Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China

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In heritage, far from being fatally predetermined or God-given, is in large measure our own marvellously malleable creation.

After a 40-minute flight from Kunming and a 20-minute bus ride, the tourists arrive at the town entrance. The towering words ‘Welcome to Lijiang’ – calligraphy by former Chinese president Jiang Zemin in 1997 – and a giant UNESCO World Heritage Site signboard lead the visitors past a 100-metre wooden waterwheel, down several narrow stone streets into the newly reconstructed Old Town. On one side of the street, souvenir shops, guesthouses, bars, and nightclubs compete for space on the bustling streets of the Old Town, while hostesses dressed in colourful ethnic costumes welcome the guests. On the other side of the street, a stream is diverted to run through the town, flowing from the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain to the Black Dragon Pool.

After a couple of minutes walking along the stream, tourists come to the intersection of the two main streets, Qiyi Street and Wuyi Street, where they pass through a gate adorned with a red plaque and satin banners. The vertical plaque over its entrance signals that this is a Naxi Wedding Courtyard, the Naxi Xiyuan. Red lanterns, a common folk symbol of marriage in China, hang on either side of the gate. While the entrance plaque and the red lanterns may have caught the tourists’ eye, it is the lane leading to the chapel and the paintings of three deities at the end of the courtyard which draw the visitors in.

This Naxi Wedding Courtyard is the subject of this book. It reflects an entanglement of individuals’ desires, dreams, imaginations, and hope. It represents a site jointly established by diverse groups of people with very different agendas, including local government agencies eager to promote the fame of Lijiang as a World Heritage Site; entrepreneurs hoping to preserve traditional culture through the heritage tourism industry; practitioners of the Dongba religion wishing to perform their ethnic identities; and tourists, mainly domestic Han Chinese but some of international origins seeking to fulfil fantasies of romance.

To understand the story of the Naxi Wedding Courtyard, it is important to first familiarize oneself with Lijiang’s Old Town. In recent decades, Lijiang has become a ‘stage,’ a space of ongoing change and contestation. Negotiations
between international, national, local, and individual imaginaries transformed Lijiang from a historic town into a romantic heritage destination. Following the reinvention of the ethnic Naxi wedding, intertwined with the traditional and contemporary customs of this minority, the Naxi Wedding Courtyard has become a stage to display and perform local cultural heritage.

Reconstructing a World Heritage Site

Since China ratified the UNESCO World Heritage Convention in 1985, both national and regional governments have started utilizing heritage as an effective strategy to obtain political legitimacy and economic benefits. Many local governments at cultural and natural sites established local heritage offices to prepare for the World Heritage nomination procedure. These offices manage the sites and oversee their conservation and promotion once they have been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Lijiang is one of them. In this first phase of ‘producing’ a new imaginary of the town, the local and national governments, as well as UNESCO, play a significant role.

In October 1994, the Yunnan Tourism Planning Conference was held in Dali and Lijiang. During the closing ceremony, the governor of Yunnan Province announced that Lijiang would soon apply for World Heritage status, and in June 1995 national heritage experts conducted a preliminary evaluation of the town. After the investigation, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) decided to include Lijiang’s Old Town on the national tentative list for nomination in 1997. Following this decision, the Lijiang government established a heritage nomination working group to initiate the compilation of the nomination dossier. As a retired official, Mr. He, a member of this working group, told me:

We were very excited about the idea of a World Heritage nomination. Like me, many of us come from different departments within the Lijiang government. We started to work intensively together and prepare the documents for the heritage nomination.

However, a magnitude 7 earthquake struck the region of Lijiang on 3 February 1996. Approximately 20 per cent of the houses collapsed, and 300,000 people were forced out of their damaged homes.21 The nomination procedure was stopped, and governmental efforts concentrated on restoring Lijiang.

21 These figures include many towns or villages around Lijiang.
after the disaster (zai hou chongjian). Three weeks after the earthquake, a team of experts from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and SACH came to Lijiang to investigate the effects of the earthquake.²² Mr. He recalls,

Honestly we were worried about the nomination, because we thought the procedure was over. I was surprised that UNESCO really attached great importance to this disaster. During their visit, they carefully studied the situation of the town. They found that while many old buildings had collapsed, the historical urban fabric and the cultural landscape of Lijiang had remained intact. They encouraged us to continue preparing for the UNESCO nomination as planned. This was really exciting news!

