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DRESSING THE PART: PRODUCING ETHNIC MINORITY TEXTILES IN THE ERA OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM*

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ABSTRACT
Visualizing difference is central to ethnic tourism and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) performance in Southwest China today. The expectation that individuals in ethnic minority communities will always be dressed and ready to meet romanticized expectations, while otherwise living their lives, creates new subjectivities and refashions how people think about and interact with their traditional material practices. ICH interventions may promise support for minority cultural reproduction but can instead disincentivize the intergenerational transmission of skilled knowledge. At the same time, individuals are experimenting with new forms of entrepreneurial heritage-making that meet community needs without official ICH endorsement, including the development of small-scale ethnic fashion industries. Based on fieldwork in Baiku Yao and Sanjiang Dong communities in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, this study highlights individuals engaged in the making, wearing, and marketing of minority dress on an expanding national stage.

KEYWORDS: textile manufacture • embroidery • China • ethnic clothing • heritage tourism

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INTRODUCTION

A new era of multicultural discourse emerged from China's post-Mao reconstruction period in the 1980s, linking political and economic aspirations under the slogan of unity-in-diversity. Ethnic minorities, once targeted with punitive assimilation projects and derided as indecently dressed "barbarians", became "brothers" with the Han majority and part of a greater panoply of "colorful nationalities" living together in harmony (Gladney 1994; An 2011; Chen 2011). No longer seen as merely a marker of poverty and backwardness, ethnic minority clothing, in turn, became a symbol of artistic achievement and collective patrimony worthy of national protection.

This more open form of nationalist rhetoric accompanied China's interest in pursuing both transnational capitalist market expansion and the international projection of cultural soft power. Through this lens, exoticized minority cultures, especially those concentrated in the poverty-stricken Southwest region, were less likely to be viewed as potential threats to the central state's authority and modernizing agendas than as "national treasures", a vast, untapped cultural resource. Romanticized and codified ethnic representations, often emphasizing the splendor of minority dress practices, were increasingly deployed to stimulate patriotism and the economy through cultural tourism, and this shift toward a more celebratory rhetoric and broader economic opportunities supported a (re)flourishing of sartorial diversity across the Southwest.[1]

Since then, the display of ethnic dress and textiles has become one of the main techniques for illustrating, extolling, and capitalizing on cultural differences in modern China. As a popular subject for taxonomic museum exhibits, costume catalogs, collectible doll sets, and tourist industry marketing, the spectacle of distinct "costume groups" presents cultural diversity as mere superficial variations and simplifies it into something quantifiable, containable, and ultimately consumable (Varutti 2011).

Against a backdrop of political, economic, and social reforms, China's rapid and destabilizing transformations have also been met with the countervailing forces of nostalgia. Since signing the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), as Lijun Zhang (n.d.) observes, China has been gripped by "heritage fever", developing a complex, layered, and far-reaching state apparatus for promulgating folk practices and craft traditions to achieve multiple, and sometimes paternalistic, political objectives under the banner of ICH. Interpreting and administering this system on-the-ground generates a host of potential contradictions. The goal of economic growth, for example, particularly for provincial, prefectural, and county governments, routinely supersedes intentions for sustainable cultural conservation and social cohesion (Nitzky 2014: 302; Li et al. 2015).

This study adds to the growing literature investigating on-the-ground impacts of ICH policy and ethnic heritage tourism on communities in China (Oakes 2013; Chio 2014; Luo 2016; Zhang 2019; n.d.; You 2020) by focusing on the making, wearing, and marketing of minority dress. My approach is situated within a folkloristic framework for examining the role of dress and adornment as it interacts within the intermingled life cycles of humans and things (Shukla 2008). Through this investigation, I prioritize the interpretations, creative strategies, and attitudes of textile artists and entrepreneurs in two locales, both situated near the northern border of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The findings are based on collaborative field research conducted with

U.S. and Chinese colleagues to Lihu Yao Ethnic Township in April 2015 and December 2017 and Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in July 2018 (Jackson 2019; 2021; 2023).[2]

BAIKU YAO IN LIHU YAO ETHNIC TOWNSHIP

Huaili is composed of a cluster of natural villages (*ziran tun*) situated high in the karst mountains of the Lihu Yao Ethnic Township of Nandan county. This area is home to the Baiku Yao, a distinct sub-branch of the Yao minority group officially recognized within China's 56 *minzu* (nationalities) ethnic classification system (see Mullaney 2010; Chen 2011).[3] Called *Dounou*/*Donuo*/*Duonu* in their own dialect of Bunu (Bu-Nao language group), the Baiku Yao, like many other minority subgroups within the minzu system, were bestowed an exonym inspired by traditional features of their ethnic dress (see Litzinger 1995: 119–120). *Baiku*, meaning 'white trousers' in standard Chinese, describes a characteristic garment worn by men.[4]

I first visited Huaili in April 2015 as part of a cultural exchange of museum professionals representing US and Chinese institutions (Gao 2015; Dewhurst 2017; Jackson 2023). Traveling as a small group, we visited ethnic nationalities museums and tourist sites in Guizhou, Yunnan, and Guangxi to better understand approaches to heritage development in China. As one of our planned site visits, we were hosted by colleagues at the Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum (*Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao shengtai bowuguan*) located at the center of the Huaili cluster. This institution exemplifies the evolving approach to China's ecomuseum model, one that has incrementally given greater priority to community-led initiatives over top-down state directives meant to stimulate economic growth through tourism. The Lihu ecomuseum was established in 2004 following a typical state bureaucratic process but then became the first in China to employ full-time staff members hired from the local ethnic communities.[5] Over time, this innovation has resulted in the de-emphasis of presentational modes, such as exhibits and public performances, in favor of projects focused on in-group cultural transmission, including curriculum development for teaching Baiku Yao culture in local schools, apprenticeship programs, hands-on workshops, oral history projects, and documentary film production (Nitzky 2012). The young ecomuseum staff have also been instrumental

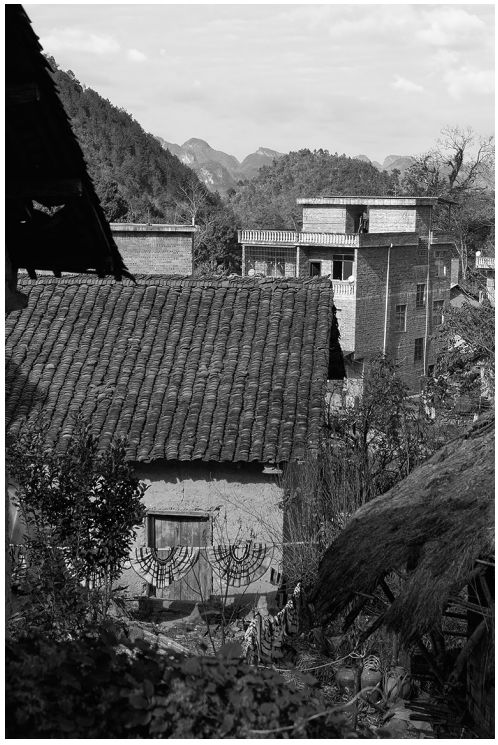

Photo 1. Baiku Yao homes in the natural villages of Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2017. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

in generating enthusiasm around various cultural revitalization projects among their peers (Zhan 2017).

Upon our arrival to the ecomuseum campus, after a short drive up a steep and winding road from the town center for Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, we witnessed a performance troupe rehearsing the Monkey Stick Dance (*Hou Gun Wu*), a choreographed dance with provincial-level ICH status produced almost exclusively for tourists.[6] A little later, another van appeared, transporting a group of men in dark business suits. The men took pictures of the dancers (who were dressed, not in performance regalia, but in a typical blend of industrialized readywear and locally handmade clothes). After a few minutes, the visitors briefly perused the ecomuseum's neglected exhibit space, wandered tentatively around the village center, and soon left. As tourists, it was unclear what they should do or where they should go.[7] He Chun, an ecomuseum staff member, and Ai Lan, a curator from the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi, then led us away from the village center to visit a textile artist's home a short walk from the ecomuseum galleries and offices. Passing between a mix of older adobe houses and newer multistory concrete residences, a woman began shouting at us from her yard, shooing us away with her arms. She was stirring a vat of Indigo, and as intrusive strangers, we could bring bad luck and poor results to the dyeing process underway.[8]

These initial encounters hint at local ambivalence toward the heritagization of Baiku Yao lifeways and textile traditions and the tourist gaze such heritagization encourages. It is one thing to consciously perform – and be directly compensated for – cultural productions designed to meet visitor expectations. It is another to offer up one's private activities for voyeuristic, and possibly destructive, observation. Some Huaili residents argue that not all cultural forms, material or immaterial, should be open for outside consumption.[9] As William Nitzky (2012: 400) reported, some in the Yao community resent the government's attempted museumification of their homes, asserting "we did not ask for a road to be built to our doorstep". Friction between local and state interests persists, despite efforts to recognize more local authority in heritage and economic development. Heritage tourism and the commodification of Baiku Yao culture continues to grow rapidly in the area.

