



Research article

Preserving the Feitao Ritual in an Era of Globalization: The Heritage Ecology of Maonan Ethnic Minority in Modern China

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of the Feitao ritual, a traditional practice of the Maonan ethnic minority, within the broader context of globalization and heritagization in China. It addresses the challenge of preserving the cultural identity and memory of ethnic minorities amidst economic development imperatives, a dilemma common to many late-developing countries. By focusing on transforming the Feitao ritual from a communal practice to a performative spectacle, this study unravels the intricate process of heritage ecology within minority rituals. Utilizing a combination of ethnological fieldwork and interviews, this article explores the perceptions and approaches toward the post-heritagization of the ritual among the Maonan community members and policymakers. It also emphasizes on the evolution of the ritual into a significant tourist attraction, showcasing the performative transformation of religious practices by an ethnic minority in China. The central argument of this article is that this ritual is formed in ecological interactions; it also symbolizes a self-defense for the rights and a pursuit of recognition for a minority group. It has been a vital medium for the Maonan people to construct and uphold a positive self-perception. This study endorses a faith-aware and community memory-focused approach to preserve the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. The authors contend that this approach is essential to safeguard the cultural memory and identity of minorities in developing countries like China against the homogenizing forces brought by globalization in China.

Keywords: Maonan minority group, Feitao ritual, heritage, ecology, globalization.



Climate Action, Life on Land

Introduction

The narrative of the Feitao [肥套] ritual by Maonan [毛南] people begins with a metaphorical interest in the presence of masks. European elites wear masks during European carnival traditions, such as masquerade parties, which usually feature a fest of music and dance. On this special carnival occasion amidst the normalcy throughout the year, attendees express taboo desires,

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which are normally forbidden to demonstrate on all other days, by using these masks as a canvas to subvert gender and societal norms (Mitchell, 2017, p.291). By using a variety of colors, they promote an environment free from judgment and allow people to express themselves freely and anonymously (Tseëlon, 2001, p.2). Masquerade balls are mainly for amusement and call for masks for performers; in contrast, the ritual masks from Guangxi, China, have more religious significance (Han, 2012, p.86).

About three hundred years ago during the Ming Dynasty (1368 –1644), the Feitao ritual had become a collective religious practice of the Maonan group (Han, 2012, p.11). The ritual has its origins in the ecological interactions of the Maonan people, whereby the deities control the climatic forces that affect prosperity, life, and human activity. Local people use music, dance, and offerings in the form of grains and livestock to express their reverence for the deities (Han, 2012, p.31). It consists of about a dozen songs and dances, with the ritual masters dancing and singing while wearing masks of various shapes and sizes, each of which is strictly regulated and limited to be presented in the ritual arena (Chen & Zhang, 2014, p. 113).

This ritual, which has been maintained by more than a dozen generations of Maonan since the late Ming Dynasty, establishes communication and interaction between Maonan and nature, and with the deities, and is an integral part of the community's identity and sense of belonging (Yang, 2010, p.18). Bangstad and Pétursdóttir (2021) propose that ecology includes not only how human culture is conditioned by natural forces, but also how humans shape natural history locally and regionally. However, after the ritual was included in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China by the Chinese government in 2006, several local government-led renovation projects redefined the traditional rituals of the Maonan group.

The ritual is now a key aspect of local heritage tourism. The masks in rituals are no longer exclusive to the ritual master but have been demystified as wholesale souvenirs and merchandise in the hands of tourists; music and dance elements have been extracted from the supposed sacred ritual and adapted into local popular songs and dances. This ritual has become a local landmark tourist experience by appearing at local cultural events or festivals. It is no longer a ritual that only appears at religious events but has undergone significant secularization. Ironically, the local government promotes a staged version of the ritual as the so-called truest epitome of the Maonan culture, commencing a widespread narrative that the adapted ritual is still the soul of the Maonan group.