After the meeting, the working group continued to prepare the nomination dossier and submitted the documents to UNESCO in June 1996. One year later, an ICOMOS expert, accompanied by officials from SACH, conducted a three-day evaluation and recommended adding the site to the World Heritage List. This decision was formally made during the World Heritage Committee meeting in December 1997 in Naples, Italy, making Lijiang the first World Heritage Site in an ethnic minority area of China. In the UNESCO description, the nomination highlights the cooperation among different ethnic groups as a national project of unity (Shepherd and Yu 2013: 28):

From the 12th century onward, the Old Town of Lijiang was an important goods distribution center for trade between Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet, and is where the Silk Road in the south joins the Ancient Chama (Tea and Horse) Roads. The Old Town of Lijiang became an important center for the economic and cultural communication between various ethnic groups such as the Naxi, Han, Tibetan and Bai. Cultural and technological exchanges over the past 800 years resulted in the particular local architecture, art, urban planning and landscape, social life, customs, arts and crafts and other cultural features which incorporate the quintessence of Han, Bai, Tibetan and other ethnic groups, and at the same time show distinctive Naxi features. In particular, the murals in the religious architecture and other buildings reflect the harmonious co-existence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (UNESCO 1997).

²² As the advisory board of UNESCO, ICOMOS was founded in 1965 to provide specialist knowledge in the conservation and restoration of cultural properties, especially concerning the application of materials submitted by State Parties to inscribe World Heritage Sites.
After being added to the list, a new government office – the Protection and Management Committee of the Lijiang Old Town World Heritage Site – was set up in 2002. Receiving approval from the People's Congress of Yunnan Province in 2005, the committee was transformed from a coordinating and advisory body to an administrative agency – the Lijiang Old Town Conservation and Management Bureau (the Heritage Bureau). Whereas work associated with the planning and management of Lijiang heritage sites was previously undertaken by a series of disparate administrative bodies, all work now falls under the purview of the Heritage Bureau. According to the Regulation on the Protection of Lijiang (\textit{Lijiang baohutiaoli}), the Heritage Bureau is in charge of preserving cultural relics, enhancing infrastructure and public utilities, and facilitating marketing and business development.

Reconstruction after the earthquake was one of the main tasks of the Heritage Bureau. Supported by the city government, the Heritage Bureau cooperated with the World Bank to redesign the urban and social fabric of the town. To set up the buffer zone as stipulated in the World Heritage Operational Guidelines, a clear boundary was drawn between the heritage area (the Old Town) and the ‘New Town.’\footnote{A buffer zone serves to provide an additional layer of protection to a World Heritage property. The idea of buffer zone has been included in the \textit{Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention}. For details see UNESCO (n.d.).} During this project, dozens of two-storey concrete houses built in the 1950s were demolished and replaced by

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2_1}
\caption{The World Heritage emblem in the Old Town of Lijiang}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Photo: Yujie Zhu, 2011}
low-rise dwellings, with strict provisions as to their height and their façade. In an attempt to recreate the traditional appearance of Naxi buildings, the builders maintained the Naxi architectural style of *sanfang yizhaobi*, which refers to three houses facing the courtyard and a decorative screen wall reflecting sunlight into the houses. Built from brick and timber, the houses are painted white and decorated with black tiles and red lights. At street level, the bureau replaced cobblestones with polished marble and beautified the canals with shrubs and flowerbeds. The organization also rebuilt and widened two main streets in the north of the town. This reconstruction was designed to recapture the aesthetic features of Lijiang during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Peters 2013).

Lijiang’s recognition as a World Heritage Site had a significant impact on the reconstruction and rebranding of the town. As the local authority, the Heritage Bureau used heritage as a tool to rebuild an imagined Lijiang of previous centuries. Here I emphasize that this is a reconstruction, not a restoration, because the heritage work is based neither on scientific evidence and authenticity, as stipulated in heritage conservation guidelines such as the Venice Charter, nor on Liang Sicheng’s concept of ‘restoring the old as it was’ (*zhengjiu rujiu*). The reconstruction project, as it has unfolded after the 1996 earthquake and 1997 World Heritage listing, is based on an imagination that echoes Goullart’s interpretation of the town as a ‘forgotten kingdom.’ The town is reconstructed and frozen in an imagined time and space as an exotic spectacle for display and consumption. Judging from the flood
of tourists to Lijiang in the years that followed, this reconstruction can be viewed as a big success in terms of economic development.

**The Development of Mass Tourism**

After UNESCO listed Lijiang as a World Heritage Site in 1997, Lijiang’s growing tourism industry started to attract commercial migrants, accreting the town’s cultural contact with other parts of China, and indeed the globalized world. While a number of governmental departments as well as UNESCO triggered Lijiang’s sociocultural transformation, the ensuing tourism and migration of Han Chinese businesspeople further changed the city’s urban landscape. The role of the tourism industry shifted from being an easy way of increasing foreign currency to being part of the official strategy for local development. This strategic change has had a tremendous impact on the social fabric of the town.