THE MARKET VALUE OF MINORITY DRESS

When I returned to Nandan in December 2017, now as part of the binational team whose studies of heritage practices and textile arts are presented in this issue, we were astonished by the rate of growth in two short years. Evidence of massive construction projects could be seen everywhere, from the freshly paved roads lined with rubble and crowded with dump trucks, to a brand new "poverty-relief relocation site" for Baiku Yao people just outside the county seat. This site was completed as part of a major resettlement program that reportedly cost the county 1.37 billion yuan (or about US$197 million). Like other recent government-sponsored housing projects, this one will double as a tourist attraction for Baiku Yao heritage, encouraging relocated residents to "do ethnic performances for tourists", wear traditional clothes, and engage in heritage enterprises like embroidery production workshops and guest houses (Xinhua News Agency 2020).[10] Even the new architecture dresses the part, visually communicating

its friendly ethnic identity by incorporating elements that mimic Yao adornment. For instance, graphic depictions of Yao women's skirts splayed out like circular fans, decorate the arched entrance and welcome visitors to the new community.

Once in Lihu Town, we stumbled upon a souvenir shop where tourists (overwhelmingly Han) could pay to be photographed in Baiku Yao costumes (exhibiting disparate levels of stylization) against a selection of digital backdrops depicting scenic landscapes of stilted granaries (*liang cang*) and rice terraces. As a widespread practice across China, dressing up in exoticized ethnic-inspired garb reinforces the equation of distinct garments with essentialized ethnic identities, anchoring those identities to "ideal-types", while also offering them up for appropriation by majority Han as a "safe estrangement", a temporary vacation from their modern lives (Varutti 2011: 8, 12).[11]

In the context of China's rapidly diversifying and globalizing economy, geographer Tim Oakes (2006: 14) argues that "local culture is being viewed increasingly as not just a resource for pride, nationalism and Party legitimacy, but as a viable and even dynamic economic sector capable of significant revenue generation." Especially at the local levels of government, state officials pin their development strategies on growing a robust commercial sector by mobilizing cultural symbols, exploiting ecological resources, and promoting market privatization. Thus, the purpose of local governance is now defined less by welfare provision than by its investment in the production of cultural heritage. Oakes (ibid.: 18) demonstrates how this "blurring of market and public interests in the field of culture" has compelled individuals in communities targeted for tourism in Guizhou to adopt "new subjectivities" (ibid.: 19) as place-based cultural entrepreneurs operating within an unfolding symbolic economy. Similarly, for the local Baiku Yao navigating their own emergent "climate of entrepreneurialism" in Nandan, they are increasingly encouraged to value themselves, their cultural identities, and their "living heritage" for their potential marketability to Han consumers. The economic restructuring taking place across Nandan County promises new rewards for those enterprising individuals best able to navigate a multilayered state bureaucracy of ICH patronage and to package Baiku Yao culture as attractive products for tourist consumption or export. With its potential as a major generator of locally distinct products, ethnic minority dress culture, in particular, is seen as a key resource for preservation investment and commercial innovation.

In 2006, China officially added Yao ethnic dress to its list of national intangible cultural heritage, recognizing it as an appropriate subject for study, collecting, protection, and display. Numerous efforts have followed to preserve and promote Yao clothing and textiles for the benefit of wider audiences.[12] The Baiku Yao's unique dress culture, particularly as it is practiced in remote areas like Huaili, has received special attention from scholars for being considered more authentically "complete" than that of most other Yao branches.

Though commercial, factory-produced textiles are widely available and commonly utilized in Huaili, many local women still invest significant energy in the home production of ethnically distinct styles worn for both daily and special occasions, with the majority of households maintaining a floor loom, an indigo dye pot, and a cache of silkworm eggs. Women typically attain comprehensive skills by working together in teams of female relatives throughout their lives (Wang 2019a; 2019b). Both men's and women's traditional dress incorporate a variety of celebrated garment-making tech-

niques, including cotton and indigo cultivation, natural plant dyeing (Hu et al. 2022), weaving, hand-painted starch resist dyeing using sap from the downy tree of heaven (*Ailanthus vilmoriniana* Dode) (sometimes referred to using the Javanese-derived term for wax-resist, *batik*), embroidery (Rong 2015), and a unique method for silk felting (Wang 2019a; 2019b; Zhang, G.-Z. et al. 2022).

As in other Baiku Yao communities across Guangxi, in Huaili, men's namesake knee-length white trousers are conventionally decorated with five vertical stripes of red or orange embroidery along the pant hems and paired with belted jackets dyed in two shades of indigo.[13] On special occasions, a more elaborate, multilayered jacket featuring a "rooster tail" silhouette and sash, both embroidered, may be used. A woman's wardrobe includes several sets of clothes in seasonal rotation with the finest reserved as festival dress when new, then worn as daily dress once faded. A typical everyday outfit includes a pleated, indigo resist-dyed wrap skirt trimmed with silk felt and a red embroidered hem. The skirt is closed at the center front of the waist with the overlap hidden behind a long narrow apron. The outfit is completed with a sleeveless indigo-dyed tunic open on the sides. The front is plain, while the back features a prominent hand-drawn starch-resist square (sometimes referred to as a seal) embellished primarily with orange silk embroidery, but black, white, and yellow details may also appear.[14] The tunic is often worn layered with an undershirt (of most any kind) or with an outer jacket of dark indigo. Married women mark their status with caps of folded indigo-dyed cloth bound by a white cotton ribbon. Married men may similarly wear white or indigo turbans, but with less regularity. Both genders have options for accessories, including different styles of leggings, and notably for women, a set of beaded waist tassels known as "hanging flowers" (*diao hua*) worn during the Spring Festival.[15]

Photo 2. Lu Xiao Mei works on her embroidery while visiting with Li Xiu Ying and Wang Lian Mei holding her baby. Huaili, Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2017. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

Huaili residents are well aware of the growing national interest in their clothing and textile traditions and anticipate future visitors. In addition to the cultural pride this positive attention has cultivated, many people are eager to improve their material living conditions, as most families scrape by on subsistence farming supplemented with wages earned through occasional periods of out-migrant labor. Out-migration drains Huaili of its young adults, separates families for long stretches of time, and exacerbates

the growing sense of cultural discontinuity as younger generations cannot easily inherit new roles as community leaders, ritual practitioners, and master artisans.[16]

On our first full day back in Huaili in December 2017, we stopped to chat with a multigenerational group of women embroidering together on a front porch. They invited us to watch their handiwork for a few minutes but asked us not to photograph them. One of the women was embellishing a funeral cloth, a large indigo resist-dyed textile intended to drape over the body when laid in a coffin.[17] From the doorway of an adjacent home, a young woman beckoned us over. She brought out a bag of small plastic dolls, each one dressed in handmade representations of Baiku Yao clothing.

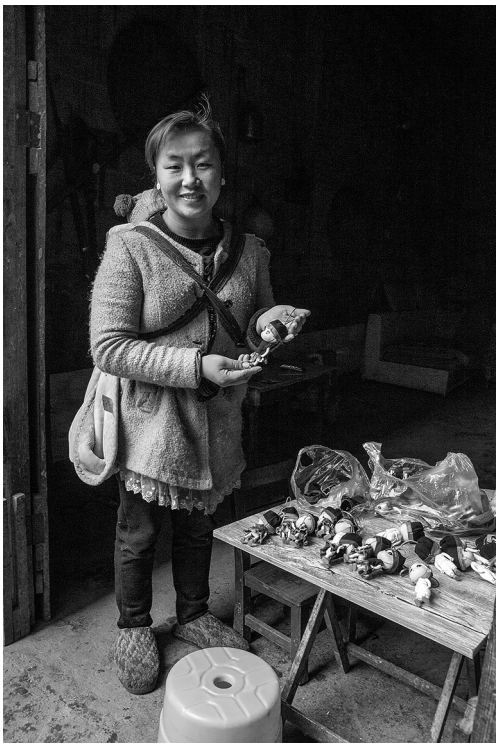

Photo 3. Li Guoying selling dolls from the entrance of her home in Huaili. Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2017. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

