

BASKETRY CRAFT PRACTICE IN SOUTHWEST
CHINA: THE CASE OF DEFENG VILLAGE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the practice of basketry craft and its relationship to changing social dynamics in Southwest China that we have observed through collaborative ethnographic projects across the region. We here focus on the case of Defeng village, a Dong (Kam) settlement where the entire community specializes in producing a particular form of basket called *fanyouyou* (rice basket) for a regional market.

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Basket making as a living form of community-based culture in Defeng is practiced, sustained, and adapted by skilled basket makers in a fast-changing social, cultural, and economic landscape. When relevant, we will also compare the basketry in Defeng to other locales that we have visited in Southwest China.

KEYWORDS: basket making • economic policy • intangible cultural heritage • material culture • social change

INTRODUCTION

Basketry is relevant and meaningful today for villages and villagers in Southwest China in diverse ways. In the region, basketry plays a key role in people's daily activities and social and spiritual life, serving multiple purposes in people's work, household operations, festivals, rituals and ceremonies (Jackson and Zhang 2019; Kay 2022; Zhang et al. 2022). We have documented various types of basket used for different forms of practical work such as carrying food, catching fish, and washing rice and vegetables. We note that baskets also play a key role in social and spiritual life in Southwest China such as hanging a rice basket on a pole in front of a tomb as part of a funeral ceremony or putting a basket with a bowl of water in it on the kitchen wall to represent a godson or goddaughter. They also play a key role at the heart of marriage ceremonies, where they are central to gift exchanges of food that help join two families together. In addition, networked exchange and selling activities show the interaction and connection of community members and local ethnic groups as well as group identification. While basket making has a long history and is still vital in people's daily life, basketry craft practice also illustrates how traditional arts are reshaped under the influence of changing social dynamics. This paper offers a research report on the practices of basketry and heritage-related phenomenon in Southwest China that we have learned through the collaborative ethnographic projects conducted in the region as well as Lijun Zhang's working and living experience in the region.¹

In the uplands of Southwest China (Figure 1), a variety of forms of baskets are made, given, sold, bought, used, preserved, and presented in an extraordinary range of contexts. He Jinxiu, a master Baiku Yao textile artist residing in Huaili Village, Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region possesses 67 baskets in her home that she uses for a great number of purposes. Qin Fu Yuyin, a Dong (Kam) basket maker in Zhaicong Village, Tongle Miao and Dong Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region has 109 baskets of various kinds in his household. And the Dong basket shop owner in Tongle, Su Chengchang stocks 41 different types of baskets to serve his Dong, Miao, and Yao clientele. To do this, he purchases from local makers such as Qin in the neighboring village, but he also travels throughout his region, sometimes visiting villages where the entire community specializes in producing a handful of forms for a regional market. Our focus in this paper is one of Su's sourcing communities, a locale in Liping County, Guizhou province, called Defeng. In Defeng, the entire community specializes in producing a particular form of basket called *fanyouyou* (rice basket) for a regional market.² Among the adults of Defeng, basket making as a form of community-based living culture is practiced, sustained, and adapted by a large group of basket makers

living in a fast-changing social, cultural, and economic landscape.³ In this paper, we will look at the craft practice of basket making, the social and cultural meanings and significance of baskets to the community, the attempt to heritagize basket making skills, and how basket making is impacted by dynamic social processes. When it is relevant, we will also compare the basketry in Defeng to other places we have visited in southwest China.

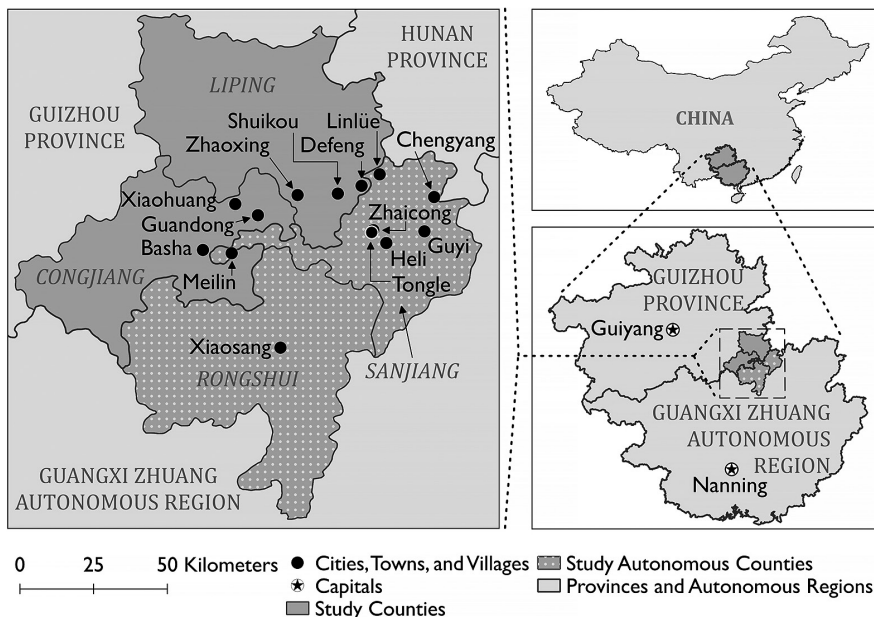


Figure 1. Location of Defeng village, Leidong Yao and Shui Township, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province in the context of the larger study region. The map marks the locations the author(s) have visited. Map by Tanager Mapping.

