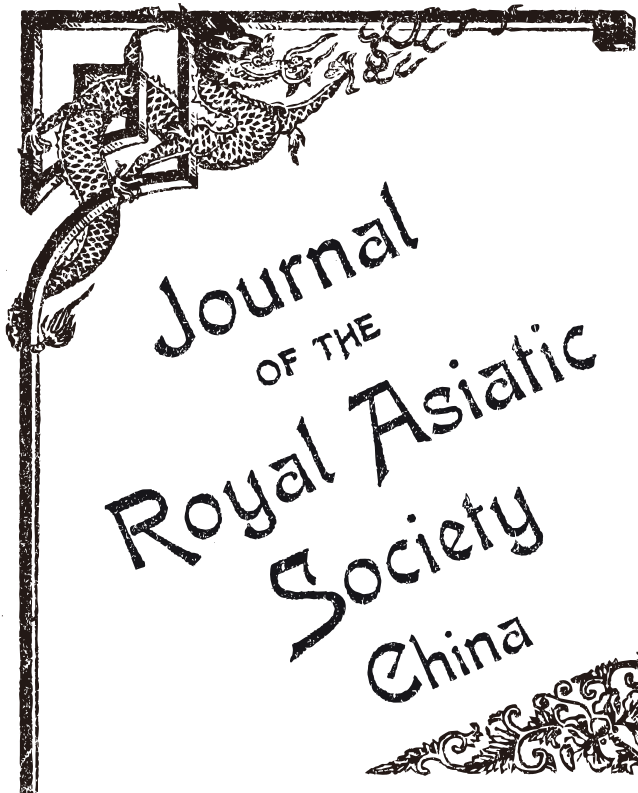

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‘LET THE PAST SERVE THE PRESENT’

RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOFT POWER IN THE PRESERVATION OF CHINESE VILLAGES.

BY ANNA-PAOLA POLA

ABSTRACT:

In 2000, two villages in Anhui Province, Xidi and Hongcun, were declared World Heritage Sites. This designation was a pivotal moment, for it was the first time the historical and cultural values of a Chinese village were recognised at such a level. Twenty years later, the country is eminent in the discourse on World Heritage Sites and is experiencing a national rural revival on a grand scale. World Heritage properties in China already include thirty villages, with more than seventy-five other potential nominations on the national Tentative List. As a result, nationwide protection measures have been established, and rural heritage has been identified as an intertwined set of tangible and intangible, natural and cultural components. However, attention remains mainly focused on the promotion of tourism as a leverage for rapid development. This approach often leads to the transformation of traditional urban spaces into empty stage sets, the marginalisation of local communities, and the reinvention of cultural practices. In this conflicting framework, understanding the situation and promoting alternative paths of development is a challenge.

Drawing upon four years of research and on-field assessment of historic villages in China, this article presents a critical overview of the situation describing the policies, approaches and practices at stake.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2000, two small settlements in southern Anhui Province, Xidi and Hongcun were declared World Heritage Sites.[1] It was the first time that the historical and cultural value of a rural village in China had gained recognition of such high calibre. However, the nomination was just the tip of the iceberg, a partial outcome of a more extensive, planned process.

THE RURAL ISSUES

At the end of the 1990s, two decades after the economic reform that powered the development of China’s eastern seaboard cities,

Figure 1: The distinctive architecture of Xidi, Anhui (September 2018)

Figure 2: Tourists photograph lotus ponds in Hongcun, Anhui (September 2017)

discontent with the widening urban-rural divide was rising and the debate on rural problems becoming more fractious. In March 2000, Li Changping, a Party secretary from a rural township in Hubei Province, wrote to the Chinese premier Zhu Rongji about his personal experience. In his letter, later published in the Guangzhou-based newspaper, *Southern Wee*kly, Li sadly lamented the conditions of farmers, villages, and agriculture (农民 *nóngmín*, 农村 *nóngcūn*, 农

业 *nóngyè*).[2] One year later, the contribution of 'agriculture, villages, and farmers' to the modernisation of the country found its way into Zhu Rongji's report on the 10th Five-year Plan to the National People's Congress (NPC). These three words, increasingly quoted in national media, quickly came to be known as the *three rural* (三农 sān nóng) issues, a formula devised by the intellectual Wen Tiejun in his 1999 article reflecting on the crisis in the countryside during the 1990s.[3]

