

# A Survey of Contemporary Bai Craft Practices in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China

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This project report was accepted for publication on March 2, 2022. *Museum Anthropology Review* editorial board member Michael Paul Jordan served in the place of editor Jason Baird Jackson, managing peer review and making the acceptance or rejection decision.

## Abstract

In this paper, the authors report on a survey of present-day craft practices found among Bai people in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in China's Yunnan province. This collaborative work was undertaken by a binational team drawn from five different Chinese and American research institutions. While brief and provisional in scope, this ethnographic survey revealed the richness of contemporary craft practice in the region and suggested some broader patterns relevant to the intersection of culturally significant crafts and the workings of formal intangible cultural heritage policies in the area. As a survey, the research was intended to prompt further—more refined and in-depth—studies. Suggestions for such further inquiries are offered in this report.

## Keywords

basket making; crafts; intangible cultural heritage; indigo dyes; master artists; material culture; metalworking; pottery; silver; textile art; tie-dyeing; woodcarvers | Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture; Yunnan; Southwest China; China | Bai (Chinese People).

## Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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## Museum Anthropology Review

Volume 16,1–2 (Spring/Fall 2022), pp 135–173

eISSN 1938–5145

<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/mar>

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the authors report on a survey of present-day craft practices found among Bai people in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in China's Yunnan province. This collaborative work was undertaken by a binational team drawn from five different Chinese and American research institutions. While brief and provisional in scope, this ethnographic survey revealed the richness of contemporary craft practice in the region and suggested some broader patterns relevant to the intersection of culturally significant crafts and the workings of formal intangible cultural heritage policies in the area. As a survey, the research was intended to prompt further—more refined and in-depth—studies. Suggestions for such further inquiries are offered in this report.

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## Introduction

Wood carving, pottery, fabric arts, basketry, and silverwork are among the endeavors being vigorously pursued by craftspeople in predominantly Bai areas in northwestern Yunnan province in the People's Republic of China. This paper reports on a May 2019 survey of crafts in this region undertaken with an interest in better understanding their current status, particularly their adjustment under the impact of formal government intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding policies and practices.<sup>1</sup> This report will introduce the research project on which it is based, evoke the social contexts in which the craftspeople encountered work, detail selected aspects of their craft practices, and conclude with observations on the relationship between contemporary craft practices in this area and relevant heritage interventions.

Based as it is on a brief survey rather than an in-depth, long-term ethnographic study, suggestions for further research will also be offered.

The research reported here was undertaken in the period of May 22 to 28, 2019. Project participants were drawn from three US museums of ethnography and two universities in Yunnan, China. The Institute of National Culture Research at Dali University generously hosted the joint investigation, with the other participants being associated with Yunnan University, the (then) Mathers Museum of World Cultures (MMWC) at Indiana University, the Michigan State University Museum at Michigan State University, and the Museum of International Folk Art.<sup>2</sup> This was the first time that this configuration of partners joined together for collaborative work on craft and associated issues in heritage studies, but the project built on collaborations that have linked representatives from the three US museums to museum and university partners in Southwest China and throughout China since 2012. A pair of museum-based, binational material culture-focused sub-projects began formally in 2013 within a larger project linking the China Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society (AFS) that began in 2007. The larger binational effort has been generously supported by a series of grants from the Henry Luce Foundation as well as by grants and in-kind contributions from a wide range of Chinese and American partners (Dewhurst and Lloyd 2019; Jackson 2019, Jackson forthcoming; Lloyd 2017).

In the first phase of the museums-based sub-project (2013–2016), the museum partners (Yunnan Nationalities Museum, Guizhou Nationalities Museum, Guangxi Museum of Nationalities (a.k.a. Anthropology Museum of Guangxi), Michigan State University Museum, Museum of International Folk Art, and MMWC) pursued a program of staff exchange, hosted two binational conferences, and collaborated to produce the bilingual traveling exhibition and catalogue *Quilts of Southwest China* (Bol et al. 2014; Gao 2015; Jackson 2021, forthcoming; MacDowell and Zhang 2016; Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory 2021a).<sup>3</sup> In the second phase of the museums-based sub-project (2017–2019), a heavier emphasis was given to ethnographic research and the project focused on fieldwork in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, with the Nandan Baiku Yao Ecomuseum and the Sanjiang Dong Ecomuseum joining the institutional partnership and hosting ethnographic investigations in 2017 and 2018. Textile arts and ICH practices have been the focus of these joint investigations in northern Guangxi (Jackson forthcoming; Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory 2021b). The opportunity for some participants in this ongoing project to visit the Dali area in 2019, under the auspices of Dali University's Institute for National Culture Research, arose as an unanticipated, but very welcome, spin-off of the collaborative work ongoing in Guangxi. The chance to learn about craft practice in contemporary Yunnan has provided a comparative dimension to the work in Guangxi while also standing on its own as a worthwhile inquiry that we hope can be extended through additional collaborative work.

The Chinese and English-language scholarly literatures in ethnology and folklore studies for Yunnan are large and sophisticated. While there are some recent craft-focused works in Chinese, this is an area that has received little attention in English-language scholarship or by non-Chinese scholars. Despite being based on work that was brief and provisional in character, we hope that this report of our survey work helps advance studies in this field.

## Ethnographic Contexts

The craftspeople encountered during our survey all self-identified as members of the Bai nationality. The Bai are a Tibeto-Burman-speaking nationality whose population (1,933,510 in 2010) centers in western Yunnan around Erhai Lake and the town of Dali (Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016, 66). We and the other project participants are cognizant of the special complexities that surround the case of Bai national (or ethnic) identity and its recognition since the founding of the People's Republic of China (McCarthy 2009; Yongjia 2010).<sup>4</sup> As our focus was on craft practices and their heritage policy contexts, we did not pursue discussions related to identity, beyond, in some cases, asking artists to reflect upon the place of the craft in Bai culture. Most of our interlocutors were craftspeople participating in formal ICH initiatives and, as a group, they possessed a sophisticated understanding of both local cultural values and forms and the metacultural discourses characteristic of wider art and craft markets, government heritage policy, and scholarly and touristic interest in local cultures. They understood the workings of China's official classification of fifty-six nationalities and the more local differentiations often found within these categories.

