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MATERIAL COMPROMISES IN THE PLANNING OF A 'TRADITIONAL VILLAGE' IN SOUTHWEST CHINA

Suvi Rautio

Abstract: Ethnic minority villages across Southwest China have recently experienced a dramatic increase in cultural heritage projects. Following new policies of rural development and the growth of tourism, villages are being converted into heritage sites to preserve the aesthetics of rurality and ethnicity. This article describes how architect scholars plan to create a 'Chinese Traditional Village' in a Dong autonomous district of Guizhou province, focusing in particular on the constraints of those plans and the negotiations. Rather than looking at plans as the end product, this article sheds light on the social dynamics of planning to reconsider the capacity for compromise between the interests and perspectives of planners, officials, and local inhabitants. Lasting compromises appear specifically in the materiality of buildings, pathways, and public space.

Keywords: architecture, China, cultural heritage, materiality, planning, preservation, rural development

By the beginning of the Lunar New Year, on a gray and drizzly afternoon, the last kernels of glutinous rice dropped from their panicles onto the sandy path below. Discarded for months, the shriveled bunches of rice sheaves from which the kernels dropped were still hanging from fir bark granary columns while the chickens pecked on the last grains below. In an effort to display the authentic architecture of a Dong ethnic minority village, the rice sheaves were never meant for threshing but were hung in preparation for the first Chinese Traditional Village Summit, which initiated a series of inspection trips of higher-level officials. During such events, the results of local development, planning, and preservation policies are exhibited to outside visitors. The results are made



visible through the aesthetic details and materiality of the village, such as the rice sheaves, to depict, as one tourist leaflet puts it, “the native wisdom of the harmonious farming community living in ancient residencies in a tranquil Traditional Village.” Much of the authenticity on display obviously stands in tension with the objectives of economic development. One way to solve the dilemma, it seems, is by exhibiting settlements as Potemkin villages. Once the visitors have departed, the material ornamentations, such as the rice bundles, become untouched remains that are left to decay.

Displaying rural aesthetics has become a regular routine in Meili, a Dong ethnic minority village in Guizhou province, Southwest China, which sits in a deep valley that carves through a steep mountainous topography. Owing to its well-preserved architectural exterior, over the course of the past decade Meili has acquired acclaimed status with multiple national and transnational cultural heritage protected merits, including the first listing of a model ‘Chinese Traditional Village’ (*chuantong cunluo*).¹ The recognition and value attached to Meili’s vernacular setting attest to the explosive growth of China’s cultural heritage preservation schemes in entering a ‘new era’ of rural revitalization and modernization strategies under President Xi Jinping (Li 2019). Previous development strategies that required the demolition and widespread eviction of urban and rural residencies are being redefined through the adoption of a “less confrontational model” (Chu 2014: 352) that places revitalization and cultural protection (*wenhua baohu*) at its core.²

Aligning with such heritage policies, the rice sheaves hanging from fir bark granary columns also serve to exhibit local and regional developmental progress put forth by local officials to please higher-level government officials and elites, specifically their colleagues and superiors in the party hierarchy. These events are commonly described as ‘window dressing’ or as the ‘formalism’ (*xingshi zhuyi*) and ‘face projects’ (*mianzi gongcheng*) of local development, which have become common in the People’s Republic of China since the turn of the millennium (Chio 2014, 2017; Steinmüller 2013: chap. 7; Tan 2016). Such terms are used to denounce policies that are viewed as ineffective or even counterproductive.

Contingent on appearances and image building, efforts to display progress mirror wider national trends in governmentality, particularly the implementation of policies and plans. Reflecting the centralized and hierarchical structure of the Chinese government, plans often respond closer to the needs of higher levels rather than the realities on the ground. Knowing that execution does not always correspond to plan, plans are oftentimes placed on hold, waiting for prompts from above (Feuchtwang et al. 2015). This deferral of implementation and outcome is widely acknowledged and gets articulated in Chinese sayings, such as ‘there are policies above and ways of getting around them below’ (*shang you zhengce, xia you duice*) and ‘the mountains are high and the emperor is

far away' (*shan gao, huangdi yuan*). These maxims reveal people's ability to resort to countermeasures for getting around things while also acknowledging the level of flexibility and adaptability required in national planning and policy implementation. This resilience and adaptability reveal that in its institutionally centralized structure, China's party-state system is held together by both top-down and bottom-up input to shape a change-oriented 'push and seize' method of policymaking as opposed to the 'anticipates and regulates' method, which is more common in constitutional governments (cf. Heilmann and Perry 2011: 13).

China's rural development efforts are particularly informative for studying how adaptive policy implementation shapes planning on the local level (Ahlers 2014). This article delves into this arena to consider the gaps in the planning of rural development through cultural heritage protection efforts. Aware that gaps in top-down policy implementation and planning are often interpreted as shortcomings or as deficits of knowledge between the technocrat (or *techné*) and local knowledge on the ground (the *metis*) (Scott 1998), this article looks beyond their deficiency to better understand how gaps also serve as productive modes. Gaps are inherent in plans and reports that include unaccountable checkmarks, elusive promises, messy contingencies, and distortions that continuously fold into the vastness of other plans (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011; Weszkalnys 2010). Rather than looking at gaps in planning as instances of failure, Weszkalnys's ethnography (2010) on the city planning of Berlin's Alexanderplatz recognizes that gaps are intrinsic to plans and can lead to productive social action. Weszkalnys makes the point that planners often reframe gaps as a problem of something that had gone wrong elsewhere. By locating failure elsewhere, meetings, contracts, plans, and timetables produce a certain agency to shape new subjectivities and possibilities.