The woman, Li Guoying, first began making these dolls in 2010 when she realized tourists admired the local dress but had no intention of paying for labor-intensive, high-priced garments. Tourists were satisfied with small, inexpensive souvenirs like the dress-up portraits they could get in Lihu town. Li designed the dolls to capitalize on this emerging sector of the market. The result is a good approximation of local handmade materials, techniques, and pattern forms used to make Baiku Yao men's and women's daily dress. In fact, she fashions the miniature clothes with materials leftover from making garments for her family. To evoke the characteristic starch-resist decoration on women's tunics and skirts, she draws them to scale with an ink pen. She can make 20 outfits in five days and dresses them on mass-produced plastic dolls sourced online. She sells each for 20 RMB (or about US$3) through WeChat and to the occasional visitors, like us, who cross her path.[18] These efforts complement the work she is already doing to keep her family beautifully dressed, and she feels pride in producing positive, accurate representations of Baiku Yao appearance that can counteract the many less-appealing depictions circulating outside the community. Some argue, for example, that in the increasingly competitive tourist market, unethical travel agencies have gone too far in their attempts to entice customers, "vulgarising" Yao women's dress in advertisements (Zhan 2017).[19]

QUALITY, CONVENIENCE, AND COMPETITION

Li Guoying is not the only woman in Huaili adapting her skilled cultural knowledge to pursue gainful market-oriented activities. He Jinxiu is a celebrated master textile artist and community leader in her 50s who has successfully navigated government-backed initiatives promoting heritage tourism development. She is currently recognized by the Guangxi regional government as a "cultural inheritor" of Yao clothes-making, and in 2016, the local ecomuseum designated her home a "productive protection demonstration household" for Yao textile traditions. Honorary ICH designations like these come with prestige, invitations to participate in special events, sales, exhibitions, or performances, opportunities to fund personal projects through government channels and to promote their status in marketing, and access to broader networks (e.g., government officials, journalists, researchers, collectors, wholesalers, organized tour groups, or travel companies).[20]

During our conversations, He told us good things have come with tourism development, particularly improved services, like better roads, electricity, and clean water. Tourists demand such creature comforts, and locals enjoy them, too. She fears, however, that other tourist demands will devalue local standards for excellence. Tourists, for example, also expect cheap, convenient souvenirs, and this fact could erode local expertise and technical mastery in handcraft. Like Li Guoying, He has observed that visitors often lack interest in or awareness of quality craftsmanship in textile production. She has heard rumors that the more commercialized Baiku Yao villages in Guizhou are already over-run with knock-off textiles made by outside entrepreneurs using factory-woven fabrics and embroidery machines. If skilled artists cannot compete, local knowledge will not be passed on to new generations.[21]

Photo 4. He Jinxiu poses with an embroidered and resist-dyed ceremonial cloth now in the collections of the Museum of International Folk Art. Huaili, Lihu Town of Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2017. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

He devotes herself to teaching textile-making skills to younger generations through private apprenticeship arrangements and formal hands-on instruction organized by the local primary schools. Such formal instruction is one of the expectations that accompanies formal recognition in the Chinese ICH system. Many girls and young women are eager to learn, she says, but with so much competition for their time and attention, as well as the pressure for many to prioritize wage-earning

pursuits, few will reach high levels of mastery for any single technique, let alone a comprehensive repertoire for making Baiku Yao clothes. Specialists estimate that a full repertoire involves nearly forty separate processes (Liu 2022) and requires several years of practiced study within a stable intergenerational system of mutual aid among teams of female relatives (Wang 2019a).

He recalled that when she was eight years old and just beginning to embroider, she believed it too difficult. She cried and resisted learning. Her father teased her, saying, "That's fine. You can just buy it from the market" (held on regular days in Lihu Town). Her mother then quipped, "Yes, but do you have any money?" Of course, she did not, so she was compelled to keep trying. She tells this story to her students when they struggle, but their experiences in the expanding cash economy are different from hers. Every year, more supplies, raw materials, and finished goods can be acquired affordably through commercial exchange, potentially eliminating another necessary step in the home production of textiles.

Photo 5. Indigo dye vendor at the Lihu Town market. Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2017. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

On market days in Lihu Town, vendors set up stalls stuffed with mass-produced readywear and accessories, as well as tables of silk embroidery thread in a rainbow of colors, hand-embroidered skirt trim, batik styluses, and bolts of undecorated, hand-loomed cotton cloth. A large section of the market is devoted to selling locally fermented indigo paste. One half kilogram, more than enough to dye a set of clothes, costs about 6 RMB (less than US$1).[22] A few years ago, He cultivated all her own indigo plants to maintain her home dye pot. Now, she regularly supplements with indigo paste from the market. After assuming additional leadership responsibilities as the chair of the Huaili Village Women's Federation (*fulian*), she decided to also take a temporary break from growing her own cotton.

Market conveniences suit busier (or less clearly plotted) lives but also deincentivize learning every step of home production. When fewer women possess comprehensive mastery, new opportunities arise for knowledgeable individuals to step into more entrepreneurial roles, specializing in particular skills to fill gaps in supply. He, however, is concerned whether this fragmentation leaves enough space for sustaining high levels of artistry within textile traditions, let alone preserving a deeper and more holistic appreciation for their cultural significance.

Like others in the community, He has entered the broader marketplace created by cultural heritage tourism. However, rather than making simplified representations of Baiku Yao dress, as Li Guoying does, she adapts certain traditional accessories as special showpieces for high-end sale to museums and private collectors. Her work with men's embroidered festival sashes provides a useful example. These lavishly decorated belts are also easily portable. They could be mounted for wall display or worn comfortably by non-Yao buyers in combination with urban fashions. Since 2009, she has created belts featuring designs of her own invention, including motifs of lovers under a tree and medallions with Chinese characters for happiness and blessing in tiny, adept stitches. These popular variations sell for 600 RMB (or about US$100) each. When tourists use them, they often wear them backwards, turning the main sections of embroidery to the front of their waists. Locals are amused by this, but according to He, more women in Huaili are eager to tap this high-end clientele, creating their own innovative sashes specifically for buyers outside the community. For all intents and purposes, she has introduced a new Baiku Yao collectible "heritage" product to market.

The pattern illustrated by Li Guoying and He Jinxiu, in which textile artists respond to the development of ethnic heritage tourism in their areas by targeting either the low or high ends of the marketplace, shares important parallels and contrasts with Southern Dong artists living in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County. This area is both more densely and diversely populated and more commercially developed. Let us now turn our attention to the Sanjiang area, particularly the situation among the Dong living in and around Tongle Miao Ethnic Township.

DONG IN SANJIANG DONG AUTONOMOUS COUNTY

Sanjiang, meaning "three rivers", sits where the Xunjiang, Rongjiang, and Miaojiang meet and exists as the only Dong autonomous county in Guangxi. The Dong people, as they are officially recognized in China's minzu classification system, call themselves Kam (as part of the Kam-Sui subgroup of the Tai-Kadai language family) (Geary et al. 2003). A populous group, they comprise nearly three million people spread across the Chinese province-level divisions of Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Regions, as well as a few areas of Vietnam and Laos. Among the populations residing in China, scholars have identified at least 30 distinct dress subgroups (Rossi 1991: 5). Those living in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County wear styles consistent with speakers of southern dialects of the Kam language.

Around Sanjiang, men's traditional dress is fairly simple, composed of trousers and a center-front closing jacket with an odd number of buttons and a round or "Mandarin" collar.[23] A woman's basic ensemble includes dark trousers or a knee-length, finely-pleated wrap skirt, leggings, and a jacket worn over a bib-like shirtfront, commonly called a *dudou*.[24] Unlike men's dress, women's, even for daily wear, is elaborately adorned with embroidery and woven ribbon trim. Fashions for particular design strategies and the addition of fashionable details (like sequins, beads, tin gimp embroidery, or crimped foil accents) come and go. Levels of formality are communicated through the extent of adornment, the types of fabric used, and the presence of various accessories.

Photo 6. Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

The most highly valued clothing for both men and women is made from indigo-dyed cloth soaked with gelatin rendered from water buffalo hide. The specific composition of the dye bath, partnered with the number of dips in it, can result in tones from bright blue to black. A reddish hue can be introduced with solutions made from steeping particular dye plants, yam or other vegetal matter, and liquor to create a bronze, copper, or even aubergine color.[25] The highest value indigo cloth – reserved for the most formal events like weddings and funerals – involves additional steps, including steaming, starching, and multiple alternating rounds of glazing the surface with egg whites and pig's blood, then pounding it smooth with a wooden mallet. This fabric (*liangbu*), variously glossed as 'bright cloth', 'shiny cloth', or 'glossy cloth', is admired for its metallic iridescence and lacquer-like luster.[26] The qualities of its beauty are often compared to the hair of attractive young women (Lee 2018: 132).

Dong clothes-making was added to the national ICH register in 2014, but Dong-style embroidery had already been given special status as a standalone ICH art form in 2011.[27] Dong embroidery comprises numerous regional varieties that together represent a large repertoire of stitches, patterns, and motifs. In the style characteristic for Sanjiang, the most detailed areas of ornamentation rely on silk satin stitch over papercut stencils that create complexity and dimensionality with a raised, light-reflective surface. As a celebrated hallmark of women's expression, embroidery is a significant and time-

consuming element of clothes-making, featured prominently on garments and accessories, including shoes, bags, and baby-carriers. Embroiderers we met in various Sanjiang locales estimated that a typical woman's jacket required around three months to complete and a *dudou* more than two weeks. One embroiderer reported that she could finish a baby carrier in as little as two months, if she worked full days from 7 am to 10 pm.