As a survey shaped by local knowledge already possessed by our Dali University colleagues on the one hand and the interests expressed by the American participants on the other, we moved rapidly from locale to locale engaging particular noted craftspeople in specific places but not learning much about their home villages or towns. As reflected in the core of this report, the focus was on particular craftspeople and their work. In many, but not all, contexts the craftspeople whom we met were widely recognized as leading practitioners in their genres. This prominence was reflected in local acclaim, relative business success, and often, formal recognition as ICH "inheritors" within the official Chinese ICH policy system (Chen 2010; Kong and Song 2018; Zhang and You 2019).<sup>5</sup>

All locations visited were in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. As shown on the map in Figure 1, we visited Xinhua (also known as Shizhaizi) in Heqing County, Diannan, Tianma, Shaxi, and Jinhua in Jianchuan County, and Xizhou, Zhoucheng, Shuanglang, Jinguisi, Qingdong, and Dali Old Town, all located around Erhai Lake in the (county-level) jurisdiction of Dali City. For the region that we visited, baseline ethnographic descriptions were made on the basis of work in 1937–1938 (Fitzgerald 1976) and 1941–1943 (Hsu 1967) and a range of more recent work deals in particular with ethnobotany (Fan et al. 2018; Staub, Geck, and Weckerle 2011), local religion (Bryson, 2013, 2016, Schmitt 2007; Yongjia 2013; Zhang 2010, 2016), tourism (Notar 2006b, 2008), and identity and cultural change (Mackerras 1988; Wu 1990; Yongjia 2010). Studies of craft include a monograph on silverwork by one of our Dali University hosts (Li 2009; see also Xu et al. 2014 and Shi 2020), a study of woodblock prints used ritually by article co-author Zhang Cuixia (2010), and a study of tie-dye textiles by Jin Shaoping (Jin 2001). Bai Zhihong (2001) discussed the nature of crafts sold to tourists in Dali at the turn of the 21st century, a theme also taken up by Beth Notar (2006a) in a wider discussion of authenticity in the Dali-area tourism economy. Bai cultural tourism is also the focus of a more recent thesis by Zhao Yawei (2016).

## Craftspeople and Their Work

In the sub-sections that follow, we introduce some of the craftspeople whom we met and the nature of their craft practices. In introducing us to these craftspeople, Li Xuelong played the key role. His research includes work on heritage crafts in north-

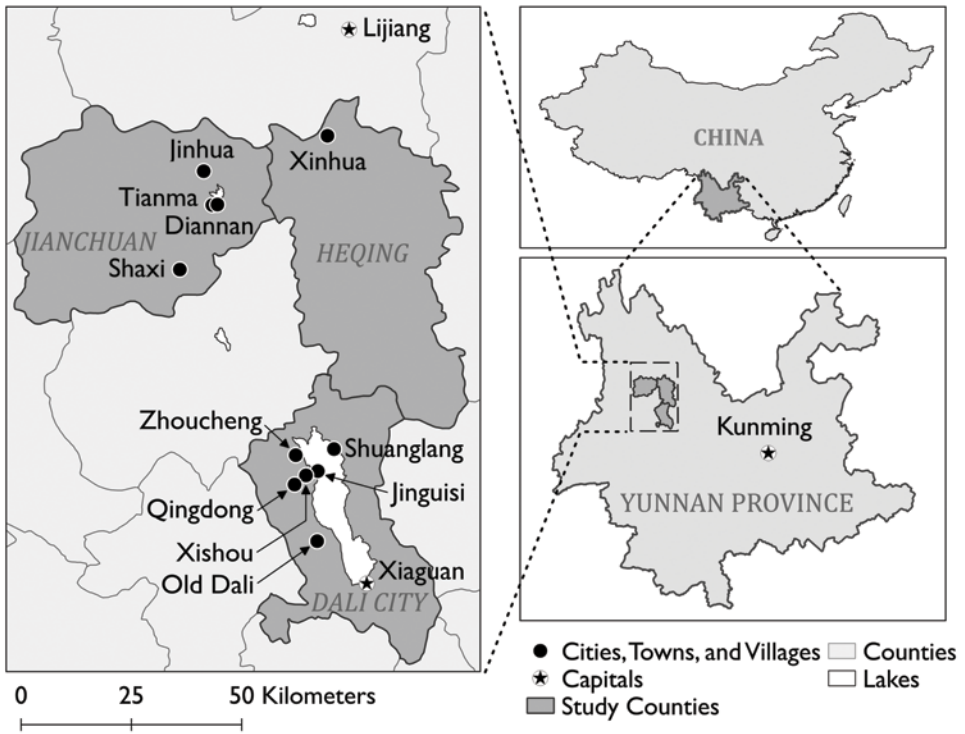


Figure 1. A map of the study region and visited locations in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan China. Map by J. Paul Blekking (Tanager Mapping and Consulting LLC).

western Yunnan and he regularly plays a formal role in the adjudication of ICH recognition for artists and craftspeople in the province. He ably guided us in our travels in the Bai region and was generous in both connecting us with a remarkable group of craftspeople and in showing great patience as we began learning about topics with which he possesses considerable expertise.

### Woodcarving

Our introduction to woodworking came through our encounter with the Bai woodcarver Shi Jiashun (b. 1970) who lives and works in Diannan town in Jianchuan County, north of Dali in Yunnan (Figure 2). From a famed woodworking community of longstanding, Mr. Shi’s practice is rooted in the local tradition of making and carving fine furniture and architectural elements such as doors, room dividers, and window shutters (Fitzgerald 1941, 57, 63, 66, 172). Woodworking was shifted during the post-1949 economic upheavals brought by the nationalization of industry and the suppression of vernacular culture that was at a peak during the Cultural Revolution, but today expressive woodwork is again a vital concern in the Dali area. While Mr. Shi can and does make traditional forms—this is an essential requirement of his status as a recognized intangible cultural heritage master—he also produces new kinds of works rooted in, but going beyond, traditional forms. These include bas-relief carvings featuring landscapes and abstract designs incorporated in wall panels and sculptural pieces as well as in architectural works.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2. Wood carver Shi Jiashun pictured in the gallery associated with his workshop in Diannan, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.

Twenty-nine years after he began carving—initially in the context of a local woodenware factory—Mr. Shi was recognized in 2016 as an inheritor at the prefectural level. This followed the 2011 inscription of Jianchuan area wood carving practices on the national ICH list. In discussing the role of ICH policy for Bai craft, Mr. Shi began by observing that: “the most important [goal] is to preserve the local traditional cultures, such as Jianchuan wood carving. All these ICH items represent the soul of the minority people, and preserving these is our greatest wish.” Regarding the impact of government ICH promotion efforts, Mr. Shi noted that heritage crafts can only be inherited: “if they have a particular livable space.” Continuing, he explained: “Crafts can only exist if craftspeople can support their families and only then can craft skills be inherited. If one doesn’t earn any money from it to pay for life expenses, no one will do it.” Regarding government promotion efforts, he observed that: “promotion work used to be done all by ourselves, and now it’s helped by the government. The goal of publicity is not simply about craft sales, it is about educating more people to know about Jianchuan woodcarving. ICH’s publicity is very good for us.”

As with other craft inheritors whom we met, Mr. Shi also stressed his duties as a teacher of apprentices. He noted that “if you are an ICH inheritor, you have to have many apprentices. The important thing is not that you are good or bad in carving but is whether you have taught a lot of apprentices and if they can find jobs having learned from you. If so, you are helping safeguard the heritage. If you do not have an apprentice, you cannot be an inheritor. Inheritance is the most important [part].” We consider apprenticeship in the case of other inheritors whom we met in the sub-sections below and in the conclusion. A sense of Mr. Shi’s work can be gained from Figures 2–6.