Taking on the task of studying the gaps in plans to better understand how people respond to them, this article considers the gaps in cultural heritage preservation plans in Meili and the material compromises that planners, politicians, and people at the grassroots level strike. In doing so, I build on Chio's (2014, 2017) ethnography in Upper Jidao village, and also in Guizhou province, to describe the agentive potential enabled in architectural renderings and plans for preservation and rural development schemes. Looking at the power dynamics and ideologies that are enabled through the politics of appearance and the state-led image building that drives development planning, Chio convincingly illustrates how renderings convey an image of rural ethnic China as envisioned by urbanites, as well as the competing ambitions of village residents that are at stake. Chio challenges the assumption that ethnic minority villages are constrained endeavors that limit the participation of village residents, showing instead how planning activates rural inhabitants to seek new subjectivities and satisfy a general condition of being. Similarly to Chio, I acknowledge the social and political importance of appearances in rural ethnic China's heritage schemes

and the agentive potential that is activated through planning. Rather than analyzing how this is achieved in the making and design of plans, I explore how social action and agentive potential are acquired through the compromises that arise spontaneously where the materiality of the village and planning intersect.

The materiality of a cultural heritage site guides preservation plans, and thus I argue that examining where materiality and planning intersect at these sites helps us to understand instances of compromise—as well as conflict—and the social dynamics of policy and its implementation through planning. As historian and geographer David Lowenthal (1985) reminds us, under heritage protocol, the appraisal of innate heritage value is embedded in the material form and its properties. From this perspective, the authenticity of an object or place is self-evident and innate in its material form. This dominant consensual view of tangible heritage prioritizes the stylistic inventiveness, form, and substance of materiality while overlooking the more complex social, historical, cultural, and political conditions that give it value. Recognizing this complexity in the conservation work on Glasgow Cathedral, Jones and Yarrow (2013) contend that material authenticity is not innate but ‘crafted’ through the skilled precision of executing preservation that materializes through the negotiation of expertise and people and things. In this article, I peer into these moments of negotiation—or material compromise—that emerge as architect scholars, agencies under the State Council, and village residents come together to ‘craft’ a Traditional Village in Southwest China.

The next four sections discuss different aspects of the materiality of planning. I first describe how Meili village gets transformed into a site that can be measured and rationalized into plans based on the assumption of ‘material completion’, that is, the architect planners’ top-down viewpoint of the village. This totalizing view of the village space gets reinforced in renderings and models that prioritize originality, authenticity, and integrity in preservation. Using ethnographic examples, I then analyze how that viewpoint becomes implemented in preservation plans, resulting in a village exterior of wooden residential homes and eroding stone pathways that generate ‘material discomfort’ for those who have to live there. The gaps in planning and outcome reveal themselves in the ‘material contradictions’ of planning that neglect the material properties that make up a living village space in an effort to adhere to tactile qualities that correspond to originality and preservation. In the final ethnographic vignette, I describe how these contradictions rework themselves into ‘material compromise’ to produce new material interventions without violating the objectives of the preservation scheme. I conclude the article with a general discussion on the materiality of planning and return to the workings of state-led image building and cultural heritage protection schemes to emphasize the role of plans as interventions of exchange and what they reveal about government and development in rural China today.

Material Completion: Rural Integrity from Above

Over the course of 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2017,³ I observed waves of architect scholars and consultants traveling from China's prestigious universities and institutions to Meili. These rotating groups were broadly composed of individuals highly educated in architecture, archaeology, urban planning, and/or heritage studies who worked alongside the local government. Predominantly middle-class Han Chinese urbanites,⁴ most of them have been conducting longitudinal research across the region and identify themselves as experts on Dong architecture and/or rural restoration.

Once an undesirable and unvalued mountain village, Meili is now a heritage hot spot that attracts scholars and visitors, reflecting the growing attention that the village has gained in recent years. After Meili was selected as the first listing of a model 'Chinese Traditional Village' in 2012, it received a range of acclaimed heritage merits, including the National Cultural Heritage Protection listing in 2013 and the sixth listing of the Chinese Historical and Cultural Famous Village in 2015, among others. Regardless of the fame and prestige of the village, the local Cultural Heritage Administration that is responsible for working on preservation plans is relatively poor and powerless. Architect scholars and preservationists working in Meili are aware of the local administration's inferior status and often blame the Cultural Bureau for its weak long-term foresight in managing Meili projects. Local officials are also mistrusted for disregarding national cultural heritage regulations and prioritizing economic development through tourism (Li 2019). This, as I was informed, is evident in state-led efforts to channel funds toward upgrading public infrastructure, such as public toilets and parking lots for tourists, rather than the vernacular architecture of the village.

