

“I WILL STITCH IT BACK AND PASS IT DOWN”:  
 A BAI ELDER MAKES AND TEACHES *BUZHA*\*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how traditional arts impact the lives of older adults, especially those recognized as inheritors of an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Through the work of elder Bai artist Mrs Zhao Huaizhu, I consider how traditional handcrafts and cultural knowledge enhance elder wellbeing and foster intergenerational connections. Mrs Zhao is a master of *buzha*, a traditional Bai art form where embroidered silk items are filled with wormwood and other aromatic herbs. Recognized as an ICH inheritor, Mrs Zhao invests her silk creations with Bai folklore,

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local history, and personal narratives. She uses her creations to convey cultural values and impart her individual identity. Engaging in this expressive practice not only gives Mrs Zhao's life purpose and meaning, but also allows her to contribute to the economic and cultural vitality of her Bai community. This case study underscores the reciprocal relationship between ICH practices and the elders who practice them. Blending folklore methods with gerontological perspectives, the essay makes clear that traditional arts and cultural performances can work to support the quality of life of older adults. While elder artisans may be vital for sustaining traditional knowledge and practices, active participation in these cultural productions also enhance their emotional, psychological, physical, and social wellbeing, which is seldom a consideration in scholarly and governmental conversations about the value of 'heritage' conservation efforts.

KEYWORDS: elderhood • life review • folk art • generativity • identity • Intangible Cultural Heritage • Bai

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars often point to a craft's history, an art form's inherent beauty, or a tradition's commercial viability when arguing for the preservation of folk arts in contemporary life (Becker 1978; Douglas 2007). While these can be important considerations, traditional crafts and community-based artmaking also work to support human wellbeing, especially in the lives of older adults. I maintain that many traditional practices often serve as accessible cultural routines and aesthetic forms that help elders to thrive in later life (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1983; Kay 2018: 6–7). Folklorists have long observed that traditional arts learned in one's youth can resurface and flower in later life (Jabbour 1981; Barrett 1985; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al. 2006: 33–34). These meaningful practices may fill the hours when an elder is alone; communicate deeply held values and aesthetics; connect them socially to family, friends, and neighbors; and allow them to experience a sense of mastery and purpose in later life. In May 2019, I was part of a team of museum-based folklorists conducting fieldwork in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China, that was documenting Bai arts and crafts as part of the China-US Folklore and Intangible



Photo 1. Zhao Huaizhu in her home studio holding a pair of child shoes that she made. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. A display of her buzha creations is artfully exhibited behind her. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, May 24, 2019.

Cultural Heritage Project, a joint research initiative of the American Folklore Society (Meiguo minsu xuehui) and the China Folklore Society (Zhongguo minsu xuehui) (Jackson 2023). Known for their rich textile traditions, the Bai are a large Tibeto-Burman-speaking nationality, who primarily live in western Yunnan Province. During our brief fieldwork trip there, Li Xuelong from Dali University introduced our ethnographic team to a distinguished group of Bai silversmiths, basket makers, woodcarvers, and tie-dye artists (Jackson 2023: 54, 57; Wuexiya et al. 2022).<sup>1</sup> One special artist to whom he connected our group was Zhao Huaizhu, a craftswoman in her mid-seventies who practiced a distinctive Bai handicraft (Photo 1). I quickly recognized elements in the elder's artmaking were like the works of some older adults in the United States (Kay 2016a; 2020). As I listened to Mrs Zhao share the stories told through her creations, I realized that her work provides an informative example of how traditional crafts may benefit older adults in Southwest China. I should note that I am not a specialist in the study of Chinese folklore and folk art; in recent years, however, I have focused my research on the important role that traditional arts can play in the lives of older adults. In this essay, I emphasize the vital work that heritage projects and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) designations can play in the lives of older adults, how traditional handicrafts



Photo 2. Four buzha pig figures made by made by Zhao Huaizhu. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.