LEARNING EMBROIDERY IN THE ICH SYSTEM

Today, scholars estimate that 80 percent of women in Sanjiang can embroider, though with varying levels of skill (Wang and Zhu 2021). During our visit in July 2018, we met Wei Fengxian, a woman in her 60s who first learned embroidery from her mother. Focused instruction began when she turned eight years old. During her childhood, she recounted, mothers in her rural community typically taught only one daughter beyond basic skills, due to the intensity of training required. In exchange for the great respect this position bestowed, the recipient supplied the family's needs for technically demanding and labor-intensive festival clothes. Taking this obligation to heart and proud of her acquired skills, Wei not only kept her immediate family well-dressed. She also made multiple sets of lavish wedding clothes as gifts for the family members of her agricultural work team. In the 1990s, when she left the rural countryside for economic opportunities in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, she earned income by making custom clothes, transitioning her domestic labor into a full-time profession. She also became passionate about teaching embroidery with the hope of revitalizing girls' dwindling interest in the practice. She now runs after-school programs at the local middle schools and, during school vacations, holds informal afternoon sessions at the local drum tower (a typical community gathering place in Dong majority areas).[28]

Photo 7. Wei Fengxian posing in her home. Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

With the development of the ICH system, Wei has been able to capitalize on her skills in new ways. She explained that Dong styles of embroidery have increased in value since being added to the national ICH list and heavily promoted, opening up new earning potential. In 2012, she sold a woman's hand-embroidered jacket for 400 RMB (or about US$60). By 2018, she could charge the same price for just the hand-embroidered collar.

Once Wei received provincial-level recognition as an ICH inheritor for Dong embroidery, she applied for provincial subsidies to open an official embroidery training center in her home where she holds weeklong courses for ten to twenty novices several times each year. These students, who are on average older (in their early 20s), are selected and sponsored by the county ICH office. Officials in the local government encourage this training as a form of poverty reduction and an appeal to potential investors, hoping the students (who are likely mothers of very young children unable to work as outmigrants or tea pickers) will go on to participate in cottage industries filling commercial orders.

As an established master artist, Wei believes ICH-driven incentives have made it possible for her to continue practicing her craft. As a teacher, however, she believes emerging artists face significant barriers to reaching similar levels of recognition and income for their work. According to her, it may require multiple classes before a new student is able to make even small, simple embroideries, earning about 50 RMB (or less than US$8) each. Individuals can currently make a higher rate of return gathering tea leaves in the local tea industry (Wang and Zhu 2021).

Because inexpensive embroideries must be produced and sold at scale, many beginners do participate in local cottage industries, creating products primarily for national and international buyers. Wei organizes this style of "putting out" and workshop production for beginning needleworkers.[29] As with similar craft embroidery industries in other parts of the world, the system of production in Sanjiang is only commercially viable by relying on structural poverty "to provide a class of producers willing to sell their labor power for almost nothing" (Oakes 2002: 161). As Wei argued, these needleworkers have limited opportunity to advance their skills or find more lucrative employment through handwork, particularly since, in terms of labor costs, there is constant pressure downward. As Liu Huijun, director of the Guangxi Arts and Crafts Research Institute, explained to a reporter, "A delicate piece of Dong embroidery might be priced at around 6,000 yuan (about US$980), which scares many people away in [the] domestic market" (Xinhua News Agency 2013). Liu believes embroiderers should raise popular demand overseas by lowering prices even more and catering to international design tastes. "The best way to protect a dying art", he argued, "is to develop it with the help of the market." As a wholesale buyer and exporter of Dong embroidery, his organization pushes cottage producers like Wei's workshop to squeeze producers, simplify patterns, and weaken the cultural distinctiveness of Dong design, paradoxically to "rescue" it from extinction.

ZODIAC SYMBOLS

The pressure to design merchandise with mass appeal is apparent in the material produced by Wei Fengxian's workshop and sold throughout the county. In tourist stops and retail shops across Sanjiang, we saw a profusion of locally made hand-embroidered products marketed as Dong that featured animal symbols from the Chinese zodiac. Zodiac symbols are not fundamental elements of Dong embroidery design, though they are commonly applied to Dong baby carriers. As a full set of twelve organized in a circle like a clock, they represent an auspicious and untroubled first year of

life. Unlike some other Dong motifs, however, they evoke broad recognition and cultural significance across China and beyond. For this reason, zodiac symbols quickly gained a foothold in the marketplace, becoming a ubiquitous offering at ICH-focused sites, like the Sanjiang Dong Embroidery Museum.

Textile artist Yang Tian and her sister-in-law Wei Qinghua established the Sanjiang Dong Embroidery Museum (SDEM) in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township the year after Dong embroidery received national ICH recognition. Like Wei Fengxian, Yang Tian and Wei Qinghua, as provincial-level ICH inheritors for Dong embroidery, leveraged political support and secured government subsidies to start this private enterprise. Private ethnic museums, founded and operated by ICH practitioners, have been promoted within China as another grassroots method for marketing ICH within the cultural tourism sector (Wang 2022). Like others of its type, SDEM does include a collection and exhibition space with a permanent display of embroidered objects, textile-making tools, and interpretive panels. However, one of its primary functions is to manage a craft workshop offering training and employment for Dong embroiderers to make saleable products and, through its related retail spaces, to promote the production and consumption of Dong material culture. When we visited in 2018, Yang told us SDEM had been devoting increasing time and energy to the production of zodiac-themed embroidered souvenirs. Later, we saw some of these, and many more varieties, being sold at Qing Hua Embroidery Workshop, a storefront in the county seat run by Yang's niece Qin Guizhen.

Photo 8. Wei Qinghua, Qin Naishiqing, and Yang Tian posing in front of the Sanjiang Dong Embroidery Museum. Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

Qin characterized zodiac embroideries as useful commercial innovations, but not necessarily strong reflections of Dong identity or culture. By not being highly localized or ethnically distinct, they can cultivate new economic opportunities for perpetuating limited handicraft techniques, but they do not foster deeper knowledge related to the most important Dong motifs. She and other artists we met identified these principal motifs as variations and combinations of the crab, spider, phoenix, dragon, butterfly, coin, flowers and grass.[30]

In fact, Wei Fengxian argued that a woman's jacket must include the phoenix and crab motifs to fulfill traditional obligations as Sanjiang Dong.[31] According to her, they represent important folk stories about Dong ancestors receiving special assistance in the past. In brief, the phoenix once led Dong ancestors to a new home in the mountains,

Photo 9. Ornaments featuring zodiac embroideries for sale at Qing Hua Embroidery Workshop in the county seat. Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

which led to thriving families. And the crab once saved Dong ancestors from drowning in a flash flood by carrying them safely above the waterline on its back. In both cases, the ancestors promised to remember and honor these good deeds through the decorations on their clothes. Such historical significance and "emotional spirit" recorded by Dong embroidery, Wei said, remains unrecognizable to tourists.

Many embroiderers told us traditional motifs were not very popular with non-Dong buyers. This fact raises questions about how novices, needing to support themselves through embroidery, could ever master a larger repertoire of Dong patterns, including those considered most salient to in-community understanding and appreciation, and, thus, demonstrating intrinsic tensions between desires for sustaining intangible cultural heritage and meeting economic realities.[32]

PAPERCUTTING AND MACHINE EMBROIDERY

Wei Fengxian suggested there were other critical gaps related to training new embroiderers and deepening their cultural knowledge of Dong textile traditions. Few government-supported classes, she said, include education in papercutting, the literal foundation for Dong patternmaking. Instead, students are provided with pre-cut patterns

Photo 10. Wei Qinghua embroiders over a papercut featuring the Spider Flower motif, one of the principal patterns of Sanjiang Dong artistic tradition. Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

Photo 11. Cao Kunlin and Lan Yuanyuan. Zhaida, Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

to then cover with satin stitch. Papercutters, therefore, have great influence over the designs being produced, but the dwindling number of experts cannot meet current demand for their services, especially now that celebrated masters like Wei Fengxian and Yang Tian devote significant time organizing the mass hand-production of zodiac symbols.

Later in our research trip, we had the good fortune to spend an afternoon with Cao Kunlin, a master papercutter, and her niece Lan Yuanyuan, a staff member of Sanjiang Dong Ecomuseum, at Cao's home in Zhaida village. Both women have been recognized as provincial-level inheritors for Dong clothing and embroidery. They repeated Wei Fengxian's concerns about the lack of emphasis placed on training new papercutters.