In response to the relatively weak and powerless role of the local Cultural Heritage Administration, visits from architecture scholars working as private intermediaries prove to be important events that affirm Meili's position as a nationally acclaimed heritage site. Furthermore, the reports compiled from these visits are important documents for budgeting plans that boost the professional status of the Cultural Bureau. Creating a degree of leverage across vertical state power relations, the research and reports reflect national priorities to implement technocratic planning into policymaking and strategies to imagine the future of the Chinese countryside (Chio 2017).⁵ More generally, the documentation and field reports of the village space that are produced by visiting teams of researchers, scholars, and consultants function as interventions that seek to impose a particular order. Transforming the village into a site of scrutiny, each group of professionals produces a new survey and inventory to measure, calculate, and analyze villagers' living habits and the vernacular setting of their homes. This data is then transformed and compiled into reports to ensure

that national preservation guidelines are being fulfilled. Research visits are also opportunities for academics, architects, and consultants to collect material for their own publications in an effort to bolster their reputations. Many of these publications, as demonstrated in scholarly research on Dong architecture (Cai 2007; Chen and Deng 2013; Jones 2016; Ruan 2006), are detailed compilations that weave socio-demographic data and architectural statistics with ethnography to redefine the socio-cultural, spatial, and built environment of villages as archetypes of Dong ethnicity.

In order to ensure scientific expertise in research and reports, an objective stance is expected of the researcher. This commitment to objectivity establishes a detachment from the inhabitants of a place, but also from the building and site itself (Yarrow 2017). The privileged stance of the objective researcher, I argue, is sustained by a particular dominant gaze of the protected building and village viewed from above. This panoramic view becomes a signifier held together by the key objectives and epistemological groundings of preservation efforts to guide decisions made regarding the aesthetics of China's heritage and restoration schemes, including its integrity. The aesthetic appeal of Meili's integrity is visible from a panoramic and totalizing perspective when first arriving at the village. Traveling down from the mountain valley, the vernacular layout of the village can be seen at the first entry point from above. Meandering along the riverbanks, the built environment of Meili is compact and symmetrically intact, as displayed in the assembled rows of wooden multi-story houses called *ganlan* with neatly tiled gabled roofs. The spatial perfection and architectural allure of the village are further enhanced with the drum tower, which is strategically located on a podium to orient the viewer's gaze. From afar, Meili appears undamaged and far removed from the industrial present, creating an image of integrity and completion that planners and tourists call *wanzheng*.

Adopted from one of the key criteria used to measure World Heritage Sites nominated by the esteemed UNESCO World Heritage Convention, celebrating localities for their integrity has become common practice among Chinese cultural heritage experts and decision makers. Likewise, *yuanshi*—directly translated as 'original' or 'historically primitive', but also associated with 'authenticity' applied in global heritage discourse—is a popular term to epitomize the historical features of Chinese village architecture, including its material parts. These terms directly define and frame the criteria of the Chinese Traditional Villages protection model since it was first declared in 2012, when then soon-to-be President Xi Jinping made frequent references to protecting the 'originality' and 'original features' (*yuanshi fengmao*) of nominated sites to justify the upkeep of China's vernacular villages (Li 2016).

The totalizing view of Meili as an original and authentic village space that meets the conditions of integrity gets projected in architectural renderings and models compiled for planning purposes. The renderings presented to me by

architect scholars portray Meili as a village space that is more orderly, green, and risk averse. Narrow, uneven stone pathways that snake through Meili's riverbanks are widened into unbent pathways where people walk side by side. Villagers in Dong attire are pasted as cut-out renderings in the same spatial circles as a blonde Caucasian woman dressed in tight jeans and oversized sunglasses carrying a small handbag and walking a dog on a leash (which curiously looks like a guide dog). Not far from the casual onlookers, a Chinese couple walk hand in hand in loose-fitting khakis beside a river filled with swarms of goldfish. Plants and flower beds line the riverbanks and—contrary to the undivided open space between neighbors that defines Meili's current spatial design—wooden fences divide households to allocate clear boundaries between homes. These subtle aesthetic and spatial shifts realign the perspective of seeing Meili village not just as a functional living space but also as an aesthetic object that can be beautified, rationalized, and trimmed, catering to Dong peasants but also to middle-class cosmopolitan urbanites. In these renderings, hegemonic visions of modernity and tradition rub against one another without breaking the 'authentic *yuanshi* features' or the 'integrity *wanzheng*' of the architectural layout. These projections are enabled based on an image of Meili from an objective and detached view from above. Next, I move closer to the ground level of the village-scape to consider an ethnographic example of what happens when the *yuanshi* layout is broken.

Material Discomfort: Rural Integrity from Below

From my first encounters with Meili residents, many frequently brought to my attention that the preservation scheme being initiated in the village and the research to support it are viewed as ongoing efforts of government-led development to modernize the village and improve its residents' living standards. Guizhou has one of the lowest GDP per capita among China's 34 provincial regions and is frequently referred to as the 'home of the poverty-stricken population'. Improving the living standards of Guizhou's rural population is emblematic of discourses that promote state-led infrastructural renewal schemes as "exhibition tool[s] for development and modernization" (Oakes 2013: 389). Thus, it came as a disappointment that Meili's preservation scheme was not attending to the development or modernization of the village exterior.