and cultural practices support elder wellbeing and how generativity and the transmission of traditional knowledge, skill, and wisdom foster intergenerational connections. Mrs Zhao makes *buzha*, decorative silk items embroidered with auspicious patterns and stuffed with wormwood and other aromatic spices (Photo 2). *Buzha* holds great cultural

significance in her Bai community. In 2009, this distinctive art form was formally recognized as an ICH practice in Southwest China's Yunnan Province (Xinhua 2020a). A provincial-level ICH inheritor of this Bai art form, Mrs Zhao lives in Jinhua (Jianchuan Old Town) in Jianchuan County in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. While China identifies the practice of making *buzha* as an important Bai tradition, for Mrs Zhao it has also developed into a meaningful personal pursuit (Wuerxiya et al. 2022: 164–165). Now in later life, the craft that she learned in her youth gives her life purpose. By serving as a recognized master in her art form and teaching younger Bai women to make this distinctive craft, the elder experiences what gerontologist call “vital involvement”, which is where older adults feel that they are an “integral part of the social fabric” of their community (Erikson et al. 1986: 296).<sup>2</sup>

While other local women sew *buzha*, Mrs Zhao has emerged as a significant traditional artist and cultural teacher in her community. Long valued by the Bai in Jianchuan County, this esteemed form of embroidery is commonly used to make pendants to hang around a child's chest or to place in a house to attract good luck, ward off evil, and bless a home (Photo 3). Throughout the year, Bai artisans also use *buzha* to craft *gongzi*, the colorful hats worn by children at the Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese New Year, and Children's Day (Photo 4) (Fitzgerald 1941: 66). The making and wearing of *buzha* signals Bai identity and communicates important cultural values, ideas, and histories (Xinhua 2020b).



Photo 3. Zhao Huaizhu sorts through *buzha* pendants that she makes for area festivals and to sell to museums and galleries. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, May 24, 2019.



Photo 4. Zhao Huaizhu standing in front of her *buzha* display holding a display of figures dressed in traditional Bai clothing that she made. Gongzi or children's festival hats are on the top shelf. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. A display of her *buzha* creations is artfully exhibited behind her. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.

#### THE ARTIST

Around the age of eleven or twelve, Mrs Zhao learned to sew traditional clothes and make *buzha* from her mother. Once grown, she worked cutting hair but made *buzha* as a leisure activity during her off hours in the morning and evening. It was not until she was about thirty that she began making *buzha* products to sell locally at festivals. She made hats, shoes, and talismans, to sell to festivalgoers. After having raised her family and retiring from a career of cutting hair, the handicraft that was once a pastime practice and a supplemental source of income blossomed into a life-defining activity.

Using colorful silk fabric and thread, Mrs Zhao stitches her *buzha* together by hand and then fills each piece with her unique blend of wormwood and Chinese herbs (Photo 5). The fragrant mixture works to repel both insects and evil spirits, but also gives a three-dimensional shape to her silken forms. While she has used the same aromatic recipe for over forty years, she has created several new forms and patterns that reflect her mastery of this traditional art. Like her mixture of fragrant herbs, Mrs Zhao blends traditional elements with her personal narratives and creative vision to produce new works that are both traditional and innovative. Her creations are often as much an expression of her individual experience and life history as an artful articulation of Bai aesthetics and cultural heritage (Photo 6). Informed by traditional designs and tech-



Photo 5. Tray with Zhao Huaizhu's mixture of wormwood and other aromatic herbs, with other *buzha* making items. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, May 24, 2019.

niques, these new works are artful additions to her already expansive understanding of this Bai handicraft.

