritagization officially makes the listed ICH a representative practice and indispensable tradition of the targeted communities worthy of being helped. In a state-led cultural recovery campaign, it is both economically and politically efficient to allocate time and resources to saving the most significant and important part of the culture, as perceived by the state and public. In a time of crisis, intangible heritage as a resource “for staking claims for culture and claims based on culture” (Hafstein 2007, 76) becomes particularly salient and critical.

Under the logic of visibility and audit culture, ICH listing and safeguarding are regarded as convincing achievements of the “cultural reconstruction” efforts. The newly enlisted Qiang ICH items, number of ICH transmitters funded, as well as the amount of financial support provided are eye-catching accountable numerical results, easily turned into news headlines. Numbers are perceived as hard facts; facts are results. The short lifespan of the media reports on a specific disaster and

the celebration of quantifiable achievements easily give people an illusion that the ICH and transmitters are automatically saved once they are listed and the money spent. The long-term, on-the-ground effects seldom intrude upon the discussion.

URGENT HERITAGIZATION AS KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

Not only did the Qiang cultural recovery project conclude by quickly listing the related cultural practices as ICH, the heritagization also involved a state-sanctioned redefinition and representation of the status and significance of the relevant Qiang cultural practices. This heritagization is a distinctive process to integrate “backward” and “superstitious” practices into new and promising “cultural categories” that are administratively manageable (Gao 2014, 558; An and Yang 2015, 284). It also is a status-uplifting campaign to make the previously “low” and local traditions into civilized and publicly shared values and practices.

To classify the folk rituals as cultural categories requires redefining the folk rituals’ political viability, scientific validity, educational utility, and social positivity, essential for the nationalist construction of a modernizing and harmonious multi-ethnic China. The heritagization of the folk rituals is nothing short of a state-led social campaign, a new kind of “cultural revolution,” and a political movement (Gao 2014).

The making of the Qiang New Year as national ICH is a vivid case in point. Dedicated to celebrating harvest and worshiping gods for their blessings and mighty power, the Qiang New Year was long a village celebration monitored by *shibi*. The New Year falls on the first day of October in the Chinese lunar calendar, around early November in the now officially used solar calendar. A celebration would take place only when there have been consecutive good harvests and no loss of lives for three years.

In Longxi the last major, village-wide, self-organized celebration took place in 1988. An ethnographer who studied the last celebration argues that in the Qiang language, this kind of major celebration is called *gua ba er*, meaning “conversing with the sky god, sacrificing sacred animals to the sky god” (Zhao 2010, 148). A *shibi* of Longxi confirmed Zhao’s explanation in my interview. Therefore, the event was long an occasion when the animistic Qiang humbly thank the gods for good and peaceful times.

The transformation of the ritualistic celebration as the Qiang New Year, similar to that of the Dai Water Splashing Festival as the Dai New Year, is a collaborative “invention of tradition” by the state’s multi-ethnic policy, intellectual elites, and official media. While tradition constitutes itself a kind of reinvention of the past (Lenclud 1987), in China there is an endemic process of reshaping tradition driven by officials in collaboration with intellectual elites as well as official media. An ethnic ritual ceremony is reinterpreted into an official and Han-oriented discourse of the New Year, promoted as an ethnicity-specific event to display their good lives and “ethnic features” under the leadership of the Communist Party (see Chu 2010). This reshaping gives a fixed calendar to the previously flexible event,

arbitrarily setting it on the first day of October in the Chinese lunar calendar. In 1988, the Qiang New Year's Day became an official three-day holiday of the A'ba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture inside Sichuan province. The Qiang New Year was never widely celebrated in past years. Only after it was inscribed as national and later UNESCO ICH are celebrations of different scales, all sponsored by local governments, held in many Qiang-concentrated counties and townships.

When inscribed as national ICH, noted rituals have to present their importance in the construction of the united, multi-ethnic nation. The Qiang New Year, in the official description, is framed as a ritual used by the Qiang to express "respect and admiration to all spirits, the motherland, and the ancestors" (ICHChina 2013a). The worship and respect of the spirits are extended to that of the nation, serving as a uniting event and gesture. Other ethnic-minority New Year celebrations, such as the Dai Water-Splashing Festival and the Yi Torch Festival, are also accredited as occasions that "increase the ethnicity's self-awareness" and that "promote ethnic unity and harmony" (ICHChina 2013b).