This development poses a critical dilemma: can the Feitao ritual be commodified for tourist consumption without compromising its historical and collective significance? The feasibility of authentically representing the Maonan's historical beliefs through staged performances becomes questionable when religious facets and ritual functions undergo substantial modification. Amidst globalization, the Chinese government has embraced heritagization, repurposing ethnic minority customs for tourism appeal. The ritual's case suggests that reinterpreting ethnic minority rituals risks eroding the authenticity of collective memory and eradicating vital historical components. Such issues illuminate the inherent conflicts and strains during the commodification of ethnic rituals and the subsequent cultural and global responses.

This ethnographic study involved interviewing participants of the ritual and applying narrative analysis to explore the interplay between the divine and secular aspects of the ritual. Fieldwork

for this research, predominantly consisting of interviews and observations, was undertaken in Huanjiang Autonomous County [环江自治县], Guangxi province, in 2016, 2019, and 2021. The central research questions posed in this article address the transformation of the Maonan ritual music: How does the Feitao ritual relate to the local ecology? What catalyzed the shift in the performative aspects of the ritual? How did ritual music evolve from being a taboo to becoming a symbol in popular culture? Furthermore, this study examines the repercussions of these changes on the Maonan community. Although the Maonan people widely acknowledge the ritual, it remains formally undocumented by local elites.

Based on a historical review of the transformation of the Feitao ritual in the 21st century, this article examines how the ecological environment has shaped this ritual, focuses on the details of the transformation of the rituals in the process of globalization and heritagization, sheds light on China's current practice of transforming ethnic minority religious cultures into heritage tourism projects, and describes the major contradictions in interpreting the different concepts that are understood by the Maonan people internally as well as by external planners. Finally, the article argues that in an increasingly globalized and heritage-oriented world, the religion, beliefs, and ritual memories practiced by the Maonan people are the most important cultural heritage, a testimony to a long history of interaction with the ecology; and that modern heritage planners should respect these histories and values when dealing with minority cultures and their historical past.

The Feitao Ritual and Heritage Ecology

German zoologist Haeckel (1866) defined ecology as the interaction between organisms and their environment, including the interaction between organisms and organisms (1866, p.286; Stauffer, 1957, p.140). In recent decades, ecologism and the increasingly widespread use of various ecological frameworks have made ecology the dominant discourse in the humanities and social sciences (Fuller, 2007; Zapf, 2009; Hoskins, 2016; Bangstad & Pétursdóttir, 2021). Heritage ecology proposes an ecological understanding of heritage, further focusing on how the formation and destruction of heritage consistently involves a wide range of human and non-human participants, and it is seen as a fundamental component of human values, beliefs, identities, knowledge, and traditions, as well as a manifestation of the long-term interactions between people, land, and the environment (Bangstad & Pétursdóttir, 2021, p.7).

Indigenous populations, often referred to as the original inhabitants of a land, maintain an intrinsic relationship with their natural environment (Baird, 2008, p.1). The Maonan people, numbering approximately 120,000, reside in the elevated terrains of Huanjiang County, southern China, with altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 1,700 meters (Cao, 2013, p.10). The region's topography and climate significantly shape the Maonan cosmology (Figure 1). Han (2012) posits that pragmatism is fundamental to the Maonan worldview, profoundly affecting their religious convictions and deity conceptualization. In the ritual, the veneration of over thirty deities primarily revolves around those associated with fertility and agricultural prosperity.



Figure 1: Among the Maonan group, various masks symbolize distinct deities and are exclusively used by performers in the Feitao ritual, such as Tiaofu [挑夫] (left) and Sanjie Gong [三界公] (right) (Huang, 2015, p. 159; p. 99).