While *buzha* pendants and clothing items such as children's shoes and hats, often decorated with animals of the Zodiac, are important traditional forms, it is Mrs Zhao's *buzha* figures and dioramas that stand out in her home gallery (Photos 7 and 8). Below the prestigious plaques presented to her in honor of her cultural work and as marks of her status as an ICH inheritor are shelf-like display boxes that house personally and culturally significant pieces of her work. The traditional children's hats are at the top, but throughout her display, she exhibits several crowing *buzha* roosters that she has made (Photos 4 and 9), locally recognized as a kind of 'traditional mascot for the Bai people'. She explains, "The rooster refers to the Bai people." With its bright red comb or crown, the rooster promotes Bai culture, raising awareness of their traditions to a "higher status... the rooster crows thousands of miles" (FM 2019). Like the rooster, Mrs Zhao serves as a cultural ambassador for her community. She makes pieces not just for local use, but also to exhibit and share with museums far beyond Jianchuan County, such as the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi, and Minzu Museum of Ethnic Cultures in Beijing, and the Yunnan Provincial Museum in Kunming.



*Photo 6. A buzha figure of a boy playing a flute sitting on the back of a bull made by Zhao Huaizhu. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.*



*Photo 7. Children's shoes made by Zhao Huaizhu that are embroidered with the animals of the Chinese zodiac. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.*



Photo 8. A buzha dragon made by Zhao Huaizhu in the style of the Chinese zodiac. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, May 24, 2019.



Photo 9. A section of Zhao Huaizhu's display showing roosters, hens, and chicks above figures of a boy reading on the back of a bull, a man plowing, and a man carrying firewood below. Bottom left also includes part of Mrs Zhao's Caravan scene. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, May 24, 2019.



Below the traditional hats and roosters on display are shelves that contain mounted scenes and figures made by Mrs Zhao. She uses these evocative creations to interpret and share aspects of Chinese culture, Bai folkways, as well as her personal memories (Photo 10). Through these special pieces, Mrs Zhao gives form to the folklore and culture of the Bai people in Jianchuan County. From the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac to examples of traditional dress and costumes, her *buzha* works reflect the traditional lifeways once common among the Bai, which she recognizes are now changing. Concerned that some aspects of Bai traditional knowledge are disappearing, she is using her craft to teach and revive this knowledge for a new generation. She explains, "I will stitch it back and pass it down. It is gone now, and I am going to bring it back." (FM 2019) Mrs Zhao is an active tradition bearer, using her craft to repair what she perceives as a rupture in the transmission of traditional knowledge and cultural identity (von Sydow 1948: 12–13). This role as both maker and mentor allows her to feel a sense of mastery and purpose in later life.



Photo 10. Zhao Huaizhu's *buzha* figures of a Bai woman grinding grain and a man carrying water using a pole. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, May 24, 2019.

What may appear to be an assortment of traditional forms and aesthetic motifs is also a carefully curated collection of local folklore. Many of her pieces assist in recalling and interpreting traditional stories, fables, or proverbs. When teaching her craft, she not only shows the techniques of making *buzha* items, but also imparts the stories, Bai

wisdom, and values associated with them. Just as she curates the material objects, she has specific messages and meanings she wants to convey. For example, she asks her students, “Why does the cow want to plow? Because heaven sent it down to wash its face three times a day and to eat once.” This story is used to teach young children to wash their faces and eat three meals a day. That is, a child should wash their face as a cow does, but they should not graze like a cow, but rather eat during the three meal-times. She explains that when she was growing up, each animal motif had its own story associated with it like this one. (FM 2019) While many may think of her *buzha* creations as colorful dolls or cute figures, she recognizes that the deeper meaning behind her creations can be easily missed, which is why she is actively teaching her students not just the techniques of the craft, but also the stories and values behind her *buzha* forms.

Among the first pieces that she showed us as we entered her home-studio were four *buzha* scenes of traditional activities that are commonly associated with ancient times: plowing the field, fishing, cutting firewood, and reading (Photo 9). The display communicates the values of Chinese culture and celebrates the heritage of the region. While the set communicates traditional ways, she tells a narrative about one of the figures that is rooted in more recent memory. She says, “This is a real story in Jianchuan County” (FM 2019). Pointing to her display of a child reading on the back of a bull (Photo 9), Mrs Zhao then told us the story of a boy whose mother died and whose father left to pursue an education, leaving the boy to care for his younger brother and sister. She explains,