With the leadership change from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in 2002, the Party signalled its commitment to tackling the urban-rural gap. In 2004, 2005, and 2006, the annual *No. 1 Directive Document* was released on rural issues. In the 11th Five-year Plan, a programme for the social and economic development of rural areas, namely *Building a New Socialist Countryside*, was included.[4] In 2018, a strategic plan for *Rural Revitalisation* further confirmed the government's commitment to these issues.[5]

The countryside was officially recognised as the missing piece to accomplishing the full socio-economic development of the nation and achieving the goal of a *moderately prosperous society* (小康社会 xiǎokāng shèhuì).[6] The 'unbalanced and inadequate development' was set as the new national contradiction to be solved, and clear goals were laid out: 'We must ensure that by the year 2020, all rural residents living below the current poverty line have been lifted out of poverty'.[7]

Compared with the past, when the rural problem mainly revolved around food security,[8] the discourse on the *three rural issues* marked a shift towards a more comprehensive approach. This time, the rural crisis was conceived as a result of different factors: rural people (income, migration), society (social capital development, socio-economic and political issues), and production (agriculture, local enterprises development).[9] All these components interact in complex ways. Their causes and solutions lie far beyond the rural domain: they involve the city, the government's urban policies, and, more broadly, the very model of development.[10]

Since rural areas had been placed at the top of the national agenda, all government offices mobilised to address the crisis in their specific sector. Solutions to promote rural development included: structural reforms that aimed to modernise the agricultural sector, increase the income of farmers and investment in rural areas. Changes addressed the review of the rural land use system (the *separation of three land rights*, 三权分置 sān quán fēn zhì) and rural financial institutions. The

burden of taxes was reduced (including the abolition of the millenary agricultural tax in 2006), rural school fees cancelled, and the rural health insurance system was redesigned. The government supported digitalisation in rural areas and subsidised entrepreneurship, fiercely promoting rural tourism.

Measures to reduce the urban-rural gap included, notably, the definition of a new planning regime aimed at reorganising the hierarchy between city and countryside.[11] The Chinese development model is closely tied to urbanisation processes, with national regulation stating that 'urbanisation is the only way to modernisation'.[12] Thus, the development of rural and marginal areas was perceived as an issue of urbanising the countryside. The strategy of *urban-rural integration* (城乡一体化 chéngxiāng yītǐ huà) pursued the goal of bringing urban standards of living to rural areas. Many interventions followed the 'rationalisation' of villages and regional layout: scattered hamlets and settlements were demolished, villagers relocated into compact clusters of new buildings on the outskirts of rural towns, and primary farmlands were consolidated.[13] In 2007, the *Urban Planning Law* became the *Urban and Rural Planning Law,* and rural land was officially incorporated into the spatial planning regime.[14] From then on, the involvement of every administrative level was required to formulate a spatial plan. Provinces were required to issue a provincial urban system plan; urban municipalities and townships were put in charge of drafting urban plans and town plans, respectively. Within this strategy, townships were designated as service centres for their territorial basin. Hence, town development had to be aligned with the needs of its surrounding rural areas, to provide the services that villages lack. Accordingly, arrangements for infrastructure (hydrological engineering projects, rural roads, biogas, power grids) and welfare services (schools, health centres, kindergartens) were prioritised. For the first time, administrative villages were asked to define a 20-year village plan including land use, functions, infrastructure provision, transport development, as well as protected areas for farmland, natural resources and cultural heritage.[15]

Support for Party officers in village planning processes often comes from the example of other villages that have achieved 'model status'. *Model experiences* (典型经验 diǎnxíng jīngyàn) allow for a policy to be tested first and, if deemed successful, to be formulated into national policy, and then extended throughout the country (this

Figure 3-6: (clockwise from left) A stage for performances being built over the river in Dangjia, Shaanxi (September 2016); restoration work for a Tulou museum, Xiananxi Yongding Fujian (September 2019); renovation work in Qikou, Shanxi (September 2019); new infrastructure construction near the Hani Rice Terraces, Yunnan (November 2018)

policy-making methodology is also known as the *point-to-surface* technique).[16] Different lists of model villages, responding to diverse aspects and scopes, are managed by various government departments. The list of *Beautiful Villages,* managed by the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), aims to improve the village environment, organisation and public services in compliance with the *Building a New Socialist Countryside* program. The *Eco-civilisation Villages,* under the supervision of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE), addresses energy efficiency, water and soil quality, and the atmosphere in rural areas. The list of *Traditional Villages,* focusing on built heritage and intangible traditions, is entrusted to the combined efforts of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD), the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA), the Ministry of Culture (MOC), and Ministry of Finance (MOF). Every group defines a set of criteria that villages must meet in order to be included in these lists. The success of a project is judged through a point-attributing mechanism, and villages achieving model status receive funds for further implementation.