The Feitao ritual, integral to the Maonan's cultural fabric, consist of two distinct forms: Red Feasts [红筵] and Yellow Feasts [黄筵]. The Yellow Feasts, dedicated to Lei Wang [雷王], a deity revered for governing weather and agriculture, are a direct response to the climatic challenges faced by the Maonan people (Han, 2012, p.5). Huanjiang County's mid-subtropical monsoon climate is prone to extreme weather events like droughts, floods, and frost, exacerbated by its karst topography, which limits arable land and hastens groundwater depletion (Lü, 2013, p.103). These erratic weather patterns and geological constraints severely impede agricultural productivity, causing crop infestation and reduced yields (Cao, 2013, p.10–11). The Yellow Feast ritual, featuring communal dancing, singing, and offerings of livestock and grains, serves as an expression of gratitude towards Lei Wang for agricultural bounty and a plea for protection against these environmental hardships (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A segment of the Feitao ritual is performed outdoors, seamlessly being integrated with the surrounding landscape and ecology. Photograph by Liu Yixing.

For the Maonan group, agriculture and animal husbandry are not mere economic activities but are entwined with their cultural and spiritual practices. Rice cultivation and cattle rearing are fundamental to their sustenance, providing essential nutrition, crop fertilizer, and livestock feed. The interdependence between these ecological practices and sustenance has profoundly influenced the Maonan group's religious beliefs, shaping a unique cosmology that blends pragmatism with reverence for the natural world (Han, 2012, p.116). Historically, the Maonan people coexisted alongside more populous ethnic groups such as the Han [汉], Zhuang [壮], Miao [苗], and Yao [瑶], often vying for land resources (Lü, 2013, p.227). Despite this competition, the Maonan people inhabited confined territories and endured prolonged subjugation by their Han neighbors and other ethnicities. They attribute the dominance of these groups to the potency of their deities. Han (2006) observes that the Maonan people recognize the practicality of these powerful deities in disaster mitigation, leading them to revere not only their indigenous deities but also those of the Han, Miao, and Zhuang. Such syncretism highlights the Maonan's adaptive and pragmatic approach to religion (Lü, 2013, p.115).

The Red Feast constitutes a ceremonial offering to Po Wang [婆王], the mother deity revered in Maonan tradition for overseeing fertility, a crucial aspect of the community's continuity (Wu, 2006, p.6). In the context of a severe climate where healthcare and sustenance are precarious, the heightened infant and child mortality rates intensify the Maonan's focus on progeny's well-being (Lü, 2013, p. 65). The Red Feast serves as a communal expression of gratitude for Po Wang's guardianship over the young. It strengthens communal bonds and a sense of collective identity and is critical to community resilience in the face of environmental adversity (Figure 3). The Red Feast consists of offerings, prayers, songs, dances, and community gatherings where community members share stories of the benevolence and strength of Po Wang, thus deepening the collective identity of the community (Han, 2012, p.5). For example, in the following number, a ritual master sings to praise Po Wang for her blessings to combat extreme ecological conditions:

(Original text)	(Translated text)
婆王降临坐坛中，全台沾恩求保佑	<i>Po Wang descends onto the altar, all in the family seeks refuge of her divine blessings</i>
永世有福坐高堂，老者寿年八百岁	<i>Blessed to sit in a high hall life after life, the old lives up to 800 years old</i>
一本万利答倍还，再保牛栏六畜旺	<i>The fortune granted will be returned in double, livestock is protected and some more prospering</i>
牛马千余万万年，种田种苗多丰足	<i>Cattle and horses are in greater herds for many thousands of years, the harvest from plentiful fields grows in abundance</i>
遣除凶恶别离坛，虚花暗山走别远	<i>Stay long on the altar to get rid of evil spirits, may bad luck and darkness leave us in peace</i>
婆王父母降筵中，金牙沾恩供保禁	<i>Po Wang came to us like our mother, with this golden offering helps us run this ritual safe and smooth</i>

Hence, the Feitao ritual is not only a religious but also social event that constructs community bonds and a collective responsibility to nurture and protect the young.



Figure 3: Traditional Feitao ritual performance in an indoor environment. Photograph by Liu Yixing.