He only graduated from the third grade of primary school, then was sent to herd cattle with a work team. While herding the cattle, he studied hard. Finally, he was admitted to the university in 1977, when China resumed the college entrance examination. That is why we say, “Even cowboys can go to college.” (FM 2019)

Her creation and its story reference the historic National College Entrance Examination of 1977, which was the first entrance exam after the Cultural Revolution, when more than five million people took the exam after a ten-year hiatus of the test. Less than five percent were admitted to the academy that year (Wei 2008). Mrs Zhao’s narrative tells an important story of hard work and achievement by a Bai youth. Her set of four scenes creates a context where she can explain Bai culture, and champion the accomplishments of that studious ‘cowboy’ and her people. These are not just examples of handicrafts, but her creations have a profound narrative component. Through making and displaying her silk statues and scenes, Mrs Zhao has created a context where she can speak about her community’s values and its commitment to education. Each piece calls upon the elder to share a story and impart her knowledge. Not only an accomplished *buzha* artist, Mrs Zhao is also a talented storyteller and mentor, who narrates stories from local history and her remembered life.

A prominent piece displayed in her studio depicts a man in a fur hat leading a convoy of horses across the mountains (Photo 11). In 1966, Mrs Zhao spent six months working at the Tiger Leaping Gorge, where she cut hair for the workers who were building the road through the mountains. While there, she saw several Tibetan caravans with teams of pack horses carrying tea and salt between Dali and Tibet, with travelers playing drums and gongs. Mrs Zhao was intrigued by their dress and the scene formed a meaningful mental image that she often recalled. While she had the idea to

create a miniature caravan out of *buzha* back then, she lacked the materials needed to make it at the time. Fifty years later, in 2016, she made her diorama. The making of this recalled scene is a kind of material life-review (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989; Kay 2016a; 2016b). From miniature houses and walking sticks to paintings and displays, I have worked with elders in the United States who make pieces that recall scenes and share stories about people, places, and experiences. Like Mrs Zhao's diorama of pack horses along the ancient tea horse road, these creations are not just craft projects, but narrative devices that facilitate the recalling and sharing of stories and cultural information that is meaningful to an elder. Mrs Zhao's artistry is only fully complete when she tells the story of the *buzha* scenes and figures that she makes and displays. Each piece calls upon the elder to narrate them when visitors stand in their presence. In writing about similar creations by older adults, the authors of *The Grand Generation* note that life-story objects are "in and of themselves incomplete. They are all frequently brought to life through narrative, the focal points of a vital interchange between artist and witnesses." (Huford et al. 1987: 42) Mrs Zhao's display of the Tibetan caravan creates a context where the elder talks of her career and travels beyond Jianchuan County; her story deepens her audience's appreciation and understanding of her art and her life.



Photo 11. Zhao Huaizhu's remembered scene of the Tibetan caravan from the Leaping Tiger Gorge that she made with *buzha*. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.

As noted, her narrative pieces are more than just visual props for stories or artful illustrations of cultural practices, through them she has crafted a dynamic system for recalling, making, and communicating ideas and memories. Conceiving and design-

ing, sewing and embroidering, as well as exhibiting and narrating her art contribute to the elder's wellbeing. In recalling and focusing on this story, the elder is engaged in a material form of "life review." Before Robert Butler's 1963 thought-changing article "The Life Review" many gerontologists believed that the habitual reminiscence often associated with later life was an emotional and/or cognitive disorder that afflicted many older adults. Butler (ibid.: 66–67), however, argued that reviewing one's life is a "naturally occurring, universal mental process." He contended that the reflective practice was beneficial, in that it assisted elders in recalling, reorganizing, and even revising one's understanding of their life experiences. He wrote,

As the past marches in review, it is surveyed, observed and reflected upon by the ego. Reconsideration of previous experiences and their meanings occurs, often with concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganization of past experiences may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meaning to one's life; it may also prepare one for death mitigating one's fears. (Ibid.: 68)