According to Cao, there are currently only five skilled papercutters left in her local area trying to serve more than a thousand residents. To fill the absence, she now focuses almost exclusively on creating papercuts for sale or trade to Dong embroiderers in her village and across Tongle Township. These are primarily sold as complete coordinating sets for jackets, shoes, or baby-carriers, already affixed to pieces of fabric with rice paste. She regularly offers these sets during market days in nearby Tongle Town. She also

works on commission to create customized designs for individual clients and keeps samples on hand to advertise some of her favorite options.

Cao articulated the main challenge for papercutters is to "keep to the tradition" but "make it different." According to her, the current fashion in Dong embroidery is moving toward more virtuosity with finely detailed, complex patterns. Her goal is to render human figures, flowers, and animals in more lifelike detail than in past convention, capturing them in active moments of expressive movement. She also enjoys in-filling animal silhouettes with delicate scrolling lines and abstract floral shapes. Her designs are more naturalistic and, simultaneously, more fantastical. "The one who cuts patterns", she posited, "follows her own preferences." And the preferences of papercutters drive new trends.

Lan, a young woman in her 20s, has studied Dong embroidery with her mother since childhood, but her mother never learned papercutting. Historically, Cao provided papercuts for the whole family. Wishing to assume this familial role and being dedicated to ICH work in her community, Lan was now apprenticing with her aunt.

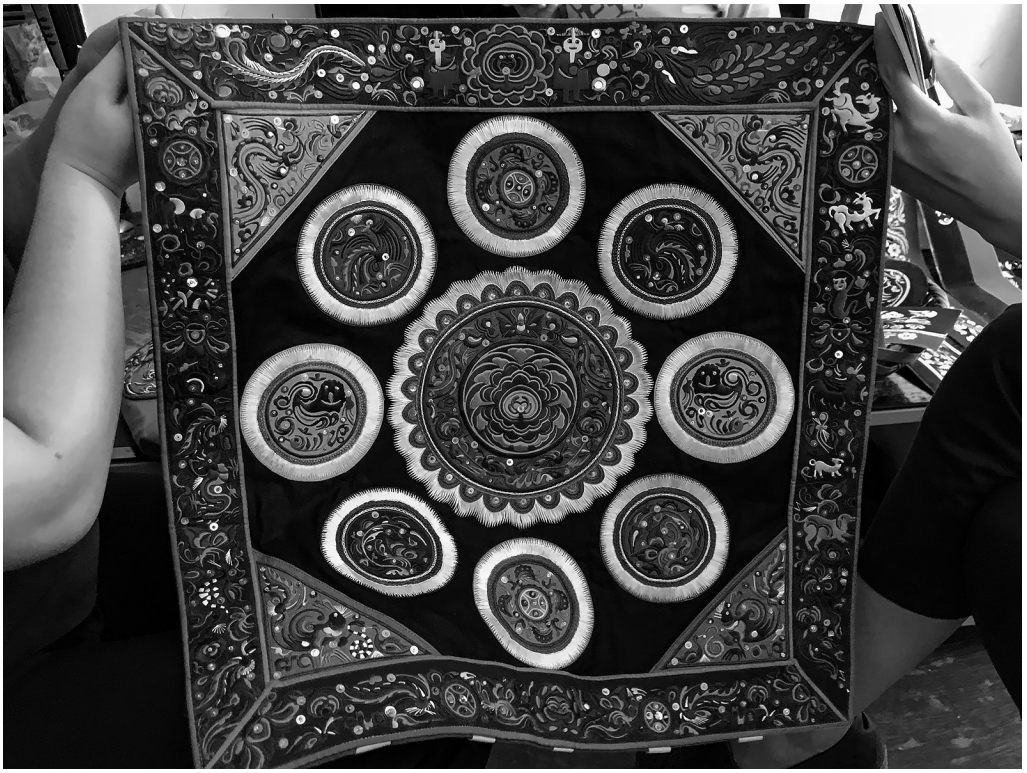

Photo 12. Baby carrier panel made by Lan Yuanyuan. Zhaida, Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

Lan explained that mastering papercutting was critical for achieving higher levels of recognition and income as a designated ICH embroiderer. For newer generation embroiderers like her to attain this status, they need to expand their repertoire to create original compositions. While innovative and experimental design has always been a

celebrated part of the Dong embroidery tradition, individual needleworkers typically operated within the formal limitations of utility object surfaces. Designs, however imaginative, ran the length of a sleeve or followed the curve of a shoe vamp. Today, there is also a growing collectors' market for framed decorative works promoted as "fine art". Papercutters possess the ability to create these high-end showpieces that stand out in the marketplace or win prizes at embroidery competitions, where not just skill, but the obvious presence of novelty and unique authorship are more highly valued than adherence to in-community traditions and standards.

As an example, Lan showed us a framed embroidery design she created specifically to enter into contests and public exhibitions. The composition is inspired by a typical layout for Dong baby-carriers – the closest corollary to a compact picture plane – with a central medallion surrounded by twelve zodiac signs. Her father, a Party secretary for the village, encouraged her to make something celebrating the Communist Party, knowing patriotic themes would resonate with judges. In her adaptation, the central medallion reads "The Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng*), a political slogan popularized by President Xi Jinping, surrounded by the Twelve Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Communist Party. This display of national unity around shared values proved an especially winning sentiment in 2018, which marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Photo 13. Framed embroidery by Lan Yuanyuan titled The Chinese Dream. Zhaida, Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

As in Nandan county, the textile artists we met in Sanjiang often felt pushed by current circumstances to either extreme of a market-based spectrum that prioritizes the expectations of majority consumers. These economic forces are reinforced by ICH policies that promise new methods for ethnic minorities to gain prestige by adopting "dominant modes" for formally representing nostalgic fragments of their own cultures (Schein 2000: 207). Such a scenario promotes assimilation to Han national majority culture, which is perhaps the more accurate – or at least more privileged – intention of many ICH policies than their *stated* goals to preserve the distinctiveness of minority heritages.[33]

In the more developed and densely-populated landscape of Sanjiang, market extremes are even more pronounced than in Nandan. As we have seen, individuals in Sanjiang are more likely to assume roles as anonymous workers in elaborated supply chains with little chance for upward mobility. Only a limited number will ever become celebrated masters, commanding high prices for museum-quality works and benefitting from organizing the labors of others. As Oakes (2002) found in the case of Miao embroiderers in Shidong, Guizhou, even at the highest levels of artistic mastery, hand embroidery can augment one's household income but rarely support a livelihood. To make a living from the production of embroidery, one must assume a "middleman" position, brokering access to labor, resources, and markets in a steadily stratifying structure (ibid.). This arrangement is hardest for new generations just entering the fields of hand embroidery and clothes-making.

ICH development through entrepreneurial ethnic heritage tourism does not support clear pathways for achieving new mastery or perpetuating the transmission of intergenerational relevance. Those able to attain ICH status and its accompanying benefits have typically learned their craft through traditional methods centered within familial networks starting in childhood, a practice that, for many, has been disrupted by modernizing influences. Without this early foundational instruction, it is unlikely a less well-situated aspirant could ever catch up in the increasingly competitive environment.

However, unlike in Nandan where Baiku Yao women have historically pursued comprehensive mastery of clothes-making techniques, Dong women in Sanjiang already practice a tradition of specialization. Thus, one could perhaps find a more rewarding role in today's marketplace by accentuating those specializations, as Cao Kunlin does with papercutting, leading to an ever-widening diversity of means, methods, and materials in an ever more fragmented system of production. In fact, Sanjiang illustrates another possible trajectory for development, a sort of middle pathway with the emergence of more localized markets that rely on new forms of specialization and target primarily Dong buyers, as opposed to tourists, collectors, and ICH administrators.

As seen on market days in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township in Nandan County, the introduction of more industrialized products to Sanjiang has also put competitive pressure on producers of handmade textiles, but, at the same time, it has also opened up new opportunities, in effect stimulating the preservation of other aspects of cultural practice. As Cao Kunlin and Lan Yuanyuan argued, there are always trade-offs in modernizations. Machine embroidery, for example, is now ubiquitous in Sanjiang. Manufactured by Guizhou factories, the designs mimic traditional Dong style in formal structures, color palettes, and compositions. Sold alongside other mass-produced notions, findings, and trims, machine embroidery is packaged much like Cao's sets of papercuts, as

discrete elements still in need of finishing: a cloth with two linear strips of embroidery to line jacket cuffs or a rectangular panel with a cut-out to follow the neckline of a *dudou*. These conveniences make it possible to produce ethnically appropriate garments more quickly at less expense.