He Gang, a local hostel owner, has witnessed the transformations. He Gang and his family own a house close to the north entrance of the Old Town. His mother, Yu, the owner of the Naxi Mama guesthouse, started the business in the early 1990s. At that time, there were not many guesthouses available for tourists. Responding to the increasing numbers of international tourists and foreign backpackers, the Lijiang government started encouraging local residents to set up their own family business and host international tourists. Yu decided to follow this business opportunity. Like other guesthouse owners, Yu renovated their house to create a ‘home experience’ for Western tourists. Many international travellers stayed at Naxi Mama for a longer period: some of them more than three months. She provided homemade food to all the guests. Naxi Mama has been highly recommended by the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks, the internationally famous guidebook for tourists. Here is an account of the experience of one of the guests at Naxi Mama:

Maybe it’s due to the very mothering nature of Mama, but eating at the communal table felt [...] good. It feels kind of like dinner with very distant relatives, so it was easy to strike up conversation with the other travellers at the table. At the very least, the communication did not feel forced. Pretty soon, we were even making arrangements to go for tiramisu and yoghurt in the Old Town together. Then again, it could also be because of the obscene amount of beer that we’d ordered.

In any case, Mama’s presence could be felt the whole time we were there. She’d make sure you took a (free) banana away with you just before you went off in the morning. She’d hug and kiss you on the cheek just before you
Jo (a fellow traveller) actually came down with a slight flu and had to stay in bed for a day during our time in the Guest House. Mama checked in constantly to make sure that I was keeping Jo well-fed and comfortable. She even poured me some special (and allegedly precious) herbal medicine pills from her own private stash to give to Jo (TW and Jo 2012).

This customized home style of accommodation and Yu’s hospitality made their family business very successful, but this success did not last long. Today, He Gang has taken over the business from his mother. In contrast to Western backpackers who prefer to stay in guesthouses that are cheap and easy to make friends at, Chinese tourists demand more comfortable hostels. Many migrants have settled in Lijiang and have opened luxury hostels. When I interviewed He Gang in 2009 at his newly renovated Naxi Mama, he told me about the recent changes to his own business:

Even five years ago, many Japanese tourists came to stay in my hostel and they would rent rooms for months. Now most of the visitors are Chinese who prefer to stay at more luxurious places. Worse, most of the guesthouses are now run by outsiders. Many of my old friends found it difficult to compete with them and sold their businesses. Luckily, Naxi Mama still survives thanks to Lonely Planet’s recommendation.

The statistics from the Lijiang Bureau of Statistics partially reflect the changes He Gang indicated. Lijiang saw 1.06 million domestic and 45,930 international tourists in 1996 (just prior to the earthquake); increasing to 34.04 million Chinese and some 1.15 million international tourists in 2016. In other words, domestic tourism constitutes the majority of the market, with 96.7 per cent Chinese tourists in 2011. Tourists also spend considerable amounts of money: in 1996 they spent 160 million yuan, a figure which rose to a staggering 60.876 billion in 2016.24

In addition to the dramatic increase in tourists visiting Lijiang, since 2000 there has also been a steady increase in internal migration and business investment. People from Zhejiang, Fujian, Sichuan, and Guangdong Provinces have gradually moved to Lijiang. Along with their arrival, a number of shops serving tourists have opened in the Old Town. Most of the main streets around the town centre such as Dongda Street, Xinhua Street, Xinyi Street, or

24 International tourists contributed 9.7 million USD (c. 80.6 million yuan) to Lijiang’s earnings in 1996. The figure increased to USD 484 million (c. 3.08 billion yuan) in 2016 (Lijiang Bureau of Statistics 2017).
Wuyi Street are now fully occupied by tourist shops, cafes, and restaurants; they sell souvenirs, dresses, CDs, and food. Consequently, heritage tourism converted Lijiang from a historic trade town into a tourism marketplace. In this market, merchants sell mass-produced souvenirs made in other parts of the country, albeit labelled as ‘locally made’ (Zheng 2011). Furnished with heritage symbols, ethnic culture, and a romantic atmosphere, the town has become a stage for tourist display and consumption.

In 2005 the Heritage Bureau launched the World Heritage Lijiang Commercial Development Plan (Shijie yichan lijiang shangye fazhan guihua) and issued several policies concerning construction and business development in the town. Most decisions put more emphasis on the interests of the tourism industry than on the historical value of the town itself.

The conversion of Sifang Square (Sifangjie) is an illustrative example of Lijiang’s ‘heritage facelift.’ Throughout history, Lijiang has served as an important trading hub as it is linked with Tibet to the north and India to the south and the west. Sifang Square had been a market hub for businesspeople and locals for several hundred years. A local Naxi man remembered: ‘There were various shops in the square such as herbal shops, grocery stores, tailor shops, blacksmiths, leather shops and paper-making workshops.’ Since the start of the open-door policy in 1978, many businesspeople have migrated to Lijiang to sell jade and jewellery produced in other provinces of China. At the time, Sifang Square still served as the main market for the local Naxi to buy and sell daily necessities, but it was heavily damaged during the earthquake of 1996.