The paper will draw upon our ethnographic research and work experience in Southwest China. We have traveled alone and with our colleagues and project partners to a large number of rural communities in the mountains of China's Southwest. From 2015 to 2017, Zhang served as a research curator at the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (aka Guangxi Museum of Nationalities) and, in that role, she was involved in research and travel among the minority ethnic groups of Guangxi, especially in the places where museum-supported ecomuseums are located.⁴ From 2016 to 2018, as part of a joint China-US collaborative ethnographic research project that focused on museums and intangible cultural heritage (ICH), a binational research team drawn from four institutions documented the making, selling, and using of a diverse and impressive range of utility baskets in China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Jackson 2019; 2021; 2023).⁵ Separately from the work with the larger team, we conducted further fieldwork in 2019 on basketry in Defeng, the Dong village in neighboring Guizhou province that is our focus here.⁶ When compared to the more prosperous eastern and northern Chinese regions, most of the ethnic minority communities in the Southwest live in areas dominated by small-scale agriculture and are understood by the state to be economically

underdeveloped. However, like other parts of China, the region is also experiencing massive social, cultural, demographic, and economic change (Steinmüller 2020).

DEFENG VILLAGE OF THE DONG PEOPLE

Defeng is a small and remote mountain-top village in southeast Guizhou filled with skilled basket makers. It is located in Leidong Yao and Shui Ethnic Township, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, on the border between Guizhou province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Figure 1). Our field trip to Defeng was initiated in 2018 by a conversation with Su Chengchang, the owner of Guiyue Baskets and Wood Crafts Store on the Guangxi side of this border region. He referred to Defeng as one of the major sites for obtaining baskets wholesale. There is a highspeed train from other places to Luoxing, a town near Zhaoxing Dong Village, a key nearby ethnic-culture based tour site. But it still takes approximately an hour of highway driving and another hour on rugged local roads up the mountain to reach the village from Zhaoxing. It can also be reached by going up from the Guangxi side. We were told that before the modern transportation system was developed in the region, basket makers carried baskets on their shoulders and walked overnight over the mountain to sell baskets in Guangxi.

There are around 130 households in Defeng, with a total population of around 350. All of the villagers are Dong and most of them have the surnames of Shi and Yang. Local residents believe their ancestors were Han people, who migrated from Jiangxi province in eastern China and became Dong through adaptation and intermarriage with local Dong people. The farming land is limited and oftentimes far away due to the very mountainous geographical context. The villagers' ancestors terraced the slopes to create paddy fields and small pieces of farmable land. They plant rice and vegetables on the farmable land. Vernacular wooden houses in southern Dong style sit high on the mountain amid patches of fir trees, bamboo, and tea trees (Photo 1). To walk around the village, we had to climb and descend slopes. Income sources are limited. A small amount of income is from lumber and raising a few animals, such as pigs. The village is designated as an "extremely impoverished village" with half of the village households under poverty line (FM 2019).



Photo 1. The entrance to Defeng village, Leidong Yao and Shui Ethnic Township, Liping County, Qian-dongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, July 10, 2019.

In these contexts, basket making plays a vital role in the local economy. In this economically underdeveloped village, a major source of household income is from the making and selling of baskets. Defeng has a greater than 200-year history of basket making in elaborate and highly-valued types. There are today over 30 active basket makers residing and working there. Even though agriculture and agricultural lifestyles still dominate the village, but unlike other agriculture-dependent areas in Southwest China where many people do handcrafts during the winter when they are not occupied with farming work, community members in Defeng make baskets all year. Defeng is one of the places that supplies baskets to a vast rural region that includes parts of Guangxi, Hunan, and Guizhou and that includes not only southern Dong communities but people of other ethnic groups as well.

THE CRAFTING OF RICE BASKETS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Defeng is particularly known in the area for the production of a finely made style of rice basket (*fanyouyou*) favored by the Dong and other ethnic people. It is an elegant lidded basket used to contain and carry food, especially sticky rice. This basket type is sold and used throughout the region. Made using plaiting techniques of local bamboo, it consists

of a square, round or rectangular body, a bail handle, and a round or oval lid. The baskets come in somewhat varied forms, sizes, and weaves (Photo 2). The most commonly seen ones are in round, rectangle, and oval shapes. The cover can be more flat or more pointed in shape. The basket is tightly sealed with the lid to keep the sticky rice moist. But the basket still allows air to ventilate so that the food do not spoil quickly. The inner two layers of the basket body is woven with smooth, thin, and supple splints, with the green and more shiny side of the bamboo splint facing inward when bamboo outer skin is used. The outer two layers of the body has narrow bamboo strands horizontally woven through vertical wider splints, with the green side of the bamboo splints facing outward.⁷ The most outside layer is usually made of bamboo outer skin. The green side of the outer layer is smooth, durable, and aesthetically more appealing. The handle is made of three splints from the outer layer of the stem wall crossing each other on the top point. Some basket makers of high competence also make a particular and more rarely seen kind of basket to carry liquid food such as soups. For this kind of basket, the bamboo splints are woven around a hollow gourd. The splints for weaving the basket are made of moso bamboo (*Phyllostachys edulis*) (or *maozhu* in Chinese) that basket makers collect locally.⁸ The baskets are both durable and light. This basket type is used by the Dong, Miao, and Yao people in daily life and for special occasions such as festivals and weddings. It is also a type that is sold to outside visitors in tourist hotspots such as Zhaoxing, a scenic mega-village and the hub for Dong-focused cultural tourism.



Photo 2. Rice baskets made by basket artists in Defeng. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, July 10, 2019.