Figure 3. Shi Jiashun carving in his workshop, where he also trains apprentices. Diannan, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Wuerxiya.



Figure 4. A set of carved panels by Shi Jiashun. Diannan, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. May 24, 2019. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst.



Figure 5. An elaborate screen that integrates the furniture and architectural elements of Jinchuan woodcarving with the more elaborate of the styles found in Shi Jianshuan's carved wall hangings. Diannan, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson.



Figure 6. While much of his work is a direct extension of the highly ornamented Jianchuan style of woodcarving, Mr. Shi also produces decorative works in a more streamlined style informed by contemporary aesthetics, as with this piece featuring the form of a log and mushrooms. Yunnan is home to an abundance of mushrooms and they are another icon of the province's richness. Diannan, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.

## Pottery

Our introduction to Bai pottery occurred in the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery in Tianma Village, also in Diannan Town, in Jianchuan. Mr. Dong (b. 1963) is a potter and the county-level inheritor working at the workshop that bears his name. When we visited, the master was traveling and we interviewed one of his apprentices named Chen Yao (Figure 7). Mr. Dong and his apprentices produce two kinds of pottery works at their large studio and gallery. They make and wood fire elegant blackware storage jars, bowls, vases, and tea ceremony sets that are rooted in local styles and that appeal both locally and to collectors beyond the region (Fitzgerald 1941, 58). They also produce a signature object that is iconic of Bai culture. These are the sculptural figures known in English translation as “tile cats.” In their classic form, tile cats sit on a curved base that is sized to match roof tiles that are made to run along the ridgeline of a classic Bai house. On this base, sits an engaging and beloved cat-like creature with distorted features, particularly staring eyes, and large mouths. When used architecturally, tile cats are the auspicious guardians of a family home. Increasingly, tile cats have become collector’s items for visitors to the region, which has led to modifications in form, such as replacing the roof-friendly base with one more suited for display indoors (Duan 2019).<sup>7</sup> A glimpse of the work produced at the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery can be gained from Figures 7–11. For discussion of a Bai pottery in Heqing County, see Lai and Su (2017).



Figure 7. Pottery apprentice Chen Yao holding a ceramic “tile cat” in the gallery associated with the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery in Tianma Village, Diannan Town, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.

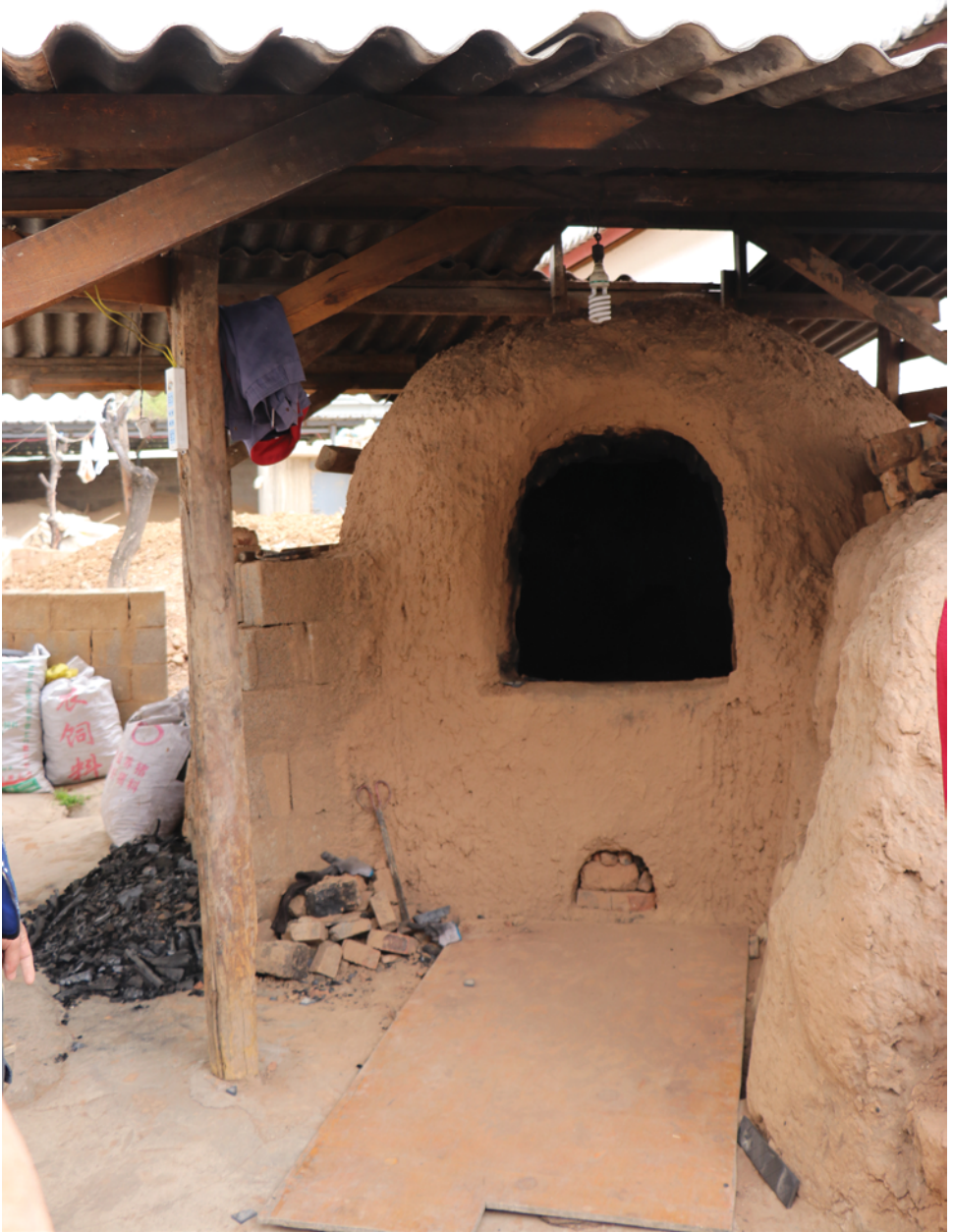


Figure 8. The kiln at the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery in Tianma Village, Diannan Town, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.



Figure 9. A display of tea sets and larger vessels produced by the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery. Baskets and basketry fish traps rest on the top of the display shelf. Tianma Village, Diannan Town, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst.



Figure 10. A group of tile cats drying before being fired at the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery. Tianma Village, Diannan Town, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst.



Figure 11. A tea set produced by the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery. Tianma Village, Diannan Town, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst.