Liulanglie [柳浪咧], a segment in the Feitao ritual performance, tells the love story between the landlord and Sanniang through its explicit and symbolic dance, lyrics and melody by the performers (Chen & Zhang, 2014, p.114). The content of the ritual reflects the Maonan connection to nature and their natural view of sex and fertility. In *Liulanglie*, two or three ritual masters sing and dance, and one of them holds a red stick symbolizing a phallus, literally simulating sexual acts between male and female counterparts. This performance is not only an art form but also a form of sexual enlightenment deeply rooted in Maonan culture (Figure 4). Through the performance of the wandering grin, the Maonan convey knowledge about sexuality and reproduction to their members. The phrase "*du liu da du lie*" [嘟柳打嘟咧] in the Maonan language, in which *liu* [柳] and *lie* [咧] respectively refers to male and female genitalia, with *du* [打] denoting "do it", is a symbolic expression of sexual coupling in the form of dance performance through the body language, educating people about the unembellished union of the male and female organs. The artistic effect and symbolic significance of this performance are further enhanced by the intensification of the rhythm of the music and the foreshadowing of the climax. The performance of *Liulanglie* in the Feitao ritual also adds to the entertaining and participatory nature of the ritual, with an anticipation that positive displays of sexuality and procreation will enhance the community's potency in reproduction.



Figure 4: Two ritual masters performing *Liulanglie* with masks, with another holding the scriptures and several other onlookers watching with interest. Photograph by Liu Yixing.

The rituals of the Maonan people are a vivid illustration of how indigenous communities intimately connect their religious practices with their ecological surroundings. The Maonan people use music and dance to express their respect and gratitude toward Lei Wang and Po Wang, reflecting their deep reverence for life and natural resources, which is a communal cultural and psychological mechanism for coping with environmental and social adversity. Making covenants with deities has to some extent alleviated the Maonan people's worries about the uncertainty of survival and climatic adversity (Han, 2006, p. 107). These religious rituals reveal their sophisticated awareness and ability to adapt to social and natural environments. As expressed by Bangstad and Pétursdóttir (2021), heritage is seen here and elsewhere as a fundamental component of human values, beliefs, identities, knowledge, and traditions, as well as an expression of the long-term interactions between people, land, and environment. However, a few Maonan members have also started to voice out their concerns regarding contemporary issues like globalization and climate change. The Maonan traditional practice has undergone minor alterations due to external pressures, indicating how indigenous traditions are adapted to changing circumstances.

Heritagization: Transformation, Performance and Staging

Originally, the Feitao ritual emerged from the Maonan's environmental adaptation methods and their pursuit of communal solidarity and religious cohesion. Following its recognition as part of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, the sacrosanct nature of these religious rites has increasingly waned, observable in the interactions with the Maonan community. Once secluded within the bounds of the community, these rites have now transitioned into public performances.

This shift is attributable to globalizing forces and the impetus to heritage commodification, which encompasses the conversion of traditional rituals into touristic attractions.

Cultural heritage has become a fundamental component within the globalization narrative, with Western conceptions of heritage being applied in diverse contexts that often diverge from their traditional origins (Harrison, 2015). In alignment with global movements, China ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004, thereby institutionalizing the protection of cultural heritage as a pivotal facet of national development strategy (Ji et al., 2020, p. 13). The Chinese ICH engages in the socio-economic fabric of the nation and localities, serving as both a political and economic tool. The propagation of heritage principles and administrative approaches across the globe extends beyond the ratification of international treaties; it is a manifestation of globalization itself, involving a series of tangible and ideological shifts that reconstitute the world's cultural landscape. Concurrently, the ascendance of heritage preservation and tourism has signaled the commencement of a heritagization epoch within China (Si & Liu, 2020, p. 110).