This disappointment was brought to my attention one evening when eating dinner with Yangxu, a humble, 45-year-old father of two children who worked part-time as a teacher at the local primary school. Built in the early 1990s, his home resembled a modest Dong household. Designed around the constrained intimacy of the floor plan, I had spent many evenings with Yangxu and his family in the hearth room by the fireplace, where meals are eaten and people

gather to socialize and keep warm during the cold, damp winter days. That evening as we ate dinner, the news in the background broadcast a speech by Xi Jinping announcing the importance of protecting the nation's cultural relics. The content of his speech aligned with what many social scientists refer to as the instrumental role that the growing heritage industry plays in celebrating China's ancient prominence to strengthen and serve patriotic sentiment (Fiskesjö 2010; Silverman and Blumenfeld 2013; Zhu and Maags 2020).

As we continue eating dinner, Yangxu expresses disdain for President Xi's words and mutters that under the current preservation measures even his pigs live more comfortably than his family. When I enquire what he means by this, he tells me about the two-story brick pigpen that he has been building for two years. The pigpen is concealed behind his wooden household in the backyard, which is why he thought it would go unnoticed by officials. Then one day he was hunted down and scolded for behaving like a bad teacher, followed by verbal and physical threats from the county-level Cultural Heritage Administration to tear down the barn. Yangxu's confrontation with the Cultural Bureau was similar to previous confrontations in the village. It was widely acknowledged by key actors working on the preservation scheme that brick deviates from the traditional use of wood and should therefore be prohibited. In the numerous meetings I sat through with officials representing the Bureau, brick was said to destroy the 'integrity' and the 'uses of protection' (*baohu liyong*) of the village, and thus carried the risk of interfering with the demands of national preservation guidelines and budget applications. At the same time, the physical and verbal bullying directed at Yangxu reveals the moral expectations that Chinese citizens living in a nationally listed 'Chinese Traditional Village' are expected to abide by. As a dutiful Chinese citizen participating in a preservation scheme, Yangxu is expected to wholeheartedly commit to the promotion, enhancement, and celebration of China's heritage and cultural past (cf. Fiskesjö 2010).

Chakrabarty's (2002) essay on the colonial gaze that surveils the sanitation of Indian urban spaces is helpful to analytically consider the moral expectations imposed on citizens by planners and local government officials. Founded on the preconditions of objective knowledge that experts—be it architect scholars, county-level government officials, or sociologists—carry with them into modern state-led planning and policy implementation, Chakrabarty describes how moral preconditions get interlaced into the work that gets imposed on research subjects. Projecting the nationalist desire for a modern nation-state with a shared history, Chakrabarty's work reminds us of the moral undertaking and assumptions that surveyors bring with them. In the context of urban India, the assumption is that people should want to contribute to civil society and live in more sanitized conditions. So why are they not doing so? In Meili, the assumption is that if people sincerely want to contribute to the nation's great civilization heritage narrative, they should welcome preservation efforts

and perform their objectified roles. As anthropologists working in ethnic China have long underlined, these objectified roles have historical roots in subjective moralizing based on a classificatory order of civilization (Harrell 1995). In accord with a Han-centric social order, certain ethnic minority populations are associated with qualities that are considered representational of Chinese ethnicity, such as heightened femininity and eroticism, ecological wisdom, and tradition (Rack 2005; Schein 2000; Yeh 2007).

As revealed in Yangxu's confrontation with the Cultural Heritage Administration, this sort of double bind is not always welcomed. Aware that wooden households carry the implications of backwardness, Yangxu had other aspirations. Returning to Xi's speech being broadcast on television, Yangxu exclaims: "If the government wants us to be 'moderately prosperous' [*xiaokang*], they need to allow all of us to live like them, too!" Epitomizing a uniquely Chinese path to modernization and development, *xiaokang* discourse is instrumental in projecting a desired image of smaller families that accumulate wealth and live 'fairly comfortably' (Smith 2019).⁶ Rich in political merit, *xiaokang* campaigns do not go unnoticed in Guizhou, where gleaming, illustrative, and highly visible billboards hover over expressways and rural roads celebrating the future of China's *xiaokang* population. I asked Yangxu's uncle, Old Yang Shengqi, what *xiaokang* means to him, and he dissected it as the antipode of a peasant. He expanded: "A peasant eats to be full, not for flavor. A peasant wears clothing to be warm, not to look good. *Xiaokang* is about eating for flavor and wearing nice clothes that compliment one's body. If the clothes wear out, *xiaokang* buys new ones. *Xiaokang* is about driving your own car to the township, not someone else's. Few peasants are *xiaokang*, because they depend on migrant labor. One year they might have money, the next they might not."

Old Yang's definition explains the general sense of precarity that China's rural citizens experience. Considering that at least one member of each family in Meili continues to cultivate the land while other family members take rotating turns between short-term, piecemeal migrant labor jobs in the city, many Meili residents would agree that peasants are antipodes to those who have access to more financially stable *xiaokang* lives, as Old Yang Shengqi describes. The preservation scheme was incorporated with promises to improve the living conditions of peasants toward a path of *xiaokang* enjoyment. Yet the disdain that Yangxu expressed to me points directly at the irony of living in a nation indoctrinating market socialism that simultaneously promotes and prohibits *xiaokang* desires. Faced with discomfort and constraint, Meili's living conditions resemble Herzfeld's (2004) research on the effect that the global heritage industry has on small-town Cretan artisans, who are prohibited from exhibiting anything except that which appears stereotypically traditional. Herzfeld describes how the constraints that get imposed on artisans are sensorial and embodied to generate experiences of discomfort while excluding them from the

project of modernity. Below I consider in more detail other forms of sensorial qualities that materiality carries.

