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# Intangible cultural heritage in contemporary China: the participation of local communities

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**Intangible cultural heritage in contemporary China: the participation of local communities**, edited by Khun Eng Kuah and Zhaohui Liu, London, Routledge, 2017, xii + 144 pp., £110 (hardcover), £39.99 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-138-64418-2 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-315-62897-4 (ebook)

The venerable intangible cultural heritage protection programmes of Japan and the Republic of Korea have long inspired scholarly critique of their effects on local and artistic communities. With China's frenetic embrace of UNESCO-style ICH policy now well into its second decade, we are starting to see an equivalent China-focused literature emerge, some of it based on long-term engagement with the groups affected (e.g. You 2015; Yung 2009). Publication of an entire volume dedicated to examination of the relationship between ICH and local communities in China is timely.

Stressing the importance of 'local voices' (ix), the editors lay out their objective in their introduction (Chapter 1): 'to explore how the local communities have continued to define and protect their own intangible cultural heritage', against the backdrop of a very top-down official framework (3). The introduction helpfully explains the official ICH systems and hierarchies of mainland China and Hong Kong, discussing briefly the issues of social prestige, socio-cultural/economic capital and collective memory that these quite costly identification and preservation policies invoke. After this come five chapters each introducing a local case study. The volume concludes with a thoughtful essay by Jung-a Chang on the role of ICH in China more generally.

Given the title of this book, the selection of case studies comes as somewhat of a surprise: the first three are from Hong Kong and the last two from ethnic minority areas of China's southwest. While the Han Chinese constitute over 90% of China's population, mainland Han regions and communities are conspicuous by their absence. The addition of at least one case study from a Han community in mainland China would have improved the balance of topics, and mention of Hong Kong in the book's title would have better oriented the reader.

This is especially so because the weighting towards Hong Kong is a considerable strength of this collection: most English-language studies of Chinese ICH to date have focused exclusively on the mainland. Moreover, the three Hong Kong situations described are particularly illuminating because of the striking contrasts among them: topics range from nationally endorsed ICH to a quotidian religious phenomenon that is not officially recognised, but whose ubiquity and significance clearly qualify it as an integral part of local life.

Khun Eng Kuah (Chapter 2) introduces the fishing community of Tai O, a village on Lantau Island settled in the nineteenth century by migrants from nearby Guangdong province. Kuah argues persuasively that it is the totality of the Tai O lifestyle that helps hold the community together, even in the face of out-migration by young people and other changes caused by Hong Kong's rapid development. She highlights the village's distinctive vernacular architecture (which encourages neighbourly interaction), the villagers' dried seafood production, their ritual practices, and their elaborate dragon boat festival as equally important in this regard. She also notes the inevitable tensions resulting from the Hong

Kong government's interest in 'heritagizing' and funding only 'the extraordinary and unique features' (24) rather than considering the culture in its entirety, as she argues should be done.

In Chapter 3, Chong Gao focuses on the annual 'Bun Festival' of Cheung Chau Island, which achieved the ultimate accolade of inscription in the national ICH list in 2011 and is now a major tourist attraction. Gao sets out its 200-year history, detailing the long-term interactions between a local community actively organising their major annual ritual event and a succession of generally laissez-faire governments. Crucial financial concerns are neatly worked in. Gao concludes that a reasonable balance is currently being struck between the 'core cultural values' of the festival and the increasing involvement of the state and outside business interests. Chapter 4, the last of the Hong Kong case studies, moves us away from officially designated heritage to a ubiquitous local religious phenomenon, the Earth God shrines, that was not included in Hong Kong's first list of local ICH, perhaps because 'it is not deemed ... sufficiently unique to Hong Kong' (70). The three authors of this chapter present a thorough historical and contemporary overview of the shrines and their significance to local communities, businesses and homes. The admirably detailed coverage of the topic includes the 2013 costs of different qualities of Earth God plaques, the ritual process of installing a new Earth God shrine, and many photographs showing the shrines' variety. The authors make a strong argument for the pervasive importance of the shrines to Hong Kong life, and conclude with the hope that they will eventually be included as officially designated Hong Kong ICH. Some readers might like an explicit statement of what the advantage of such a listing would be.

The next two essays address situations among ethnic minorities in southwest China. Chapter 5 deals with a ritual of the Buyi of Guizhou province, in which a large metal drum (described here as 'brass', but by appearance part of the bronze drum continuum of this region) is passed from one household to another. The two authors invoke much anthropological theory to support their contention that the entirety of the ritual, including the preparation process, is important to the collective community memory. They also echo Kuah's concern in Chapter 2 about the risks of selectively recognising only one aspect of a community's overall life customs. Given this volume's emphasis on 'local voices', it would have been good in this essay to have some reference to what local Buyi may actually have said in interviews – their own views are not directly stated.

In Chapter 6, Zhaohui Liu takes on one of the best-known examples of problems caused by runaway tourism in a small town: the upending of local life in Lijiang, urban hub of the Naxi ethnic group from northwest Yunnan province. Liu's meticulously documented research occurred under two very different sets of circumstances: in 2007 he was part of a team that spent about three weeks in Lijiang conducting fieldwork for a social impact assessment and resettlement action plan, while during summer 2011 he went back as an independent researcher to follow up with the same community. Particularly notable is his documentation of the community's efforts to '[remake] a heritage-based space with cultural identity to struggle for their ancestral homelands' (98), even when that heritage was not recognised by the official system. Liu makes liberal use of verbatim quotes from his interview material, which brings 'local voices' to life to a greater extent than in any of the preceding essays.

Jung-a Chang's concluding essay (Chapter 7) takes a step back to survey the big picture of ICH in China. In particular, she emphasises the engagement of ICH with cultural nationalism and 'constructing Chineseness' (114), and the transformation of 'folk culture' into 'ICH' as it was absorbed into a national project. Her chapter is grounded in an exhaustive knowledge of the relevant history, close reading and analysis of official documents, and numerous interviews with officials, scholars and ICH practitioners, many deployed very effectively to make her points. As with Liu's chapter, the frequent use of quite extended direct quotes from interviews brings the different actors vibrantly to life. Chang's long engagement with this topic and the richness of her sources allow her to address complex issues, including the sometimes ambiguous relationship between what she terms 'cultural nationalism' and 'state nationalism', the different interests local communities and the state may bring to the ICH table, and the apparent indifference of most ordinary people to the preservation of their traditions. This essay is a carefully argued exposition of the 'tangled puzzle' (133) of Chinese ICH, and a fitting conclusion to the book.

This volume is a valuable addition to the literature on Chinese ICH policy and practice, not least because of the variety of situations addressed, including those that don't dovetail neatly with the official ICH system. However, it is not without its weak points, some of which are noted above. Most surprising is the uneven quality of the written English, and the extraordinary number of errors and inconsistencies in grammar, punctuation, spelling and bibliographic style. Some mistakes in the references lists are very basic, such as alphabetising certain Chinese authors under their given names (for example, on 109, Ge Agan is alphabetised under 'A', with two more errors of similar nature on 111). Also confusing is the fact that some sources that are clearly in Chinese are listed only in the authors' English translation, making them harder to track down. One would hope that in future such a reputable press would invest more in professional copyediting.

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