Social Processes of Heritage: Insights from Rice Terrace Landscapes in Southwestern China and Taiwan

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Abstract Asian rice terrace landscapes have long been valued for their aesthetic qualities, which continue to attract both Asian and international visitors. By now, the economic "exploitation" of both tangible landscape "assets" and related local knowledge in these formerly isolated mountain regions has become a frequent subject of study. Much lesser attention has been given to the social value and function of rice terraces and their heritage. This short paper strives to explore if and how landscape heritage may constitute a medium and/or a space to (re)establish social bonds and to revive rural community life. Building on textual sources and short-term but broad field research, it discusses recent approaches in two remote East Asian mountainous regions, the Hani Terraces (哈尼梯田) World Heritage cultural landscape in southwestern China and the Gongliao (貢寮) rice terrace landscape in northeastern Taiwan.

Keywords Cultural heritage, rice terrace landscapes, social value, Hani Rice Terraces, China, Gongliao, Taiwan.

Introduction

The first Asian cultural landscape ever inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list was a rice terrace landscape. The Ifugao Rice Terraces in the Philippines were listed in 1995, only three years after the official introduction of cultural landscapes as a heritage category. Long before their inscription, rice terraces were considered representative for how human-nature interaction had shaped the earth's surface in Asia. German Jewish architect, planner, and urban historian Erwin Anton Gutkind (1886–1968), for example, included Chinese rice terraces in a 1956 essay that put forward ideas from his groundbreaking *Our World from the Air.* Therein, he takes a (back then) radically new approach, namely by observing the transformation of the earth's surface from a bird's-eye-perspective. To him, land transformations were a result of a four-stage process mirroring humanity's changing attitude toward its environment.

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In this framework, the Chinese rice terraces represent the second stage, a sophisticated "I-Thou" relationship in which people reshape and rationally adapt their environment, and adopt a respectful attitude towards other community members. This intimate inter-human and human-environment connection is disrupted and replaced by an "I-It" relationship in the third stage (Gutkind borrowed the distinction between I-Thou and I-It from Martin Buber). The third stage, in contrast, is characterized by "aggressiveness and disintegration," manifesting itself in urban expansion and rural isolation grounded in an exploitation of natural resources (Gutkind 1956, 21).[1]

Gutkind's categorization undoubtedly renders a romanticized depiction of Chinese rice terrace landscapes that stands in stark contrast to the harsh conditions under which rural communities used to—and nowadays still—maintain their livelihoods. Nevertheless, his observations point to differing value systems that were relevant in generating specific landscape appearances. By now, the rebuilding of social relations and knowledge, and thereby a reactivation of social value, has found acknowledgement as an alternative model for rural revitalization (e.g., Labrador 2011; Utami et al. 2022).

Social value as process

Rice terraces are at the same time a human and wildlife habitat, vegetation reservoir, and agricultural production site. As agricultural landscapes, they do not fit into single administrative categories but their management requires an integrated approach that combines aspects such as water regulation, forest protection, and cultural and natural heritage conservation. Still, an integration of cultural landscapes in state-led development schemes may produce detrimental effects on heritage, not least when certain values are neglected in favor of others. Cultural landscapes are particularly vulnerable to such one-sided management, primarily because they are "living heritage." Their social values are difficult to assess (Jones 2017) and, as a consequence, hardly considered.

Formal recognition of social value by the international conservation community has itself taken a long time. Due to the initially small range of disciplines engaged in conservation, mainly experts from archaeology, history, architecture, and art history, early "classical" guidelines such as the Athens Charter (1931) and the Venice Charter (1964) centered on the monumental character of heritage. At that time, the major aim was to safeguard historical, aesthetic, and scientific values of cultural heritage.

1 From today's perspective, Gutkind's approach in looking at vernacular architecture on a global scale is certainly regarded as selective, generalizing and rendering essentialist representations of other cultures (Vellinga 2019). Still, his observations point out the centrality of an intimate relation between local culture, social organization, economic structures, and environmental context.