I asked Cao if she felt her papercuts were in competition with machine embroidery; programmed machines, after all, do not require cut paper templates. In terms of price and effort, handwork would always be at a disadvantage, she said, but not in terms of quality. Machine embroidery is flat, dull, and repetitive. It cannot reproduce the sharp edges and more sculptural textures possible when hand-stitching over paper (which can vary in weight from tissue to cardstock). The types of durable threads machines require cannot match the luster of those available for handwork. And the safe, standardized designs put out by industrial companies cannot achieve the variability of a skilled craftsperson's imagination. Although machine-made options give the impression of greater choice, Cao argued that only those who control production can truly exercise freedom of choice in their self-expression. Cao believes there is room in today's marketplace to support both high and low market products, both hand and machine-made textiles. The ability to enjoy quality, however, requires either money or mastery.

Photo 14. Cao Kunlin dressed in clothes of her own creation. Zhaida, Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

While Dong women have always expressed their individuality and fashionability through dress, it has historically relied more heavily on their own personal skill or familial networks to achieve. To a certain extent, this remains true. Only the tools avail-

able to them have widened. Increasingly, women seek sartorial self-expression through shopping.[34]

A SMALL-SCALE ETHNIC FASHION INDUSTRY

The busy streets of Guyi are lined with commercial storefronts. Merchandise spills from their dark, narrow interiors onto the bright sidewalks, enticing passersby. Many of these shops are Dong owned-and-operated and specialize in selling ethnic styles of Dong clothing and accessories suitable for a wide variety of occasions from the everyday to the ceremonial.

Wandering into Dongmei Dong Clothes Shop, we met the owner Lu Yue. She was working at a sewing machine near the back, cutting out identical machine-embroidered panels from a single bolt of cloth and sewing each individually onto its own support fabric. She would later make these into a series of finished *dudou*s, combining them with different fabrics and trims, perhaps hand-sewing sequins to some for extra interest. Similarly finished composite *dudou*s hung at the entrance of the store, waving in the humid breeze.

Photo 15. Lu Yue posing in front of her store Dong Mei Dong Clothing. Guyi, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

While a hand-embroidered *dudou* could cost around 800 RMB (US$113), she charged a mere 10 to 20 RMB (less than US$3) for these. Nearby, tables boasted rolls of machine-woven ribbons in teetering stacks, mounds of commercial fabric, and piles of machine-

embroidery sets for finishing jacket hems, collars, and cuffs. The opposite wall was lined with ready-made outfits available for immediate purchase, as well as samples for custom order. Potential buyers could even pick through the disparate offerings – the machine-made cloth, trims, and panels – to assemble their own unique combinations. Lu sources machine embroideries wholesale from two factories in Guizhou. She was not aware of any other factories manufacturing Dong-inspired materials.[35] She characterized the Dong patterns copied and made available by these companies as pretty generic, appealing to average tastes for everyday looks.

Lu described her merchandise as easy, affordable options for daily wear that nevertheless communicate Dong tradition and identity. Rather than buying the many options for ready-made cotton t-shirts and blue jeans available at other storefronts along the same city block, she attracts clientele interested in maintaining a strong Dong ethnic style. Lu's inventory overwhelmingly reflected customary Dong cuts and silhouettes, often presented as full sets for women with a jacket, knee-length skirt, and *dudou*. When we met her, however, Lu was wearing a short A-line dress of her own design made in a silky fuschia fabric. Though an unconventional silhouette in the Dong repertoire, she had accented the neckline and waist with machine ribbons mimicking traditional handmade Dong brocade. Dongmei Dong Clothes Shop hints at the growing possibilities for contemporary Sanjiang Dong dress practices.

Historically, most Dong adults acquired at least one new set of handmade festival clothes annually. Today in Sanjiang, local wardrobes increasingly incorporate greater numbers of garments in a wider variety of forms serving finer functional distinctions. ICH Inheritor Wei Fengxian explained this reformulation to us as a consequence of cultural, political, and economic transformations. National discourses of ethnic harmony and ICH promotion have strengthened a sense of pride in publicly expressing Dong identity through dress. At the same time, rising standards of living through poverty alleviation and economic development mean individuals have more disposable income (and likely less self-directed time). Both trends drive rising levels of consumption. As Wei sees it, more money means more choices, and locals increasingly wish to spend their cash earnings on Dong clothing while also enjoying the enhanced convenience and variability afforded by ethnic readywear options.

Inexpensive industrialized cosmopolitan clothes still count as a significant portion of what Dong wear daily in Sanjiang, especially in the more urban areas. Within the local tourism-dominated economy, strong political and financial incentives do exist for exhibiting ethnic boundaries through the visual spectacle of dress.[36] However, these incentives alone – prioritizing out-group messaging – do not explain the emergent demand for ethnic readywear. As Wei argued, the greater motivation is an appreciation for conventional in-group aesthetics and communication, including a legible assertion of one's differential wealth and modernity. If one only cared about "looking ethnic" for tourists, there is currently a robust supply of generically stylized ethnic minority outfits produced cheaply across southwest China as costumes for the tourism industry, worn by minority (and even non-minority) performers or by tourists themselves to sit for souvenir portraits (Chio 2014: 152–158). Instead, entrepreneurs like Lu Yue are carving out their niche as specialized Dong tailors who can source and appropriately assemble Dong ethnic clothing from disparate machine-made elements, and in the process, rearticulate a distinctive Dong style through a more diverse set of materials and design strategies.[37]

Sanjiang Dong Clothes Shop, owned and operated by Wu Peiya, is located a few doors down from Dongmei Dong Clothes Shop. Like Lu Yue, Wu also offers ethnic readywear. The bulk of her business, however, is devoted to bespoke garments, from custom assembled to fully handmade, as well as any combination therein.

Several outfits on display featured lavish handwork, advertising this specialization. One of these outfits was dressed on a mannequin and covered in a plastic garment bag, protecting its precious material: bronze-colored bright cloth hand-dyed by Wu's mother in Yangxi village (about an hour's drive west of Guyi). Like other local tailors we met in Guyi who offer high-end handmade clothes, Wu relies on family members living in the countryside who still practice these traditional methods of weaving, dyeing, and needlework to supplement her own knowledge and labor.

According to Wu, those ordering garments with extensive handwork almost exclusively do so for special occasions like weddings and community festivals, or to wear while performing in various capacities in the ethnic tourist industry. As Wu surmised, "Only those showing themselves off want indigo."[38]

Handmade indigo-dyed clothes are beautiful but expensive, slower to produce, and require more careful upkeep. A full set of women's handmade clothes can cost up to 10,000 RMB (more than US$1,400) and take a year to complete. They can feel uncomfortable in hot, humid weather, transferring indigo dye onto sweaty skin. Easily damaged and quicker to fade, they cannot be easily laundered. Synthetic fabric in black or royal blue serves as a common substitute for regular indigo, and a bronze-colored satin-weave mimics the shimmer of bright cloth. Commercially manufactured fabric is more colorfast, remaining richly saturated for longer use. For daily wear, convenience commands higher priority than quality or even price. Being in higher demand, Wu can actually charge a little more for a man's polyester jacket with machine ribbon trim (220 RMB / US$31) than an unadorned machine-sewn indigo-dyed one (200 RMB / US$28), a style now popular only with old men.[39]

Photo 16. Fashionable clothes featuring a combination of handmade and mass-manufactured elements for sale at Wu Peiya's Sanjiang Dong Clothes Shop in Guyi, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, 2018. Photo by Carrie Hertz.

Young women, in contrast, prefer more colorful and flamboyantly decorated clothes that would prove prohibitively expensive if completely handmade using traditional materials and techniques. They also appreciate a wider range of synthetic colors and materials, participating in shorter trends for market novelties. Through their commercial or familial connections, different shops develop their own characteristic offerings, appealing to

varied clientele. Customers learn which tailors can best meet their personal preferences, priorities, and resources.

In this way, by catering to local needs, Sanjiang's localized markets can serve an entire spectrum from low to high, including a middle range representing more varied lifestyles and tastes. The emergence of this middle market for Dong ready-made clothing as a sort of small-scale ethnic fashion industry suggests alternative strategies for addressing existing tensions between economic needs and ICH desires. Rather than turning local culture into a decontextualized product of export, often by stripping it of ethnic idiosyncrasies to satisfy out-group preferences, Dong readywear, as a market adaptation, answers in-community desires for creative employment utilizing modest skills and *culturally-specific* self-expression. While readywear does not necessarily contribute directly to the widespread preservation of Dong traditional handicraft skills (such as the manual production of embroidery or bright cloth), arguably, neither does the low-wage putting-out system currently in place.

