



Conflicts over Local Beliefs

“Feudal Superstitions” as Intangible Cultural Heritage in Contemporary China

This article addresses conflicts over local beliefs in both discourse and practice in contemporary China, especially in the process of protecting local beliefs as China’s national intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the twenty-first century. These local beliefs were stigmatized as “feudal superstitions” in revolutionary China and were revived in public since the reform era started in 1978. With influence from UNESCO, the project to protect ICH has spread all over China since 2004, and many local beliefs are promoted as China’s national ICH. Drawing on my ethnographic case study of “receiving aunties (Ehuang and Nüying)” in Hongtong County, Shanxi Province, I argue that the categories of “superstition” and ICH are both disempowering and empowering, and the new naming should allow for more space for local communities to achieve social equity and justice.

KEYWORDS: Local beliefs—feudal superstition—intangible cultural heritage—*Hongtong Zouqin Xisu*, “receiving Aunties”—Ehuang and Nüying

On June 14, 2008, the *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* in Hongtong County, Linfen City, Shanxi Province, was announced as one of the 510 national-level intangible cultural heritage (ICH) elements by the People's Republic of China (PRC) State Council. This announcement followed the first national-level list of 518 ICH elements that was released on May 20, 2006. In total 1,372 elements were designated as China's national ICH by 2014. I argue that the heritage-making process has not empowered the key folk institutions (including *she*¹ and the temple reconstruction associations) and local communities to protect local traditions with and for local people. Instead, it has disempowered them and put local communities at the bottom of the power relationship, exaggerating already existing inequalities between folk society and the local state (You 2015). A key issue that local communities encounter is the stigma of local beliefs as “feudal superstitions” (*fengjian mixin*). This article addresses controversies and conflicts over local beliefs in the process of promoting and protecting them as ICH in contemporary China. Although we might assume that the category of “superstition” is disempowering and that of “ICH” is empowering, in actual practice these terms can both disempower and empower community members. The new category of ICH should allow more space than it does for local communities to achieve social equity and justice.

In the application materials, the original title of the local tradition was “receiving aunts and greeting *niangniang*’ visiting relative activities” (*“Jie gugu ying niangniang” zouqin huodong*) (Hongtong County ICH Protection Center 2006, 2007). The terms “aunts” and *niangniang* refer to Ehuang and Nüying, the two daughters of Emperor Yao and two wives of Emperor Shun. Emperor Yao is believed to have lived between 2333 BCE and 2234 BCE. He was one of the Five Emperors that appear in records documenting the origins of Chinese cultural history (Sima 1959 [91 BCE]).

Yangxie village in Hongtong is believed to be the birthplace of the sacred animal *xie* who could distinguish good from evil, and also the birthplace of Nüying. Traditionally villagers in Yangxie, where the Temple of Yao is located, view themselves as the descendants of Emperor Yao and call Ehuang and Nüying “aunts.” Villagers around Lishan, where the Temple of Shun is located, refer to Ehuang and Nüying as *niangniang* or “grandmas,” as they view themselves as the descendants of Emperor Shun. The term “receiving aunts” is used by Yangxie villagers

to refer to their annual ritual processions of receiving Ehuang and Nüying on the third day of the third lunar month. On that day, residents in Yangxie carry Ehuang and Nüying's divine sedan chair to Lishan, where the two ladies' base temple is located, to receive their two aunts and bring them back to visit the home of their parents in Yangxie. On the twenty-eighth day of the fourth lunar month, which is believed to be Emperor Yao's birthday, villagers from Lishan come to Yangxie to receive the two sisters back home. Because of their distant connections with ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun, villagers from Yangxie and residents from Lishan refer to each other as "relatives" (*qinqi*) or "sacred relatives" (*shenqin*), which are believed to be more intimate and important than "secular relatives."

In Chinese folklore studies, there are in general two terms to define local beliefs: "folk belief" (*minjian xinyang*) and "folk religion" (*minjian zongjiao*) (Zhou 2013, 2017). Zhou Xing summarizes the difference between these two terms: "religion" is what the government has recognized as legitimate, while "belief" is traditional or regional or illegal; the former has more foreign origin[s] and the latter is indigenous" (Zhou 2017, 152). Zhou defines Chinese folk beliefs as "different notions about gods and spirits, belief rituals, and related customs that common people steadfastly hold on to or maintain in their everyday practices" (ibid.). Although Zhou attempts to draw a clear line between official "institutionalized" religion and folk beliefs, the boundaries are often ambiguous within local communities.