The complexity of considering social value in theory and practice lies in the wide array of aspects that constitute it. Besides individual and collective identity, memory practices, emotional and spiritual attachment as well as a sense of place that may be linked to a site, heritage may generate social benefits such as maintaining knowledge and social coherence (ICOMOS China 2015, 61). Scholars suggested to conceive social value as a dynamic process rather than a static category. Drawing on her work with Waanyi women in northern Queensland, Australia, archaeologist and Museum Studies scholar Laurajane Smith defined heritage as "the act of passing on knowledge in the culturally correct or appropriate contexts and times." She stressed the mnemonic function of landscape for passing on oral histories to younger generations as it offers a "sense of occasion" for both transmitters and receivers (L. Smith 2006, 46–47). The Canadian architect and cultural landscape theorist Julian Smith also highlighted the experiential dimension of cultural landscapes. In his view, this task can only be carried out by the cultural group who created and sustains them (J. Smith 2010, 46).

Many regard the continuously adapted Australian Burra Charter (1979, revised 1981, 1988, 1999, and 2013) as the primary document to consider such experiential, mnemonic, and sensual aspects formed by a set of equally weighted values in the conceptualization of heritage's cultural significance. A review of more recent relevant charters consolidates this shift in understanding, from "intrinsic" heritage values to such "assigned" (European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe 2000, amended 2016) and "ascribed" by people (Faro Convention, Council of Europe 2005). Despite such formal recognition, a prioritization of historic, aesthetic, and scientific over social value continues due to established institutional and evaluation structures as well as resource constraints in heritage management practice (L. Smith 2006; Emerick 2014; Jones 2017).

In line with the view that social value is of a fluid, iterative, and embodied nature (Jones 2017), we may ask whether and how landscape heritage constitutes a medium or a space to (re)establish social bonds and to revive rural community life. In tracing this question, the following reflection focuses on the social dimension of agricultural landscapes and their heritage. It draws on desktop and field research, the latter conducted in 2023 in the Hani World Heritage-listed rice terraces in southwestern China and the Gongliao terrace landscape in northeastern Taiwan.

Conservation and management approaches

Despite significant differences in scope, historic development and demographic composition, both rice terrace landscapes in southwestern China and Taiwan face similar challenges. Their mountainous terrain prevents the use of heavy machinery for cultivation, and agricultural yields are often barely enough to feed a household. As a result, younger generations of farmers abandon their fields to find better living and working conditions in urban areas. These dynamics have led to a hollowing out of local villages, accompanied by decay and replacement of tangible heritage such as

local architecture as well as, in particular, a decline of community ties and intangible practices, including the use of "traditional" farming techniques and local customs.

The Hani Rice Terraces in China's Yunnan province have been part of a macro-level development strategy since the 1980s. Besides mining and agriculture, the provincial government greatly fostered its tourism industry and invested in large-scale infrastructure projects. However, hopes that economic benefits gained from GDP growth would "trickle down" to the rural poor remained largely unfulfilled (Donaldson 2011). In 2013, the Hani Terraces were successfully inscribed on the World Heritage list. The ensuing period of mass tourism opened the door to entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry from the provincial capital Kunming or even megacities in other parts of the country, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. Local Hani who constitute a majority of the population in this region had little opportunities to participate and were mainly engaged in cleaning and gastronomic services (Fuller et al. 2022).

More recently, the focus has shifted to development at the village level and a new approach introduced to one of these villages, Azheke (阿者科), received international attention. The "Azheke Plan" designed by the School for Tourism Management at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou is based on a detailed redistribution scheme of tourism-generated revenues to local villagers. Following fix profit distribution guidelines, 30 percent of the total revenue remain with the village's collective tourism company and 70 percent of the profits are distributed among all villagers. The profit share every villager receives is measured according to certain criteria, including the state of one's traditional dwelling, engagement in terrace cultivation, and whether or not one holds a local registration (SYSU 2022). Until today, nine profit sharing meetings have been held and the Chinese tourism expert who invented this model, Bao Jigang (保继刚), received the 16th UNWTO Ulysses Award at the 25th UNWTO General Assembly in October 2023 for his contribution to poverty reduction.