Building upon Butler's perspective, gerontologists now recognize that recalling memories and sharing life stories helps many elders forge new meaning out of old knowledge. Not only is the regular recalling of life events a natural process, the recollection, consideration, and sharing of folklore (traditional knowledge, stories, proverbs, songs, sayings, etc.) also is a naturally occurring human process, where elders make sense of the ideas, values, and practices that were instilled or taught to them in their youth. In fact, these are not separate processes, Mrs Zhao easily shifts from talking about cultural knowledge to sharing stories. As she exemplifies, this consideration of both personal memories, local stories, and traditional knowledge is sometimes manifested through contemplating, making, displaying, and sharing material objects like those in Mrs Zhao's diorama (Barrett 1985: 39, 45).

An example of the convergence of cultural knowledge and personal memories through narrating her creations was when Mrs Zhao showed our ethnographic team a mounted display featuring four small figures dressed in the traditional Bai clothing of her youth (Photo 12). She explained that she uses them to teach younger generations about how the Bai dressed in earlier times. However, through them she makes clear the cultural changes she has witnessed throughout her life. She describes that in her youth in Jianchuan County, Dong Shan or local men traditionally wore a white shirt with a white sash, a black coat, and loose dark shorts. She says, "It used to look like this, but now it's all changed" (FM 2019). Then she showed us how women traditionally dressed, pointing to each as she described them: married, unmarried, and then an unmarried woman with a rabbit fur hat. Each of her female figures are wearing layers of white, black, red, and blue clothes with a sleeveless shirt overtop. When asked why she made it, she explained, "This is our traditional Bai costume, but it is not like this anymore" (FM 2019). Like many of the older adults with whom I have worked, the objects they create often are documentary efforts to record how things used to be, but also to create a narrative opportunity, a context, where they can discuss how local life has changed over time (Cashman 2006). These are not just illustrations of cultural history, but her handmade figures and scenes that create opportunities for the elder to share personal memories and express personal values and cultural identity. Pointing to one of the figures of a Bai woman, she explains, "My grandmother was like this, look

at the tiny feet, golden lotuses" (FM 2019). When Mrs Zhao says, "golden lotuses," she is referring to the smallest form of bound feet, which was a common and culturally desirable practice when her grandmother was young (Greenhalgh 1977: 8). The small feet in Mrs Zhao's figure are subtle; it is only when she is narrating her creation that she invokes the old practice and her family connection to it. Through creations like this, Mrs Zhao demonstrates that she is not just a master *buzha* artist, but a keeper of traditional knowledge and history. Her creations communicate older ways of life, both as local history and personal memory. Because her handmade items are physical depictions of stories that are displayed in the material world, by design they enlist the maker to narrate them, allowing her to demonstrate and disseminate her cultural knowledge.



Photo 12. Display made by Zhao Huaizhu showing the traditional Bai clothing and adornment of her youth. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.

## TWO PROVERBS ON AGING

Two *buzha* pieces made by Mrs Zhao visually convey traditional Chinese proverbs that center on the topic of aging, or more specifically intergenerational responsibilities and reciprocity. The first piece shows an old crow in a nest being fed by a younger crow (Photo 13). Mrs Zhao explains that the baby crow is now mature, and the elder crow has grown old. She has lost her feathers and is no longer able to fly to find food. So, the young crow returns home to feed her parent – to feed the old crow and support her parent. (FM 2019)



Photo 13. A *buzha* figure made by Zhao Huaizhu of an old crow in its nest. This piece corresponds to a traditional Bai proverb she shares. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, May 24, 2019.