The heritagized folk rituals have to carry scientific values and educational functions in public celebrations. The animistic spirit worship represented in the Qiang New Year is reframed into activities promoting environmental protection awareness and ecological conservation. The New Year is described as celebrating the Qiang's "awe of nature" and appreciation of "a harmonious human-nature relationship" in the nomination for UNESCO inscription. Such respect and appreciation are also appraised as "civilized" conduct to help sustainable living and environmental protection. The dancing and singing activities involved are examples of the distinctive "artistic values" of Qiang ritual.

In China, celebration of an ICH event is often made into "a public space for scientific and cultural activity" (Gao 2014, 557–58). Bingzhong Gao (2014) observed several educational boards displaying "standards for the informed consumer," "urging filial gratitude," and "Four After-Dinner Don'ts" around the temple where the Dragon Tablet Fair, an element on the Chinese national ICH representative list, was held. Similarly, in Longxi, educational boards including information about "civilized tourism" and filial piety conduct were permanently erected in a square where most of the Qiang rituals were performed.

Social positivity refers to the benign and positive spirit and energy that the folk rituals now behold. "Positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) has become a nationally celebrated idiom to describe things and conduct of good and inspirational values (Du 2014). I find most of the heritagized folk rituals started to represent similar benign, inspirational, and oftentimes patriotic "positive energy" in the official presentations. For example, the Water-Splashing Festival, a heritagized ethnic Dai ritual, is described as celebrating "the ethnic Dai's nature-revering, water-loving, pious, calm, and tender characteristics" in the official introduction (ICHChina 2013b). The entertaining elements of such ethnic folk rituals also help elevate their social positivity. The Bai Worship of Three Spirits, Dai Water-Splashing Festival, Yi Torch Festival, and Qiang New Year, among others, are variously presented as cheerful and collective carnivals comprising dancing, singing, banqueting, and other performances. The state-organized staged celebrations aim to

highlight the “ethnic features” of the minorities, which, however, tend to render them “primitive,” “mysterious,” and “feminine” in nationalist discourse (Harrell 1995; Liang 2013; Schein 1999). The celebrations also display the betterment of the ethnic minorities’ lives, nationally celebrated as the “great transformations” of the ethnic communities since the establishment of Communist China (Fan 2016).

During fieldwork, I observed a celebration of the New Year organized by the Wenchuan county government in Longxi. A full day of activities was planned, including *shibi* performing Sheep-Skin Drum Dance, women and children singing welcoming songs to visitors, the sale of Qiang embroidery works, and a free yard banquet hosting about three hundred visitors. In the post-Wenchuan earthquake context, the local governments lavishly organized celebrations of the newly heritagized Qiang New Year and other cultural practices to remind the audience of the state’s “loving care” for the affected Qiang.

The governments also used the seeming revival of such cultural practices to show that the Qiang communities as a whole positively and resiliently recovered from the earthquake. The township government erected large billboards in the village during the New Year celebration in 2013, contrasting pictures of the villages before and after the earthquake to praise the “miraculous reconstruction” of the township. The villagers were homogeneously presented in the pictures as grateful beneficiaries of the reconstruction. This was why during the yard banquet held at the celebration, the vice-head of Wenchuan County could cheerfully make a speech in front of thousands of guests, welcoming them to “experience the special glamor of Qiang culture” and “witness the happy lives of Qiang earthquake survivors.”

Along with the nomination and safeguarding campaign, intangible heritage embodies a particular “patrimonial regime” (Hafstein 2007, 76) in which national and local governments turn vernacular practices into governing objects. In the case of the Qiang New Year, the patrimonial logic first “refigures backwardness as authenticity” (Hafstein 2007, 83), which at once treasures and transforms the New Year. Consequently, the heritage intervention turns into “a resource for administering populations; a resource, in fact, through which communities can police and reform themselves, so they may be able to conduct themselves in accordance with the way they have been, or will be, trained to see [their practices]” (Hafstein 2007, 83–84). What is being recognized and preserved is a state-sanctioned ethnic minority practice benefiting the unity and diversity of the imagined Chinese culture.