Many scholars advocate the term "popular religion" to define traditional beliefs and practices surrounding localized temples, and Adam Yuet Chau suggests that we should "question the very concept of 'belief' in the Chinese popular religious context, as the concept carries with it enormous Judeo-Christian theological baggage" (Chau 2006, 59). One of his main goals is to embed Chinese popular religious ideas and beliefs in their "cultural and sociopolitical milieu" (Chau 2006, 60). Though I agree with his approach, I am also aware of the "linguistic compromise" that we make when we use "belief," "believe," "believer," "worship," or "pray" to describe Chinese folk supernatural ideas and practices in the English language (Chau 2006, 61). During the course of my fieldwork in Hongtong in 2007, 2012, and 2013, however, I did encounter many local people who used the word "to believe" (*xin*) to describe their relationships with their "aunts" Ehuang and Nüying, for example by saying "I believe in 'aunts'" (*wo xin gugu*), and who also used the noun "belief" (*xinyang*) to describe their practice in their colloquial language, for example by saying "Belief here is very strong" (*zher xinyang hen qiang*). Clearly, local people do have a language for their beliefs. *Xin* (to believe) is an important concept for local people in Hongtong, and therefore I have chosen to use the noun *xinyang* (belief) to describe local people's ideas and practices despite possible "linguistic compromise."

The local beliefs that I study have been valued, cherished, and practiced by many ordinary people in Hongtong, but they were attacked as "feudal superstitions" during Mao Zedong's era, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tried to eradicate them while building a new revolutionary China. When the reform and opening-up policies began in 1978, the CCP attached great importance to eco-

conomic development, and control over cultural life was relaxed. Local beliefs were gradually revived in the 1980s but were still prohibited by law. After the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, the CCP faced criticism from the Western world and chose to develop its economy domestically when foreign investments decreased and tourism revenue dropped. Meanwhile, the CCP started to draw on China's cultural traditions to reestablish its status as a legitimate regime. Therefore, traditional culture became a source of national identity and pride necessary for the consolidation of the regime. It also became a means to gain economic achievements, since the state adapted capitalism to run the country (Oakes 2006). Within this historical context, the revival of local beliefs has been widespread throughout the country since the 1990s.

In the twenty-first century, with influence from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the project to protect ICH was launched in China in 2004. Many local beliefs have been promoted as China's national ICH since then. However, this national campaign has not changed the controversies over local beliefs, which are still stigmatized as "feudal superstitions," and religious activities are downplayed by officials and scholars in the ICH application process. In this article, I will first present how local beliefs were attacked as "feudal superstitions" in modern China and how local communities have responded to this negation on the ground. Then I will illustrate how local beliefs have been recognized and celebrated as China's national ICH by new actors. Finally, I will analyze how local beliefs are practiced in local communities before and after the ICH designation. My conclusion is that the categories of "superstition" and ICH are both disempowering and empowering, and that ICH policies and practices should allow more space for local communities to protect and reproduce their own tradition on their own terms.

THE NEGATION OF LOCAL BELIEFS AS "FEUDAL SUPERSTITIONS" IN MODERN CHINA

The question of the legitimacy of local beliefs has long been a problem in the state discourse in China, and Zhou summarizes three paths to legitimize local beliefs in contemporary times: "folklorization," "religionization," and "cultural heritage" (2017, 151). He further examines how the ICH movement has transformed local beliefs into "cultural heritage," especially how it has made them distorted, fragmented, "formalized," "public," and "performative" (2017, 160). Gao Bingzhong evaluates the influence of the ICH movement on local beliefs and argues that it reaffirms the value of local beliefs neglected and even attacked in previous revolutions (Gao 2007, 2013, 2017). In reality, the influence of the ICH movement is much more complicated than it first appears; ICH politics institutionalize specific cultural beliefs while simultaneously excluding certain cultural forms and values.

Jason Ānanda Josephson (2017) traces the genealogy of the reification of a binary opposition between science and religion in Europe and America since the Renaissance era (dating from the late fifteenth to early seventeenth centuries) and

the production of the category of “superstition” in the process of modernization as the negation of religion and later as the negation of science. He writes:

Overlaps between “religion” and “science” were often described as “superstition” or pseudosciences. Policing “superstitions” became part of the way that the categories of “religion” and “science” were formed in differentiation. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the rejection of “superstition” was necessarily incomplete, and hence it was always possible to partially transform it into a site of resistance. (2017, 15)

Josephson’s exploration of the construction of the category of superstitions in a long historical process in Europe and America provides us an important perspective to understand the gap between intellectuals’ rejection of superstition in discourse and ordinary people’s active engagement with various religious activities on the ground. Similarly, the Western concept of “superstition” has been translated, interpreted, and used by various actors and social agents in China for different purposes. This new category has transformed local temples into “site[s] of resistance.”

The Chinese term for superstition, *mixin*, is a loan word from Japanese, and the Japanese term was translated from the Western concept of superstition (Shen 2006). *Mixin* was introduced to Chinese audiences by Chinese intellectuals who studied in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the term was borrowed into the Chinese language, it soon took on its own life. In the New Culture movement of the mid 1910s and the 1920s, Chinese intellectuals drew on the Western concept of democracy and science to revolt against Confucianism. They advocated replacing religion with science, and folk beliefs were attacked as superstitions. Chen Duxiu, a leading figure in the anti-imperial Xinhai Revolution and the May Fourth Movement for Science and Democracy, who co-founded the CCP (with Li Dazhao) in 1921, used the term *fengjian* (feudal) to refer to anything old, outdated, pre-modern, and not revolutionary (Song 2009). This term was then combined with the term *mixin*, and the term *fengjian mixin* (feudal superstitions) was used to refer mainly to folk beliefs.