The system of model villages is a crucial feature of China that dates back to the Mao era. The paradigm of the model village is Dazhai, in Shanxi. In the 1960s and 1970s it was the starting point of a nationwide emulation campaign on the efficiency of Communist agricultural productivity.[17] Model villages are not the only parallel between current policies and previous 'to-the-countryside' campaigns. There are multiple initiatives that bear a notable resemblance to previous experiences. The consolidation of dispersed hamlets and villages onto single sites has been common practice in the PRC, as the focus of preserving farmland has remained unchanged throughout the years: from Mao, through the Economic Reform Period, until now.[18] The idea driving the *Building a New Socialist Countryside* policy is also not entirely new; the *People's Daily* editorial, on July 2, 1956, was titled precisely 'Building the New Socialist Countryside'.[19] Indeed, the inspiration for the homonymous 2006 policy is rather evident as the 1956 programme targeted improving agricultural production, water conservancy, road building, rural housing, public health and sanitation, and education.[20]

However, even if the intent of the 2006 action plan for rural environments is not entirely new, the fresh heritage component has injected a very different twist to contemporary rural development policies.

The attitude towards the past

In a 1980s essay, Simon Leys (the alter ego of Belgian-born sinologist Pierre Ryckmans) tried to describe the complex relationship that China, the oldest living civilisation, has with its past. This relationship, he wrote, combines a great sense of continuity with indifference for the preservation of its material vestiges and even, at times, iconoclasm.[21] Today, a further layer of interpretation could be added to the 'attitude' highlighted in Leys' remarks. Many tangible and intangible cultural items – after having been neglected, barely considered, or fiercely criticised – have been so strenuously re-evaluated and promoted that the country is now witnessing a 'heritage craze'[22] or 'heritage fever' (遗产热 yíchǎn rè).[23] This heritage momentum accords with a cultural shift that has been progressively implemented since the mid-1980s.

China's effective entry into the global heritage discourse occurred in 1985 after the country had signed the 1972 UNESCO *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*

(World Heritage Convention). In 1987, the World Heritage Committee, gathering at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, approved the inclusion of the first group of 'outstanding' Chinese properties in the World Heritage List: the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, and the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor with his terracotta warriors were among those. In January 1990, the *People's Daily* published a speech by Li Ruihuan, then Minister of Culture, titled *Some questions relevant to enhancing the outstanding elements of national culture*.[24] In his speech, Li described the promotion of national culture as having critical political significance and instructed that ancient buildings, cultural relics, and ancient texts be protected and restored. According to Guo Yingjie, the Minister's speech has to be interpreted as the Party's effort to promote culture as a tool for stability and to rekindle nationalism and Party legitimacy in a post-1989 context.[25]

Within a few years the country had promoted so many new inclusions in the World Heritage List that in 2019, with 55 nominated properties, China equalled the longstanding pre-eminence of Italy. By signing the UNESCO Convention, the country has taken part in the global process of heritage recognition and protection, embracing its principles, terms of reference, and narratives. However, in China, as in any country, the World Heritage nomination has become a political feature, affirming the prestige of the nation. Thus, international heritage narratives underwent a process of domestic appropriation to serve the strategic objectives of the Party-state.[26] This 'domesticated' discourse on heritage was used to promote a 'consensus version of history'[27] and became an instrument of governance, used to legitimise political decisions, support economic choices, reinforce the national sense of identity, and generate soft power abroad.[28]