At the moment, mechanization produces larger wardrobes without supplanting the premium status typically afforded to handwork. Traditionally-designed, handmade clothes remain highly valued among Dong wearers for festive and formal occasions, underscoring the importance of those events and highlighting the heights of Dong sartorial artistry.[40] Rather than replace traditional ethnic clothes, readywear expands the options for dressing Dong. Its presence introduces new categories into the local fashion system, refining and intensifying distinctions between daily and special occasion dress, but also between the statuses of individuals. This reinterpretation of Dong dress mirrors the steadily growing mobility, competition, and social stratification experienced today within the Sanjiang Dong community and, more broadly, across the spectrum of Chinese society. Once a widely shared fact of life, handmade embroidered clothes – regardless of their quality of execution – are increasingly understood as luxury goods no longer accessible to most in the community.

Political scientist Christina Maags (2018: 136, 138), in her examination of policy outcomes in East China, found that individual cultural practitioners operating without the blessing of ICH endorsement felt that "official recognition and economic commercialization create a process of exclusion", heaping compounding rewards on those already "equipped with social capital" while leaving them comparatively disadvantaged in the marketplace and alienated from heritage traditions they can no longer afford for themselves. The feelings of exclusion spurred by the official ICH recognition system, therefore, can discourage poorly positioned practitioners from pursuing traditional activities. In this comparative examination of policy outcomes in the Southwest region, however, we see that they can also instigate diversification, experimentation, and more expansive notions of ethnic traditionality.

The work of ready-to-wear and bespoke tailors has emerged from the current conditions created, in part, by ICH and ethnic heritage tourism, and it continues to be deeply intertwined with the revitalization and rapid commercialization of Dong identity and textile traditions. It is unclear, however, what roles independent Dong tailors can play within today's entrepreneurial ICH system, one that privileges state validation of authenticity and Han majority preferences for consumption. The vast gap between what these textiles *mean*, let alone what they are worth, to buyers and sellers cannot be easily resolved within a diverse marketplace of "competitive liberalization" (Oakes

2002: 165–166). In fact, the rhetorical value and symbolic capital of traditional cultural heritage often masks a reliance on exploitative labor practices to prop up economic development. Dong community members and government ICH officials are united in their concern about the declining number of textile masters, but, in reality, the current market-oriented structure can only reward a meager number at the upper echelons. Like fashion runway shows filled with designs few people, if indeed any, will ever wear, the high-end output and promotion of ICH inheritors generates an aura of authenticity and prestige for artistic traditions that can now operate more like commercial ICH brands.

CONCLUSION

Visualizing difference is central to ethnic tourism and ICH performance. As anthropologist Jenny Chio (2014: 134) argues, for host communities in China, much of the *work* of tourism is visual, that is, anticipating the directed gaze of "sightseeing" and dressing the part. In response, communities are literally and metaphorically "changing their clothes" to project the appearance of being rural and exotic, yet modern and welcoming (ibid.: 137). This expectation that individuals will always be dressed and ready to meet romanticized expectations, while otherwise living their lives, creates new subjectivities and refashions how people think about and interact with their traditional material practices.

Yet, even while being held in this productive gaze, individuals may still feel "overlooked" within the current configuration of socio-economic opportunities conditioned by ICH tourism. As this article illustrates, one of the potential consequences of these processes is fragmentation, both in terms of social relationships and cultural coherence. ICH policies suggest methods for supporting the reproduction and coherence of distinctive minority cultures, but the on-the-ground economic and political incentives for cultural commodification can open fissures, instead manufacturing an assimilating homogeneity dictated by bureaucrats, in-group elites, and wealthy majorities. ICH interventions – as with the putting-out production of zodiac embroideries – can encourage an essentializing simplification that exacerbates feelings of cultural alienation and loss within minority cultures. They can also intensify pre-existing inequalities in ways that actually disincentivize the intergenerational transmission of skilled knowledge.

The action of fragmentation, however, can also be interpreted as manifestations of expansion and diversification as individuals practice creative agency within a globalizing "heritage-scape" (Di Giovine 2008). Typical modes of ethnic minority textile production are now learned and practiced in a greater variety of ways. New divisions of labor contribute to specializations and a plurality of innovative forms along a continuum of quality. Textiles are made for, marketed to, and consumed by a wider range of people representing a broader social spectrum of identities, positionalities, motivations, and circumstances. The top-down cultivation of new audiences for ethnic minority textiles exert destabilizing pressures on artists, pushing many to extreme positions in the market economy. But the broader conditions in China, of which ICH tourism is simply a part, has also primed a middleground for bottom-up methods of entrepreneurial heritage-making that are meaningful outside tourist contexts and pursued without official ICH endorsement. The logical question is whether bureaucratic ICH modes of commodification can support the increasing diversity and complexity of modern minzu lives.

NOTES

1 For background on dress reform movements that promoted national uniformity under the leadership of Mao Zedong, see Chen 2001.

2 This study of textiles and dress relies on my participation within a multi-phase program of cooperative ethnographic research initiated by the American Folklore Society and the China Folklore Society known as the China–US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project. As part of this umbrella project, a binational network of scholars and institutional partners documented the making, circulation, and use of textiles, basketry, and other artistic forms within several ethnic minority communities in the Southwest of China in two major phases between 2013–2016 and 2017–2021. For a more thorough account of these subprojects, our fieldwork process, and other resulting publications, museum collections, and exhibitions, see Jackson 2019; 2021; 2023. Most pertinent for understanding this study is a brief explanation of fieldwork conditions. For the US-based researchers, our itineraries and interactions were highly mediated in terms of movement and language by our China-based partners, which included a multiethnic, multilingual group of scholars, museum professionals, community culture bearers, and arts practitioners. Most interviews were conducted in a mix of English and standard Chinese, but also commonly incorporated regional dialects and minority languages. Given this complexity, as well as the short duration and episodic nature of our research, we did not have direct access to the most precarious actors within the emerging ICH tourism economy. Their presence, however, is apparent through empirical observation and published sources, and we endeavored to learn as much as we could through conversations with our interlocutors who shared their perspectives on these dynamics. Names included with consent of participants.

3 Baiku Yao also reside in Baxu Township of Nandan County and across the provincial border in Yaoshan Yao Ethnic Township in Libo County, Guizhou (Zhang, L. et al. 2022: 243).

4 "In Chinese history, political identification and dress (particularly male dress) were closely connected…and was deeply rooted in the understanding of social hierarchy" (An 2011: 184).

5 Local staff manage operations with financial and technical support from the Guangxi Anthropology Museum in Nanning as part of the 1+10 model established by the Guangxi Autonomous Regional Government (Zhang 2018). See Nitzky 2014, chapter 3 for more on the development of the Baiku Yao Ecomuseum and Donghai 2008 for a broader examination of how the ecomuseum concept has evolved in China.

6 For more background on the Monkey Stick Dance, see Nitzky 2014: 256–258, 261–262.

7 Anthropologist William Nitzky (2014: 237) found this to be a common complaint among visitors to Huaili's ecomuseum who felt there was nothing to see beyond the main exhibition center.

8 For a more thorough discussion of taboos and the impact of "luck" on the success of clothing production in Huaili, see Wang 2019a. Taboos related to indigo dyeing are shared with several other groups in Southwest China. Writer Catherine Bourzat (2016: 86) describes a similar taboo against strangers approaching an indigo dyepot for Gejia dyers in Guizhou.

9 Government officials and business elites commonly frame this desire not to commercialize all aspects of culture as a hindrance to necessary progress that should be overcome. See, for example, Ye and Xue 2022.

10 To learn more about the outcomes of relocation for Baiku Yao communities and its effects on daily life, see Hu et al. 2023. In terms of dye practices, the researchers found early evidence that relocation is eroding traditional knowledge about dye plants commonly used in the natural villages. The downy tree of heaven, however, remains an important cultural symbol, so even though none grow near relocation sites, an active circulation (commercial, gift, and trade) has sprung up to supply resettled communities.

11 Similarly, Nitzky (2014: 248) observed tourists being invited to try on garments following paid performances at the ecomuseum. Members of our team have also observed cognate practices

in the Dali and Lijiang areas of Yunnan and at Xijiang Miao Village in Guizhou. More recently (ca. May–June 2023), entrepreneurs in the ancient towns of Yunnan (Dali, Lijiang, Shaxi, Shuanglang, Xizhou, Dali) have begun offering up even more imaginative fantasy costumes assembled from a mix of minority dress (Miao silverwork, Uyghur veils, etc.), theatrical costume elements, and haute couture-style items (Jason Jackson, personal communication to the author, September 12, 2023).

12 One of the more notable examples is a 2019 publication *A Rainbow in the Mountains: Dress of the Yao* (Li 2019). Part of a series of books on ethnic minority dress cultures (*Zhongguo minzu fu shi wen hua shu xi*), *A Rainbow in the Mountains* has been celebrated as the most comprehensive and systematic examination of Yao clothing in China to date. Based on 15 years of fieldwork, the book documents more than 70 "costume types" in use within four linguistic subgroups (Mian, Bunu, Lakkia, and localized Mandarin dialects) across six province-level divisions (Guangdong, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Guizhou, Hunan, and Yunnan) (Bing 2023).