When building a new modern nation-state, Chinese intellectuals and reformers viewed folk beliefs or popular religion as an impediment to progress. It might also be seen that anti-superstition sentiment among Chinese intellectuals and reformers in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century was partially an expression of a Confucian fundamentalism that had deep roots in Chinese philosophy and political thinking over several centuries (Goossaert 2006). In a time of crisis with foreign invasion and internal chaos in the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals and reformers embraced the Western view of rationality and science to embark on their own agenda of national revolution and modernization. They emphasized that only by matching the Western world’s science and technology would they be able to prevent their country or nation-state being completely overturned. Local beliefs were seen by modernist reformers as an obstacle to science and technological progress, and they were also targeted by religious reform movements because they were viewed as distracting people from an appropriate practice of beliefs (Byrne 2012).

From early times the CCP adopted the Marxist critiques of religion and considered religious beliefs in general as “perpetuating factors of ‘superstition’” (Hetmanczyk 2015, 29). The critique toward “superstition” and even “religion” was directly related to the socialist conception of history introduced by Guo Moruo, one of the most influential historians in modern and contemporary China. In his 1930 book “Studies on ancient Chinese society,” Guo adopted the five-stages model outlined by Karl Marx, which ranges from primitive communism, ancient slavery, and feudalism to capitalism and socialism. This structure of history was advocated by the CCP and became the official framework after 1949 (Dirlík 1985). In terms of beliefs, the category of “feudal” was used to refer to those religious discourses and practices in the imperial period, such as ancestor reverence (Hetmanczyk 2015). With this stigma, local beliefs became the main target for social reforms and changes under the rule of the CCP in Mao Zedong’s era.

LOCAL RESPONSES TO THE REJECTION OF “FEUDAL SUPERSTITIONS”

During the Cultural Revolution, when the CCP launched the campaign to destroy the “Four Olds” (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas) in 1966, local beliefs of Ehuang and Nüying were attacked as “feudal superstitions,” and the annual ritual processions of receiving them were officially banned in Yangxie. However, a few villagers still practiced them secretly. Unfortunately, their activities were reported to the local government by some fellow villagers, and participants were sent to prison. Qiao Guoliang, one of the participants and also *shè* head in Yangxie, even lost his official job in a supply and marketing cooperative in his local town. He was attacked as counterrevolutionary in the One Strike-Three Anti campaign in 1970. When reflecting on his experience during the Cultural Revolution, Qiao wrote:

At that time, the class status of my family was not good, and I was labeled as a counterrevolutionary, but I had never been scared, because I had thoroughly thought over the basics of the two aunties again and again. In general, it is not counterrevolutionary, Yao and Shun and the two aunties were real people during their time, their stories were true, not forged. Moreover, they were the ancestors of Chinese descendants, [so] from ancient time up to the present, in China and abroad, we all say “days of Yao and Shun” (golden age of remote antiquity in Chinese history, or times of peace and prosperity). This makes it clear that it is good, not bad. . . . Even when I . . . was sent to prison, I did not feel ashamed, but felt honored and proud, because it was for the two aunties, and I had no complaints no matter how I suffered. (Qiao 1998, Section Nine)

The strong beliefs in “aunties” as well as Yao and Shun caused Qiao Guoliang and other practitioners to suffer during the Cultural Revolution, but it also motivated them to rebuild temples and revive annual ritual processions in the 1980s and 1990s. Overall, the category of “feudal superstitions” was used to suppress local beliefs, but it also made those beliefs more appealing to those sincere believers. Therefore, this type of negation and exclusion partially transformed local temples into “site[s] of resistance.”

In 1993, a filmmaking team from Shanxi Television made a documentary about the annual ritual procession of receiving “aunties” in Hongtong. The filmmakers supported local beliefs, but they had to face criticism from officials who still regarded local beliefs as “feudal superstitions.” At the end of the documentary, the scriptwriter Zhou Zongqi, who was the vice president of the Shanxi Writers Association then, faced the camera and said:

We have seen the whole process of receiving aunties, I do not know what you may think. Probably you may think it is all worthless and meaningless, and it is completely ignorant and unwise. Well, what do I think? Frankly, I have a strange but true feeling. I feel that my old mother is standing among those Yangxie villagers, and receiving aunties with them. Speaking of my old mother, in my memory, the core of all her spiritual life is to burn incense for deities, kowtow toward them, and make wishes. They always expected to get social justice, to get ample food and clothing, and to get peace, happiness, and good luck. If they could not get these from real life, they would continue to make a magical and fanciful dream in the wind of incense smoke, and they would continue to make the ritual procession of receiving aunties on the wild and long historic land, walking toward the unknown future in the rolling yellow dust.