Material Contradictions: Trodden Stone Pathways

In addition to the preference of brick over wood, Meili villagers also held conflicting opinions with key actors involved in preservation planning about the materiality of the pathways that navigate across the village space through to the mountains. These treaded stone pathways carry historical merit and continue to play important logistical functions between the terraced paddy fields, farmlands, and village living space, but also farther afield to villages and towns in the vicinities. As sites of travel, the trails are also historical markers of wealth and prestige. Engravings in slates of stone written in Chinese characters (*hanzi*) record donations from road repairs offered by wealthy Meili families. Other sections of the stone trail show engravings of embellished flowers alongside illustrative metaphors depicting Meili's beauty and mapping out the trails ahead. Revealing the skilled work of a mason, these carvings add an aesthetic element to the mountain paths. They are rare in the region and generally date back to the era of Emperor Qianlong's rule in the eighteenth century when the village was flourishing. They also mark a time in history that saw an increase in prosperity and Sinicization through the assimilation of Confucian ideologies and worldviews (Harrell 1995).

The most elaborate remaining stone pathway is a 2.5 kilometer mountain trail that comprises 528 stone sheets. Referred to as the 'ancient pathway' (*gudao*) in preservation documents, the trail is valued for being original (*yuanshi*). Asymmetrical and jagged, due to the many years of treading and the wet climate conditions of Guizhou's mountain villages, I could understand why the pathway fits this description. In the cold and rainy winter months, the path can also be dangerous and cumbersome as the green clumps of moss along the edges of the stones transform the eroding trails into slippery slopes. Trudging heavy stacks of harvested goods up and down the trails, the villagers associated *yuanshi* with poverty and hardship. They wanted to see changes to the ancient trails, and many imagined that this would bring the same convenience to their lives that urbanites enjoy.

Yang Jinlong, a 37-year-old Meili resident, expressed these desires to me most coherently. Mediating between the local government and village level, Jinlong saw himself as the 'village boss' (*laoban*). Stylish and flaunting confidence in his presentation, he liked to dress in colorful and tight-fitting collar-up shirts, sometimes paired with heavy silver necklaces. His voice was hoarse, probably from endless chain-smoking, and half of his face was disguised by a dark birthmark. Paired with his attire and short, cropped hairstyle, Jinlong

often stood out as conspicuously mischievous. Proud, lavish, and projecting a sense of 'thick masculinity' (Evans 2020), Jinlong's physique did not resemble Old Yang Shengqi's definition of a Chinese peasant living in a general sense of precarity. He epitomized defiance to these categories of marginality and displacement, replacing them with an aspirational role of a 'boss' with authority and legitimacy in overseeing and planning projects. In keeping with his focus on external appearances, Jinlong's efforts to dress in neat and polished attire extended to his goal of modernizing the village environment.

Despite the fact that as the financier in Meili's state-led projects Jinlong was responsible for immense debt, he considered his position as pivotal. Regardless of the debt, he never missed the opportunity to praise how government projects will benefit Meili's future. Representative of the majority of Meili residents I befriended, Jinlong envisioned that developing the ancient stone pathways would align his home village with the modernization of the rest of the nation. When I had friends visiting from Beijing, he would often join us on our walks along the mountain trails and on numerous occasions would point out that the government has plans to widen and even out the paths so that when my friends return to visit, the village will be even more beautiful. Resonating with Taussig's (2004) descriptions of the tactile qualities of smooth, surfaced concrete as an index of 'high modernism', Jinlong would confidently point out that a renewed concrete path will make walking in the village feel like walking in the city, where people can navigate through space even with their eyes closed. In this way, Jinlong is convinced that the widening and renewal of the stone pathways with smooth surface stones will add new value as a material embodiment signifying economic progress and modernity.⁷

Framing local infrastructural efforts with the national drive for development—reflecting what Dalakoglou (2010: 132) describes as “a framework of socialist modernism and infrastructural fetishism”—Jinlong liked to praise the imagined renewed cement surfaces with nationalist slogans and catchphrases. Quoting slogans of political leaders from the post-1978 reform era (e.g., “If you want to get rich, build a road first”), he would then falsely attribute them to Mao Zedong. Mistakenly crediting these catchphrases to Mao Zedong—who was vehemently opposed to capitalism, having committed his entire political career to revolutionizing a nation committed to anti-revisionist socialist class struggle—was irrelevant to Jinlong. The slogans were merely indexes that allowed him to reference national figures of authority when attempting to educate visitors, such as my friends and myself, that Meili aligns with China's modernization schemes, where infrastructural development and material advancement are fetishized at the forefront. Jinlong's aspirations to live in a village with flat-surfaced, widened stone paths that allow people to navigate through space with careless effort resemble Yangxu's aspirations to build a brick barn. Both draw on materiality to imagine a future of contentment and

progress as affluent *xiaokang* Chinese subjects whose village is taking part in the national drive toward modernity.