In the mountains of Gongliao district at the northeastern tip of Taiwan, terrace farming revitalization was initiated under very different circumstances, but as a reaction to similar topographic restraints (see fig. 1). The Gongliao hillsides only allow for small-scale farming and a single crop yield per year, which pushes farmers to additionally engage in part-time jobs outside of the villages. While the niche position of Gongliao's rice fields between industrial production and larger-scale agricultural development had long kept them below the radar of governmental attention, the region came under a sudden threat in 2010 when the Ministry of the Interior set up plans to expropriate the land and sell it to developers. When these plans became known to farmers and a bird-watching group that frequently visited the hillside, they mobilized to protect the terrace landscape (Wei 2018). By making use of political resources and social capital of some of the birdwatchers, the development plan was successfully revealed to the media and eventually had to be given up. In order to prevent future expropriation, an influential specialist at the Forestry Bureau with connections to the birdwatchers established a program for revitalization of terrace farming and delegated it to the Environmental Ethics Foundation of Taiwan (EEFT, 人禾環境倫理發展基金會), an environmental NGO (ibid.).

Figure 1 Rice terrace fields in the Gongliao Mountains, Taiwan, April 2023.
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Another central actor in the revitalization process is a cooperative named Hehe (和禾) that was founded by a former teacher at Gongliao primary school. While EEFT operates from an urban base, the Hehe cooperative organizes core activities along the agricultural production cycle such as seed transplantation and harvesting together with farmers and volunteers. The Hehe program attaches great importance to balancing local values and environment preservation with economic profits. Cooperating farmers commit themselves to refrain from the use of heavy machinery, pesticides and herbicides, and to keep their fields constantly filled with water.[2] Both EEFT and Hehe proceed from an ambition to revive the local farming community and to reconnect humans with nature, a vision that, at an international level, is integrated with the so-called Satoyama Initiative.[3] Other than profit maximization, this approach promotes core social values such as mutual support, reciprocity, and an exploitation of natural resources only to the degree necessary. This value-orientation renders the approach

2 Interview with Hehe founder, Gongliao, Taiwan, 4 May 2023.

3 The Japanese term *satoyama* (里山, literally "uplands near villages") refers to a land-use mosaic of human settlements and "secondary" nature (woodlands, grasslands, agricultural fields). It is eponymous for a global initiative launched in 2010 under the auspices of the Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability of the United Nations University in Tokyo. It aims at maintaining biodiversity and human well-being in "socio-ecological production landscapes and seascapes" (SEPLS) through revitalization and sustainable management (see Takeuchi 2010).

comparably holistic, addressing not only issues of economic feasibility, but also the long-term transmission of local knowledge.

Terrace cultivation

Terrace cultivation clearly is at the heart of conserving the unique character of rice terrace landscapes. Not only the material preservation of myriad paddy fields cascading down the mountains, but also cultural practices and social organization revolve around the dynamic agricultural production cycle and related processes such as water regulation. Bouchery, for example, in his in-depth study of the Hani terrace irrigation and drainage system, pointed to distinctive roles in Hani society that are connected to terrace cultivation, such as the "channel guardian" responsible for the irrigation network (Bouchery 2011). Moreover, natural and cultural elements of the terraced landscape are figuratively portrayed on local clothing, as found by Formoso in his work on the symbolism of costumes worn by Niesu women in Yuanyang county (元阳县, Formoso 2000).

Linking up to Smith's above-mentioned "sense of occasion," the passing on of certain aspects of culture requires appropriate temporal and spatial conditions. In the past, the Hani terraced landscape has been a place where local knowledge and skills such as farming and handicraft techniques were passed on in the fields and around Hani festivals, of which many are now listed as intangible cultural heritage. Following changes in lifestyle and a high outmigration, the significance of farming and its related cultural elements for maintaining community bonds declined. The implementation of the Azheke Plan introduced a new social event, public profit-sharing meetings, to take place in the Hani village. In these meetings, Hani residents receive their share of the total revenue generated from ethnic tourism in front of the entire village community. Besides the strong symbolic demonstration of collective conservation work translating into actual material benefit, the profit sharing meetings have become a social gathering that underlines shared community characteristics, including the cultivation of terraced paddies and the maintenance of traditional "mushroom houses" (蘑菇房, so named after their outward appearance, see fig. 2).