The narrator further problematized the rejection of local beliefs as “feudal superstitions” after Zhou’s statement, and he said:

Yes, all the deities are surreal. But the recreation and worship of the deities by villagers in the inland province is very real. It is difficult for us to use the word “feudal superstition” to simply evaluate it. . . . Today, during China’s reform and opening-up period, no doubt it is a time of confusion for villagers. People have to seek new ideals and new beliefs from confusion, pursue a shared spiritual purpose to place hope on, and look for some new powerful interpretation. If you do not let villagers receive aunties, then what else should you let them believe? Is there some more powerful and better ethics and social ideals that can bring pure and honest villagers together? Is there some healthier and more reasonable ways of beliefs that can give villagers comfort of life and spiritual benefits? Is there some more acceptable interpretation or discourse that can make villagers turn confusion into motivation? This is such a huge problem.

The rejection that villagers had to face in the 1990s continues to exist in the twenty-first century, and the problem put forward by the narrator has not been resolved by the CCP up to the present.

During my fieldwork in Yangxie, I talked with many local people who sincerely believe that their aunties were real people in history, and that they have miraculous power to make wishes come true. Yan Zhenghong, a retired official in Yangxie, one day mentioned the stigma of local beliefs as superstitions:

For thousands of years, even though all dynasties attacked superstition and temple activities, no one could forbid it. Why? You may call it superstition, or you may say it is a kind of spiritual purpose that villagers place hope on. For example, we, poor ordinary people, do not have power or money. I hope that my grandson would go to college, what shall I do? (I would) go to the temple, burn

incense, and ask for blessings from deities, to bless my grandson to go to college. . . . Everyone has wishes, beautiful wishes. Who does not want his children to pass the exam and have a better future? Who does not want his life to be better and richer? These are basic requirements, and these requirements are not high, even though it is hard to make them come true. What would you do if you could not make them come true? Place hope on deities. How can you interpret that as superstition? Superstition and non-superstition, they are hard to define, aren't they?

Yan's comments resonate with Zhou Zongqi's statement in the documentary *Inland China in 1993*. "Feudal superstition" is a stigmatization of living beliefs by intellectuals, reformers, and the CCP in a variety of cultural, social, and political movements. It is not real and functional in practice. But some officials and even scholars still reify it as real and assume it as a bounded entity. Living beliefs are important in helping people cope with rapid social change, connecting them together, and giving them hope. When such beliefs are stigmatized as "feudal superstitions," the foundations of local communities could be weakened or destroyed instead of strengthened. In this new century, with the shift in ideology and cultural policies, many religious activities that were attacked as "feudal superstition" during the Cultural Revolution are now promoted and celebrated as ICH. In this heritage-making process, local beliefs have been reconstructed and reinterpreted, and some of their religious aspects have been downplayed or ignored (Liang 2013; Chen 2015). In the following section, I will illustrate how "receiving aunties" has been selected and recognized as China's national ICH by new actors, and how this new designation has affected local communities.

LOCAL BELIEFS PROMOTED AS CHINA'S NATIONAL ICH

The success of the designation of *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* as China's national ICH was fostered by a collaboration among local communities, officials, and folklorists (Wang 2009; You 2015). Zhou Xibin, the Communist Party Secretary in Ganting Town in 2006, played an important role in the application process. He first saw the term "intangible cultural heritage" on a ticket for a performance of "Naxi Ancient Music" (*Naxi guynue*)² when he visited one of his friends during the Spring Festival, 2006. After finding out more about ICH and the lists, he decided that the local beliefs in Yangxie village (which is a part of Ganting Town) deserved to be designated as ICH.

Zhou Xibin first mobilized local officials to study the important documents about ICH national policies, including "Recommendations on the Strengthening of the Safeguarding of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage" (State Council 2005) and "Circular on the Survey of Intangible Cultural Heritage" (Ministry of Culture 2005). The town-level government in Ganting made study plans for officials and arranged special lectures regularly every week (Wang 2009). In March 2006, the Hongtong County ICH Protection Center (ICHPC) was established in the County Cultural Bureau, and the bureau's director, Wang Chunliang, also served as director of this newly established center.

On the second day of the third lunar month in 2006, the Ganting Town government launched the opening ceremony of “receiving aunties” in the Temple of Yao in Yangxie, which marked the beginning of ICH protection work in Hongtong. Zhou Xibin invited a variety of journalists, writers, and cultural celebrities from regional to national levels to participate in the annual ritual processions of “receiving aunties” on the third day of the third lunar month; they were also invited to reflect on it in essays that were collected and published in a volume he edited (Zhou 2006). With the promotion of officials and local communities, “receiving aunties” became the second element of ICH in Hongtong County, and the Hongtong County ICHPC nominated it as an ICH element at the provincial level.