In international politics, the concept of *soft power* refers to the ability of a state to alter the behaviour of others to achieve its objectives, using cultural charm instead of coercive means.[29] Coined by Joseph Nye in his 1990 book about the 'American power'.[30] In 1993 the term was introduced in China, and, in a short time, it was adopted into the official discourse of Chinese leaders.[31] Hu Jintao mentioned the *cultural soft power* (文化软实力 wénhuà ruǎn shílì) of the country in his 2007 Report for the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[32] Ten years later the concept was still present in Xi Jinping's speech to the 19th CCP Congress: 'We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication

so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's *cultural soft power*'.[33] As a result, cultural awareness rapidly spread across the country, enriching the national debate, its vocabulary, and the very idea of what is considered heritage. From 'cultural relics' (文物 wénwù) to 'heritage' (遗产 yíchǎn), from monuments to vernacular buildings, from ancient towns to cultural landscapes, from tangible items to intangible practices, this conceptual extension has enabled a progressive inclusion of more and more sites under the heritage umbrella. Old villages and rural areas have felt this renewed cultural mood the most.

For thousands of years China has been an agricultural empire and an incredible array of remnants of this past still marks the land: hydraulic works, rural settlements, old postal and commercial routes, etc. The narrative of the Chinese ancient farming civilisation is a powerful message to articulate the State's identity and continuity in world society. Therefore, villages that have escaped the pace of modernisation conserve a cultural richness that is a precious resource for the *Beautiful China* (美丽中国 měilì zhōngguó) promoted by today's national slogans.[34] Moreover, many of these villages are home to different ethnic groups, and their promotion is crucial to convey to the world a much more inclusive idea of 'Chinese identity'.

In the 2000s, the debate on the *three rural issues* brought rural heritage to the foreground across the country. Social and economic transformations in the countryside threatened rural heritage, but paradoxically also stimulated its conservation. This was possible thanks to enhanced fiscal and regulatory support from the State and a more engaged interest from the broader public.[35] After the inclusion of Xidi and Hongcun in the UNESCO World Heritage List, many other rural settlements rapidly followed. The *Kaiping Diaolou and Villages* (designated in 2007) count four villages, *Fujian Tulou* (2008) includes six clusters of settlements, the *Cultural Landscape of Honghe Hani Rice Terraces* (2013) has five nominated villages plus 77 rural settlements within the nominated property.

In 2011, the *West Lake Cultural Landscape of Hangzhou* (2011) stimulated an intriguing debate among experts regarding the exclusion of some tea villages from the nomination[36]. Moreover, the national Tentative List, where sites to be considered for World Heritage nomination are listed, includes many villages looking for

Figure 7-9: (from top) Dance performance in Langde Miao Village, Guizhou (May 2017); Tulou buildings in Tianzhongcun, Fujian (September 2019); Taoping Qiang Village, Sichuan (March 2019)

international recognition. In 2008, the *Ancient Waterfront Towns in the South of Yangtze River* submission described four water towns (Zhouzhuang, Luzhi, Wuzhen and Xitang) but, in time, the tentative dossier progressively developed and now includes 18 settlements. The *Ancient Residences in Shanxi and Shaanxi Provinces* (2008) proposed two villages, the *Miao Nationality Villages in Southeast Guizhou Province* (2008) had more than 30 ethnic villages, the *Ancient Tea Plantations of Jingmai Mountain in Pu'er* (2013) included eight villages, the *Diaolou Buildings and Villages for Tibetan and Qiang Ethnic Groups* (2013) counted 15, and the *Dong Villages* dossier (2013) applied for the inclusion of 22 small settlements.

Figure 10-11: (from top) Watertowns have become popular tourist destinations. Restaurants line the canal in Tongli, Jiangsu (July 2016); Tourists are rowed on small boats in Zhouzhuang, Jiangsu (October 2018)

As Yan Haiming notes, even small towns barely known in their provinces have shown their intention to compete for a World Heritage nomination. In 2004, the small ancient town of Qikou, located on the shore of the Yellow River, hosted the *International Symposium on the Protection of Ancient Architecture in Qikou* with the ultimate aim of placing the town on the World Heritage List. Local officers and scholars acknowledged that this goal seemed impossible but admitted the statement itself would strengthen public and tourist interest and bring more attention and financial support from the government.

