

BOOK REVIEWS

RAUTIO, SUVI. *The Invention of Tradition in China: Story of a Village and a Nation Remade*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2024. 267 pp. ISBN: 978-981-97-3838-0 (cloth); ISBN: 981-97-3838-5 (paperback); ISBN: 978-981-97-3839-7 (E-book).

Scholarly works have increasingly demonstrated how Indigenous communities around the world contest Global Heritage Projects situated within the landscapes they have historically managed and inhabited. While states pursue the conservation of natural and cultural heritage sites designated as holding outstanding universal value and recognised by UNESCO, local populations often resist these efforts, particularly when such projects threaten their lives and livelihoods. A critical question, then, is how to study the implementation of these heritage preservation projects when they become a top-down industry aimed at attracting tourism. Dr. Suvi Rautio's remarkable book addresses this complex issue through an exceptional self-reflexive ethnography set in contemporary China. This compelling ethnography examines how cultural heritage and traditional culture mobilise to serve the economic and political imperatives of capitalism in the post-Mao reform era in China. As part of the broader heritage industry, specific places are selected, reconfigured, and marketed for their distinctive cultural features, crafting a profitable image of cultural branding.

Rautio's ethnographic fieldwork (2015–2017) was conducted in a village located in a county considered 'poverty-stricken' in Guizhou, one of China's most ethnically diverse, yet economically underdeveloped provinces. The village, which Rautio calls 'Meili', was designated a 'Traditional Village' under China's nationally protected heritage site in 2012 and later included on UNESCO's World Heritage

Convention tentative list as part of the 'Dong Village' initiative. Drawing upon Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) seminal work on the invention of tradition, this book illustrates how traditions are constructed in the name of preservation—branding peoples and places with the goal of developing tourism, creating jobs, and alleviating poverty.

In her book, Rautio reveals how long-distance rural-to-urban migration, encouraged by the Deng Xiaoping government after Maoist rule post-1976, left many rural areas of China depopulated. More recently, under Xi Jinping's leadership (from 2012 onward), rural tourism and e-commerce have been promoted to attract rural citizens back to and in an effort to revitalise the countryside, mirroring similar efforts such as India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The author explores how the government's heritage-building efforts attempted to reshape rural lives and livelihoods, unpacking the reasons behind migrants' returns to their natal villages.

Applying Strathern's (1999, 2004) approach to scale, Rautio investigates how a village is remade into a heritage site in complex and multiple ways through various institutional and discursive processes. She analyses in great detail whose versions of a village are privileged and how various state institutions, experts, and villagers negotiate these competing narratives to facilitate the heritage-making process. In doing so, this book provides an in-depth examination of the broader social and economic structures

underpinning the heritage industry in ethnic China, showing how both the built and natural environments in a village are transformed by actors operating at multiple spatial and perspectival scales. The ethnography begins by situating readers within the lived experiences of Meili's inhabitants, highlighting how kinship and lineage continue to shape the village's organisational structure. Notably, many of the villagers in this ethnography express a distrust of or aversion to those involved in heritage preservation efforts, perceiving them as external threats to their daily lives.

Nevertheless, the everyday lives of local people are increasingly governed by governmental technologies—surveys, maps, and regulations—implemented under the cultural heritage preservation project known as the 'Chinese Traditional Village' programme. This governance mechanism produces a growing divide between the technocratic vision of heritage experts and the lived spaces of the local communities, raising critical questions: Does this divide restrict villagers' access to homes and livelihoods? Are the villagers included meaningfully in decision-making processes? Can the villagers shape their own futures within this heritage-building project? Navigating the life history trajectories of three rural returnees from urban areas, Rautio demonstrates that state-led rural revitalisation heritage programmes hardly attend to the precarious lives of rural migrants. Echoing Chio's (2014) work, which shows that project plans activate villagers to construct new subjectivities, Rautio describes how heritage projects compel villagers to reimagine themselves in new roles. She illustrates how multiple conceptions of the 'Traditional Village' coexist and often conflict with one another, revealing that heritage projects cannot account for all material realities—instead, they inevitably prioritise certain interests over others.