On July 6, 2006, the Shanxi Provincial Department of Culture issued a “Notice on the Declaration of Elements of Provincial-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage,” with an application deadline of September 30 (*Shanxi News* 2010). In order to prepare the application materials, a survey team was formed in Hongtong. Many town-level and village-level officials served in the leading committee of the survey team, and the survey team members included retired officials in Yangxie, *shè* executors in Yangxie and Lishan, and some staff from the Hongtong County ICHPC (Wang 2009). The survey took sixty-eight days, and the team of fourteen people visited more than thirty villages along the routes of the annual ritual processions. They talked with more than two hundred people and recorded interviews with thirty-three individuals. In addition, the team investigated fifty-two temples, more than forty vernacular dwelling houses, fifty-four stone steles, seven old trees, and four hundred and two objects in the region. Eventually, they collected more than twenty objects, made several eight-hour videos, took more than two thousand pictures, and recorded data with more than ten thousand characters. In particular they discovered the stele established in the Temple of Ehuang and Nüying in Wan’an in the year of 1674, which recorded the “public property” in the temple, and the stele in the same place established in the year of 1788 that commemorated the celebration of Ehuang’s birthday on the eighteenth day of the sixth lunar month. The team also collected more than seven hundred couplets in local village temples, more than one hundred poems on Yao and Shun as well as Ehuang and Nüying, notations for ten music pieces of Awe-Inspiring Drums and Gongs, and more than thirty legends and folk tales (*ibid.*).

With strong promotion by the county-level government, *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* was successfully designated as an element of provincial-level ICH in Shanxi in late 2006, and this was the beginning of a long process of ICH application at the national level. In early 2007, Zhou Xibin managed to contact Liu Kuili, committee member of the Bureau of Academic Divisions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Deputy Director of the Expert Committee on National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection (*Guojia feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhuanjia weiyuanhui*),³ and also the president of the China Folklore Society at that time, in addition to other folklorists, to request help for the local people in completing the application materials. Chen Yongchao, who by this time was a professor at Beijing University, volunteered to help, and he took his students to record local tradi-

tions during the annual ritual processions of “receiving aunties” in the third lunar month. At that time I was working as an assistant editor for *Forum on Folk Culture* (*Minjian wenhua luntan*), a flagship journal in Chinese folklore studies, after I graduated from the MA program in folk literature at Beijing University in 2005, and I was also invited to join the team. We conducted our first fieldwork in Hongtong around the third day of the third lunar month (from April 16 to 22) in 2007, using participant observation, interviews, and video-recording to document the annual ritual processions of “receiving aunties.” After our fieldwork, the research team wrote a detailed field report that was published in *Forum on Folk Culture* (Chen et al. 2007). This field report first describes the whole process of “receiving aunties” from the second day to the fifth day of the third lunar month and then explores how local people regard Yao and Shun’s legends as real history and how they use this history to construct local beliefs. The researchers also analyzed the construction of relationships among people in the region by the use of an invented kinship system and the secular beliefs toward ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun as well as Ehuang and Nüying (*ibid.*).

The same research team went back to conduct further fieldwork on the twenty-eighth day of the fourth lunar month that year to celebrate Emperor Yao’s birthday in Yangxie. After going back to Beijing, Chen Yongchao and his students revised the application materials and made a documentary in mid-August. Wang Chunliang, Yang Ruiping, and Wei Xiaoping went to Beijing to discuss the applications in late August and finished the application texts on August 30. The Shanxi Provincial Government approved the nomination on September 15, and the Shanxi ICH Protection Center then recommended it to the national ICH Protection Center (Wang 2009).

With strong support from folklorists, *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* was approved by the Steering Committee of Chinese National Intangible Cultural Heritage, but it disappeared from the tentative second list of national ICH elements released by the State Council in early 2008. No one knew for sure what had happened, but according to rumor, the application was rejected by a senior official in the Ministry of Culture who thought that there were too many sacrifice scenes in the documentary. After receiving the news, Zhao Zhongyue, the director of Shanxi Provincial ICH Protection Center, immediately notified Wang Chunliang and asked him to organize a petition against the exclusion of *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* in the national ICH list during the public comment period. The Hongtong County ICHPC, the Shanxi Provincial ICH Protection Center, and metropolitan folklorists all sent their appeals against the decision to the national ICH Protection Center (Wang 2009). Hongtong cultural officials and village representatives went to Beijing during the Chinese New Year and collaborated with folklorists to argue vociferously for the value of the local tradition. Finally, on June 7, 2008, *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* was inscribed on the second national ICH list.

In the application, *Hongtong Zouqin Xisu* was represented as living folklore intertwined with history and place, and its religious aspects were downplayed. Based on the data that I obtained during my fieldtrips in Hongtong in 2007, 2012, and 2013, the local annual ritual processions of “receiving aunties” center on local

temples and worshippers, and ordinary participants desire to obtain blessings from deities by being good and serving in local temples, both before and after the ICH designation. In the following section of this article, I will draw on my participant observations in 2013 to illustrate the process of “receiving aunties” and the meaning of local religious rituals from the perspectives of local communities.

“RECEIVING AUNTIES” ON THE THIRD DAY OF THE THIRD LUNAR MONTH

The third day of the third lunar month, known as *san yue san*, is the traditional date for married women to “go back to visit their parents” (*hui niang jia*) in Hongtong. Like ordinary women, Ehuang and Nüying also go back to visit their parents, Emperor Yao and his wife in Yangxie, on that day. In order to escort their two aunties back, Yangxie residents proceed to Lishan on the second day of the third lunar month and return with the statues of the two ladies in their divine sedan chair (chair for short) on the third day.