The transformation of the ritual has brought positive aspects to the Maonan community, including economic growth, increased tourism, job creation, and increased cultural awareness (Zhang, 2012, p.13). This transformation is largely attributed to the power of the Chinese government and the push to commercialize heritage, where traditional rituals are repackaged as attractions for tourism and cultural exchange. By attracting tourists and cultural enthusiasts, new sources of income have been opened, contributing to the economic well-being of Maonan communities. This infusion of capital not only revitalizes local businesses but also fosters a more sustainable economic model centered on cultural tourism. The growth of tourism and related industries has led to the creation of many jobs in Maonan communities. Cultural awareness and conservation of public performances of the ritual have played a key role in raising awareness of Maonan culture. This increased visibility has not only made Maonan's rich heritage known to a wider audience but has also emphasized the importance of preserving this unique cultural practice.

Heritage tourism is one of the most popular heritage marketing processes. Heritage is therefore staged and negotiated as a response to contemporary human interests and conflicts in social constructivist terms. However, new meanings and contexts are given, changed, produced, and re-produced in different spaces and times, although the essential nature of presence and continuity has been maintained. *Ai Nan* [艾南], a musical show, epitomizes the global heritage economy's influence on minority ethnic rituals and exemplifies this phenomenon. Commencing its stage tour in Huanjiang County, China, on December 14, 2021, the play draws inspiration from the Feitao ritual. *Ai Nan* intricately depicts the Maonan cultural life, blending music and dance to narrate themes such as love, marriage, birth, deity veneration, and future aspirations. The creative inspiration primarily stems from *Liulanglie* and *Yao Wang Dance* [瑶王舞]. Typically, the music involves incantatory chanting and singing in the style of *Liulanglie* and the dance is characterized by *Yao Wang Dance*. Since music and dance that are derived from the ritual become crucial elements in the play, drum accompaniment is a consistent feature as observed throughout the whole performance.

The opening act of *Ai Nan* highlights the mask carving process integral to the ritual. The second act features performers in masks resembling Yao Wang wielding red sticks that symbolize phallic

fertility and exaggerating distinctive hip-twisting movements in *Yao Wang Dance*. The following acts include group dancing with masked performers, mirroring the *Yao Wang Dance* movements from the Feitao ritual. The musical score incorporates adapted *Liulanglie* melodies. The subsequent act, led by four performers representing ritual masters, features ritual instruments and dance movements inspired by an adapted *Yao Wang Dance*. Later acts primarily depict the ritualistic scenario, integrating its numerous musical and dance components. Traditionally, Feitao ritual masters alone are only permitted to wear masks, serving as a conduit between the deity and human worlds (Lü, 2013, p. 19). However, transforming this ritual into a theatrical mask dance raises questions about its sanctity. Critics contend that performers donning masks onstage are to promptly demonstrate an act of disrespect toward the deities, and this act has cast doubts on the authenticity of performance.



Figure 5: A provocative act in the stage program *Ai Nan* adapted from the Feitao ritual (Heci Mass Art Center, 2022a, 00:04:45).

Liulanglie's stage adaptation, previously noted for reflecting the sexual culture in the Feitao ritual, is remarkable. Deacons' teachings about sexuality through explicit movements have transitioned from taboo in feudal times to the center stage in the contemporary *Ai Nan* production. These provocative movements (Figure 5), along with melodic chants from the ritual, now form part of the performance's narrative and visual spectacle, reconfigured into popular song formats. The ritual traditionally uses singing and musical instruments to bridge the human and divine realms. These include incantatory verses, typically whispered monotonously, and melodic singing in a traditional Chinese pentatonic scale (Chen & Zhang, 2014, p.113). Notably, *Liulanglie*'s signature phrase "*du liu da du lie*" resonates in the musical theme, which is rendered in the *yu* [羽] scale of this pentatonic system, and recurs throughout the performance. On stage, the music and dance elements from the ritual have shed their original sacred prohibitions (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The Feitao ritual adapted as a dance performance (Heci Mass Art Center, 2022b).