The Azheke Plan undoubtedly has a clear economic focus. Still, the new engagement with heritage that it triggered has also become a social process that involves members of the village community across different age groups. Its success or failure will largely depend on its capacity to kickstart a long-term recentering of community life on local heritage and a related involvement of local Hani beyond the economic sphere, e.g., in heritage interpretation.

In Taiwan's Gongliao mountains, new strategies have recently been explored to revalorize terrace farming and related local knowledge. One interesting initiative is the rice planting competition, an opportunity for second-generation farmers to challenge master hands and showcase their seedling transplantation skills. Supported by the New Taipei City Education Bureau and EEFT, the competition format aims to

Figure 2 Historical Hani dwelling in Azheke village, 2023. © Fabienne Wallenwein

Figure 3 Rice planting competition, Gongliao, 2024. Photo provided by courtesy of EEFT.

convince second and third-generation farmers to return to their hometowns and reverse views of farming as being "outdated" (Sun 2023). The competition is supposed to provide an opportunity for bringing generations together, generating mutual respect and acknowledgement of the farming culture's value. So far, the competition has taken place three times and received broad media and local attention (see fig. 3). It has become an established social event that draws second-generation farmers, many of whom additionally work in off-farm jobs, back to the mountains during this period.

Moreover, Gongliao's Hehe cooperative participates in local market events, most importantly the regularly held farm produce markets in the capital city of Taipei. These events are not only used to sell local products such as rice, honey, and homemade biscuits, but also function as platforms for disseminating terrace cultivation-related knowledge. By showcasing the benefits of this mode of production for maintaining biodiversity, the community aims to raise awareness of the societal benefits generated through terrace farming among the general public. This approach upholds a strong educational focus. It targets young and interested urban volunteers who are willing to engage with this specific type of heritage and aims to generate solidarity on the part of society to support the cooperative's work. Rather than maximizing outreach, it carefully navigates between greater economic benefits and landscape protection.

Digital technologies and virtual spaces

In both southwestern China and Taiwan, stakeholders seek out new opportunities gained through digital technologies and virtual spaces to expand the visibility of terrace landscapes, attract visitors, and reach out to consumers, but also to challenge established social perspectives on terrace cultivation. A comparison of both landscapes shows considerable differences with regard to the groups of stakeholders employing new media and spaces, as well as the goals pursued therewith.

Visual representations of terraced landscapes that highlight their aesthetic values have long been major catalysts for ethnic tourism. Starting from around the late 1970s, photography has become an important medium used by government officials, domestic, and non-Chinese visitors to put paddy fields in southwestern China into perspective. While the complex and characteristic landscape mosaic formed by a myriad of paddies is only revealed when staged or contemplated from a downward angle, such a photographic lens carries the risk of reinforcing static views of landscape, as well as notions of rural inferiority (Chio 2014, 190–91). Still, it has become a widespread practice in China's multiethnic terrace landscapes to set up controversial viewing platforms at suitable elevated locations where hard-working farmers are exposed to the tourist gaze (cf. Urry 1990, see fig. 4). Here, what astonishes the spectator is the landscape in its entirety rather than an eye-level sight of individual fields.

More recently, drone technology has been used to, arguably, render more holistic landscape representations. Similar to Gutkind's approach mentioned in the

Figure 4 View from the sightseeing platform constructed at one section of the Hani Rice Terraces, 2023. © Fabienne Wallenwein

introduction, aerial images of the Hani Terraces play an important role for generating a new perspective on this marginal region long associated with poverty and "backwardness." A research group from Sun Yat-sen University's School for Tourism Management, for example, made use of drone-shot video clips and images to attract visitors when establishing the tourism company in Azheke village. The material was not only used for promotional purposes, but also to underline its World Heritage character and related responsibilities. The dissemination via diverse social media channels can be expected to raise awareness of this preservation responsibility, maybe even generate solidarity among a national audience.