Embedded with preconceptions such as progress and modernity, concrete functions as a medium in dynamical engagement with people's aspirations (Archambault 2018; Stolz 2019). From the perspective of affect theory, the engagements that people associate with materiality are not objective qualities inherent in the material form but subjective experiences that do not always overlap with those of others (Navaro-Yashin 2009). Regardless of Jinlong's aspirations, his drive to repave the paths with flat surfaces clashed with the plans of the architect scholars, who were committed to maintaining the *yuanshi* properties of the stone. I observed this dissension when accompanying a team of architect scholars who had traveled from Beijing to Meili for the weekend. In efforts to find stone sheets that would project the teleological and purposive views that associate *yuanshi* tactility with ethnicity, tradition, and ruralism, the architect scholars wanted rustic, erosive, and aged stones that are literally closer to nature.

Arriving at massive rock and boulder factories in search of such stones, we are instead presented with the tangible smoothness of thinly cut sheets of stone that mirror the 'high modernity' that Jinlong envisages. Seeing the thin stone sheets, the leading architect of the team, Mister Zhang, expresses his dissatisfaction, stating that the flat-surfaced sheets resemble stones used in urban pathways, which are not suitable for a village. Mister Zhang clarifies to the staff that what his team wants are 'ancient' (*gudai*) stones. Met with confusion, Mister Zhang proposes that the factory staff carve through the surrounding limestone mountains and sell them thicker, uneven sheets of stone that resembles the natural effect of erosive gravel. This suggestion does not resolve the puzzlement on the faces of the factory staff, so Mister Zhang gives up, and we travel to the next factory.

The objective of Mister Zhang and his team of architect scholars to remain materially bounded to the image of a Chinese Traditional Village that draws on *yuanshi* qualities is infeasible. Eroded through years of extensive usage and exposure to damp weather conditions, the engravings on the stones require the work of an artisan skilled in masonry who can recalibrate his aesthetic eye to recreate the original hegemonic practices. Such tactile awareness of material form is not found in today's commercial boulder industry market, which caters to cost-efficient material goods sold in bulk to feed the modern market economy. The confrontation at the boulder factory reveals not only the limitations of preservation planning that adheres to 'original' features and the aesthetic appeal of upholding an image of authenticity from afar. It also reveals the *neglect* of the material properties that make up a living village space. These limitations reveal the contradictions in restoration efforts, which result in gaps and distortions in plans. As gaps, they provide room for compromise, which I turn to now.

Material Compromise: Cream-Colored Plastered Walls

The final ethnographic example of this article considers the preparations for a Chinese Traditional Village Summit, which was held in Meili and neighboring villages in October 2015. As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this article, these summits are important publicity events and attract a wide audience of prestigious academics, government bodies, media personnel, heritage specialists, and architects from China and abroad. In transforming the village setting into a spectacle, sheaves of glutinous rice were hung from barns; brick and concrete walls were concealed by hammering wooden planks to the exteriors;⁸ wooden public trash cans with the English text 'PUSH' were situated along the riverbanks; and maps and wooden signs were posted to direct tourists to sites deemed of historic relevance. Although most of the villagers complied with these preparatory tasks, the few who did not responded with hostility and verbal threats. Resistance also appeared in more disguised forms, such as stacking a pile of tiles on a small plot of land so that it did not get converted into flower beds, as pictured in the architectural renderings mentioned earlier.

Other forms of resistance materialized in absent-mindedness or feigned ignorance, such as the response of a family whose (wooden) pigpen was demolished in order to broaden the stone pathway by the river. By the time of the summit, compensation had not yet been paid. Consequently, even though announcements were broadcast on the morning of the summit to lock up all farm animals, the household let its pig idle along the recently polished and sanitized stone pathways on the day of the summit as a show of parodic authenticity. When word about the roaming pig spread across the village, Meili residents responded with mockery and exaggerated cynicism: "Aren't animals *yuanshengtai*!?"

Yuanshengtai is roughly translated as 'indigenous' or 'natural'. When used to refer to a place or person, it carries assumptions about its cultural distinctiveness and ecological value with a hint of condemnatory associations, such as 'pre-modern' or 'primordial'. Like 'originality' and 'integrity', it is a term with rich semantic meaning that has been thoroughly incorporated into China's cultural heritage and popular discourse, including marketing practices. Luo's (2018) work shows how regional and urban elites—in efforts to obtain capital, power, and legitimacy on the local county and provincial government level—acquire *yuanshengtai* as an eco-cultural brand to reiterate a local and provincial identity. Building on Luo's work, I explore how terms that abound with political relevance are strategically coined, not only by elites to gain cultural capital through regional competitiveness, but also by ethnic minority villagers in an attempt to access decision-making power and compromise in the material outcome of image-building displays, such as the Traditional Village Summit.