The case of Qikou reveals that the national concern with World Heritage is not just related to the international designation, but it also relays to very domestic logics.[37]

Besides the World Heritage List and its overwhelming relevance, a mechanism to ensure the conservation of historic villages was established, implementing inventories at state, provincial, and local levels. In 2003, the first group of *Chinese Historical and Cultural Towns & Villages* was listed.[38] The list, replacing 'cities' with 'towns & villages', assumed the same name as the *Chinese Historical and Culture Cities* list that in 1982 identified historic cities to be protected at the national level. The process of inclusion includes a standardised set of criteria to objectively evaluate villages across the country. It assesses the period and state of conservation of buildings, construction techniques, the consistency of the built fabric (mainly along streets and waterways),

Figure 12: Qikou Village on the Yellow River, Shanxi (September 2019)

the integrity of the settlement layout, as well as conservation tools and any regulatory system in force.[39] The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD) and the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) are in charge of coordinating the protection of these villages, which now, after several rounds of inclusions, totals 487.

In 2007, the issue of the *Circular on Strengthening the Protection of Vernacular Architecture* introduced the concept of 'vernacular heritage' into the Chinese official lexicon. In 2012, a new list of villages was released. The press conference for the launch of the *Chinese Traditional Villages* provides an exhaustive account of the establishment of this new list of small settlements:

> The country has a thousand year old farming civilisation rooted in the countryside; traditional villages that have preserved their heritage are the soul of the nation and the root of our culture […]. Such heritage is not renewable and is facing a crisis caused by the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the last decades […]. Therefore, although some villages might not have many ancient buildings, they embody in their layout, in their location, and many intangible aspects the cultural elements that reflect the essence of Chinese culture, probably even more deeply than *Historical Villages*. Ancient buildings display old material forms, but our ultimate scope is not the forms themselves, but to preserve the culture that is embedded in those forms and places.[40]

The list of *Traditional Villages*, therefore, intends to expand the scope of the previous list, including a larger number of villages. Accordingly, it defines a more comprehensive standard template of selection. Criteria are articulated in three main categories: architecture, settlement layout, and intangible elements. Throughout all the sections, regional and ethnic elements and the 'local sense of beauty' are steadily emphasised. Traditional building techniques are considered relevant especially when combined with existing skills and tools still applied in 'the architecture of everyday life' (日常生活建筑 rìcháng shēnghuó jiànzhú). Feng shui (风水) is not directly mentioned, but the symbiotic relationship between villages and

their specific natural environment is broadly considered, both in the scientific and cultural aspects reflected in site selection.[41]

Support and management mechanisms for the nominated villages are ensured through informative documents such as the *Basic Requirements for the Preparation of Traditional Villages Protection and Development Plan*[42] and the *Guidelines on Enhancing the Conservation of Traditional Villages.*[43] Furthermore, a *Research Centre* and an *Archive on Traditional Villages* have been established. The Ministry of Finance (MOF) - in charge of the list with the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD), the Ministry of Culture (MOC), and the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) - offers a subsidy to villages included in the national list. As a result, many villages that previously did not qualify for the title of *Historical and Cultural Villages* enrolled in the *Traditional Villages* list. Now, there are 6,819 traditional villages recognised at the national level, and the number of villages at the provincial level is even larger.[44]

The 2013 Press Conference for the launch of *Traditional Villages* announced the government's plan to enhance the promotion and knowledge of traditional villages in the wider public, using television and other media.[45] Hence, a year later, the first broadcast made its debut on national CCTV (Chinese Channel of China Central Television). *Nostalgia* (记住乡愁 jJì zhù xiāng chóu) is a TV documentary series (in its sixth season, in 2020) which met with great acclaim among mainland and overseas Chinese audiences.[46] The series, a Chinese cultural heritage project, was planned in close coordination with the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOUHRD) and the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) and produced by the Central Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. Every season has 60 episodes, each describing a traditional small settlement, its people, stories, and traditions, covering all regions across the country and different ethnic groups, "in search of the country's cultural genes" as the broadcast description on the website declares.[47]

Until recently, rural environments were considered backward areas in opposition to urban development and progress, but villages are now experiencing increasing appreciation throughout the country. A nostalgic sense for traditional lifestyles, genuine Socialist-Confucian values, and Chinese ancestral precepts is embedded in this new feeling

for the countryside. Rural nostalgia is a distinctive feature of rapidly urbanising societies. In post-socialist China, these nostalgic feelings may act as a tool to create an idyllic image of ecological rurality and screen out painful memories. As Davis notes, nostalgia may contribute to the maintenance of solidarity in whole societies after 'untoward historic events'.[48] In younger generations, this nostalgic feeling - that is not truly nostalgia as it concerns places never seen and events never lived through - creates a powerful collective archetype of continuity between past and present, replacing the void of painful memories that remain unscrutinised.