Nowadays, Sifang Square has been redesigned as a tourist destination for sightseeing and photography. The shopping malls and houses that were built around Sifang Square, ostensibly for the purpose of beautification, were intended to serve tourists, not the local population. Tour guides present the history of Lijiang and introduce the town’s tourist attractions. Tourists can pay to ride horses imitating the tea caravans (mabang), which used to traverse the Ancient Tea Horse Road, a network of caravan paths winding through the mountains in southwest China. They can also encounter and applaud the Naxi elders dancing in Sifang Square. This local dance originated from a celebratory song Remeicuo in the Baishuitai region aimed at driving evil spirits away, and became popular around Lijiang County after 1949 (Arcones 2012). During the dance, Naxi people, men and women, join hands, make a circle and swing their arms back and forth as they sing. As

Sigley (2013) argues that in recent years, the notion of Ancient Tea Horse Road has also been constructed as a heritage discourse, and utilized as resources for tourism development.
Su and Teo (2009) observed, daily activities in Sifang Square have shifted from what once was local community life to a tourism-oriented service. While the government, UNESCO, and a steady influx of commercial migrants were changing Lijiang’s appearance, the local citizens had trouble coping with the town’s new development. Traditional family-run businesses were being overrun by tourist shops, which sell industrially produced goods at considerably cheaper prices. The local craftsmen are exposed to commercial competition; they lack protection for maintaining their ability to produce locally made handicrafts. Local grocery stores and restaurants eventually disappeared, unable to compete with the new souvenir shops and fancy restaurants. In response, the Heritage Bureau established a new market close to the south gate of the Old Town. But the distance of the new market from the centre inconvenienced local residents. One Naxi resident complained:

In my childhood, we used to go to the market every day. But now, everything has changed. [...] I have to walk 20 minutes to the new market to buy fresh vegetables, and then carry heavy bundles back home by walking another 20 minutes. [...] It’s much better to live in the New Town and shop in the supermarket.

Lijiang has been converted from a historic trade town to a tourism hot spot, a well-set ‘stage’ decorated with heritage symbols and representations of ethnic
culture for tourist consumption. This consumption, due to the historical reputation of the local ethnic community, is filled with romantic components.

**Becoming a Town of Romance**

In 2003, a TV series entitled *One Metre of Sunshine* (*Yimi Yangguang*) was filmed in Lijiang. In this drama, one of the characters commits suicide on the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Lijiang was chosen for this setting because the local Naxi culture has been commonly associated with a tradition called ‘dying for love’ (*xunqing*). This tradition was described in the ancient Naxi narrative poem *Lubanlurao*, a story in which a young couple died for love. As in the poem, many young Naxi people are uninterested in a marriage arranged by their parents with their own kin, and would rather find partners on their own. According to Naxi scholar He Jiaxiu (2006), suicide occurs frequently among young, unmarried Naxi people. Most cases take place in isolated or remote areas, far from the person’s home village. Lovers dying together indicate a shared desire for eternal reunion in paradise. When committing such acts, people wear their best clothing and flee to remote sites with their lovers. They bind their bodies together to ensure a collective transmission to paradise. Couples commit suicide not merely for a fleeting taste of romantic adventure but for the eternal happiness promised in the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain’s Third Kingdom, described in Naxi popular legend.²⁶

The TV drama *One Metre of Sunshine* was hugely successful on a national scale. No matter whether it is officially recognized by the authorities, Lijiang’s fame for love and romance is now overriding its brand as an ethnic historic town and a World Heritage Site (Zhu 2012b). As depicted in of a number of novels, films, and popular songs, Lijiang was regarded as ‘the land of sacred love.’ Since 2006, Lijiang has hosted the annual ‘Chinese Valentine Festival’ every August to attract young tourist couples. Through these cultural festivals, the tourism industry in Lijiang reinterprets ethnic love traditions and presents them as modern images of romance. Naxi scholar Yang Fuquan once voiced his opinion on these cultural festivals, arguing: ‘Naxi festivals should be staged by local Naxi to celebrate some unique aspect of our community, such as the traditional Sanduo festival.’²⁷

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²⁶ The Third Kingdom of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain is a holy site, according to Dongba religion. Naxi people believe this is paradise on earth.

²⁷ The Sanduo festival is a traditional religious festival for Naxi people in Lijiang to worship Sanduo, the god of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain and the most powerful territorial spirit of nature in the Lijiang area.
But current inventions of these love festivals are not for Naxi, but only to attract tourists. These festivals lost the original meanings of the traditions.

However, scholars’ critiques were not able to stop the local government from developing Lijiang into a town of romance for tourists. During my stay in Lijiang in 2005, I met many tour guides who repeated the same myth of a Naxi tradition of dying for love (*xunqing*). A number of young couples have come to Lijiang because they enjoyed watching the TV series *One Metre of Sunshine*, and believe in the existence of the ‘Third Kingdom,’ where they can enjoy eternal love. As one young girl from Beijing told me ‘I was walking through all the streets where *One Metre of Sunshine* was filmed. For me, Lijiang is a fantasy where I can find my true love.’