As Mrs Zhao recites and explains the proverb, the lesson and importance of this piece comes into focus. She stresses, “We are raised by our parents, and there will be a day when our parents are old that we will need to take care of them” (FM 2019). While multigenerational living remains common in her Bai community, Mrs Zhao’s intergenerational reminder that elders caring for the young and the young are expected to care for their elders seems especially timely. China, like much of the world, is facing a major demographic change, where the age of the general population is sharply increasing. According to World Health Organization data, while the average life expectancy in China was only 44.6 in 1950, today it has increased to 77.4. While longer life expectancies have grown, so has the percentage of older adults, per capita. (WHO 2015: 1) China’s One Child Policy, a governmental mandate between 1980 and 2016 that limited families in China to one child, has amplified the burden that younger generations now face. Folklorist Juwen Zhang (2022: 126) has written about Chinese proverbs

and aging and how the one-child policy and other forces are changing how people think about aging in China. He notes that notions of elderhood, that is the “traditional sense of old age” (ibid.) is giving way to a modern more legal understanding of aging practices which includes retirement. In this time of great social, cultural, economic, and demographic change, generational roles and intergenerational expectations are becoming more strained and past practices are up for reconsideration (Davis 2014; Silver and Huang 2022).

Sociologists recognize what is commonly called China’s “4-2-1 Problem,” which is the burden grown children from single-child families face, where one child is expected to care for two parents and four grandparents (Mu 2007; Davis 2014). Mrs Zhao did not mention the 4-2-1 phenomenon when she shared the display, she did not have to. Instead, she presented the piece as a “moral lesson” that she wants to impart to younger Bai. Her creation visually stresses that children need to “take care of their parents.” (FM 2019)

Alongside her Old Crow figure, Mrs Zhao’s second proverbial piece carries a similar message to respect and honor elders. The *buzha* scene shows two lambs kneeling to suckle (Photo 14). As a lamb grows, it must kneel to continue to nurse its mother. Our collaborator Li Xuelong interpreted the piece to us this way, “This means that lambs drink milk by kneeling to express their thanks for the mother’s milk. That is, children

should learn to be grateful from an early age.” Mrs Zhao described both pieces as “moral education.” (FM 2019) Together, they communicate the message that not only does a parent care for their children, but children are expected to someday care for, support, and respect their parents. Moreover, just as the lamb kneels, children should be thankful for what they received from their elders, which may include cultural knowledge and training. These ‘moral lessons’ of intergenerational care and appreciation stand out in the artist’s showroom display. Nevertheless, as an ICH inheritor, Mrs Zhao is still demonstrating care for younger generations, she is actively teaching and educating younger women in her community, conveying to them the knowledge and skill needed to support themselves and their families, but also to carry Bai culture into the future.



Photo 14. A *buzha* scene made by Zhao Huaizhu showing a mother mountain sheep nursing two lambs that is associated with a traditional Bai proverb. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.

The two pieces based on Bai proverbs worked to engage and teach younger generations about traditional patterns of elder care and the responsibility that younger Bai owe their parents and grandparents. These pieces call for a form of generational reciprocity, foregrounding the mutual obligations between generations. While the physical care and wellbeing of an elder is explicit, implied are obligations. Just as Mrs Zhao now devotes her time to teaching younger women in her community to make *buzha*, someday, when the younger women are old, they too will be called upon to teach the Bai handicraft to the next generation. Generational reciprocity flows through a master artist to their students and younger peers, with an expectation that someone will teach the generations of the future. Mrs Zhao is engaged in a form of cultural revitalization. She is not

just reviving the practice for her own use, but revitalizing it, bringing it back for her Bai community.

In 2006, the County Women's Federation asked Mrs Zhao to teach *buzha* to local women to alleviate poverty in the county. Since that time, she has led dozens of workshops to teach the art and business of *buzha* to younger Bai women (JCC 2018). At an age when many other elders retire, the master *buzha* artist busies herself in both making and teaching. This special kind of mentorship is what gerontologists commonly refer to as "generativity" which is the caring for and guiding of future generations. Erik Erikson (1950: 267; Erikson et al. 1986: 73–74) noted that this intergenerational concern is critical for elder wellbeing, and in fact is a vital part of the human life cycle, particularly for older adults. Many elders struggle to find opportunities to share their knowledge, wisdom and advice to younger family or community members. Worldwide governmental and nongovernmental agencies have worked to conserve heritage practices and document traditional knowledge. Ruptures in the transmission of traditional practices diminish cultural vitality and negatively impact the lives of older adults.