The routes of receiving aunties have been stable in recent years despite small changes that arise under particular circumstances. For instance, during the flood disaster in Hongtong in February 2013, the bridge across the Fen River in Tunli was destroyed. On the second day of the lunar month, Yangxie participants passed Han Village for the first time and crossed the bridge over Fen River (see figure 1). This was the first time that Han Village got involved in the ritual processions; its village heads led local residents to set up an altar near the bridge of Fen River before Yangxie residents arrived. They offered fried steamed buns, fruit, cookies, and other foods, and burned incense in worship. When Yangxie participants arrived, they placed the chair of Ehuang and Nüying and the yellow canopy in front of the altar, and Han Village residents set off fireworks to celebrate the coming of the parade. The *shè* head on duty from Yangxie burned incense and put it at the altar, and participants from Yangxie and Han Village then kowtowed toward the altar. Afterward, the *shè* head burned new sticks of incense and gave them to



Figure 1. The Yangxie procession passed Fen River at Han Village on the lunar March 2, 2013. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 2. Devotees burned incense and kowtowed toward the divine sedan chair of Ehuang and Nüying in the Niangniang Temple in the Northern Maju village on the lunar March 2, 2013. Photo by the author.

the village heads from Han Village, who then put incense at the center of the chair and kowtowed toward it. Villagers also donated some money to Yangxie participants and prayed for protection from the two ladies.

Because Yangxie participants took a detour through Han Village, they did not pass Tunli, Hongbu, South Maju, and Longma along the procession route as usual, but they still passed North Maju and Chijing, which were marked as important places in Ehuang and Nüying's legends. In North Maju, the village temple heads, who were also local ritual specialists (known as *mazi*), led a team of villagers with colored flags and a band of drums and gongs to welcome Yangxie participants at the entrance to the village and then led the procession to the village temple. At the entrance, they also offered sacrifices and burned incense at the altar. When the chair and the yellow canopy arrived, local villagers volunteered to carry them to the village temple, accompanied by the music of drums and gongs played by participants from both villages. At the temple, all participants burned incense and kowtowed toward the deities, seeking favors and assistance from them (see figure 2). Afterward, the procession moved along the main streets in the village, and local residents offered sacrifices and burned incense at temporary altars in front of their houses along the procession route (see figure 3). Some local residents carried the chair and yellow canopy from the temple to the end of the village and then left them to Yangxie participants, who then put them back in a truck.

The rituals held in Chijing village (see figure 4), Zhao Village, Xiqiao Zhuang, and Lanjia Jie were similar to those in North Maju, but Xiqiao Zhuang has an important temple for Ehuang and Nüying that was built in 1936, and Yangxie participants always have lunch in the village. At the exciting moment of the arrival of Yangxie participants in Lishan, Lishan *shè* heads and executors led their parade to



FIGURE 3. Local residents in Northern Maju village offered sacrifices and burned incense at a temporary altar in front of their house along the procession route, on the lunar March 2, 2013. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 4. An old lady burned paper in front of Yangxie's divine sedan chair of Ehuang and Nüying in the Niangniang Temple in Chijing village, on the lunar March 2, 2013. Photo by the author.

receive their Yangxie “relatives” at the place believed to be where Shun plowed the fields. *Shè* heads and executors from both Lishan and Yangxie burned incense and kowtowed there and then joined the procession to proceed to the Shun Temple and the Temple of Ehuang and Nüying in Lishan. The Yangxie parade followed the Lishan parade, and the bands of drums and gongs from Yangxie and Lishan competed with each other in playing traditional pieces. Eventually the chair from Yangxie was received in the Temple of Ehuang and Nüying, and it was placed in front of the temple hall. *Shè* heads from Yangxie and Lishan then led devotees to burn incense, kowtow, and ask for blessings from the deities.

When the religious rituals were completed, Yangxie participants were received back home by their Lishan “relatives” for food and rest. In 2013, the middle *shè* in Lishan ran temple fairs until the coming of the rotation of other *shè* in Lishan on the fourth day of the fifth lunar month. Dong Juantou and Lanjia Jie formed the middle *shè*, and devotees from both villages then invited their Yangxie “relatives” to have free meals in their houses and sleep there. About four hundred people from Yangxie participated in “receiving aunties” and stayed in Lishan for one night in 2013, while more than fifty households from the middle *shè* volunteered to receive their Yangxie “relatives” and offered accommodation on the day.