The significance of the rice basket in the community is reflected by a legend circulated among community members about how the making of the rice basket originated in the village. It is reported that about 200 years ago there was a man with the surname of Liao and his wife who wandered to the village to escape the war in his hometown in Jiangxi province. The villagers' ancestors hosted the couple. To express his gratefulness to the local people, the man, who was a master basket maker, taught the villagers the skill of making the rice basket. The narrative also emphasizes the exclusiveness of the skill transmission. The skill is said to be only taught to the men and not to the women in the village and it is only internally transmitted within the village. Neighboring villages are not able to make the kind of basket that the community members depend on as a long-term income source. Defeng residents do not conventionally teach outsiders the skill. Our consultant Shi Jinke, who told us the legend, said that if the outsiders are smart enough, they can learn from watching others making it (FM 2019). The legend presents the community member's collective memory related to the origin and long history of basket making in the village and underwrites a claim to being the home of this basket type in the Southwest.

Compared to the other communities we visited, the basketry craft practice in Defeng is distinctive in terms of scale and its status as a defining feature in local culture. In an article that examines basketry practices found among two minority nationalities populations, the Baiku Yao of Lihu Yao Ethnic Township in Nandan County and the Dong of Tongle Miao Ethnic Township in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County on the northern borders of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, we introduced two skillful basket makers: Li Guicai and Qin Fu Yuyin (Zhang et al. 2022). Li, who is from Huaili Village, Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, is the only fulltime basket maker in Huaili village. He started learning basket making with the goal of supporting his widowed mother and family. Later on, basket making provided him with an alternative way of making a living when life situations made individual work choices more limited. He started to be a full-time basket maker because health challenges prevented him from being a migrant worker or doing farm labor at home. In his village, many of the male residents can make baskets in simpler forms, such as those for carrying poultry or small pigs, but they rely on Li for the Baiku Yao-style rice basket. Similarly, Qin is among the few people in his Dong village of Zhaicong, in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, who are more actively engaged in the craft of making baskets. Qin learned the craft from someone outside of his village when he worked at a small hydroelectric station. He is actively engaged in farming activities and only makes baskets during his spare time to bring supplemental income to his family of five people. His signature form is a locally valued basket worn at the waist by wading fishermen, who use it as a creel. This form is a variant of another local type used for the harvesting of tea. He might make a bundle of baskets and offer them directly to buyers on a market day, but he regularly sells his wares to the local basketry retail store owned by Su Chengchang.⁹

The basket making in Defeng presents a different model in comparison to the situation in Li's Yao village and Qin's Dong one. With more than 30 skilled basket makers regularly making baskets, the high-density presence of talent and active traditional knowledge relating to basketry craft became a distinctive feature of Defeng. It makes it a remote place known to people in other areas and regions. This regional rice basket form becomes a representative cultural element and an identity marker that community



Photo 3. The canonical Defeng style of rice basket being used in a ceremony in Dudong Township, Sanjiang Dong Ethnic County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph credit to Anthropology Museum of Guangxi, March, 2011.

in Liping County, Guizhou, the rice baskets attract both local residents' and tourists' attention at local stores. Defeng rice baskets have established their reputation over history and throughout region and Defeng has become a key source community for basket retailers.

As mentioned previously, working more locally, Li and Qin take the baskets they make to their own local periodic markets. Qin also takes baskets to Su's nearby store. Like other specialty basket making villages in the region, Defeng has established a different basket trading model. When a large group of baskets are made, the wholesalers and retailers come to the village and buy the baskets at wholesale prices. They then resell the baskets at different markets, stores, and festivals. The market merchants and other buyers also today place orders through mobile phone and social media platforms such as WeChat (Weixin). With mobile payment tools, basket makers can receive a deposit when the order is placed.¹¹ This becomes a sustaining business model that connects Defeng to the various customers through digital media and a regional network of basket merchants.

The high level of skills and specialization of basket making in Defeng is also reflected by the tools that basket makers create and use. In China there is a saying that "one must have good tools in order to do a good job." Compared to Li and Qin who only use a billhook as their tool in the process of basket making, the basket making tool repertoire

members use to define themselves and to express village cultural identity. It helps them consciously and subconsciously mark and represent their tradition and identity. Upon our arrival, a younger villager we met proudly said "we are 'home of the Dong rice basket [*Dongzhai fan-youyou zhi xiang*]'...we depend on it for our living. The whole village makes these rice baskets, all year round." (FM 2019).¹⁰ This is an example of community members using the rice basket as cultural and identity markers. This is something that we don't find in Li and Qin's case.

While Li and Qin's baskets are for family and community members' use and are sold in a local market context, the rice baskets made in Defeng supply needs both near and far. We have seen that the kind of rice basket that basket makers in Defeng specialize in making are sold not only in Su's store in Tongle and by a retailer in a street market in Guyi, the county seat for Sanjiang County. We have seen people using them at a Dong folksong festival in Meilin Township, Sanjiang County. At the nearby tour site of Zhaoxing Dong Village

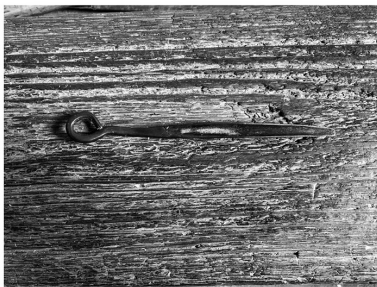
in Defeng is much more specialized (Photo 4). After a bamboo stalk is cut down and brought back to their home work areas, basket makers use a buck saw to saw the bamboo stalk to the desired length. A knife froe (*po mie dao*) is commonly used for splitting bamboo into strips of varying widths. A homemade tool called a polishing knife is used to polish the two edges of the splints and to make their width smooth and even.¹² When the knife for splitting bamboo is horizontally put on a bamboo jig (*an dao jia*) with the blade facing 45 degrees upward, it can be used to smooth and polish the surface of the bamboo splint. The splint can be further polished with a sanding pad. Bundles of bamboo splints are thus prepared and hung on the wall or placed on the floor, ready to be used to weave baskets. During the basket weaving process, a basket maker's awl is put to use to help make space for inserting the splints.