Despite instances of mockery and the hidden transcripts of resistance described above, most Meili residents complied with government efforts to prepare for the

summit by creating a village exterior that mirrors a template of Chinese rural aesthetics. It was only when the county-level government announced orders for all brick and concrete walls dividing households to be replaced with mud walls that complicity was replaced with widespread, organized resistance. According to the local government, mud walls were considered more suitable because they feed on a nostalgic representation of the past by adding a rustic element that conforms to an authentic ‘countryside appearance’ (*nongcun cunluo de yangzi*). Like the *yuanshi* stone sheets that architect Mister Zhang wanted carved directly from the limestone mountains, the use of mud reflects expectations that ethnic villages should be comprised of material properties that are raw, unprocessed in form, and thus closer to ‘nature’. These intentions echo the systems of hierarchized classificatory order that are characteristic of China’s ‘civilizing projects’ (Harrell 1995).

The villagers’ collective resistance to mud relates to Yangxu’s disinterest in the use of wood: both cases show how clearly aware villagers were of the double binds imposed on them. Derived straight from earth and carrying the stigma of backwardness, mud was deemed an undesirable material substance that was inferior to brick, a material shaped by human and mechanical production and labor. The internal village meeting that followed led to consulting Miss Wu, the project manager and main architect scholar of the preservationist scheme. Rather than merely conveying the villagers’ dissatisfaction, however, the village secretary conforms to the language of cultural politics to claim that mud is not *yuanshi* as a material resource to the Dong people. In doing so, the secretary tactically tries to strike a compromise by drawing on the marginality of Meili, using claims such as *yuanshi* and Dong ethnicity and thereby repositioning the centrality of the village (Tsing 1993).

Miss Wu agrees with the village secretary, adding that it would be unsustainable to use mud in such humid and rainy weather conditions. In the end, she makes the decision to use lime plastering on the walls, and new teams of construction workers are hired to cover the brick walls with gleaming lime plaster. When the county officials return to inspect how the preparations for the summit are moving forward, they heavily criticize the gloss of the lime plaster for ruining the rusticity of the ‘village appearance’. To remove the sheen of the plastering, new orders are put forth to coat the walls with gray paint. In the end, the walls reveal a stale cream-colored tint that fails to suggest rusticity, Dong authenticity, or even *xiaokang* modernity. Nonetheless, the task at hand, which was to cover the brick and concrete walls so that they were no longer visible, was accomplished through an act of compromise. In a successful attempt to convert the gaps in plans into moments of productive action, the compromise resulted in redirecting the architect’s gaze through acts of compliance, disguised resistance, and dialogue borrowing terminology that gets circulated through heritage discourse on the materiality of the village. While the compromise might

have produced an unwelcome outcome for the officials, it opened space for Meili villagers to rework the walls to meet their own desires and needs.

During efforts to reach a compromise on the materiality of the walls, adjustments to the systems of classificatory order and ethnic representation were heightened. This illustrates that the inequalities that uphold these systems are not fixed entities but are continuously being reshaped by the indexes and affective qualities that rub against people and material objects. They define the gaps in planning that then rework themselves into instances where expertise and aspirations coalesce to produce new material interventions. In these interventions, opposing preconceptions and affective associations to materiality come together to put forth solutions that uphold the architectural 'completeness' of a Chinese Traditional Village.

Conclusion: The Materiality of Planning

This article has dealt with the social dynamics of planning and the possibility of compromises between the interests and perspectives of architect scholars, preservationists, officials, and local inhabitants of the village of Meili. These social dynamics arose in response to the affective qualities of people's engagement with material objects. Different levels of engagement came to the fore in the various stages of planning: material completion, material discomfort, material contradictions, and finally material compromises. I began by looking at how the plans draw on a preservationist ethos that defines and envisions materiality based on associations to tactile properties that define originality and integrity to uphold an image of a Traditional Village from above. This results in imposing restrictions and material discomfort on residents who have to abide by plans that prohibit them from adding new material value to their wooden homes, pigpens, and ancient stone pathways. The use of material forms whose tactile properties are thought to be representational of rural living and ethnicity sits in conflict with village residents' own material desires, which index contentment, progress, and affluence. Yet to move forward with preservation plans, new material properties are required that are met with limitations and contradictions. I have illustrated this in the challenges of finding material properties that resemble the rustic and erosive stone pathway in the boulder market, which caters to cost-efficient, flat-surfaced stones resembling Taussig's (2004) notion of 'high modernity'. These contradictions in the planning stage reveal gaps that rework themselves into instances of compromise where opposing preconceptions and affective associations to material form coalesce into new material interventions.

The outcome of the brick walls is an example of such compromise. Although it left much to be desired, it also showed the impact of villagers' reactions and

their capacity to rework plans: in this case, not to cover the walls with mud, but instead simply to keep the bricks visible. Like the rustic stone pathways and traditional wooden buildings, the local government's decision to cover the walls with mud was made on the basis of using unworked, raw material—supposedly exemplifying the tangible authenticity valued by planners. Plans, however, cannot cover all the possible affective qualities of materiality they set in motion and, by necessity, impose particular material affects while ignoring others. We have seen in this instance, however, that the affective qualities can strike back, not through direct confrontation but through the unanticipated gaps that continuously shape and reframe new material interventions.