The temple fair in Lishan started on the second day of the third lunar month and reached its culmination on the third day, when the temple complex was full of visitors from all around. Many devotees made their pilgrimages to Lishan on that day, offered sacrifices to the two ladies and other deities, donated money to the temple, burned incense, and kowtowed to and prayed for protection from the deities. In front of Yangxie’s chair for the two ladies, some people asked for long yellow strings and long strings of red cloth from Yangxie devotees and exchanged them for money donated to the two ladies (see figure 5); these kinds of exchanges happened throughout the ritual processions. Before Yangxie participants received Ehuang and Nüying’s mini statues from their temple in Lishan, a young ritual specialist from Yangxie suddenly went into a trance and demonstrated his divine power by stabbing an iron rod through his cheeks and holding the rod in place by biting down on it with his teeth. His name was Li Yu, and he claimed that he was an apprentice of Tongtian Erlang, the two ladies’ adopted son in heaven. This was the first time he had shown his divine power in public, and he subsequently became famous in Hongtong and many people would go to visit him for healing. When receiving Ehuang and Nüying from Lishan to Yangxie, Li Yu became “the general who opened the road” (*Kailu Jiangjun*) for the two ladies. He always walked in front of the chair and scared away crowds of people who tried to worship the deities and who thus blocked the procession on its way (see figure 6).

Around noon on the third day of the third lunar month, after receiving Ehuang and Nüying’s statues from their temple in Lishan and burning incense in different temple halls, Yangxie participants said farewell to their Lishan “relatives” and passed ten different villages until they went back home on the evening of the fourth day of the third lunar month. Along the return route, devotees from many villages prepared free tea, snacks, and meals for their Yangxie “relatives.” In Wan’an, a large temple fair was held from the second to the fourth day of the third



Figure 5. A lady was “buying lockers” and a red cloth string from Yangxie devotees in front of the divine sedan chair, which was placed in front of the Niangniang Temple in Lishan on the lunar March 3, 2013. Photo by the author.



Figure 6. “Kailu Jiangjun” Li Yu (in yellow gown) walked in front of the divine sedan chair and “opened” the road for the two ladies during the procession on the lunar March 3, 2013. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 7. Mini statues of Ehuang and Nüying (in front) that were received back by Yangxie devotees from Lishan on the lunar March 3. Photo taken on April 20, 2013, by the author.

lunar month, as it was in Lishan. On the third day, Yangxie participants stayed overnight and enjoyed banquets with local residents in Wan'an. On the fourth day, when the Yangxie parade went back home, they put the mini statues of Ehuang and Nüying in the two goddesses' temple in Yangxie after some religious rituals (see figure 7). Villagers burned sticks of incense and kowtowed toward Ehuang and Nüying to receive their protection. They then took the incense back home and put it in burners on the altars in their homes. Housewives made special foods such as dumplings and placed them on the altar in worship.

Bryan Lowe (2017) sees ritual used not simply as a representation of a pre-existent cultural or political system but rather as a social and ethical practice that generates new communal identities and offers opportunities for individual cultivation. Similarly, the annual ritual processions of "receiving aunts" connect many local communities together and generate new identities for them in the name of Ehuang and Nüying. They also provide channels for local people to cultivate moral virtues (*gongde*), which are believed to bring good fortune and health for the whole family. This process is simultaneously ethical and ritually efficacious. The experiences among participants are personal, pious, and religious.

Although the religious aspects of "receiving aunts" were downplayed in the ICH application process, they are widely embraced by local communities, groups, and individuals both prior to and since the ICH designation. In a way, the ICH designation is not as empowering as some scholars have proposed (Gao 2013, 2017). During my fieldwork, I found that almost nobody knew what ICH was, except a few local officials and scholars who had previously collaborated with folklorists during the ICH application process (You 2015). However, this does not

affect local ordinary people's active participation in the annual ritual processions of receiving Ehuang and Nüying and in donating money and resources to local temples and parades. Whenever they faced the unknown or the uncertain, they would seek help from the deities or religious specialists, and local beliefs have continued to play a key role in their daily lives, no matter whether they are rejected as "feudal superstition" or celebrated as ICH.

THE POWER OF NAMING

The politics of recognition is a key issue that has been widely discussed and debated among scholars who study ICH policies and practices in China and beyond (Smith 2015; Zhang and Zhou 2017; Kuah and Liu 2016; Svensson and Maags 2018; Blumenfeld 2018; Ku 2018). The politics of ICH often interacts with the politics of recognition, and the latter is highlighted in Nancy Fraser's work (1995, 2000, 2001, 2003). Fraser's approaches to the politics of recognition are different from what she calls "the identity model," which emphasizes respect and cultural affirmation in intersubjective recognition. Instead, she proposes her theory of the politics of recognition to approach the justice issues concerning institutionalized cultural value, social inclusion/exclusion, and hierarchy, as she realizes that misrecognition is intertwined with the institutionalized norms of resource allocation, which also devalue certain cultural forms. Inspired by Fraser's model, Laurajane Smith (2006, 2010, 2015) combines the politics of recognition with her notion of authorized heritage discourse, highlighting the power of knowledge implicated in struggles for recognition in the heritage-making process. Following Fraser and Smith's theories, I approach the politics of recognition within the context of the naming and renaming of local beliefs across time and space. My focus is on grassroots agency in the process of transmitting, reproducing, and transforming local tradition in modern times and protecting it as heritage in this new century (You 2020).