Observing the modified performance of the Feitao ritual underscores the need for a critical assessment of its heritagization impacts. Senior Maonan individuals, particularly those aged over 60, express dissatisfaction, viewing these changes as a sacrilege that distorts their cultural tenets, potentially disrupting cultural continuity. Such alterations to the *Liulanglie* in the theatrical form are perceived as eroding the collective memory and historic culture of the Maonan. Meanwhile, the younger cohort, less attuned to these cultural subtleties, prioritizes the entertainment aspects of the performances. This generational divide may erode the elders' connection with traditional practices, while the youth remain oblivious, thereby widening the interpretive schism. This evolving landscape poses a threat to the ritual's original essence, sparking debates over authenticity and ethnic identity.

Globalization has profoundly impacted the cultural evolution of ethnic minorities in China, notably reshaping the perception of the ritual among the Maonan people and across the nation. This evolution illustrates how global influences intermingle with local environments and social structures, leading to a reevaluation of traditional practices. Historically overlooked, the Feitao ritual has gradually garnered the esteem it merits, demonstrating the adaptive resilience of cultural heritage in the face of global changes. Through this lens, this ritual becomes a symbol of how heritage ecology can inform our understanding of cultural sustainability and adaptation in a rapidly globalizing world.

Controversies from within and outside the Maonan Community

In the era of globalization, the Maonan ethnic community, along with numerous indigenous and minority groups, confronts the challenge of safeguarding its distinct cultural identity. The Maonan community is grappling with the challenge of maintaining the integrity of its cultural heritage, especially the Feitao ritual. This situation leads to two primary controversies: internal discord within the community and external pressures arising from governmental strategies.

With globalization, the role of cultural capital in the global economy has substantially grown. Since the late 1970s, China's economic reform and opening-up policy have shifted the government's role from purely regulatory to an active participant in global economic and cultural spheres. This power shift has given local authorities greater decision-making autonomy, significantly impacting China's cultural resource management and local government roles (Zhang & Wu, 2008). Consequently, local governments have transformed from regulatory entities into dynamic drivers of economic and cultural development. The directives of the Chinese government have ignited intense competition among local governments, each leveraging their distinct cultural and historical attributes to boost local economic growth (Hsueh & Chang, 2016, p.229). In 2004, China ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, recognizing the importance of intangible cultural heritage in its national development path. The Convention has been instrumental in disseminating heritage management models worldwide and transforming the international tourism economy. For China, amidst significant transformations, cultural heritage is emerging as a vital asset for national, economic, and cultural influence (Zhang, 2018, p.90).

During globalization, cultural capital's importance in the global economy has markedly increased. Local governments maintain that cultural dissemination and development should align with current trends and integrate smoothly with modern society's needs and aesthetics. This method facilitates wider public comprehension and valuation of Maonan culture, encouraging local cultural tourism and associated industries' growth. Despite potential cultural distortions during adaptation, authorities deem these compromises crucial to enhance Maonan culture's accessibility to a broader audience, thus fostering growth in related sectors, including cultural tourism. Adaptations may include the appropriation, reinterpretation, or reenactment of the Feitao ritual music and dance to better align with contemporary social preferences. By adopting this strategy, they have not only surmounted resistance to cultural assimilation but also leveraged previously undervalued intangible cultural assets from performance arts.

Local governments must enact strategies to protect and sustain Maonan culture, ensuring its preservation and widespread dissemination. If adaptation and presentation enable wider access to and comprehension of Maonan culture, such alterations may be deemed necessary. This approach does not signify a neglect of authentic performance; instead, it indicates a belief in balancing adaptation with dissemination. It is noteworthy that while many Chinese heritage initiatives are labeled as conservation or preservation, their expansion is largely market-driven.

A major contention stems from certain community members' perception of the ritual's "commercialization". This contemporary version, viewed by some as diluting the ritual's essence, has led to dissatisfaction, particularly among the Maonan community's elders. They contend that these changes erode the ritual's religious sanctity and traditional value. In a personal interview with two venerable elderly in the Maonan community who want to be kept anonymous, it was apparent that they have a serious critique on this rising phenomenon. They view the commercialization of the Feitao ritual as both a misinterpretation and misrepresentation of traditional Maonan culture, as their critique stems from a profound belief in the vital importance of preserving Maonan cultural heritage, a key element of their ethnic identity. This scenario highlights a widespread dilemma among indigenous communities globally: maintaining cultural integrity amidst modernization and external pressures. Once solely a religious and communal ceremony, the ritual now stands at the juncture of tradition and modernity.