In recent years, the rising importance of digital platforms for cultural production and promotion as well as their incorporation of the rural realm has further led to new socio-economic mechanisms and entanglements designated as "platformization" or "platform ruralism" (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Wang, Xu, and Liu 2022). In the case of the Hani Terraces, virtual spaces and social media platforms are employed to reach out to new target groups for selling collectively produced organic local goods, such as red rice, red rice vermicelli, and rice liquor (see fig. 5).

Young and well-educated locals have started to make use of such new opportunities for offering cultural experiences and hospitality services. One example is a Hani woman with the nickname "Lanzi" (兰子) who gave up her former job to return to a village in the terrace landscape in 2019. On her way to becoming a young entrepreneur, she and her team explore new forms of engagement with local heritage and

Figure 5 Locally produced red rice packaged for sale, 2023. © Fabienne Wallenwein

disseminate knowledge on traditional Hani clothing and food culture via different social media platforms (Wang and Zeng 2021). Although digital space and media provide rural residents with unpreceded opportunities to construct images of rurality themselves, and to increase visibility of everyday life, this new potential must still be treated with caution. Scholars criticized that urban-centric and market-oriented digital representations of rural spaces are romanticized, commodified, decontextualized and tend to conceal urban-rural inequalities (Zhao 2024, 496). Such negative effects were observed in particular where farmers are highly dependent on big platform firms and their sometimes exploitative terms and conditions.

While in China's Hani Rice Terraces the use of new digital tools and virtual platforms aims at crossing physical mountain borders, the approach adopted at Gongliao in Taiwan is much more introspective. Both EEFT and the Hehe cooperative use social media for outreach. They do so on selected platforms such as Facebook and Line, the instant messenger services most widely used in Taiwan. However, in most cases, one needs to proactively approach these initiatives to be added to their groups. This procedure can be regarded as a threshold guaranteeing that group members have an honest interest in their work, their activities, and their products. Gongliao residents also manage their own group for village community members to share, among others, farming and conservation-related information. Terrace cultivation and engagement with local heritage can therefore be observed to expand into virtual space and both create a new social network as well as solidify existing social community ties.

Although great importance is attached to the use of manual labor for cultivating the terrace fields, digital technology is used where appropriate or beneficial for preservation of the landscape. Examples are digital documentation of rediscovered

plant or returning animal species, as well as live broadcasting during events in order to limit the number of visitors to the fields. During the above-mentioned rice planting competition, visitors were directed to gather at the former local primary school and follow the event via the broadcast so as not to damage the field ridges (Sun 2023). This solution further shows the great level of attention paid to local farmers' interests. The Hehe cooperative also uses social media to promote and sell its agricultural produce. However, as agricultural yields remain on a small scale, it is more effective to do so within its own groups rather than via a big sales platform.

Conclusion

This brief investigation of heritage as a social process by example of two rice terrace landscapes in southwestern China and Taiwan has shown how engagement with cultural and natural heritage may enhance social bonds and community life when proceeding from local needs. In the Hani Rice Terraces, the eradication of poverty and the generation of opportunities for local villagers to make a living remain the most urgent tasks. While the Azheke Plan may not provide an answer as to who will cultivate the terrace fields in the next generation, the biannual profit-sharing meetings have so far become an important community event. The possibility to transcend mountain borders by use of digital platforms further encouraged some younger natives to return to their villages and re-explore the potential of landscape heritage, thereby increasing chances for its revalorization.

In Taiwan, non-governmental organizations play a central role and are regarded as mediators in conservation between responsible government bodies, mainly the Forestry Bureau, and local communities. This rather micro-oriented approach has a clear long-term perspective that is seen in the slow but steady growth of customer groups and young voluntary urban supporters of terrace cultivation. Events such as the rice planting competition employ heritage to pursue ambitious social goals, in particular, a greater appreciation of farming and related professional knowledge and skills. In the face of real expropriation threats, environmental and heritage protection efforts have further become important strategies in defending local interests as well as strengthening intergenerational relations.

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