In my case study, appeals to ICH lend historical and cultural legitimacy to claims to identity and tradition within local communities, as the claims are not only made toward their place but also toward their past. When local residents in Yangxie were mobilized to apply for the ICH designation by collaborating with local, regional, provincial, and national officials and scholars, they were seeking not only the legitimacy of the identity of their place but also to contest and redress the experiences of "injustices" that participating in the annual ritual processions of "receiving aunties" once entailed during the revolutionary era. In a way, the politics of recognition allow space for local communities to make claims for the legitimacy of their place, history, and beliefs, and these claims might help them obtain justice that was once denied to them.

With the shift in ideology and cultural policies relating to local beliefs from "feudal superstitions" to ICH, the power of naming is illustrated in the process. "Superstition" is produced as a category to negate certain beliefs and knowledge, and this kind of negation is both disempowering and empowering. By contrast, ICH is produced as a category to celebrate certain beliefs, knowledge, and practices. This kind of celebration may seem empowering in the first instance, but in

reality it has disempowered local folk groups and communities and put them at the bottom of power relations (You 2015, 2020). The power struggle for ICH recognition and management is intertwined with the general circumstances of villagers' livelihoods, marked by rapid urbanization, economic difficulties encountered by villagers in daily life, and political challenges of corruption and authoritative power. The ICH movement is negatively perceived by one villager that I interviewed, and he regarded it as "a waste of money and manpower" (*laomin shangcai*), like many other social campaigns in modern China. The discourse of ICH indeed represents a location from which one can criticize society. My main concerns here are not only with what counts as ICH, who decides, and who benefits, but I am also concerned with how the new naming could allow us to reflect on the labels that we use for local beliefs and create space for local communities to achieve social equity and justice.

CONCLUSION

This article addresses controversies and conflicts over local beliefs in the process of promoting and protecting them as ICH in contemporary China. I situate the discourses and practices regarding local beliefs within particular social, cultural, and political contexts in a long historical process, and illustrate both continuities and ruptures between the ICH movement and other social campaigns in modern China. I argue that the category of "feudal superstition" does not negate and destroy certain beliefs completely, whereas the new category of ICH does not necessarily celebrate all aspects of religious value and meaning. Both categories are empowering and disempowering at the same time. The question that remains is, if so, should we care about the name? Yes, of course we should, but in ways that local communities choose.

"Superstition" and ICH are not the only categories for understanding local beliefs in China, and challenges to these sets of discourses or frameworks exist across time and space among various individuals, groups, and communities who practice and define their own beliefs (Hansen 1990; Kang 2006; Chau 2006; Yue 2014, 2017; Zhou 2013, 2017; Laukkanen 2018). Marina Svensson's research shows how the Internet and social media enable ordinary people to engage in representing and protecting their own tradition and heritage individually, performatively, and visually in contemporary China (2018). Similarly, Yangxie villagers and other ordinary people within interconnected communities continue to practice and document their own beliefs by written records, pictures, and videos (You 2020). As Khun Eng Kuah and Zhaohui Liu write: "to the local people and community, their intangible cultural heritage is what they consider as their living cultural traditions and they continue to practice them irrespective of whether the state or heritage bodies take notice of them or not. They are less concerned about the hype that surrounds heritage conservation and preservation and they continue to live their life around them" (2016, 2–3). With that in mind, this article sets a starting point for further exploration of grassroots agency in protecting and sustaining cultural

heritage on the ground, and one hopes that ICH policies and practices would help local communities obtain social equity and justice in the long run.

In China, the discourse of ICH is a recent invention, but this does not mean that prior to the appearance of ICH local traditions were meaningless to local communities. In Hongtong, the annual ritual processions of “receiving aunties” could be traced back to the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) (Chen 2015). Yao and Shun’s stories were canonized in the *Shiji*, written by Sima Qian (ca. 145 or 135 BCE–86 BCE). Before that, there were different versions of Yao and Shun’s stories in ancient texts (Chen 2000). Traditions and local beliefs like these have continued to reflect and shape the way ordinary people imagine and reproduce their past and their place, and their cultural production is sometimes intertwined with nation-state building and nationalist discourse (Chan 2018). As local beliefs continue to play a central role in ordinary people’s daily lives, ICH policies and practices in China and also worldwide should enable them to value, cherish, and reproduce their own traditions in ways they choose.

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NOTES

1. *Shè* is the key folk group that organizes local annual ritual processions of receiving deities and sponsors local festivals and celebrations. It provides a way to connect people together to serve deities in the temples.
2. *Naxi guyue* is the traditional music of the Naxi ethnic group in southwestern China. It is a kind of ritual music intertwined with local religions and has been represented as a “living fossil” of traditional Chinese music (Rees 2000, 4–5).
3. The Expert Committee on National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection was established on July 13, 2006, and its main tasks include making the ICH protection program, making and implementing the ICH census, review and administration of a national-level directory, and approval of national-level ICH elements and “representative transmitters,” among other responsibilities (Luo 2008).

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