## Embroidery and Fabric Sculpture

In the town of Jinhau, also in Jianchuan County, we had the opportunity to meet and interview provincial-level inheritor Zhao Huaizhu in her home fabric arts studio (Figure 12).<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Zhao (b. 1947) is skilled in a range of textile art forms, but her preferred medium is the creation of fabric sculptures or figurines. She often brings these animal and human figures together into evocative scenes reflective of traditional Bai cultural life. She sees these scenes as both documentary and instructional. While they stand on their own as aesthetic objects, she also uses them as prompts for—and illustration of—stories of Bai lifeways as she has observed and remembers them (Kay 2021).

The broader category in which Mrs. Zhao works is known as *buzha*. This term refers to a kind of fabric craft in which colorful cloth is stuffed with fragrant herbs and decorated with embroidery. While figures and scenes fit within this category, so do elaborate baby hats and other forms, such as puppets and various fabric toys. On first encounter, Westerners might think that the kinds of works that center the *buzha* genre are a new form emergent within a global culture of “cute” but this would be a misreading, although contemporary tastes are certainly relevant to present-day buyers and makers (Yano 2015). Writing of the Bai in a very different era (1936–1939), C. P. Fitzgerald—in a discussion of hats and their sale in lively regional markets—singled out “the gay caps in the shape of tigers’ heads which are favoured for baby boys (1941, 66).” Such hats remain a part of Mrs. Zhao’s repertoire. What *buzha* works share is the dimensionality that comes from the stuffed fabric, embroidered and applique decoration, and the use of varied colored fabrics.

When asked what we should share about Bai culture with people in the United States, she was clear in directing us to: “tell them that our Jianchuan culture is vibrant. We have a long history of sewing with cultural connotations. [Our crafts] aim to help younger people become better adults.” Mrs. Zhao’s work using craft objects as narratable objects for cultural exegesis, oral history recitation, and memory ethnography parallels the cases chronicled by our research collaborator Jon Kay for the state of Indiana in the United States (Kay 2016a, 2016b, 2021). While this cultural work is important to her, she is also proud to have trained a vast number of apprentices as part of poverty reduction efforts in her home region. Among her students have been groups of “rural women with disabilities. I teach them to sew dolls and help them sell them so that they can become self-reliant.” With our group she stressed that she “likes *buzha* very much and that she gets many orders for her sewing work.” She added “Anyway, I am old enough to teach and train others to pass it on. They say it is a pity that I am old. However, it is not a pity to get old. Sympathy might be warranted if I could not pass it on given that I do want to pass it on. It is satisfying when, [like me] one can teach others and gain recognition that provides a sense of appreciation and accomplishment.” Mrs. Zhao’s work is pictured in Figures 12–16.



Figure 12. Zhao Huaizhu in her home studio in Jinhua, Jiachuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. She holds a pair of baby shoes and child's hats and fabric figurines can be seen on her display wall. May 24, 2019. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst.



Figure 13. A buza work featuring chickens by Zhao Huaizhu. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.



Figure 14. Vignettes such as this one help Zhao Huaizhu narrate, and preserve knowledge of, everyday cultural practices that were more common in the past, such as hand grinding grain or carrying water with shoulder poles. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson.



Figure 15. Fabric figures by Zhao Huaizhu help her teach younger Bai people about older styles of Bai men's and women's dress. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photographs by Carrie Hertz.



Figure 16. Jon Kay makes a videorecording as Wuerxiya interviews Zhao Huaizhu in her home studio. Note the plaques that record her many recognitions as a master artist and ICH inheritor. While such plaques have become a common emblem of participation and stature in contemporary government ICH initiatives, their bestowal and display connect to an older and more general practice—widespread in China but documented locally—in which families proudly display honorary plaques bestowed by government officials (Hsu 1948, 28–29). Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 24, 2019. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson.

## Silverwork

In Xinhua, in Heqing County, can be found a community famous for its silverwork (Li 2009; Shi 2020). Unlike the better-known silverwork of the Miao of Guizhou, the Xinhua smiths do not primarily focus on items of adornment. The primary consumers of Bai silverwork have long been Tibetan Buddhists. Bai silver artists produce ritual offering bowls and other objects used in religious devotion. In understanding

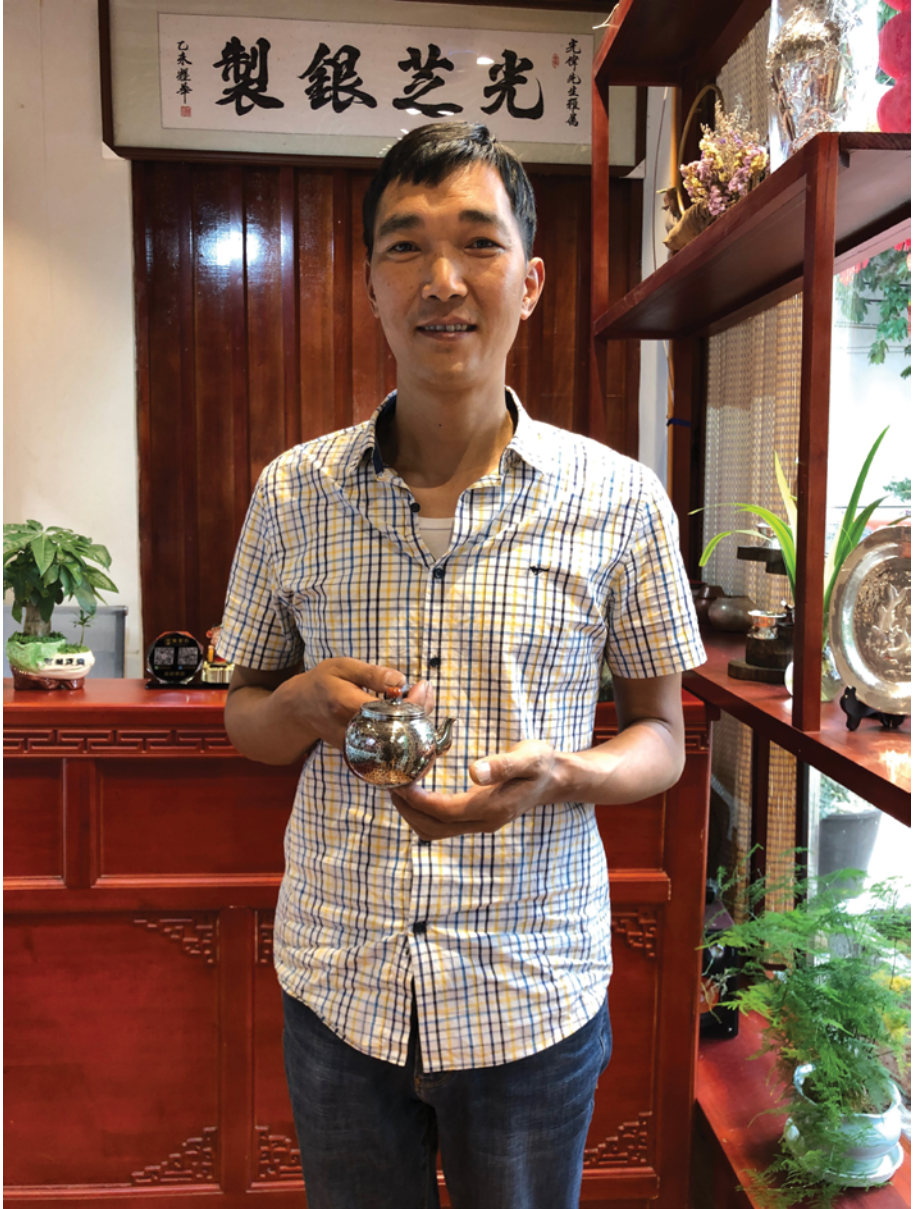


Figure 17. Cun Guangwei pictured in his gallery in Xinhua (Shizhaizi), Heqing County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 25, 2019. Photographs by Marsha MacDowell.