Knife froe and sanding pad



Polishing knife and bamboo jig



Basket maker's awl



Buck saw

Photo 4. Tools used by Defeng basket makers for making rice baskets. Defeng, Leidong Yao and Shui Ethnic Township, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, July 10, 2019.

Despite its impressive scale of production, making baskets remains an individual and family production activity in Defeng. Even though the basket making in Defeng is much more specialized than the villages that we visited in Nandan County and Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, we did not observe divisions of labor that are common in industrialized ways of production. Local basket makers do all the work and master all of the procedures of making rice baskets. They cut bamboo and take it back home (Photo 5). They split the bamboo and make the bamboo splints, and later use the splints to weave baskets. Most of the male community members learn to make baskets



Photo 5. A Defeng villager carrying a bamboo stem back home. Defeng, Leidong Yao and Shui Ethnic Township, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, July 10, 2019.

much for the basket making process. On the other hand, the basket makers are more used to, and comfortable, working in their own houses rather than going to the village facility. (FM 2019)

Young people show more interest in basketry craft practice in Defeng compared to our study villages in Nandan and Sanjiang. When asked if the young people in their family and village are interested in learning basket making from them, basket masters Li and Qin both pro-

Photo 6. Shi Jingao making rice baskets in his living room. Defeng, Leidong Yao and Shui Ethnic Township, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang July 10, 2019.

from older community members when they were young, oftentimes when they were still a teenager. The basket makers said the skill that is hardest to acquire is making splints. It takes at least two to three years of working to fully master this skill. The major challenge is that the thickness of the splint is not even, the basket makers need to make some sections thinner based on their experience (FM 2019).¹³ This also makes it hard to have the basket making automated and industrialized. This doesn't mean that the village didn't try to industrialize the production of rice baskets. In 2017, the government invested in buying machines and helped the village open a small factory called Defeng Village Bamboo Basket Production Development Co-operation. The co-operation invited community basket makers to join it but the community member's enthusiasm only lasted for two weeks. We were told that there were two major reasons that the new ways of production were not adopted by the basket makers in Defeng. On one hand, the machine does not help



vided negative answers (FM 2017; 2018). Basket craft seems to be only practiced by the older generation and the prospect of making baskets is not something relevant to the younger generation in those places, although young people remain active basket users. In Defeng, there are many basket makers who are in their senior age and who have been making baskets for many decades. The basket maker Shi Jingao said that he started to make rice baskets when he was around 15 (FM 2019). Now, after 60 years, his is still making rice baskets in his 70s (Photo 6). Like the cases of Nandan and Sanjiang, many younger community members in Defeng Village become migrant workers in cities or have left the village for better opportunities. Even though rare, we still do see young people in Defeng show interest in basketry craft or engage in basket making activities. We anticipate that this is true of other remote, basketry specialist villages in the Guizhou-Guangxi borderlands.

Upon our arrival in the village, we were quickly introduced to Shi Jinke. Shi, who was in his 30s when we met him in 2019, learned to make rice baskets from his father at the age of 18 (Photo 7). He later spent more than a decade in a city in southern China as a factory worker. He came back to the village in 2016 and joined his elder brother and other baskets makers in the village in making baskets to earn a living. With his brother, he lives in a traditional two-story wooden house that their parents left to them. He said he didn't like the worker's life in the city. Rather, he enjoys living among his own people and the less stressful village lifestyle. Basket making provides him with a way to return-migrate to the village and to have more autonomy in leading his own life. With his technological skills, Shi connects with retail and wholesale basket buyers from near and far through the social media app WeChat on his phone. He takes orders for himself through social media. When an order is too large for him to fulfill alone, he shares the order with senior and elderly basket makers of his village who themselves do not have internet fluency or who do not use the internet at all.



Photo 7. Shi Jinke making rice baskets in his ground-floor workshop. Defeng, Leidong Yao and Shui Ethnic Township, Liping County, Qian-dongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, July 9, 2019.

BASKET TRADING AND ITS IMPACT ON LOCAL LIFE

Even though Defeng is remote and perched atop a mountain, it is an important connecting node in a trading network spanning adjacent areas of Guizhou province, Guangxi

Zhuang Autonomous Region, and Hunan province. Since Defeng is the key source community of the particular kind of rice baskets that are in high demanded by multiple ethnic groups, the rice basket makers are put in an advantage position in the trading relationship. When asked why he made the decision to come back to Defeng and make rice baskets for living, Shi said, “The businessmen send money to our house, they pay the deposit. They need us. It not the case that we need them.” (FM 2019) It was reported to us that most of the rice baskets are bought and used by the Dong and by subgroups of Miao such as Cao Miao and Da Miao people living in Liping County and Congjiang County in Guizhou province, Guilin, Sanjiang Dong Anthonomus County, Rongshui Miao Autonomous County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and Tongdao Dong Autonomous County in Hunan province (FM 2019). Nowadays, a growing number of rice baskets are sold to tourist destinations and business entities such as hotels (Photo 8).



Photo 8. Tourists showing interest in rice baskets available at a local store in Zhaoxing Dong Village, Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province, China. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, July 9, 2019.