John Urry (2002) uses the idea of ‘tourist gaze’ to describe the stereotypical expectations when tourists encounter local culture. Using such a ‘tourist gaze,’ this girl expected to see what she imagined to be an authentic place. Such authenticity is not necessarily related to untouched nature, the original status of architecture, or the back stage of local family life (MacCannell 1973). Instead, this authenticity is an outcome of the ethnic reconstruction in which certain local ethnic symbols have been commercialized for touristic purposes.

Music also plays an important role in the promotion of Lijiang as a romantic heritage destination. Many ethnic love songs are played in the shops around the town. In 2006, a singer named Kankan from Jiangsu Province released a song called ‘Tick Tock,’ which was the main theme of a popular TV show ‘Love Story in Beijing.’ After some singers performed it in the bars of Lijiang in 2007, the song became very popular and was played all around the town:

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Tick tock tick tock; the clock keeps moving on.
Tick tock tick tock; raindrops on the ground are splashing.
Tick tock tick tock; do I still miss him?
Tick tock tick tock; a few tears fall.
Tick tock tick tock; who can I talk to in the lonely night?
Tick tock tick tock; who can dry my tears in sadness?
Tick tock tick tock; I will refresh myself and continue my journey.
Tick tock tick tock; someone else will take care of me.
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The soft melody and lyrics of the song perfectly match the romantic atmosphere of the town. Although most of the Naxi residents do not like the song

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28 In response, local communities often tailor their culture to match tourists’ expectations due to financial interests.

29 The lyrics were translated into English by the author.
and believe that it does not represent Naxi culture, many tourists, such as
the following female tourist, were obsessed with it:

I listen to the song everywhere in the town. I listen to the bar singer
playing it. I go to the restaurant when it is being played. I heard the song
the first day I arrived. Now, I will leave this place, but the melody is still
in my mind. I believe the melody will remind me of this magical place.
It is a very different experience from what I have in Shanghai. The ‘tick
tock’ gives me peace.

Western travellers visiting Lijiang during the early years of international
tourism brought with them expectations different from those of Chinese
tourists. I met a number of Western travellers who complained about Liji-
ang’s alleged destruction by mass tourism; they often expressed a sense of
‘authenticity loss’ and nostalgia about the earlier explorers’ narrative about
an ‘oriental paradise.’ On the contrary, Chinese tourists are indifferent as
to whether the toured object is fabricated or not. What matters is the exotic
and romantic features of a place that differs from their city routines. Chinese
tourists are fascinated by narratives and cultural products that reflect and
reinforce their notions of romance and the exotic such as the stories of ‘dying
for love,’ the One Metre of Sunshine TV series, and the ‘Tick Tock’ songs.

Transforming into a Capital of Love Affairs (Yanyu)

In Gender and Internal Orientalism in China, Louisa Schein (1997) has shown
that the post-Mao cultural revival of ethnic minorities is linked to the desire
to establish a Han-centric, masculine, modern, national self – a desire which
is dialectically produced by constructing a backward, feminized, exotic,minority other. In such a context, minority women are often represented
as natural and traditional, and associated with danger and allure. Like
many ethnic areas in Southeast Asia such as Vietnam or Thailand, there
is a stereotype of ethnic tourism in China that non-Han Chinese are often
associated with sexual activity (Walsh and Swain 2004). As part of the femin-
ized Chinese ethnic minority project as Schein described, the sensuality
and sexuality of ethnic women is often embedded in tourism promotional
materials and television programmes. Since early 2000, the demand for sex
tourism in Yunnan has steadily increased. An increasing number of tourists
come to Lijiang to pursue their dreams of love, and sometimes, these dreams
are connected with wild, exotic, and sexual desires.
In September 2007, I saw several prostitutes in a night bar who were dressed in Mosuo costume. One of my local informants told me later that these girls were all Han Chinese from Sichuan, another province in southwest China. Yet they pretended to be local Mosuo girls because customers prefer to have affairs with Mosuo girls who they regard as more attractive. Two days later, a young Chinese tourist I met in Lijiang confirmed this and told me:

How fantastic that the Mosuo men have no partnership responsibility and family burden! How great to chase girls in the town of romance during my Chinese Valentine Festival trip to Lijiang.

The Mosuo, also called ‘Na,’ is an ethnic group living in the Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces of China. They are culturally different from the Naxi people, but during the government’s ethnic identification in 1950s, Mosuo and Naxi were officially recognized as part of the same ethnic nationality. Distinct from the Han custom of marriage, the Mosuo community maintain the tradition of the ‘walking marriage’ (zouhun). This unique marriage custom is deeply rooted in the Mosuo’s social and cultural tradition of the matrilineal family system (Mathieu 2000; Cai 2001). The marriage and the propagation of offspring are practised by men who visit women’s houses at night, if given permission, and return home early next morning. The couples do not marry each other, and both of them stay in their own matrilineal families for their entire life. Children born from these relationships are raised by their mothers and their mothers’ families (often the mother’s brothers). The ‘walking marriage’ custom is commonly described as ‘serial monogamy’ (Namu and Mathieu 2003). Indeed, many such pairings last for a lifetime and the male partners often do have a role in the care of their children.