this interethnic trade, it is important to know about the historical “horse and tea” road and other caravan routes that knitted Southwest China into a larger world that includes not only what are today the countries of Southeast Asia but also the vast Tibetan settlement region, which extends into Yunnan (Du 2014; Freeman and Ahmed 2011; Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016, 399–400). The county-level Bai master Cun Guangwei (Figure 17) must know and teach these forms central to the Tibetan trade but, as we learned during our interview with him, he and his apprentices today also make works—tea sets in particular—that are aimed at urban buyers from Beijing and beyond.<sup>9</sup>

Our discussions with Mr. Cun (b. 1979) were extensive. He began his career working in silver at age fifteen. In relation to ICH impacts on the works made by the Xinhua smiths, he noted that: “We have no problems with [technical] skills. Design is our shortcoming”. He further observed, in this connection, that ICH training programs organized by the local government in partnership with fine arts schools are proving helpful in addressing this weakness in terms of design expertise. He added that training and wider markets have pressed local smiths to produce more exacting work. On the interface with formal arts education, he stressed that he and his colleagues are now strengthening the technical skills of academy-trained smiths, showing a reciprocal relationship. In his busy workshop, he hosts and trains both local apprentices and those coming to his community from university-based programs. For examples of Mr. Cun’s work in silver and bronze, see Figures 17–21. For further detail on Xinhua silverwork in general, see Li (2009), Xu et al. (2014), and Shi (2020).



Figure 18. Cun Guangwei in his workshop in Xinhua (Shizhaizi), Heqing County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 25, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.



Figure 19. An stemmed offering bowl by Cun Guangwei. Xinhua (Shizhaizi), Heqing County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 25, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.



Figure 20. A tea pot by Cun Guangwei. Xinhua (Shizhaizi), Heqing County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 25, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.



Figure 21. A tea pot by Cun Guangwei. Xinhua (Shizhaizi), Heqing County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 25, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.

#### Tie-Dye Indigo and Related Fabric Arts

In Zhoucheng, long famed for its tie-dye work, we visited the Puzhen Tie-Dye workshop and interviewed masters Duan Shukun (b. 1973), a provincial ICH inheritor, and Duan Yinkai (b. 1975), a national level ICH inheritor.<sup>10</sup> For some of us, this was a return visit to a workshop that we had first documented in 2013. In the years since, the operation has expanded further and now includes an extensive museum. We will be drawing upon our experiences at the workshop in our future work on indigo dye craft. Here we note, with respect to the further impact of ICH policies, that the Puzhen Tie-Dye workshop was designated as a “ICH production demonstration base” by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2017. Mr. and Mrs. Duan explained that it was one of fifteen such bases in China and that it was established through a cooperation project that included the China Film Academy, the Yunnan Art University, the Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture, the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture government and their firm, the Puzhen Bai Tie-Dye Company.

For visitors, the most tangible expression of this transformation is the building of an elaborate, and very professional, museum space in which the detailed history and ethnography of Bai indigo knowledge—including extensive ethnobotanical information—is exhibited for visitors alongside a rather comprehensive treatment of the practices, forms, and aesthetics of Bai textile art, particularly the now iconic tie-dye work. While it could be visited alone, the museum prepares visitors to enter into expanded and modernized workshop and sales gallery spaces. The transformed facility includes buildings present and used at the time that Jackson, Dewhurst, and other team members visited in 2013, but the operation has been

both expanded and the facilities reworked to showcase Bai architectural styles that were obscured or not present in the smaller (but still large) facility as it was earlier. In its new form as a ICH production demonstration base, the workshop can now accommodate large groups of tourists and it can also facilitate not only production activities but also training of both local Bai apprentices and those who visit the site from around China. Scenes from the Puzhen Tie-Dye workshop are presented in Figures 22–26.



Figure 22. Duan Yinkai pictured with work from the Puzhen Tie-Dye workshop, which she leads with her husband Duan Shukun. Zhoucheng, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.



Figure 23. Indigo dye vats and other equipment within the Puezhen Tie-Dye workshop. Zhoucheng, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Jon Kay.



Figure 24. Tye-dyed indigo fabrics dry on a rolling rack at the Puezhen Tie-Dye workshop. Zhoucheng, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.



Figure 25. A tie-dyed indigo fabric presented by Duan Yinkai (right) and her mother (left) at the Puezhen Tie-Dye workshop. Zhoucheng, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.



Figure 26 Wuerxiya (left) participates in an interview with Duan Yinkai (center) and Duan Shukun at the Puezhen Tie-Dye workshop. Zhoucheng, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Marsha MacDowell.

## Basketry

The research team was able to confer with two basket makers in the Dali area.<sup>11</sup> Basketry master Wang Zhuyuan (b. 1943) is lightly involved in ICH work as a city (=county) level inheritor. This mainly involves his teaching introductory basketmaking to area tourists with interests in local culture. Across Erhai Lake from his home in Jinguisi, we interviewed another local basket maker who—like most of his professional peers in China—is working outside of any formal ICH frameworks. This maker is Zhao Renbiao (b. 1952) and his home is the cultural tourism-dominant town of Shaunglang. In addition to meeting and interviewing these two basketry masters, we held informal discussions with two basketry sellers (one near Xizhou and one in Shaxi) and we observed baskets being marketed and used at the annual Rao San Ling festival in Qingdong village.<sup>12</sup>

While tie-dyed indigo textiles are probably *the* most iconic of Bai crafts, basketry is among the most unmarked and uncelebrated. Yet, bamboo baskets are not only essential tools for a vast range of work activities among the Bai and other peoples in Southwest China, they are also put to work in a different part of the heritage sector. Throughout the Bai region, baskets are deployed ubiquitously as decoration in galleries, boutiques, restaurants, hotels, and other locations frequented by tourists drawn to the region by an interest in rural and minority heritage culture. They are iconic of rural life and its virtues, particularly for those who travel from the urban centers of eastern China. Thus, while only lightly included in the formal ICH inheritance and safeguarding system they are very much a part of the heritage tourism landscape, even as they remain central to the practical business of everyday life and work (Jackson and Zhang 2019). Figures 27–29 show Wang Zhuyuan, his workshop, and some of the baskets that he and his family members produce. Figures 30–31 picture Zhao Renbiao and the type of basketry bassinet for which he is best known.