It comes full circle

The promotion of culture in the 1990 discourse of Minister Li Ruihuan can also be read from another perspective, besides its function as a tool for stability and nationalism. Tim Oakes notes that the speech can be interpreted as the Party green light for a 'cultural turn' in economic development strategies.[49] In the early 1990s, after fiscal decentralisation emburdened local governments, the PRC recognised culture as a potential and underexploited economic resource for regional development. In a few years, this resulted in the rapid rise of cultural regionalisms, the promotion of local specialities, and rural tourism development.

The interpretation of culture in instrumental terms, to increase the economic value of a location and its products, is certainly not original and is not limited to China. This entrepreneurial approach to culture has become an international feature. UNESCO has promoted it since the *World Decade for Cultural Development* (1988-97) and further implemented it with the UNESCO *Creative Cities Network*. Founded in 2004, the Network sets its goal in 'placing creativity and cultural industries at the heart of [*city's*] development plans'.[50] China, with its 14 'creative cities', leads the Network and plays a very active role in the group, periodically promoting and co-organising the UNESCO *Creative Cities Beijing Summits*.

The combination of culture and entrepreneurship also seems to be the rationale for establishing the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2018, merging two formerly separate entities, the Ministry of Culture and the China National Tourism Administration. Tourism in China is a rapidly growing market, with demand steadily increasing alongside national incomes. Rural tourism, in particular, exploits

Figure 13-15: (from top) Art students on a field trip in Hongcun, Anhui (September 2018); a glass bridge over Huangling Wuyuan (September 2018); panoramic view of Shiyuanzi Yongding, Fujian (September 2019)

vernacular architecture, pastoral landscapes, agricultural products, as well as local rural traditions and ethnic features, that are an essential part of the 'exotic' attractiveness villages display to urban visitors. Walks through old villages and itineraries among fields are offered to tourists, employing short default paths, panoramic observation decks, glass bridges hanging over blooming fields, and hot-air balloon rides.

Farmers are being asked to replace traditional crops with ornamental plantations such as rapeseed, lotuses, and chrysanthemums to increase the tourist appeal of the site. Thus, visitor flows follow seasonal blooming, when rapeseed flowers surround villages in a sea of yellow in mid-March, or red maples flame the landscape in the autumn.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, rural tourism is intended to offer tourist visits, entertainment and shopping opportunities, boosting employment and increasing the income of farmers.[51] This growing economic sector is considered a means to fight poverty by redistributing national wealth from coastal cities to inland regions. According to the *National Tourism Development Report*, rural tourism in China is creating ten million new jobs annually. Between 2014 and 2015, this sector grew by 60 per cent. Estimates show that by the end of the 13th Five-year Plan (2016-2020) 150,000 villages will have been designated as rural tourism sites with three million operators and four billion tourists in this sector alone.[52]

Rural heritage is, therefore, seen as a powerful economic asset for local government in meeting its need for rapid development.[53] Moreover, in remote, rural, and ethnic regions, the tourism industry is introduced as a modernising tool to promote economic, social, and cultural development and to better integrate minorities within the nation-state.[54] Consistent with this vision, the *National New Urbanisation Plan 2014-2020* states that urban plans:

> should take into account the natural, historical, and cultural conditions of different regions and highlight regional differences, promote diversity, and avoid homogeneity; cities and towns should have distinctive historical memories, cultural contexts, and regional and ethnic features so that we can develop a new model of urbanisation that reflects reality and embraces diversity.[55]

Similarly, the 2015 revision of the *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China* specifically mentions 'the cultural diversity of different ethnic groups, regions and of the vernacular cultural heritage with unique local features', and suggests that the targets of conservation should be focused on social benefits, economic growth, and urban and rural development.[56] A list of *Beautiful Leisure Villages* and experimental zones for rural tourism, established by the Ministry of Agriculture, pioneered this strategy, and, at the end of July 2019, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism launched a further group of *Key Rural Tourism Villages*.