In the disaster context, such subjectivity-making also involves a reinforcement of an imbalanced gift relationship between the dominant state and passive Qiang “victims.” In the economy of disaster aid, such a gift relationship rendered the Qiang “politically indebted minority ‘victims’ whose survival and advancement are forever owed to the state’s spectacular benevolence and overwhelming power” (Zhang 2016, 91–92). The danger, as Valdimar Hafstein (2007, 95) argues, is that “the patrimonial regime will wind up suppressing multivocality, amplifying internal hegemony—the one voice—and thus drown out dissent.”

ICH SAFEGUARDING: WHO IS PROTECTING? WHAT IS PROTECTED?
AND FOR WHOM?

The urgent Qiang ICH safeguarding is a state- and scholar-led endeavor to transform ethnic rituals into a political resource for claiming the hegemonic power and qualities of Chinese ethnic minority groups. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of ICH rescue as a means of recovering and protecting local cultures requires further investigation. The first issue is who should safeguard ICH. According to UNESCO principles, the community is the main actor in applying for, safeguarding, and transmitting the cultural practices dear to its members. When adding the Qiang New Year into the list of ICH in need of urgent safeguarding, UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Intangible Cultural Heritage states that it "commends them [the Qiang people and local authorities] for the continued attention they are providing to intangible cultural heritage as a means to restore social solidarity and community identity." It further reminds the State Party of "the continuing need to ensure the fullest possible participation of Qiang communities at all levels of implementing this safeguarding plan." As one colleague jokingly said to me, "When UNESCO asks for 'the fullest possible participation,' it usually implies that there is little community participation [in the nominated communities]" (see also Kuah and Liu 2017).

In the Qiang experience, the local communities were largely marginalized. Local governments are the main applicants, regulators, and managers of the ICH items identified in their territories. In the nomination for the Qiang New Year to be on the UNESCO list, the Sichuan Department of Culture was the main managing agency; several county-level bureaus were the community organizations and representatives. The local governments sanctioned the nomination, which had to serve the state's governing purposes down to the noted localities. A small group of scholars, working with, and to a great extent for, the local governments, were charged to quickly determine the basic information of the Qiang New Year for the nomination. One scholar confessed during the interview, "It [the nomination] is essentially a few men's work. My colleague and I sat here, looking at a map [of China], and mapped the regions to be included in the Qiang cultural conservation area. If we say it is [included], it is [included]." Implied in this comment was an arbitrary decision-making process. Arbitrariness is a non-judgmental term here to show that the emergent policies produced were results of the subjective judgments of officials and scholars made with limited research materials, in a short time frame, and oftentimes in closed offices. From the beginning, the actions of the government officials and scholars echoed the practice of salvage ethnographers.

Excluded from decision-making processes, the practitioners' and inheritors' active agency in defining their own cultural practices was denied. Here come the questions of what culture is to be preserved in the "cultural reconstruction" projects and how. Since the earthquake, a massive amount of media attention and money was invested into the rescue and protection of Qiang culture. As with all minorities and rural practices, Qiang culture was already endangered by massive urbanization, rural exodus, and modernization, not to mention the problematic ethnic policies and several occurrences of social unrest since the establishment of

the PRC in 1949 (Le Mentec and Zhang 2017). The discourse of Qiang culture receiving a “devastating blow,” as reported in various news venues, is questionable. As one ethnologist and Qiang scholar said, “As long as there are Qiang people, Qiang culture survives and continues. I do not think Qiang culture was devastated by the earthquake as they [the mass media] depict.”

The Qiang scholar’s comment urges us to reflect on what makes Qiang culture and on the ownership and authority of such culture. Under the Chinese political agenda and propaganda, the Qiang “cultural reconstruction” focused on restoring a selected group of Qiang cultural symbols and “modernizing” the Qiang’s lives as a way of preserving the Qiang “cultural features” while improving their quality of life. The ICH safeguarding campaign only managed to problematically rescue and promote part of the Qiang cultural practices deemed worthy of reconstructing. Even for the heritagized practices, the ICH promotion activities observed during fieldwork oftentimes ended up reducing culture into a “superficial veneer of different textiles and staged rituals” that could be (re)stored in an unchanging tradition (Zhang and Barrios 2017, 95). The public celebration of the Qiang New Year in most villages unfortunately became a hodgepodge show of the “Qiang culture” to promote tourism and the reconstruction accomplishments. Villagers were too busy engaging with tourism activities to celebrate the New Year with *shibi* or fellow community members. The New Year rituals and embroidery skills, mobilized as commodities for tourism consumption, were not properly respected nor continuing as community traditions (Le Mentec and Zhang 2017).