Figure 27. Wang Zhuyuan (right) and Duan Ruizhen (left) at work in their basketry workshop in Jinguisi, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson.



Figure 28. A trilingual interview (Bai, Mandarin, English) with basket maker Wang Zhuyuan led by Zhang Cuixia (center) and video recorded by Jon Kay. Jinguisi, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Marsha MacDowell.



Figure 29. Bamboo basketry splints soak in water before use in the workshop of Wang Zhuyuan. Wang purchases bamboo from harvesters and thus generally works with dry rather than fresh green bamboo. Jinguisi, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 26, 2019. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson.



Figure 30. Basket maker Zhao Renbiao being interviewed by Wuerxiya in Shuanglang, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 27, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.



Figure 31. Shown at the left is a bamboo basketry cradle by Zhao Renbiao. At the right is such a cradle prepared for use with a shoulder or head strap for carrying, fabric lining, and an indigo tie-dyed sunshade. Shuanglang, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. May 27, 2019. Photograph by Carrie Hertz.

## Comparative Reflections on Bai Craft and ICH

Our survey emphasized established craft workers who are connected to the formal, national ICH safeguarding system. Thus, our preliminary reflections do not relate to the total world of Bai craft activity. This vaster world of craft includes a great range of material forms, techniques of making, practices of circulation, and contexts of use.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging this limit, we have a sense that our survey captured a reliable initial picture of those crafts practices that are being celebrated, and invested in, within China's layered system of county (city), prefectural, provincial, and national ICH recognition, support, and promotion.<sup>14</sup> Having introduced some individual makers, we conclude with some preliminary observations of a general sort.

Recognition as an ICH inheritor brings with it significant obligation to take on apprentices and/or engage in formalized teaching activities. The form that this teaching takes is somewhat variable, based on the craft medium and local social contexts, but in every case that we know, it is significant. This teaching aspect relates to the policy goal of sustaining the underlying craft form as an expression of cultural heritage, but it often also relates to local and regional poverty reduction strategies. For example, in a 2017 article for the All-China Women's Federation focusing on the career of Zhao Huaizhu, the author notes that Mrs. Zhao had already taught over 1000 women across eight townships to make buzha works. By the time of our visit, this number of apprentices had doubled. Such craftwork provided women with supplemental income during slack seasons within the agricultural calendar (Dong 2017) and, as Mrs. Zhao suggested to us, it was of particular value to women needing pathways to self-sufficiency. While large numbers of learners can gather for brief training workshops such as those that Mrs. Zhao participates in, fewer apprentices can work side-by-side with Mr. Cun or Mr. Dong for long periods at a time, but even in such intense workshop contexts, the numbers of apprentices can be very large. The teaching obligations of formal inheritor status give some talented makers—particularly those who are elderly—reason to evade rather than pursue such recognition.

Just as formally recognized masters have an obligation to teach, they all are also expected to participate as learners in formal training events. We have not documented the scope of this training in detail, but most inheritors spoke of attending short courses related to such matters as marketing, promotion, pedagogy, and quality assurance. While other factors also shape the work of these craftspeople, this training contributes to what we might see as a high level of market and disciplinary sophistication among them.

On a more personal scale, a kind of standard reception practice has arisen among the Bai craft masters and their peers in the Southwest. The same sorts of practices may exist beyond the Southwest where we do not have comparable experience. In the tourism-minded minority nationality villages of the Southwest, a kind of regional welcoming ceremony has arisen based, we think, on a Miao prototype pioneered at Xijiang Miao Nationality Village in Leishan County, Guizhou (Luo 2018, 81–82; Schein 1997, 70). New villages being opened up to minority cultural heritage tourism often emulate practices developed by already-established destination villages in the heritage tourism system (Chio 2013; Luo 2016). Similarly, craftspeople among the Bai and across the Southwest, welcome visitors to their studios and workshops in a now conventional way grounded in an adaptation of tea ceremony practices. We will attempt a more detailed account of these practices in later work. For now, we speculate that, above and beyond emulation of peers grounded in informal professional networks, these

somewhat shared hosting practices likely arise from the kind of formal training that craftspeople in the ICH system receive. Standardization need not undermine sincere hospitality. As with ritual in general, it can be seen as channeling it in formal ways that provide additional power. In that context we just note that the ICH masters we have met are uniformly hospitable and that they have highly developed routines for welcoming, educating, entertaining, and encouraging guests to have a deeper appreciation for their crafts. As among artists and craftspeople around the world, this often includes developing, polishing, and repeating engaging stories that bring these crafts to life and place them into contexts that outsiders can understand and appreciate.

Finally, all of the Bai craftspeople we met—regardless of their discipline—described a two-part sequence in which being recognized was based on assessment of mastery of canonical techniques, forms, and styles but that, having been recognized as masters, new freedom to innovate was available to them. We can see this across the group of Bai craftspeople, with Mrs. Zhao, Mr. Cun, and Mr. Shi providing particularly strong instances.

Critical heritage studies, particularly as practiced among western folklorists and ethnologists, tends to cast a doubtful eye on government-led ICH recognition and safeguarding activities, emphasizing unintended consequences, including tendencies to create new economic winners and losers, to inhibit innovation within vernacular culture, and to introduce metacultural frameworks that fundamentally alter, and sometimes harm grassroots culture and social relations (Bendix 2018; Foster and Gilman 2015; Hafstein 2018; Hafstein and Skrydstrup 2020; Noyes 2016, 337–409). Having dwelt on these real problems ourselves, we do not contest these concerns but we observe that they did not rise to prominence in our thinking when we were visiting with the talented Bai craftspeople of northwest Yunnan. As noted, we do see tendencies towards harmonization and formalization and it is not at all hard to imagine local social tensions arising from differential inclusion and exclusion from government ICH safeguarding initiatives. But it is hard to feel overly discouraged when one meets—as we have in Yunnan and elsewhere in Southwest China—craftspeople who all seem authentically happy, who are devoted to craft activities that are thriving, who have large numbers of appreciative students, whose work is valued in the marketplace, and whose families are clearly enjoying an enhanced quality of life as a result of ICH program participation.