The Mosuo culture initially became well known internationally by means of the book *Walk out of the Kingdom of Women*, written by a local Mosuo girl named Yang Erche Namu in the early 1990s. In her book, the Mosuo’s matrilineal system and the ‘walking marriage’ custom are described as ‘the living fossil of matrilineal kingdom,’ ‘the mysterious eastern kingdom of women,’ or ‘the last matrilineal family of human beings’ (Namu and
Mathieu 2003). Since then, a large body of literature has been published on the Mosuo marriage tradition, often perpetuating such romantic ethnic conceptions of the Mosuo.

Due to commercial promotion by tourism operators, ethnic elites, and the local government in Yunnan Province, the image of the Mosuo and their ‘walking marriage’ custom has been further romanticized, even in nearby areas, like Lijiang, which is not home to the Mosuo. The media primarily portray the Mosuo group as sexually promiscuous: the women change partners frequently; they are said to live in a sexual utopia where women often seduce men. Tourism operators have used the Mosuo’s romantic image to market the town, attracting more tourists (especially men) to visit the area. On the Chinese popular social media site Sina Weibo, for instance, Lijiang is framed as the most romantic heartland where tourists search for romance:

A bright moon, a stream along the street, and bars in two-storey ancient wooden buildings, which are decorated with red lanterns. [...] This is the most popular and most crowded place of Old Town – the Xinhua Street or so-called ‘Bar Street.’ Lying on the tranquilly flowing water of the Old Town, it is famous for a large number of local bars decorated in different styles. [...] Every night, travellers get together here and take part in different forms of entertainment in this fascinating night scenery. They are easily stimulated by the mixed aura of antiquity and modernity, and soon become intoxicated with it. [...] Males and females are talking, laughing, drinking, singing and dancing together in a romantic atmosphere. This could be a start of a beautiful encounter, or a fling in an exotic land. (Sina Tourism 2013)

Driven by Mosuo’s ‘walking marriage’ tradition, local tourism industry has facilitated the transformation of Lijiang into an imaginary of a ‘sexual utopia,’ or – to use the Chinese term – the ‘capital of yanyu.’ In Chinese, ‘yan’ means beauty, and ‘Yu’ means encountering. Yanyu is usually related to an accidental romantic encounter with some stranger. The tourism industry in China has used yanyu as a new attraction to market the destination in which tourists expect to have sexual encounters or temporary relationships during their trips. This does not necessarily refer to the prostitution industry, and often concerns relationships among tourists themselves. A popular pictorial pulp called Yanyu in Lijiang stated in the preface, ‘yanyu is like a luxurious dinner for beggars. In Lijiang, the dinner never stops. People from all over China come to Lijiang with the desire of searching for something: they search for love, search for sex, and search for romance.’
When I started my research in 2005, I found that many young Chinese tourists (both men and women) visiting Lijiang were interested in having sexual affairs with local ethnic people. The appeal of casual love affairs for tourists is primarily driven by the Mosuo walking marriage tradition and stories of amorous affairs told by guides or published on the Internet. A common example of affairs tourists engage in is young female tourists who have short-term relationships with charming Naxi singers from remote mountain areas in bars. One of these women, Ms. Hua, a tourist from Beijing, described her attraction to one of the singers, ‘the singers eyes are so charming, I can understand from his music that he is full of stories.’ This is not an uncommon sentiment and other young women holidaying from large cities express similar feelings of attraction.

Later in 2009, during a return visit to Lijiang, I found that the nature of yanyu had changed. With the relocation of many Naxi from the Old Town to the New Town, Lijiang had become the playground for Chinese tourists in search of love affairs among themselves. One afternoon I sat with a tourist named Jun from Shenzhen in the Sakura bar. He was on his third Qingdao beer when he claimed, ‘This is a very interesting place, you know.’

This week I already had affairs with three girls from different places in China. I’m not forcing anything. I don’t mind where they come from. If we meet in the bars and are both interested in each other, we will have some drinks and dance. If it happens, it happens. It is not only about
sex, but also about feelings, you know. You can't get the same feeling in your daily life.

Like Jun, many Chinese tourists visit the bars each evening during their stay expecting to have an affair with other tourists. These (mostly male) tourists are often keen to talk to each other and share their yanyu experience. They take advantage of the relative anonymity and develop temporary relationships during their stay. Affected by the media and the romantic atmosphere in Lijiang, people easily develop the desire to experiment with new forms of emotional intimacy and sexual freedom, a freedom they lack at home.