13 Scholars have assigned legendary significance to these stripes, speculating they allude to the tiger claw wounds or a bloody handprint suffered by heroic ancestors (e.g., King Pan/Panhu, the Dragon Dog or Li Shuibao). For representative examples, see Rong 2015: 264–265 and Garrett 1994: 185. Bin Wang (2019a: 23–24), however, counters that most Baiku Yao in Huaili reject these interpretations.

14 This seal or stamp design, *Yao Wangyin* or Yao King's Seal, is said to symbolize the golden seal bestowed on a legendary ancestor who died in battle and is sometimes characterized as a gendered counterpart to the "bloody handprint" embroidered on men's pants. See Liu 2022, and Endnote 13.

15 According to He Jinxiu, Baiku Yao clothing styles do vary between communities in Guangxi and Guizhou. She believes the most noticeable difference is overall tone, with Guizhou clothing being darker than in Guangxi (personal communication, December 17, 2017).

16 For the broader issue of rural-urban migration in China, see overviews by Eric Florence (2020), Hans Steinmüller (2020), Wanning Sun (2020), and Roberta Zavoretti (2020).

17 For a description of Baiku Yao funerals including the use of handmade funeral cloths, see Nitzky 2022 (especially p. 193).

18 I purchased a set of Li Guoying's dolls for the Museum of International Folk Art's permanent collection (A.2021.3.1ab).

19 In the specific case of the Baiku Yao, prurient interest centers on the open-sided tunic worn by women. For more on the broader context of the othering of ethnic minority women in tourism, media, and other spheres, see the pioneering works by Louisa Schein (1997; 2000; 2020).

20 The ICH Inheritors program is a four-tier system establishing separate and hierarchical lists at all four administrative levels of government. Cultural practitioners must apply and be accepted for inclusion on Inheritors' lists and many hope to advance toward the highest level of national recognition. To read more on how top-down ICH policies and list-based inscriptions can lead to new forms of social conflict and the uneven distribution of opportunity among local stakeholders, see Maags 2018 and Blumenfield 2018.

21 These concerns are not unwarranted as Baiku Yao have some comparative knowledge of the mass-marketed, factory-produced ethnic dress now produced in Eastern China and imported into minority areas, as among the Miao/Hmong in China, Southeast Asia, and diaspora communities in the west (ex. Turner et al. 2017: Chapter 7). Our team has seen such dress throughout China's Southwest and documented its sale in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

22 The amount of indigo paste required for dyeing depends on the desired effect. In general, the darkest shades of indigo are considered the most prestigious, because achieving such a depth of color when "dyeing black" entails a high quantity of both dye and time spent repeating steps to build up layers of color. In addition to a preference for darker shades, ethnologist Bin Wang (2019b) documented fashionable cycles in Lihu for shades of black that lean bluish, greenish,

or reddish. These subtle variations demonstrate one's deep knowledge of dyeing materials and processes, as well as one's ability to adapt those skills from year to year to follow prevailing trends. It also illustrates how relatively fast-moving dress trends do not require industrialization to develop.

23 For a more thorough description of men's dress across Dong subgroups, see Bu 2017.

24 The *dudou* or *doudu* (literally 'belly-band' or 'belly-wrap' in standard Chinese) is a common article of clothing that has assumed a variety of forms among different groups in the dress history of China reaching back to at least the Ming Dynasty (see Garrett 1994: 89, 182). Except in the case of children's clothes (Szeto 2010: 123–124), the *dudou* has generally been considered an undergarment intended for layering but in more recent decades has also been incorporated as outerwear in urban streetwear or runway fashion with intentionally provocative effect (Zhao 2013: 1–2). In Western fashion, this style of garment would more likely be classified as a 'dickey', 'chemisette', or 'bib'.

25 Marie Anna Lee (2018) documents red dye production in the Dimen Kam community in Guizhou where a reddish purple-black color is prized. She identifies the main ingredients as rhododendron leaves (*Rhododendron simsii Planch*), mashed yam tubers (*Dioscorea cirrhosa*), dried berries or roots of Chinese sumac (*Rhus chinensis*), and wood ash steeped in water (ibid.: 165–170). She also notes, especially for preparing indigo, some women prefer to reserve the secrets of their dye pot recipes for only their female heirs to know (ibid.: 132–135).

26 The production of shiny cloth is associated with a number of Miao and Dong groups and can vary between individual practitioners and communities. For a more detailed look at various processes, see Torimaru and Torimaru 2004.

27 Dong-style woven brocade – primarily used for making wedding bedcovers, burial shrouds, bags, baby-carriers, baby clothes, and trim for adult garments – was the first Dong textile tradition honored with national ICH status in 2008. More recently, Sanjiang Dong regional clothes-making and cloth production received prefecture-level recognition in 2016 and 2018 respectively. (See ICH list for Liuzhou.)

28 An explanation here may be necessary. Like Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Tongle is a township rather than a town. It thus includes, in a governance sense, both a recognizable town and a rural hinterland of villages. Like Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Tongle is not just a township, but an ethnic township. Because it is already situated within a Dong Autonomous County, the ethnic designation of Tongle Ethnic Township is given over to the Miao, who constitute a significant part of the township's total population. But, on the streets of Tongle-as-a-town, dress alone will quickly inform visitors that this is a Dong place.

29 A cottage industry, also known as a "putting-out" system, involves subcontracted producers working from their homes using materials and instructions provided to them by a central agent who usually pays them by the piece. Historically, this arrangement has been very common for various kinds of textile manufacturing throughout the world. Though it is often presented as an intermediate stage preceding a transition to industrial capitalism, as anthropologist Ronald Waterbury (1989: 244) has shown, the practice commonly reemerges when there is "sufficient demand for handmade or quasi-handmade goods" in a "population compelled by economic circumstances to sell its labor cheaply".

30 For more on characteristic Dong motifs, see Li and Xu 2018.

31 Dong design language, including popular motifs and their meanings, can vary from place to place making it possible for knowledgeable individuals to identify a woman's geographic origins based on details of her embroidery. Lee (2018), for example, identifies a different set of principal motifs for Dimen Dong, whose dress generally resembles that worn in Sanjiang. As in Sanjiang, some designs are considered obligatory. While there is great freedom in how the "happiness bird" motif is rendered, for example, a Dimen Dong woman's *dudou* should incorporate a version of it in the yoke embroidery (ibid.: 208).

32 As anthropologist Suvi Rautio (2024: 168–169) rightly points out, many social enterprises in China and elsewhere dislocate traditional handmade textiles in order to recontextualize them as broadly desirable products within a neoliberal framework for globalized standards of value.

33 Assessing the gaps between ICH rhetoric and empirical outcomes leads me to this conclusion, which is further supported by recent scholarship documenting a broader policy shift from communist pluralism toward an ethnonationalism that privileges "Han-dominant identity". See Franceschini and Loubere 2024.

34 This transformation is certainly not limited to the Dong in Sanjiang. For a comparable case study for the Miao (Hmong) in Yunnan, see Miyawaki 2020. Chie Miyawaki found that the introduction of mass-produced materials resulted in new ethnically-expressive styles, a shift in dress norms, and a general recalibration of clothing categories. These changes, however, did not weaken the in-group desire for ethnic clothing to serve as a boundary marker in the context of multiethnic China.

35 Yang Tian told us there was a small factory in Tongle Town manufacturing Dong machine-embroidery for *dudou*s, but we were unable to confirm its location, ownership, or scale of operation.

36 Wei Fengxian credited government interventions as contributing factors in this trend. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, she recollected, government officials pressured Dong women to abandon skirts for "modern" trousers; now, for the sake of tourism, officials are essentially paying the Dong to wear traditional skirts by subsidizing their production through ICH programs.

37 The work of Aranya Siriphon (2007) provides an interesting contrast to the situation in Sanjiang. She found a similar desire among Dehong Tai (Dai) in Yunnan for ethnic fashion that could communicate in-group wealth and status while also resisting sinicization. These desires were met by adopting imported Thai ethnic clothing that was perceived as of higher quality and prestige than Chinese products. Among the Dehong Tai, distinguishing themselves from the Han majority through a "culture of brotherhood" with Thai ethnicity was more important than asserting a unique Dehong Tai minority identity (ibid.: 229).

38 Indeed, many scholars writing about tourism in this region have noted the disappointment expressed by tourists to ethnic minority sites when they encounter people wearing "boring" indistinct clothes much like their own. (See, for example, Chio 2014: Chapter 4.)

39 Older women, too, tend to favor darker daily dress, sometimes over-dyeing their brightly colored *dudou*s with indigo to darken them for continued use.

40 As a common pattern throughout the world, the introduction of industrial clothing does not necessarily replace highly prized traditional styles of handmade dress, but instead reclassifies them strictly for special occasions (see Hertz 2021).

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