Early on, the UNESCO ICH Committee cautioned against such a tendency when inscribing the Qiang New Year (UNESCO 2009):

Takes further note of the State Party’s intention to revitalize the festival by promoting tourism, including the construction of museums devoted to the New Year, but cautions that such initiatives risk diminishing the meaning and importance of the festival to local Qiang, and encourages it to make every effort to ensure that such interventions serve primarily the needs of Qiang people.

As previous sections of this article discussed, the heritagization process greatly altered the local and public understanding of the Qiang New Year. During fieldwork, I was lucky enough to participate in a celebration of the New Year organized by Longxi villagers themselves. Listening to *shibi*’s night-long chanting of the *shibi* spirits’ and ancestors’ names as well as observing the appropriate sacrifice of sheep and chickens, I found out that the ritual, as with many others studied in classic ethnographies, was originally intended for achieving social coherence and exclusion. The New Year was also an occasion when villagers collectively confirmed and recognized social rules and discipline. As Emile Durkheim (1995) would argue, recognizing the existence of the sacred spirits in owning the land and resources is an effort to evoking the coherence of the society—the one and only sacred source of discipline and morality that can unite people in solidarity. The ethnographic materials reveal that the Qiang New Year is never simply a dancing and singing event, as explained in the official discourse. It is embedded and made meaningful in a specific epistemological and social context. It evokes moral and political ideals and practices that sustain the social coherence of the Qiang villages. Unfortunately, the

New Year is losing its significance and value in the local community as it is wrongly celebrated. It also may become increasingly irrelevant to the local social life, as it is improperly commoditized in tourism development.

Contemporary ICH safeguarding is taking place in a fast-changing cultural context. The dynamics within the question of for whom ICH safeguarding is, require further investigation (Chen 2015). Admittedly, the urgent Qiang ICH safeguarding provided new resources and opportunities for the folk rituals to survive (Zhang 2017; Zhang and Zhou 2017). Although the New Year was not celebrated properly, villagers gained room to safely perform related rituals to fulfill their responsibilities and reinforce social relations after the ICH safeguarding campaign. Such responsibilities and relations form the backbone of everyday community life, where the socially accepted meanings and effects of the cultural heritage lie. During my fieldwork, *shibi* were constantly invited to conduct healing rituals for the sick. Most Qiang go to modern hospitals now for treatment and know very well that *shibi* can not cure severe illnesses like cancer. Yet healing rituals brought emotional solace to the sick, especially those suffering terminal illnesses, and cultural relief to their family members, who considered organizing such rituals as fulfilling their filial piety.

Increasingly, *shibi* were asked to perform “sending the red” onto villagers’ new cars and minivans by putting a piece of red cloth behind the windshield. In the past, *shibi* only dealt with worship and other major community events. Having the Sheep-Skin Drum Dance group perform at an elder’s funeral was increasingly seen as a display of economic advancement and filial piety by the host families. At one of the funerals in Longxi, hiring the Sheep-Skin Drum Dance group cost the family 3,500 yuan (\$530), more than what the family could make in a month. Yet all villagers agreed that the funeral was the grandest in recent years with such a lavish ceremony. In private settings, *shibi* strictly followed the required procedures. Everyone would stop making jokes and chant the scripts. On other occasions, villagers accused some *shibi* of performing “fake” and out-of-context rituals to entertain tourists, at the expenses of blaspheming spirits or ancestors. *Shibi* and their apprentices discussed their dilemmas with me, as they were also worried about offending the spirits when performing for money or showcases. They expressed a strong desire to edit part of the rituals, such as the dance steps or drum-striking skills, mainly for display and artistic purposes, while retaining the sacred part of the practices for meaningful rituals. Yet the question remains whether *shibi* have the right to edit the now-heritagized rituals, and if the edited versions would be allowed in the official discourse.