In the contexts of the modern market economy and national ICH policy, those crafts considered within our survey are in different developmental states. Wood carving, tie-dyeing, pottery, and basketry, have always been more centrally used in people's everyday lives across the span of time from the past to today's society. They are more closely related to the daily life of ordinary people. But silver goods, because of their higher value, are rarely used in daily life, at least not as fully or as broadly within Bai society. The modest historical exceptions are women's decorative bracelets, necklaces and other personal items. The elaborate silver products central to the market and to the ICH system today can be said to be handicrafts for rich families and for outsiders. They are less closely related to the lives of ordinary people. While silverwork can be seen as distinct from the other genres in this way, the different material culture forms might also be seen as existing on a kind of continuum, with elaborate silverwork on one end and utility basketry on the other. While the forms can be considered in this way—from most to least elite, from most to least utilitarian, from most Bai-oriented to most outsider-oriented—we can also consider such positionalities within particular types or forms or genres. The different craft disciplines such as silverwork or basketry

or pottery contain within them both formal categories and individual works that can be positioned along such continuum. As we have learned elsewhere in the Southwest, different makers will also tend to specialize at particular points on such continuum, as when some Dong embroidery inheritors primarily produce masterworks for outside purchase and others produce works to be worn by local community members (Hertz 2021).

As in other parts of the world, ICH “safeguarding” in the Bai area is entwined with social and economic development initiatives. For the inheritance and development of intangible culture, the government advocates cultural industrialization to improve people’s income. Local people are often willing to take the development path of cultural industrialization, whether this depends on the dividends brought by rural and heritage-oriented tourism or the path of industrializing and commercializing local craft practices, both of which can increase the income of local people. However, the fact is that not all handicrafts can follow such a path, at least not to an equal degree. The craft products evoked in this survey are all for sale. They are not only consumer goods but they are mostly, or have mostly been, also necessities of local Bai life. In fact, in terms of daily use, the space for local use and purchase of these handicrafts is shrinking, meaning that some craftsmen cannot maintain their livelihoods. However, as a dividend of tourism development, some of these craft products are appreciated and thereby purchased by tourists and outside collectors. To a certain extent, tourism-based economic income exceeds the income obtained from the sales of local daily necessities. As noted above though, this transformation is varied across craft disciplines and forms, with basketry remaining the form (of those considered here) most embedded locally and least oriented towards purchase by outsiders.

Under government ICH safeguarding policies, the state has identified and inscribed both crafts (as ICH elements) and craftspeople (as ICH inheritors). This naming and its associated recognition endow them (both crafts and craftspeople) with various forms of cultural and social capital, which craftspeople are using in their lives and careers. Because inheritors are expected to be active in ongoing efforts (such as the promotion of their crafts in general, in training apprentices, and in being participants in their own continuing education), they tend to accrue further cultural and social capital as their careers as makers and as inheritors continue.

Brief survey work is, of course, better at identifying, as well as engaging with, those who are already well-known. Those who are happy—and who are not so economically constrained as to lack the time to give to the task—are certainly more likely to spend time talking to inquisitive outsiders and this openness is clearly amplified further in the context of craftspeople or artisans seeking both outsider-buyers and positive publicity for their work. These dynamics are all familiar in art and craft research contexts. A function of survey work in such circumstances is to orient and inform further work. We hope this report of our efforts serves this end. We close by highlighting a few potential pathways forward.

In-depth studies of particular crafts within particular Bai communities are certainly justified and would almost certainly produce rich understandings of both craft practices and their embeddedness in a constantly changing social and cultural surround. All of the craft practices that we encountered would warrant such studies, although silverwork in Xinhua has previously received monographic attention (Li 2009). Such study would allow for greater understanding of local contexts of education, creation, marketing and use as well as differentiation of levels of quality and the relationship

of this to internal and external uses and markets.<sup>15</sup> If suitably located, a community-based ethnography of craft could take into account the complex connections linking those who are included within, as well as those operating outside, the ICH system. Informed by our survey, Wuerxiya is presently preparing to undertake such study in a dissertation research context. Members of our project team also aspire to continue group work on basketry and on dress and related textile arts. For the wider field of Bai craft studies as a whole, we see two main ways that community-grounded ethnography could be pursued. In areas with larger, denser populations, a single craft could be examined in-depth, as with tie-dye at Zhoucheng (Wuerxiya's aspiration) or silverwork at Xinhua. Alternatively, in locations such as in and near Jinhua or Shaxi, for instance, it would be possible to study craft in a community across disciplines seeing how those that are celebrated and those that are not—including practical forms outside the scope of our survey—such as welding or utility furniture making—articulate with the rhythms and dynamics of local life.

The Bai region offers an excellent context for specialist study of ICH heritage policy as it is being put into practice in a region with a long history of cultural tourism. Even when multi-sited, as our survey was, such work would best be served by sustained research over an extended period of time. While our project benefitted from the strong language skills of bilingual and trilingual team members, in-depth, longer-term work would ideally be pursued by a smaller group of researchers with fluency in Mandarin and, ideally also, the Bai language. With those caveats in mind, we also observe that for English-language scholarship some knowledge of the region's arts—even if obtained quickly, under less than perfect conditions—has the capacity to positively contribute to literatures of value, for instance, to museum curators, comparative scholars, craft collectors and others with needs to contextualize or compare craft objects and to get at least a glimpse of their makers and communities of origin. We hope that further—more substantive and in-depth—research on Bai craft can be pursued in the years ahead and that existing scholarship in Chinese can also be translated into English. As noted above, Mrs. Zhao, like her Bai peers, wanted us to stress to our English readers that the crafts of her home region are “vibrant”. They certainly are and thus we are thankful to have been given a chance to gain a glimpse of them and to share that experience here.

## Acknowledgements

In connection with the specific research reported here, the authors are eager to thank all of the craftspeople and craft retailers who generously welcomed and instructed the larger research team. Deepest thanks as well go to the faculty and staff of the Institute for National Culture Research at Dali University for skillfully hosting a fruitful research collaboration. In addition to support provided by the Institute for National Culture Research, funding for the survey was provided by a grant awarded by the Henry Luce Foundation to the AFS in support of the larger China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project. That project is a joint endeavor of the AFS and the China Folklore Society. As plans for the survey project in Yunnan were developed, the research team was given crucial and expert support by Jessica Anderson Turner of the AFS and Surna of Minzu University of China. Finally the authors thank two generous and anonymous peer-reviewers as well as Michael Paul Jordan for his service in place of the *Museum Anthropology Review* editor in connection with the review and possible acceptance of this article.

## Contributor Roles

Jason Baird Jackson is the corresponding author for this paper. Drawing upon the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (cRediT), the following contributor statement is provided (Allen, O'Connell, and Kiermer 2019).

Wuerxiya: Data Curation, Investigation, Writing-Original Draft, Writing-Review and Editing, Project Administration. Jason Baird Jackson: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing-Original Draft, Writing-Review and Editing. C. Kurt Dewhurst: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing-Review and Editing. Zhang Cuixia: Investigation, Writing-Original Draft, Writing-Review and Editing. The co-authors together assume responsibility for this article. Not responsible for defects in the article, but central to the research reported, are the other members of the research team. Cun Yunji: Project Administration. Yin Qun: Project Administration. Li Xuelong: Investigation, Project Administration. Li Taohong: Investigation. Carrie Hertz: Investigation. Marsha MacDowell: Investigation. Jon Kay: Investigation. Sarah Hatcher: Investigation. Zhang Lijun: Project Administration.