A basket of regular size in the canonical Defeng style takes from one to two days to make and it is generally sold for 50 to 70 RMB (around 7 to 12 US dollars). Despite this low price relative to labor inputs, the large demand from neighboring and regional communities makes basket production a stable or reliable source of income for the villagers. Such stable income supports a lifestyle that involves, as we were told, “being poor but not impoverished,” a more laid-back attitude, and the daily enjoyment of rural life, music, drinking, and social activities among the Defeng residents (FM 2019). According to Xu Yeping, the official who had been staying in the village and who is familiar

with the villagers' lives, most of the residents do not have savings, and their houses are shabby compared to some other places. But they have no lack of money. When it is not the busy season for farm work, they enjoy a slower pace of life when compared to the other nearby communities. Many residents do not get up until 8 o'clock in the morning. When they have made a few dozen rice baskets, they would sell them and stop making any more. Instead, they invite relatives and friends to visit places, drink, play cards, or enjoy other forms of entertainment. They start to make rice baskets after they have spent all the money. The cycle and pattern of life continues in this way and sets the villagers in the "being poor but not impoverished" condition. (FM 2019) Such arrangements are a reoccurring theme in craft and artisanal economies in cross-cultural contexts and represent a stark contrast with regimented factory labor, something younger Defeng adults know from experience and older Defeng residents know through the experiences of their younger relatives.¹⁴

A LOCAL OFFICIAL'S VIEW AND A VERNACULAR VIEW OF ICH

Despite the economic and cultural significance of the rice basket to the local community and to users across the Dong region, the practice and transmission of the basket making here, as in Nandan and Sanjiang, faces uncertainty as many villagers become migrant workers, most of the younger generation no longer regard the craft as a viable means of livelihood, and the relocation of villagers, due to infrastructure construction and government-led poverty alleviation projects, threatens to scatter the village as a social group. A high-speed railway is planned to be constructed in the area. For the county government, poverty alleviation has become a primary official task in Defeng. Some villagers have moved to the county seat as part of the poverty alleviation program. There are still around 20 households who do not want to move. Most of them are the senior members of the community. They do not feel like they can adjust to the new life at the county seat. In addition, they have to depend on basket making in the village to make a living. Defeng villagers who presently still stay in the village are still being persuaded to relocate to new houses close to the county seat. The village has now lost its elementary school because of depopulation and the relocation of the community members and the fate of its longstanding basketry tradition is uncertain. Even though Shi seems to firmly believe that the basket making skill will be transmitted from one generation to another as the demand in daily life will determine the continuity of the folk art, the situation and social transformation described above will lead to uncertainty and complexity for the future transmission of the knowledge and skill.

Under such circumstances, like many other places in China, local people tried to use the ICH designation system as a way to preserve the skill and to help with local development (Kong and Song 2018; Zhang 2019; Yang 2020). The official in charge of the poverty alleviation project in the village tried to persuade the Liping County government to work on bringing "added value" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998) to the local rice basket and basket industry through nominating Defeng rice basket making skills as formally recognized and validated ICH. To his disappointment, his proposal was dismissed by the local government. (FM 2019) In Southwest China, the ICH discourse and practice related to basketry is scarce in comparison to the highly promoted and celebrated tex-

tile arts such as ethnic costume and associated arts such as embroidery. But, in this regional context, the concept of ICH has clearly started to be introduced to the community and there is awareness among some community members such as Shi Jinke. Xu's proposal to designate Defeng rice basket craft as ICH was inspired by his trip to the neighboring province of Yunnan where he visited a basket-focused ICH museum and related basket factories in Hekou County. For him, the major motivation is to raise the value of Defeng rice basket and to attract more consumers. In his view, the rice basket has only been used for its use value as a daily utensil or practical necessity. Its "artistic value" or "esthetic value" are not reflected in the selling price. Echoing the authorized ICH discourse, he believes that selecting basket makers as ICH inheritors would ensure the continuity of the craft skill. In addition, the "artistic value, transmission value, and craft value" of the rice basket would be represented and thus the folk art and handcraft could be sold in a higher price on the market. Furthermore, he thinks that ICH designation could help with the development of industrialization in basket making and the development of local tourism. (FM 2019) This reflects an instrumental conception and an understanding of ICH that is widespread among local officials across the region. It is one that also impacts local community members' understandings of ICH. When asked about his opinion of ICH, Shi said that if an ICH designation could add value to the rice basket and that they thus could sell baskets for a higher price, more younger community members who works in the factories would come back and make rice baskets.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic research helps us to better understand the current condition and practice of basket craft practice in Southwest China and the impact of social change on the practice. It also helps us to think about the transmission and sustaining of community tradition and other issues related to ICH safeguarding. The lidded rice basket loved by the Dong and used by them and their neighbors plays an essential role both in the distinctiveness of Defeng village and its interactions and connections with other ethnic groups. The craft, transmission, social significance, and cultural meanings of the rice basket in Defeng is exemplary of what the Chinese folklorist Liu Tieliang (2005: 50) has characterized as "representative culture." According to him, the representative culture of a community should 1) reflect the unique historical process and contribution of the community; 2) show vitality and represent the collective character and disposition of the community; and 3) profoundly connect to local lifestyle and various cultural phenomenon. The rice basket of the southern Dong area holds a unique position in representing the localness of Defeng. This basket mediates and enhances the village's connection with other communities and peoples in the region. It reflects Defeng's contribution to the region and its cultural life. That cultural life is actually expanding as the basket gets taken up into new contexts of use, such as hotel and restaurant decoration where it is a marker of rural, regional, and ethnic lifestyles.