The enterprising and self-reliant image of rural male returnees is celebrated in the local discourse of the village, casting them as role models for the village youth. However, Rautio also raises some concerns in her ethnography: Does their drive toward entrepreneurial self-reliance trap rural youth in cycles of debt and exploitative labour? Rautio argues convincingly that these male rural returnees, whilst affected by global market forces, draw upon masculinity as a crucial element to exhibit self-reliance.

By contrast, the chapter on women's work reveals how textiles and handicrafts are commodified through an intangible cultural heritage programme, transforming women's voluntary labour into commodities for consumption and state-regulated economic activities. While the book powerfully argues that women lose agency, which they exercised through the continuation of ethnic beliefs and rituals in the process, it leaves readers curious: Why are these women not acquiring any new kind of agency within these heritage preservation regimes? Could their participation, resistance, or negotiation be shaping the marketisation of crafts and textiles in subtle ways?

Rautio's ethnography paints a vivid picture of the village economy and its social fabric. She shows how the social cohesion of a village community disintegrates under competitive rivalry, fuelled by what she terms the 'brutal structures of China's political economy'. Using gender as a lens, here she reveals how women become the symbolic bearers of the Dong tradition or Indigenous culture, while men dominate public roles and wield cultural and political authority. This results in men mediating, negotiating, and defining tradition—particularly in the selection of choir members where criteria such as kinship and age reinforce patriarchal power. The book's exploration of internal village hierarchies prompts further questions:

Do women resist this control? If so, how—overtly or through more subtle forms? Going beyond the dichotomy between dominance and subordination, Rautio engages with internal conflicts among the Meili inhabitants and explores how places can be explained using their own hierarchies.

This book's strength lies in its multi-scalar, perspectival analysis. The Meili village is interpreted differently depending on the institutional, cultural, and political vantage points assumed. Each scale constructs a hegemonic version of the village, producing competing totalities. From one angle, Meili takes the shape of a cohesive 'traditional' village; from another, it is a fragmented site of contested modernity. The central argument of this book—that the village is continuously being remade—powerfully echoes throughout the narrative.

Like many nations, China promotes a statist interpretation of tradition. While traditions are passed down based on local beliefs and modern practicalities, state-promoted heritage industries select tradition based on architectural artifacts and ethnic performances. Rautio highlights how this curated version of culture leads to tensions between state officials, local elites, and ordinary villagers. In doing so, she argues that the heritage industry transforms villages into arenas of competitive rivalry. By weaving together issues of ethnicity, gender, contemporary socioeconomic transformations, and cultural politics, this book convincingly demonstrates that China's villages are not static. Rather, they are dynamic spaces, constantly shaped by multiple layers of negotiations. Against a top-down narrative of heritage, villagers assert bottom-up claims to place, grounded in their lived realities.

Rautio's creative use of the notion of invention underscores how heritage is strategically mobilised to serve the political

and economic ends of power structures. Yet, a critical question remains unanswered: Has capital been extracted from villages by China's capitalist class or elite investors, leaving micro-farmers resource-poor and dependent on urban migration? Or has capital been redirected to rural areas in order to fulfil Chinese leaders' promises of prosperity and revitalisation? The answers to these questions are crucial to understanding the actual beneficiaries of China's rural revitalisation and heritage preservation projects.

In conclusion, Rautio's book offers a profound exploration of how heritage preservation becomes both a capitalist enterprise and a nationalist project. It also raises important avenues for future research: How might women reshape the heritage preservation industry through participation or resistance? And, how is kinship being restructured amid economic and social transformation? Ultimately, this wonderful ethnography serves as a compelling account of the making and remaking of tradition—and the contested futures of rural China.

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