What the statistics usually do not explain, however, is the mechanism behind those tourist development projects. Large-scale investment companies - based on a model of public-private partnership - are invited to act as engines of rural development. These enterprises obtain monopoly contracts (up to 50 years) for the tourism development of a location, usually one or more entire villages, plus potential plots of land. This model of tourism development is generally known as *Enclave Tourism* because the investment company separates the village designated for tourism-leisure activities from the primary territorial unit and manages the intended use of the space.[57] Old buildings are maintained, and many restructured in line with proposed uses (modifications to the facades of ancient buildings are generally not allowed). The company takes charge of the construction and management of all tourism facilities on the site. New structures built range from parking lots, toilets, information boards, and ticket offices (there is always an entrance ticket to visit the village) to large-scale accommodation structures, hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, exhibition centres, theatres, as well as electric buses, new roads or even cable cars to transport visitors to the site.

Investments are in proportion to the company's means and the expectations of local Party cadres. Hence, such a process is easily subject to external pressures. Outcomes show that this model of tourism development often leads to homologated interventions, cultural and historical reinterpretations, and commodification of local traditions.[58] Very little room remains for local initiative. The company has to maximise short-term profits to generate return on invested capital and legitimise its work and role with Party officers. The distribution of the benefits resulting from tourism activities to the local population is left to free negotiation between representatives of the inhabitants

Figure 3-6: (clockwise from left) A new parking lot in Qikou, Shanxi (September 2019); the cable car to the village of Huangling, Wuyuan, Jianxi (September 2018); a tourist map in Taoping Qiang village, Sichuan (March 2019); and the culture centre under construction in Qianghu Miao Village, Guizhou (June 2017)

and the private company. Such an approach regularly marginalises local communities, who end up obtaining meagre dividends by way of compensation or limited income from low-level tourist jobs (quite often companies prefer to employ cheaper, non-local labour). In the past, some situations have generated tensions between the local population, investment company, and visitors, resulting in the renegotiation of agreements and even the expulsion of the company.[59]

Conclusion

The 2012 *Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Protection and Development of Traditional Villages* clearly expresses the strategic nexus that ties together rural heritage preservation, national identity construction, and economic development in China. The document decisively states that the promotion of rural heritage conservation is important for three main reasons: it enhances the awareness and confidence of the country in its culture, it safeguards the cultural diversity of China preserving all its ethnic cultural expressions, and it improves the economic development of rural areas.[60]

Indeed, in the past 20 years, rural heritage conservation has

matured in China. This is evident in the enhanced regulatory system, and the number of villages added to the UNESCO World Heritage list and other official, national lists of protected sites. Accordingly, rural heritage values have been acknowledged and included in a more comprehensive and updated concept of heritage. Current ideas of heritage are no longer limited to monuments and ancient relics but reflect a host of contemporary values, encompassing social structures, agricultural patterns, environmental practices, intangible customs, and belief systems. This inclusive idea of heritage is also a result of the influence of international trends that have attuned to national needs.

China has witnessed a recurrent mechanism of congruence-building and domestic appropriation of international heritage policies to legitimise a national agenda.[61] Rural heritage has, therefore, been handled by the central government to convey a narrative of an ancient farming civilisation, acting as a powerful tool to revive national identity and produce soft power. Cultural resources and rural tourism have been used by local governments as a social-economic driver to attract investment and reduce rural poverty. However, the impact of an aggressive tourism industry can marginalise the inhabitants of rural communities, thus undermining the state policies that were designed precisely to promote cultural industries and rural development.

The picture emerging from this interpretation of current dynamics is consequently complex, and not without its contradictions. The Chinese experience in rural heritage preservation reflects a constant negotiation process among multiple priorities in the national political agenda (development, stability, heritage conservation, etc.). Equally, rural heritage is subject to a continuous reconceptualisation process to create a vision for the future rooted in the country's past – or at least in what today is deemed to be its past.

About the Author

Anna-Paola Pola *(ap.pola@whitr-ap.org/ nnplpl@gmail.com)is an architect and urban planner. Currently, she is Director of Urban Planning and Research fellow at WHITR-AP(the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia and Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO), based in Tongji University, Shanghai. Her studies focus on the preservation and development of small settlements and rural areas in China, she collaborates on grassroots projects in villages and acts as a planning consultant for local governments, institutions and NGOs.*

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