In the meantime, the rice basket craft practice profoundly impacts local people's daily lifeways and connects to other cultural elements in various ways. It supports and sustains the lifestyle of the community members. This is true in our case of Defeng, but it is also true everywhere in the region where such bamboo baskets are made, circu-

lated, and used. It is a central connecting node in the network of local life and culture as well as an iconic cultural element that community members use to identify themselves and to form their identities as craftsmen, as village residents, as Dong people, as rural people, and as participants in the contemporary Chinese economy. As stated above, the region is very diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, economy, and geographical features. Miao, Yao, and Dong people in northwestern Guangxi and southeastern Guizhou live close to each other and very often may go to the same multiethnic markets. In general, baskets are not as distinctively used in ethnic representation as some other cultural items such as national dress. But Defeng is an exception. Defeng rice basket production and use plays an important role in inter-regional and inter-group relationship and group identification. Other peoples in the region connect Defeng Village to the particular kind of rice basket that is widely used in daily life, festivals, and ceremonies and which have cultural significance in the region. Defeng community members such as Shi Jinke can also recognize the different baskets made by different ethnic groups in the neighboring areas based on their styles and functions and identify where they are made. In this mode of village level craft specialization, the case of Defeng and its basket making neighbors, this part of the Southeast Asian massif parallels the situation in other world locations, such as Oaxaca, Mexico (ex: Cohen and Browning 2007).

Our ethnographic research has helped us understand the differentiation and dynamics of basket making in Southwest China. Baskets remain central to everyday life and to special ritual and festival occasions for nearly every rural southern Dong, Yao, Miao and other ethnic person. For basket makers or those who are learning the trade, basket making can provide an alternative way of making a living when life situations make individual choices more limited, as in the case of Li in Huaili village. Basketry can significantly connect to the community lifestyle, cultural activities, and local identity as in the case of Defeng village and other villages where basketry is a community-wide industry.

In some other world regions, hand-made baskets have become highly valued for the cultural traditions and identities that they symbolize. Japan and Native North America represent comparative examples most central to our own research. But in Defeng, and more generally in the other communities that we and our collaborators have visited in Guizhou, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Sichuan, we have observed the *relative* (not absolute) absence of government involvement with baskets in terms of heritage discourse and practice. They are, in most rural areas, still an art and craft of necessity embedded with the habitus of everyday life (Jackson et al. 2020). Paradoxically, they thus hold and express the essence and value that UNESCO originally set for the designation of intangible cultural heritage, namely, the sustainability and vitality of traditional culture in community life. Although it is undergoing significant change, basket making and basket using is not only a thing of the past. It is a living tradition (Jackson and Zhang 2019; Zhang et al. 2022).

As reflected in the Defeng case, basketry craft practice is very much under the influence of changing social dynamics. Our documentation and study of baskets presents a historical period in China that is characterized by a transition point from a largely traditional, agriculture-based society to a more modern, industrial, urbanized, and service-oriented society. Currently, market demand and the importance of the basket in local daily life still sustains this traditional craft. However, it clearly is experiencing the impact

of social changes. These include the shrinking of small-scale non-mechanized agriculture, aging and depopulating rural communities, the rise of cultural tourism, regional and local engagements with cultural heritage initiatives, electrification, internet connectivity, and other aspects of technology development, strengthening of transport infrastructure, state-led environmental interventions, and policy-oriented programs such as poverty elimination efforts. During our visit to Defeng, most of the households that we visited only had senior people and young kids. While it boasted more younger adults than other communities of its type, many middle-aged villagers have become migrant workers. The continuity in, and the evolving nature of, community crafting practices, including bamboo basketry, faces increasing complexity and uncertainty. As in fabric arts, further differentiation is likely. Some baskets will be – and are being – replaced by industrial replacements, but artisanal heritage production may become established and grow in a heritage context still somewhat on the horizon. Basket makers and their communities will have to continue navigating the changes, opportunities, and challenges brought by these processes of social change. Such social processes not only have direct impacts on the crafting practice itself. Maybe more significantly when thinking about the practice of ICH safeguarding, they can also change the socio-cultural environment in ramifying ways, altering the broader circumstances that are fundamental for the practice, vitality, and continuity of the ICH seen holistically as an integrated way of life entangled with countless connected cultural practices and elements.

NOTES

1 Jason Baird Jackson (2023) provides a full account of the collaborative research projects on which this paper is based. As noted below, Lijun Zhang worked as a researcher focused on intangible cultural heritage issues at the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi between 2015 and 2017. She is also familiar with the social life of baskets in China more generally, having been born and raised in rural Fujian province in a basket-using farm family.

2 Our fieldwork was conducted in standard Mandarin Chinese and all the local terms in this paper are in standard Mandarin Chinese.

3 A more extensive and fuller report and examination of basketry practice in Southwest China will, we hope, eventually be available in a book that we are writing. In the book, we look at the making, selling, using, and collecting of bamboo baskets across this region. Our studies have taken place mainly in upland communities in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. Briefer work has taken place in lowland Sichuan.

4 In Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (AMGX), along with the provincial cultural administration, has developed the “1+10 Ecomuseum Program.” In the “1+10 Ecomuseum Program,” 1 refers to the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi and 10 refers to the 10 ecomuseums that are developed by the AMGX. The ecomuseums are located in different ethnic communities across the region. The AMGX and the ecomuseums establish collaborative relationships. In such relationships, the AMGX provides the ecomuseums with administrative, institutional, professional, and financial support while the ecomuseums, with their proximity to local communities and community members, work with the AMGX on community engagement, cultural documentation, cultural preservation, display of local society and culture and other cultural practices (Zhang 2018).