Creating a Cultural Theme Park

In 2003, an article entitled ‘Lijiang, Whose Old Town Is It?’ (Lijiang, shuideng gucheng?) was published in the newspaper Nanfang Zhoumo (Southern Weekly). In this article, Ying Yi (2003) raised the question of who owns Lijiang as a World Heritage Site: the local community, tourists, external businesspeople, or the government? The article argued that Lijiang has become a playground of Han Chinese who engage with both cultural production and romantic consumption. Local residents, who are supposed to represent their own culture, are absent in this crowded market.

In addition to the public media, scholars also criticized Lijiang, suggesting it has become a ‘hollowed out’ (kongxin hua) town without the essence of culture (Su and Teo 2009). In the summer of 2013, I had dinner with Prof. He, a local Naxi scholar. While watching tourists passing by the souvenir shops and photographing lanterns and canals, I asked Prof. He what he thought about the recent changes in Lijiang. He responded: ‘Lijiang is not so much different from a theme park.’ According to him, the reconstruction of the town after the earthquake had transformed Lijiang into ‘an amusement park without local culture.’

In reaction to these criticisms, the Heritage Bureau decided to promote Naxi culture heritage. As a part of this strategy, the government has organized Dongba religious festivals and Naxi ethnic concerts each year. Apart from these activities, the Heritage Bureau outsourced most cultural industry projects to local commercial corporations. The Naxi Cultural Industry Company, for example, one of the Heritage Bureau’s main contractors, has promoted Naxi culture through the tourism industry since 2000.

The general manager of the Naxi Cultural Industry Company, Mr. Liu, is a local Naxi businessman. As the president of the association, he has been
active in the local cultural industry since the very beginning of tourism development in the town. In response to what he sees as the erosion of Naxi culture in his hometown, he promotes local culture through his businesses. By creating a tourism project based on local folk religion and ethnic culture, he attempted to search for an alternative way of preserving Naxi heritage. This is what Mr. Liu told me about his business:

These days many businesspeople from outside of Lijiang come and dominate the business market. They have money and resources. But they have very little knowledge of Naxi culture and traditions. They are polluting the heritage of my hometown. They bought products from wholesale markets in Zhejiang or Guangdong Provinces. The souvenir products sold here can be found everywhere in China.

We Naxi need to promote our heritage and allow more people to know about real [zhenzhengde] Lijiang. I think there is two ways to do it. The first way, as many scholars do, is to write books and conserve objects in the museum. I think there is a second way, by inviting people to participate in our culture, and integrating the tradition into daily life.

In 2005, the Heritage Bureau and the Naxi Cultural Industry Company co-launched a project called ‘Encountering a Naxi Family’ (Zoujin naxi renjia) to diversify Lijiang’s heritage tourism products and promote authentic Naxi culture. Ten traditional courtyards in Lijiang, including the Naxi Wedding Courtyard, were selected to exhibit Naxi handicrafts, clothing, music, religion, food, and wedding traditions. These selected residential houses are primarily located in Qiyi and Wuyi streets, an area of family-owned handicraft workshops in earlier times.

According to the project description, a local family resides in each of the selected houses: financially supported by the Heritage Bureau, they work there and exhibit particular aspects of Naxi culture. Some courtyards are accessible for free while others charge entrance fees. Each courtyard has an exhibition room to present the history and cultural background of one specific traditional handicraft, as well as a show room where people are able to experience the manufacturing process. Families are also able to sell their handicrafts to visitors as souvenirs. Laoqing, for instance, used to own a family workshop to produce and sell copper products to local Naxi people for a living. In 2005, Laoqing’s workshop was selected as one of the houses to display his copper-making craftwork. Agreeing with the selection, Laoqing makes copper products in his family workshop during daytime. His wife sells the products to tourists and educates them about her husband’s craft.
They are expected to wear Naxi clothes during visiting hours. As Mr. Liu explained, ‘this makes the family more authentic in front of tourists.’ With the local Naxi family living in these courtyards, the project has transformed family life into an exhibition for consumption.

The Naxi Wedding Courtyard is one of these ten houses. In contrast to other courtyards exhibiting various elements of Naxi culture, this courtyard offers Naxi wedding ceremonies as a tourist participatory service. Such projects – with a theme of authentic Naxi culture – provide legitimacy to developing commercial business while maintaining the town's World Heritage status. During the UNESCO-ICOMOS monitoring mission in 2008, the director of the Heritage Bureau guided the UNESCO representatives to all the selected theme houses of ‘Encountering a Naxi Family’ and invited them to have dinner at the Naxi Wedding Courtyard. The director of the Heritage Bureau presented Mr. Liu’s project as an innovation of heritage conservation and sustainable development of local culture. As introduced by him, ‘The wedding ceremony aims to protect local culture heritage, even if it is a paid service.’ The project has received positive feedback from the mission experts.
Mr. Liu adopted the discourse of authenticity from the local government, who used similar terms to convince UNESCO of their World Heritage status. According to Mr. Liu, ‘Instead of yanyu, the cultural tourism project of “Encountering a Naxi Family” encourages tourists to experience ethnic and authentic culture.’ The promotion material of the Naxi Wedding Courtyard indicates their intention. The material states:

As a World Heritage Site, Lijiang has its unique natural and cultural resources. The ethnic Naxi tradition and the world-famous living Dongba culture, the only religion still using hieroglyphic scripts, attracts both domestic and international tourists to visit the site. However, due to commercialization and modernization, the peaceful town lost its original culture. Supported by Lijiang city government, we developed the project of the Naxi Wedding Courtyard to promote and present authentic Naxi ethnic wedding traditions. We welcome tourists to experience this different ethnic culture. We are also happy to see local Naxi relearn their traditions. By staging original, pure, and romantic Naxi weddings, we provide a platform for tourists and local Naxi to communicate with and learn from each other. (Chinese promotional material of the company, translated by the author)

To promote the discourse of authenticity, words such as ‘ethnic,’ ‘magic,’ ‘ancient,’ ‘untouched,’ ‘authentic,’ and ‘pure’ are highlighted throughout the advertising and promotional materials. These descriptions, common in heritage tourism discourse, also highlight that local heritage is under threat and, if lost, irreplaceable. The company affirms that the more ‘exotic’ or ‘authentic’ the service presented is, the more enticing it will be for tourists.

Conclusion

Western traditional conservation theories have often emphasized the significance of the physicality of place. Nevertheless, heritage should also be regarded as a social and cultural production that involves a constant process of creation and destruction. This is particularly the case in some Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and China, where renewal and reconstruction has become part of the long-standing tradition of heritage conservation.

This chapter focuses on the social and cultural contexts of the Naxi Wedding Courtyard, a Lijiang business that adapts traditional Naxi wedding ceremonies for tourists, arguing that the state and various other actors have
(re)produced Lijiang as a stage for cultural performances and romantic consumption. After Western explorers like Rock and Goullart, swayed by colonial nostalgia, presented Lijiang as an oriental paradise in historical reports, this image has continuously been fostered by others such as the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks. Since 1997, Lijiang’s Old Town has become a World Heritage Site by following the UNESCO heritage conservation guidelines. The local government used the post-earthquake reconstruction as an opportunity to recreate the built environment not as it had been, but to match early twentieth century tourist images of Lijiang. The ethnic image of a frozen and timeless Naxi culture has been further manipulated by the public media and represented in television documentaries, theme parks, fashion boutiques, and museums as a result of romantic consumption.

For local authorities like the Heritage Bureau, heritage is not only the object of regulation but also a means of production and profit. They deliberately use the heritage industry to foster economic development, and by extension, its ruling legitimacy, as it is based on continuous economic growth (Zhao 2009). To respond to the public criticism of over-commercialization, the Heritage Bureau has come up with a specific solution for heritage conservation. By developing profitable cultural industry projects, such as ‘Encountering a Naxi Family,’ the Heritage Bureau has turned local family life into commodities for exhibition and consumption. In these projects, it is not the local residents themselves who represent or even own their culture; the authorities decide what should be presented to lure tourists. With the guidance of local authorities, these families are educated to be ‘authentic’ and are transformed into an alternative form of cultural heritage.

In these stories, the existing power relationship is unbalanced, especially when the nation state as the framework for identity and device of governance becomes overwhelming in people’s daily lives. It is still heritage management – inspired by expert knowledge and economic incentive – that defines what heritage is, and determines the manner of heritage representation (Smith 2006; Brett 1996).

It is not surprising to find stories similar to that of Lijiang elsewhere in China, especially since economic development has been at the top of the national agenda for more than three decades. Very similar stories have occurred elsewhere in Yunnan and in other regions of China, such as the invention and reconstruction of Shangri-La. Zhongdian, a town 150 kilometres away from Lijiang, at the border of Yunnan and the Tibetan region, was renamed Shangri-La in 2001. Referring to exoticism and eternal love, the theme of Shangri-La appeared in James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon*, published in 1933. Western backpackers often move on from Lijiang to
Shangri-La to explore a better, less touristic place to match their dream of finding a ‘real Shangri-La.’ However, as Ben Hillman (2003) has shown, the town is experiencing a shared destiny with Lijiang of cultural destruction. Without the consideration of the local community, cultural heritage has often become an economic project manipulated by governmental agencies that have their own entrepreneurial pursuits and policy agendas.

This chapter illustrated how different actors have created a ‘stage’ in Lijiang by transforming its built environment and tourism imaginaries over time. In the next chapter, I will move on to the content of the Naxi wedding tradition which functions as a script for cultural performances. Against the backdrop of Lijiang’s transformation, the performers of the wedding tradition are adhering to the officially sanctioned way of inventing cultural performances in order to legitimize the promotion of its cultural authenticity. Heritage, as referring to both place and cultural tradition, becomes a battleground for different groups of people, where conflicts over pride, profits, and identities unfold.