With increased domestic tourism and local interest, *buzha*, like other cultural productions in this Bai community, has expanded beyond being thought of as festival commodities and traditional talismans and are now commonly conceived as a potential source of supplemental income for Bai women (Xinhua 2020a). Since 2006, Mrs Zhao has actively trained more than 2,000 Bai women to make and market their *buzha* products. Her handicraft and economic training have helped lift Bai women out of poverty in Jianchuan County. Mrs Zhao explains, "I am very old now, and the most I want to do is to spread the art.... The old skills are passed on, so that more women can benefit from *buzha*." (JCC 2018) The elder is not teaching the *buzha* merely as a heritage practice, but also because it remains useful to her community. Folklorist Henry Glassie (2003: 176) offered that "tradition is the creation of the future out of the past. A continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present, linking the vanished with the unknown." Mrs Zhao's traditional knowledge about Bai culture in general and *buzha* in particular is a resource that she shares with younger Bai women helping to equipping them to build their own Bai future.

Mrs Zhao is proud of her vibrant Jianchuan culture, which has a long history of textiles that are imbued with deep cultural significance. She explains that at its core, her art is to teach others "how to be a people," that is, how they should live ethically in this world (FM 2019). As observed about the generative practices of adults, it is therefore the responsibility of each generation of adults to bear, nurture, and guide those people who will succeed them. As adults, as well as to develop and maintain those societal institutions and natural resources without which successive generations will not be able to survive. (Erikson et al. 1986: 73–74)

While the work of bearing and providing for children often falls to parents or younger adults, it is often older adults who teach their culture to the next generation. Mary Hufford (1986: 59) has explained that creative practices like Mrs Zhao's work are efforts to recycle the "knowledge and values of past generations. They tie past, present, and future together." This is generativity, not just the blind caring for the young, but a generational effort to seed and nurture future generations. It is an intergenerational compact. She is helping provide the cultural resources and knowledge to build the Bai community of the future.



Picking up one of her *buzha* pieces of a horse (Photo 15), she quotes another proverb, “A good horse will never turn around to graze on an old pasture.” She then explained, “No matter how good the horse is, he does not look back. The horse is always looking forward, and people always regret it.” (FM 2019) Her point is that, while people may be nostalgic for the past, people and communities continue to evolve and change, and cultural groups must keep moving forward. While she actively labors to bring back *buzha*, she knows the past is in the past. As Li Xuelong, who brought us to meet the elder *buzha* master, explained, “The past is over. It won’t happen again.” (FM 2019) While people may be nostalgic for the past, and ICH policies may strive to preserve and replicate the older ways, artists and elders like Mrs Zhao recognize that cultural traditions are dynamic and emergent. When asked as a representative of Bai culture, what does she want to convey to the West about Bai culture, she said, “Tell them that our Jianchuan culture is vibrant. We have a long history of textiles with profound cultural connotations.” She then explained that this tradition at its “core” is to teach the Bai “how to be a people.” (FM 2019) It took a bit for what she was saying to sink in. She wasn’t just teaching her students how to make *buzha*, she was teaching them how to be Bai.



Photo 15. A *buzha* figure made by Zhao Huaizhu of a horse grazing. This piece corresponds to a traditional Bai proverb she shares. Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Photograph by Jon Kay, May 24, 2019.

Why does any of this matter? Yes, it is great to have another example of a vernacular way of aging, but there is something more that I want readers to take away from the art and life of Mrs Zhao. As I noted in my introduction, many older adults struggle with feelings of loneliness, boredom, and helplessness. Yet, many ICH inheritors resist these difficulties, in part because their heritage practices support them in later life (Thomas 2004: 179–188; Richardson et al. 2023: 183–186). ICH inheritors and other traditional artists are central to a community of practice, they are often valued by family and community, and often people seek them out to learn from them, whether it is an odd group of folklorists from the United States or a Bai mother who wants to start making *buzha* to support her family. Mrs Zhao did not seem bored to me. When we were there, she was making pieces for a museum in France and preparing for classes. While our visit was not planned, she seemed accustomed to people visiting her showroom, where she is called upon to narrate her work for them. Finally, she was far from helpless. She is not like the proverbial old crow, at least not yet. Her traditional knowledge and creative

practice are a source of power for her. At a time when many elders may need assistance, she is still serving others through her art and knowledge – often, teaching women a third of her age how to help themselves through this traditional art.