## Notes

1. Happily, this paper appears as part of a collection in honor of Daniel C. Swan, a museum ethnologist who is closely associated with long-term fieldwork undertaken collaboratively with specific communities—most prominently with citizens of the Osage Nation (Swan and Cooley 2019; Swan and Jordan 2017). We celebrate him and the kind of in-depth work that he has modeled, but in connection with this paper we also note the importance that survey research and survey-based museum collecting also played in his work. Numerous examples can be found across his *oeuvre*, but a prominent example is the work that he and leaders of the Native American Church of undertook together to document the expressive life of the church on the Great Plains, in Navajoland, and across North America (Swan 1999, 2008, 2010, 2016).
2. Professor Cun Yunji, Director of the Institute for National Culture Research at Dali University, hosted the project team with arrangements skillfully made by Professor Yin Qun, who serves as the Institute's Secretary. The investigation team was comprised of Li Xuelong and Li Taohong of the Institute of National Culture Research, Zhang Cuixia then associated with the Dianxi Development Research Center, Yunnan University, Carrie Hertz, Curator of Textiles and Dress at the Museum of International Folk Art, Marsha MacDowell, Curator of Folk Art at the Michigan State University Museum, C. Kurt Dewhurst, Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Michigan State University Museum, Jon Kay, then-Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the MMWC, Wuerxiya, who was then a graduate assistant at the MMWC, Sarah Hatcher, then Head of Programs and Education at the MMWC, and Jason Baird Jackson, who was then Director of the MMWC. In fall 2019 the former Mathers Museum of World Cultures was incorporated into a new museum at Indiana University, the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (IUMAA). Jackson, Kay, and Wuerxiya are not involved in the new museum and their primary affiliation is the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, also at Indiana University. Hatcher is on the staff of the IUMAA. Not participating in the survey project described here, but central to the larger effort of which it is a part is Zhang Lijun, Assistant Professor of Folklore at George Mason University. Throughout this article, the names of first-language English speakers from the United States are given in

conventional personal name first, family name second order. The names of Chinese individuals are given, in conventional Chinese style, with family name listed first.

3. After touring to four venues in the United States (the three US partner museums plus the International Quilt Museum at the University of Nebraska), the exhibition moved to China where it has been presented at four museums in Southwest China. In China the exhibition was retitled *Quilting Arts and Tradition: People, Handicrafts, and Community Life*. Zhang Lijun and Marsha MacDowell led the exhibition and catalogue project as co-curators (Jackson 2022; Jackson, Zhang, and Wuerxiya 2021; Zhang and MacDowell 2016).
4. Liang Yongjia (2010) evokes the various lines of discussion on this question in relation to the Bai people of the Dali area. The broader contexts of the ethnic classification project in Yunnan are treated by Thomas S. Mullaney (2010).
5. The nature of the ICH system as it relates to both craft genres and individual craftspeople is a topic touched upon throughout this paper. In response to the interests of a generous peer reviewer, we note that ICH status is bestowed upon individual craftspeople by relevant government departments. The departments involved relate to the levels of Chinese governance, but at every level, ICH activity follows from national policy priorities. For Dali, in descending order, is the top national level (all-China), then the provincial level (Yunnan), to the (Dali) autonomous prefecture level, and then the municipal (Dali City) (=county) level. These levels are more than just administrative divisions, they convey connotations of relatively greater or lesser prominence and recognition for heritage crafts and craftspeople, with the status of national ICH inheritor carrying the greatest status. Craft genres formally inscribed as ICH at these various levels will be targeted with different levels of funding for ICH preservation and promotion work. For inheritors, the levels correspond to different levels of support. The higher the level, the higher the corresponding funding and subsidies, but often also the greater the associated obligations. While led by government bureaus, academics (particularly folklorists, ethnologists, and arts educators) and local people participate actively in ICH deliberations, which often include research investigations and demonstration activities. Craftspeople are generally very proud to be named to inheritor status and communities often benefit more generally from the development of social and cultural capital that follows from both having a locally important craft or a local craftspeople so-recognized.
6. Our meeting with Shi Jiashun and our tour of his workshop took place on May 24, 2019. We also briefly met a second Jinchuan County Bai woodcarver, county-level inheritor Mr. Li Shixian (b. 1953) in the woodcarving training studio on the Dali University campus on May 23, 2019. That studio, inside the National Art Gallery of Dali University is one of a set of workshops established in 2016 as a “teaching and creation base” by the China Central Academy of Fine Arts.
7. Our visit to the Dong Yuechang Black Pottery took place on May 24, 2019.
8. Our meeting with Zhao Huaizhu took place on May 24, 2019. Her work training apprentices was profiled by Dong (2017). A second Jianchuan County buzha artist was profiled by Wu (2013).
9. Our visit with Cun Guangwei took place on May 25, 2019.
10. Our visit to the Puzhen workshop took place on May 26, 2019. For three American members of the team (Dewhurst, Jackson, and MacDowell), this was a return visit. They had visited previously on December 11, 2013 during a brief tour of the Dali area hosted by the Yunnan Nationalities Museum that was led by our project collaborators Xie Mohua and Du Yunhong.
11. Our meeting with Wang Zhuyuan and his family took place on May 26, 2019. We met with Zhao Renbiao on May 27, 2019. This was a second encounter with Mr. Zhao, as Dewhurst, Jackson, and MacDowell had met him for just a few passing moments

while visiting Shuanglang on December 11, 2013. Regarding the sale of basketry in the region, the team held discussions with two basket sellers, once in a roadside market near Xizhou on May 24, 2019 and once with a basketry shop owner in Shanxi on May 25, 2019. Baskets were obtained for the collections of the then-MMWC and for the Michigan State University Museum from Mr. Wang and from these two basket sellers. The interviews with basket makers and basket sellers in Yunnan mentioned here will be drawn upon in a region-wide study of basketry now in preparation.

12. Our visit to Qingdong village, where we witnessed parts of the Rao San Ling festival, including its very extensive market, took place on May 27, 2019. Li Taohong led our visit to the festival and team member (and co-author here) Zhang Cuixia made special efforts to help us understand this festival, which figures prominently in her research studies as a Bai ethnologist.

13. Here we are evoking a model central to work on material culture in American folklore studies. As articulated by Henry Glassie and extended by Pravina Shukla, this framework attends to the “sequential contexts” of “creation, communication, and consumption” that reveal the life history of objects (Shukla 2008, 386–87; Glassie 1999, 41–86).

14. In the layered Chinese system of inheritor recognition in service of ICH safeguarding, higher levels of recognition are associated with greater levels of support as well as greater levels of obligation to participate in such activities as apprentice or student training and regional development and promotion activities.

15. Similar considerations of community variation and internal differentiation have been examined by our project collaborator Carrie Hertz in connection with textile arts among the Dong and Baiku Yao in northern Guangxi (2021).

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