This duality underscores the intricate dynamics between cultural preservation objectives and market demands, making heritage transformation a debated and inherently volatile undertaking. As the Maonan community contends with the complexities of preserving its cultural heritage amid rapid global changes, internal conflicts have arisen, notably regarding the presentation of the ritual. This ritual, integral to the Maonan's cultural and religious identity, has been transformed in ways not universally accepted by the community.

Continuity and Persistence of Group Beliefs

The Chinese Government has made efforts to incorporate intangible cultural heritage into its national development strategy, focusing on the demands of the twenty-first century. However, as the twenty-first century progresses, this initial enthusiasm has given way to more nuanced trends. This issue is exemplified by the conflict over Maonan cultural heritage preservation, where adapting and commercializing heritage for economic gain and visibility is widespread. As globalization intensifies, commercializing and staging cultural heritage has emerged as an inevitable trend. This is evident in the transformation of the ritual, where cultural fast-food programs have diminished its historical significance and the Maonan's collective memory and beliefs. Should consumer habits and aesthetic preferences shift, cultural heritage might once again be altered to suit commercial interests. The discourse between the Maonan community and local planners has become intricate and delicate.

Confronting the dual challenges of globalization and heritagization, China's ethnic minorities are proactively exploring adaptive strategies. To counteract cultural homogenization, the Maonan have initiated efforts to preserve and transmit their traditional culture, with collective memory serving as an essential conduit for culture, history, and national identity. Anthropologists and administrators largely concur that tribal cultures may face extinction due to internal decay and benevolent assimilation by Western modernity (Phipps, 2010, p.234). The ritual showcases a unique approach to adapting and resisting the pressures of heritage dominance and globalization. Originally, this ritual was the Maonan's response to environmental challenges and a crucial means to uphold community cohesion and religious faith. However, amidst globalization, this tradition faces the threats of commercialization and cultural uniformity.

The Maonan resist cultural assimilation and distortion through the preservation and reinforcement of the ritual's traditional beliefs. This equilibrium helps mitigate cultural distortion and assimilation. Despite the encroachment of foreign cultures, the Maonan preserve their culture's unique and intrinsic value by steadfastly upholding the essential elements and procedures of their traditional ceremonies. Recreating historical narratives and myths in their rituals allows the Maonan to convey religious and cultural knowledge to the youth, thus ensuring a degree of cultural continuity and integrity. During significant local festivals like the Fenlong and Folk Song Festivals [分龙节与民歌节], attention centers on the ritual performers and the ritual. The ritual masters of the ritual serve not merely as entertainers but also as custodians of religious and cultural wisdom.

Importantly, the ritual is not reduced to a mere commodity of lower social value. The ritual performers maintain their status as custodians of religious culture, and the ritual itself seems to

govern the intricate interactions among local government, capital, and diverse stakeholders. Through engagement with all involved parties, the performer safeguards the ritual from becoming merely a commercialized or marginal social activity. The ritual is primarily a performance-based sacrifice to the deities, where performers possess a unique ability to connect with deities, establishing them as folk figures devoted to religious affairs. This authority granted to ritual performers, deeply rooted in Maonan beliefs, explains the residents' reluctance to accept outsiders as performers. Notably, when invited for official or commercial performances, performers often offer incense and seek ancestral forgiveness before leaving. These actions, seen as an apology intertwined with secular needs, reflect the Maonan people's steadfast commitment to their beliefs and loyalty to their belief system, thereby ensuring their unwavering fidelity to their ethnic faith. In this process, the role and status of the deacons as conveyors of religious culture are recognized and preserved.