Not only do ICH policies and practices insufficiently engage with local actors, they usually lead to differential advantage for some local actors over others (An and Yang 2015). In E’er village, the ICH safeguarding scheme seems to focus more on supporting individual transmitters than the whole community. Limited state subsidies were given only to *shibi* listed as national- and provincial-level transmitters of the inscribed national ICH. In E’er, there was only one national-level and three provincial-level transmitters. This leads to two main problems. First, nominated *shibi* became too busy with their outside business to spend time in their own

village teaching apprentices. And second, other self-identified but not officially recognized *shibi*, *shibi* apprentices, and Sheep-Skin Drum dancers were deprived of the right, opportunity, and funding to perform and transmit their skills. *Shibi* apprentices thus lost the motivation to contribute. As An and Yang (2015, 284) argue, “This [ICH] ranking is bound to aggravate the inequality among different cultures or among different social groups within a cultural system. It may even weaken the confidence of those cultural bearers whose traditions are excluded from the category of ICH.”

On a last note, the ultimate goal of ICH safeguarding and “cultural reconstruction” as a whole should be to sustainably strengthen the communities where such heritage knowledge originates and becomes meaningful. However, the emergent Qiang ICH safeguarding campaign seemingly ended along with the completion of state-led post-earthquake reconstruction projects. More comprehensive and long-term planning for rebuilding and strengthening local communities is lacking, needed so that Qiang ICH can maintain its liveliness and relevance. In Longxi, the Qiang New Year celebration was periodically held due to a lack of funding since my fieldwork year in 2013; almost no support has been given to other heritagized practices.

CULTURE AND ICH SAFEGUARDING IN TRANSITION

The urgent ICH rescue and safeguarding initiatives demonstrated the Chinese state’s particular conception of cultural heritage and how it should be protected in times of crisis. This article cautions against turning ICH safeguarding into a one-time, photo-op “solution” to serve the involved agencies’ particular sociopolitical ends. Moreover, the registration of national ICH status for many folk rituals, including the Qiang New Year, became a state-driven process to re-evaluate the noted rituals as politically, economically, educationally, and socially acceptable and viable practices. In the same process, ICH’s socially embedded values were marginalized. The results went against UNESCO’s primary goal of safeguarding ICH of, for, and by the noted communities.

The transformative power of ICH safeguarding within both state agencies and local communities is extremely strong and important. At the beginning, it seemed that the Chinese government effectively coopted an international concept to serve its own longstanding purposes of re-organizing domestic social life and regaining power on the global stage. Nevertheless, the Qiang’s case shows that the UNESCO-initiated campaign has fundamentally changed how the local people perceive and deal with their ethnic cultures as part of the public culture, bringing about revolutionary yet disputable practices toward the folk practices on the ground.

The dynamic relationship between ICH safeguarding and cultural preservation calls for a fight against the logic of heritage regimes and cultural enterprises, which mistakenly represent local cultures, and against the logic of their preferred technology of listing. This article has discussed the negative impacts of the project-based safeguarding initiatives, emphasizing a holistic and sustaining mechanism that can empower both the communities and their valued practices. The Qiang’s experi-

ence reveals that local cultural practices can be energized through a heritagization process led by a willing and powerful state. More critically, this article has analyzed potential threats to community agency and coherence if ICH loses its relevance to local community practices. It argues for a long-term investigation of how communities creatively use such new resources to transform themselves under different names. Ultimately it calls for future research on if and how contemporary ICH safeguarding logics and practices allow local actors the right and freedom to retain and re-invent the heritagized practices in turbulent times.

AUTHOR

Qiaoyun Zhang is Assistant Professor at Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, China. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from Tulane University, USA, and was a research fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the Netherlands. Her research focuses on cultural recovery and preservation after disasters and engages with topics of state-ethnic relations in China, intangible cultural heritage preservation, and disaster tourism. She has published articles in journals including *China Information*, *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, and *Practicing Anthropology*. Her past research was supported by the National Science Foundation, Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, and Association for Asian Studies, among others.

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NOTES

1. To follow the Qiang language rules, the singular and plural forms of the term *shibi* stay the same.

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