5 The four institutions engaged in the collaborative project are the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi, the former Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University, the Michigan

State University Museum, and the Museum of International Folk Art. The Anthropology Museum of Guangxi's English translation was Guangxi Nationalities Museum before 2016. The Mathers Museum of World Cultures was incorporated into the newer Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 2020.

6 The areas of the Southwest where we have visited are among the most ethnically diverse regions in China. Remarkable cultural diversity co-occurs here, and is shaped by, unique and varied geographical features. Most of our field sites are rural, mountainous areas where minority nationalities groups such as the Yao, Dong, Miao, Bai, and Zhuang live.

The Dong, known to themselves as Kam, are "the northeastern most Tai-speaking highland minority group, located in China" with a population of just under three million as of 2010 (Michaud et al. 2016 [2006]: 129). The Dong reside in upland locations within the Southeast Asian Massif where they practice irrigated rice cultivation and are, in numerous but not all locales, being pulled into commercial heritage-tourism activities. The Dong are one of the 56 nationalities, or ethnic groups, recognized officially by the People's Republic of China. On the basis of dialect and other cultural features, the Dong can be characterized as having two logical, geographically manifest, sub-groupings – northern and southern (Geary et al. 2003). Like the Dong people we have met in Guangxi, the Dong of Defeng are of the southern Dong grouping. We have not traveled in the territory of the northern Dong. See Jackson and Zhang 2024a for more background on the Dong people, including additional citations to the literature about them.

More briefly, we offer additional contextualization of other ethnic groups/nationalities mentioned in this article. In their own ways, all of the following peoples living in upland areas share a broad regional sociocultural adaptation to this environmental and social context, but each also manifests considerable interethnic and intra-ethnic distinctiveness. See Michaud et al. 2016 [2006] for specific accounts of these and other peoples as well as for a general orientation to the region of concern in our work.

Yao: People identified by the Chinese government as Yao live widely distributed across Southern and Southwestern China and groups related to the Yao in China are found in neighboring parts of the Southeast Asian Massif. Jean Michaud, Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, and Margaret Byrne Swain (2016 [2006]: 427) identify 3.6 million Yao living across this transnational region (ca 2010). We have not engaged with Yao people living in the vicinity of any of the Dong settlement areas where we have visited but we have pursued related research among one Yao population, the Baiku Yao of Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, Hechi (Prefecture-Level) City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Jackson 2023; Zhang et al. 2022). Zhang also did short-term research among the Ao Yao at Jinxiu Guchen Ao Yao Ecomuseum in Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County, Laibing (Prefecture-Level) City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Yao groups share languages of the Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mein) language family. For work by our research group on basketry among the Baiku Yao, see Zhang et al. 2022 and Kay 2022.

Miao: People identified by the Chinese government as Miao live widely distributed across Southwest China and groups related to the Miao in China are, as with the Yao, also found widely in neighboring parts of the Southeast Asian Massif. We have only engaged lightly with any Miao settlements found near the Dong communities in our study region. These are at the village cluster associated with Basha Administrative Village, Bingmei Town, Congjiang County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou and (for Lijun only) Xiaosang Administrative Village, Antai Township, Rongshui Miao Autonomous County, Liuzhou (Prefecture-Level) City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Beyond the area of Dong settlement, we have also engaged with the Miao people of Longjia Village, Suoga Miao, Yi, and Hui Ethnic Township, Liuzhi Special District, Liupanshui (Prefecture-Level) City, Guizhou. Michaud, Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, and Swain (2016 [2006]: 256) report a Miao population just in China of just under 9.5 million for 2010 and there are large numbers of Miao (Hmong) in Southeast Asia and global diaspora. Miao groups share languages of the Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) language family.

Zhuang: Still larger in population than the Yao and Miao, the Zhuang constitute the largest of the minority groups recognized by China residing in, and adjacent to, the Southeast Asian Massif. For the Zhuang in China and neighboring Vietnam, Michaud, Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, and Swain (2016 [2006]: 438) cite a combined population of over 20 million people. Our engagements with Zhuang people are limited, but include encounters in Chengguan Town, Nandan County, Hechi (Prefecture-Level) City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and (for Zhang) Jiuzhou Zhuang Ecomuseum at Jiuzhou Administrative Village, Xinjing Township, Jingxi County, Baise (Prefecture-Level) City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The language or languages of the Zhuang are a part of the Tai-Kadai language family.

Bai: A key area of study for our broader work in Southwest China, but existing at considerable distance from Defeng village and the southern Dong, are the Bai people centered primarily in northwestern Yunnan. Our engagements among the Bai and their immediate neighbors have been comparatively extensive and have taken place in villages and towns within the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan. Michaud, Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, and Swain (2016 [2006]: 66) cite, for 2010, a Bai population in western Yunnan of just under two million, with significant numbers of people classified as Bai also residing in Guizhou and Hunan. The Bai people speak a language, in multiple dialects, of the Tibeto-Burman language family. See Wuerxiya et al. 2022 for work by our team related to basketry and other crafts among the Bai.

Han: The ethnonym Han refers to the majority nationality recognized by the People's Republic of China. While not touched on in our article, Han people can be found throughout not only Southwest China but beyond in other parts of the Southeast Asian Massif and mainland Southeast Asia more broadly. We do not touch on Han specifics in this article, but it is important to register the Han presence in our wider study region and in the lives of people living in minority communities such as Defeng village. For a brief overview of the Han in an upland Southwest China/Southeast Asian Massif context, see Michaud et al. 2016 [2006]: 169. We have specifically engaged with Han basket makers and sellers throughout Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, but not in the Dong areas of Guangxi or Guizhou.