Through their efforts, the Maonan group ensures cultural preservation by fostering a dialogue between their traditions and modern society. The Maonan people have collaborated with government bodies, academics, and cultural institutions to secure recognition and protection for the ritual's cultural values. This partnership has raised the profile of Maonan culture both nationally and internationally and has been instrumental in identifying effective preservation strategies and resources. By striking a balance between tradition and modernity, spirituality and commerce, and local and global influences, the Maonan people have adeptly preserved their cultural heritage, ensuring its ongoing dynamism amidst change. This journey is pivotal for the Maonan people and offers invaluable insights and motivation for other cultures confronting akin challenges.

Respecting the History and Values of Heritage Ecology

Within the global heritage movement, which is a phenomenon that transcends national boundaries, reverence for the history and significance of heritage ecology is crucial. Heritage ecology—a framework that recognizes the symbiotic relationship between cultural practices and their surrounding environments—becomes evident as other developing countries, like China, struggle to balance cultural tourism and the preservation of indigenous traditions (Zhang, 2018, p.5). Apart from that, evidences of hegemony from a relatively more authoritative establishment have also been discussed and scrutinized scholarly. Byrne (1991) exemplifies comparative cases that draw a significant difference between the notions of a dominant entity and others, particularly highlighting the plausible imposition of 'evidently Western notions of heritage in the non-Western world', which is frequently at odds with the diverse range of global cultural realities (1991, p.272). Rather, the case of the Feitao ritual deals with the hegemonic pressure that is generated from the heritagization process.

The experience of the Maonan community with the Feitao ritual embodies this larger global predicament: how to preserve indigenous and cultural heritage in a world that is changing quickly. Their journey highlights the importance of community involvement and a balanced strategy in cultural heritage management by highlighting the need for a sensitive, inclusive approach that respects traditional values while accommodating necessary adaptations for cultural survival.

During its rapid transformation over the past three decades, China's traditional cultural heritage has emerged as a significant source of national, economic, and cultural capital (Zhang, 2018, p.22). This trend is consistent with developments in other similar nations that are grappling with how to preserve their cultural heritage while striking a balance between original traditionalism and cultural tourism. The general issue is highlighted by the conflict between the preservation of cultural heritage and tourism in the Maonan ethnic group, where cultural heritage adaptation and commercialization have become commonplace. The local government's proposal to alter the content of the ritual to make it more appealing to the general public is an example of the dangers that come with placing too much emphasis on contemporary utilitarian values. These values have the potential to destroy cultural practices' historical significance as well as collective memory and group beliefs (Zhang, 2018, p.2).

Conclusion

Within the complex framework of heritage ecology, local governments need to consider methods for safeguarding the fundamental aspects of Maonan culture. To guarantee that traditional values and cultural foundations are accurately reflected in commercial expressions, this calls for a thorough understanding of them. The solution to this conundrum depends on striking a balance between cultural heritage's historical and commercial aspects. To avoid imposing elitist and consumer-focused viewpoints, local planners and administrators should collaborate with the Maonan community to create historically and practically accurate interpretations of the Feitao ritual. These consultations support the memory keepers in these communities as well as the preservation of cultural heritage values for ethnic identity. Respecting Maonan culture's history is essential when presenting and adapting it, and over-commercialization and distortion should be avoided.

It is crucial that the Maonan people are to advocate their culture openly and inclusively while upholding their cultural norms and boundaries. Ethnic culture and contemporary aesthetics and requirements must be balanced, which calls for managers' cooperation and effective communication. A careful balance between protecting cultural heritage and promoting economic development can be achieved through cooperative efforts with academics, cultural institutions, and local governments. This means combining the innately religious aspects of the Maonan people with contemporary artistic expressions, all the while attending to modern societal needs and aesthetics. By creating cultural goods and services that speak to the current era, this kind of collaboration hopes to support the respectful and long-lasting continuation and growth of Maonan culture.

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