Mrs Zhao has received greater attention and orders for her craft work in recent years. She is thankful that as an elder she can continue to make and teach her craft, as well as share the traditional knowledge that she inherited from her elders. She observes that many have said “it is a pity” that she is old; however, she explains, “it is not a pity to get old. It would be a pity if I did not pass it down. I want to pass it down.” (FM 2019) When you are old and still working, that gives elders a sense of accomplishment. She stresses that when she teaches others, she feels useful and valued by her community: “You teach others and gain achievements, which have a sense of appreciation and accomplishment” (FM 2019). ICH designations may help safeguard traditional knowledge, but the often-overlooked way that traditional practices maintain and improve elder wellbeing is worthy of further study.

While many agree that the safeguarding of traditional arts is important as a heritage project and economic resource, my hope is that more scholars will focus their work on how traditional arts and cultural performances support elder wellbeing. I contend that ICH practices and their inheritors are mutually supportive; elder artisans are needed to maintain and teach traditional forms to the next generation, but also older adults in these heritage contexts benefit emotionally, psychologically, physically, and socially through their participation in traditional practices. Pioneering geriatric psychiatrist Gene Cohen (2006: 8) studied the positive impact that creative activity and artmaking had in the lives of older adults. He observed that unlike other art forms and genres where older artists may be an exception, in the folk and traditional arts elders are often the norm. They are essential to maintaining many folk traditions. In fact, many elders thrive through active participation in folk and traditional arts, which is exemplified in the work and life of Mrs Zhao. The community needs her to teach and share her knowledge of *buzha*, but also Mrs Zhao receives great satisfaction from making and teaching *buzha*. In fact, it is the combination of making, teaching, and sharing her traditional knowledge and personal stories that gives her life purpose and meaning.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> More specifically, this project on the work of a single Bai textile artist began in the context of a survey of Bai craft practices undertaken by a binational team in several locations in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, in Yunnan, China. That project – and the various craftspeople encountered – is discussed in Wuexiya et al. 2022 and the larger efforts within which that survey project took place are described in Jackson 2023. The following sources address issues in the ethnography of the Bai people. The two baseline ethnographies in English are by Charles Patrick Fitzgerald (1941) and Francis Hsu (1948). Later English language works include studies by Megan Bryson (2013; 2017) on gender and religion, Susan McCarthy (2009) and Yongjia Liang (2010) on ethnic identity, Beth Notar (2006) on tourism, and Huier Ma and Huhua Cao (2021) on traditional knowledge and social change. Key background issues of a broader sort include the process of ethnic identification in Yunnan, and in China generally, (discussed in Mullaney 2010) and the broader context of the Southeast East Asian Massif, an upland geo-cultural region that includes the Bai areas in visited by members of the Bai craft survey (explained in Michaud et al. 2016).

2 Erik Erikson's concept of "vital involvement" refers to one's active engagement and meaningful participation in their life, especially in later adulthood. It focuses on the importance of finding purpose and meaning through contributing to society and maintaining a sense of generativity as a way to find personal fulfillment and psychological wellbeing.

## SOURCES

FM 2019 = Fieldwork materials. Interview with Zhao Huaizhu by C. Kurt Dewhurst, Carrie Hertz, Jason Baird Jackson, Jon Kay, Li Xuelong, Masha MacDowell, Wuexiya in Jinhua, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China on May 24, 2019. The interview recordings, transcripts, and photographs from which this essay is based were collected in the home studio of Mrs Zhao Huaizhu. All fieldwork materials are retained by The Material Culture and Heritage Studies Laboratory housed at Indiana University's Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology. All names included with consent of participants and collaborators.

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