As Chinese cultural heritage schemes, such as the Chinese Traditional Village listing, are increasingly dominating development projects, local people's daily lives and actions are being governed through preservation discourse and protocols. Much of this draws on the rhetoric of hegemonic global heritage institutions that distinguish themselves on a 'heritage belief' that grants central importance to the intrinsic value of material authenticity (Brumann 2014). Authenticity does not have to consist only in material substance, but can also be identified in material practices (Jones and Yarrow 2013). Acknowledging the central role of craft and skill in China's rural heritage schemes is not enough, however: we also have to pay attention to power relations and the social dynamics of plans. The notion of material compromise is an attempt to situate material practice within hierarchical relations and social conflict. The power relations that shape material compromises are continuously shaped by the indexes (both historical and current) and affective qualities that impact people's engagements with material objects.

To understand the workings behind these schemes, we must draw attention to the resilience, flexibility, and adaptability of planning as a basic feature of China's state-led development, particularly in the countryside (Ahlers 2014; Heilmann and Perry 2011). Rather than looking at plans as end products, my ethnographic approach has focused on the social dynamics of planning, and we have seen how people respond to, get around, or reshape plans on the ground level. As colleagues have shown in relation to the implementation of development schemes in rural ethnic China (e.g., Chio 2014, 2017), studying the embedded relations of plans is crucial to an understanding of the agentic potential of plans. The anthropology of planning in general (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011; Weszkalnys 2010) reminds us that agentic potential becomes prominent in gaps in planning that are absolutely decisive for outcomes, as this article demonstrates.

Yet our focus on gaps and compromises should not blind us to the fact that there are huge imbalances. The agency of the subjects of planning, such as the villagers of Meili, is generally limited. Ultimately, in Meili, as in so many other places, most grassroots initiatives have to yield to the planners, who

are backed by state power. The pressing needs of local populations, including basic public goods and services such as healthcare, education, and access to land, are frequently subordinated to heritage preservation and the ambition of planners (Meskell 2010). Well-versed with the double bind of preservation plans imposed on them, Meili village residents find the means to get around them without disrupting the local Cultural Heritage Administration's objective to display local development during summit tours and inspection trips.

Once the tours are over and the visitors have departed, the material ornamentations become lasting remains that linger on in the village, dissociated from the lives that inhabit the space. Left unnoticed, the cream-colored plastered paint starts to chip off the walls, and the ancient mountain pathway continues to crumble and erode, while the frail and empty rice sheaves still dangle from the upper levels of Meili's fir bark granary columns. As material remains, they carry the face of the state to remind villagers of its continuous presence. Meanwhile, their stillness upholds an image of rural integrity and originality to safeguard and strengthen the preservationist ethos of a forever-lasting Chinese Traditional Village.

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Notes

1. The first listing of Chinese Traditional Villages consisted of 648 villages considered 'important in preservation value' (*zhongyao baohu jiazhi*). The list was compiled in December 2012 based on scientific reports on the architectural history of villages monitored by a Committee of Experts (*zhuanjia weiyuan hui*) from the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Finance. Topping the list, Guizhou province has 90 such villages, highlighting the relevance of the province in driving rural revitalization through the Traditional Villages scheme. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Chinese text are my own.
2. While this is a reflection of national policy more generally, including China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), it is also important to keep in mind that demolition and dislocation have not entirely stopped. Instead, subcontractors are now responsible for these activities (Huang 2019).
3. My fieldwork included interviews and participant observation with Meili residents, tourists, government officials, researchers, and planners. Connections to my field site were initiated through personal contacts with architect scholars who advise and work closely with the local government's Cultural Heritage Administration. Before beginning my research, I made two preliminary visits to Meili to collaborate with my affiliates and was granted official approval to reside in the village and to access the local Cultural Bureau preservation plans. This allowed me to attend meetings and events organized by the local government while assisting with the rare translation job. See Rautio (2019: 35–43) on how I positioned myself in Meili and the challenges that I faced.
4. The People's Republic of China recognizes 56 nationalities (*minzu*). Han people constitute the majority, totaling approximately 92 percent of the entire population.
5. Emphasis on the technocratic planning of rural revitalization programs was particularly enforced with the 'Construction of the New Socialist Countryside' (*jianshe shehui zhuyi xinnongcun*) campaign formally declared in 2006. Since then, the drive to integrate planning into the revitalization and modernization of rural China has been prioritized through policy initiatives and strategies

mapped out in the Five-Year Plans of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

6. *Xiaokang* first appeared in the Confucian canon, the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, opposed to 'the great unity' (*datong*). While *datong* implies equality between all, *xiaokang* refers to the 'small wealth' of individuals and families (Smith 2019). The party leadership started using the term in the 1980s, and it has become a key term in propaganda discourse since then.
7. Another aspirational element of concrete, which was brought to my attention when reading about Archambault's (2018) work in Mozambique, is the low-skilled labor required to lay out concrete paths that can easily be produced by the end users themselves. Working for rural development schemes in the region, Jinlong is well aware that flat-surfaced cement paths are favored, not only for their aspirational qualities, but also for the relative ease with which manufactural and infrastructural repairs can be made.
8. This activity, referred to as 'get dressed and put on a hat' (*chuanyi daimao*), is not unique to Meili or Dong villages. As Chio (2014) notes, villages across the region 'get dressed' in wood to meet national heritage criteria.

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