7 As Kazuyoshi Kudo points out, for the bamboo wall, the fiber of bamboo outer skin is of greater density compared to the inner layer towards the stem cavity. Thus the outer layer makes stronger and more resilient weaving material. The fiber becomes less dense and weaker when it is closer to the central stem cavity. (Kudo and Sukanuma 1980: 69) The inner layer of the stem wall is less suitable for basket weaving, especially if you want to make the basket stronger and more durable. It is also common to find baskets made of the inner layer of the stem wall. In contexts such as the baskets under discussion, the shiny, smooth, and more moisture-repellent, and thus cleaner, side of the bamboo faces in toward the food, but it also – in an additional, outer layer of weaving, faces outward. This is an ideal arrangement for baskets being used for food, where cleanliness is desired.

8 The bamboo family is very large. According to Kazuyoshi Kudo and Kiyomi Sukanuma (1980: 5), there are 46 genera of bamboo with over 1,200 species. Bamboo is widely planted in Southwest China. The particular species of the moso bamboo or *maozhu* used to make rice basket in Defeng is called *nan zhu* in Chinese. Bamboo is a very accessible natural material in this region. People use it to make different kinds of daily items, working tools, ceremonial objects, architectural forms, and decorative items. For baskets, the bamboo basket maker prefers to use bamboo of around two-years old as the splints made of bamboo at this age are both supple and durable.

9 Across the region, there is a periodic market day in the local town center every three or five days for people from the surrounding areas to buy practical utensils and to sell their farm products and handcrafts (Jackson and Zhang 2024b). See Skinner 1985 for the renewal of periodic markets in China after 1977.

10 Declaring a place as “Home of XX” is not only a way for people to identify a particular cultural element or product as a local marker, it has also become a branding and marketing strategy

in many places in China and globally. It indicates that the place is known for the cultural practice or for producing the product, usually over a long period of time. In the context of ICH policies and the development of cultural tourism, many places use such declarations to promote themselves and to attract visitors. We later learned that the declaration of Defeng Village as “home of the Dong rice basket” was first proposed by Xu Yeping, a government official from Liping County who is assigned the work of staying in the village and helping with poverty alleviation. Xu tried to promote Defeng rice baskets and used the declaration to help with local development (FM 2019).

11 This model is important to ensure a fair share of the money from selling the baskets on the market. The price difference between the wholesale price in Defeng Village and the retail price at local markets is small. According to Li Guozhong, a basket merchant in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, Nandan County, the retail profit for each basket that he sold is around 2 to 3 RMB (approximately 30 to 40 cents in US dollars). This situation in most rural contexts is quite different from that found in areas where tourists constitute a key market (Dali, in Yunnan, being an example). In those situations, the difference between wholesale and retail price can be quite great, setting up very different market effects in local society.

12 In Chinese, the term *po mie dao* or *po zhu dao* ‘bamboo splitting knife’ specifically refers to the kind of knife froe that is used to split bamboo. It comes in different forms. The knife is used to section bamboo and to split bamboo splints. While studying the knife froe online, we found a tool in round shape that has six blades for sectioning a piece of bamboo all at once and this is referred to as *zhuzi kaipian ji* (‘bamboo sectioning machine/tool’). Cutting bamboo, sectioning bamboo and making bamboo splints are the procedures that are more easily automated or industrialized with machines or the assistance of special tools in the process of basket making. The machines at Defeng Village Bamboo Basket Production Development Co-operation have the function to do such work for the basket makers. In other parts of China, there are other tools that basket makers use, including striking maul, drawknife, splitting wedges, curved awl, vise grips, and curved gouge as shown in a photo by Deng Longhua in a news story titled “A Senior Basket Maker Practicing the Handcraft for 50 Years and His Hard Work Leads Him to a Better Life” on *Xinhua News* (Wang and Deng 2023). Since conferring with the makers in Defeng, we have documented the use of the bamboo sectioning tool with basket makers in Yunnan.

13 In his book *Japanese Bamboo Baskets: Form and Function Series*, Kudo also points to another reason why making thin bamboo splints is technically difficult. He explains that, when slender horizontal bamboo strands are woven around wide but thin vertical splints, the wide vertical splints need to be pliable at the basket rim. So the width of the splints is tapered. The basket maker needs to do the weaving with care, carefully controlling their strength and balancing the construction. Otherwise, the basket won’t be as durable. It takes a certain amount of experience to split the bamboo to shape the right kind of splints. (Kudo and Suganuma 1980: 69)

14 For a sophisticated treatment of masculinity and rural return migration, among young Dong men of a different community and its complex effects in village social life, see Rautio 2022.

15 Why was the proposed ICH designation denied for Defeng? We do not know this, but we speculate on the basis of regional dynamics that baskets – particularly utility work baskets – remain too widely made and too taken for granted in everyday life to be positioned alongside less utilitarian and more time-intensive and aestheticized practices such as weaving, embroidery, and silverwork. At the same time, we have increasingly documented situations in the region in which basket makers and basketry are being woven into the official Chinese ICH system. In the Southwest, such efforts are relatively further along in Yunnan, Hainan and Sichuan relative to Guizhou and Guangxi. Our discussions in Defeng included recognition by Defeng residents that other neighboring villages were specialists in other local basketry forms. Village X makes basket type A; Village Y makes basket type B, etc. In such a context, a county or prefectural ICH official might be wary of granting a status to one village that numerous other villages might feel a right to claim also.

SOURCES

FM = Authors' fieldwork materials from 2019, collected in Liping County, Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou province. Fieldwork materials from 2017 and 2018 were collected in Nandan County, Hechi Prefecture City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Liuzhou Prefecture City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Materials are kept in the authors' personal collection and permission has been obtained to disclose the informants' names in the article.

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