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# Archaeological Tourism, World Heritage and Social Value: A Comparative Study in China

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the relationship between archaeological tourism, UNESCO World Heritage designation, and the social value attached to archaeological sites in China. It aims to provide novel insights into such connections by examining the impact of archaeological tourism on the social values that local communities place on archaeological sites that are in the process of becoming World Heritage Sites. In recent decades, the increasing commercialization of archaeological sites for tourism, combined with the growing influence of the World Heritage listing process, has had a significant impact on the lives of communities in close proximity to archaeological sites. One way to comprehend such an effect is to examine changes in the social values assigned to those sites by their local residents. This is due to the ability of tourism development to (re)create and modify such values attributed to archaeological sites by changing their function, capacity, quality, and meaning. The World Heritage listing process, particularly during the pre-nomination period, plays an important role in shaping the tourist transformation of these sites in preparation for World Heritage inscription. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on two archaeological sites that have recently obtained the World Heritage status: the Daming Palace archaeological site and the Huashan rock art area. By applying ethnographic approaches, the article illustrates the complex influence of tourism development and the World Heritage Convention on contemporary Chinese society, in order to encourage further reflection on the existing management and development mechanisms of archaeological sites in China and around the world.

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World Heritage; UNESCO; China; archaeological sites; social value; tourism; rock art; community participation

## Introduction

A close integration of tourism and archaeological sites over the last three decades has resulted in a steadily growing archaeological tourism market. The rise of archaeological tourism is fueled by the enormous global recognition of heritage and the subsequent trend of heritagization. UNESCO is without a doubt the most influential global

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organization in the institutionalization of heritage. The World Heritage Convention, adopted by UNESCO in 1972, established the World Heritage List – ostensibly to serve as a guideline for what should be preserved for future generations. In recent years, state authorities’ constant desire for “global accreditation” has resulted in an explosion of World Heritage sites. At the local level, the World Heritage nomination process has had an unintended and uncontrollable impact on the tourism development of archaeological sites, as well as on the lives and livelihoods of the people who live in close proximity to these sites. One way to comprehend such an impact is to examine how the social values ascribed to the sites by local residents have changed as a result of the nomination process and accompanying tourism development. Social value refers to the associations and meanings that a place of heritage holds for contemporary communities (Jones 2016). The commercialization of archaeological sites for tourism, combined with the influence of World Heritage production and consumption, creates a social effect through which values associated with the sites are redefined and renegotiated.

Archaeological sites, or sites of archaeological significance, have become a type of cultural tourism destination that has been extensively commodified and is increasingly integrated into the global tourism market (Russell 2006). The combination of archaeological sites and tourism creates an edutainment space (Melotti 2011, 20) that offers experiences of wonder, mystery, and the rediscovery and reinvention of identities. The commercialization of archaeological sites for tourism purposes has the potential to provide tangible benefits to the local populations. In practice, however, competing interests of diverse stakeholders, as well as systemic power imbalances, make equitable distribution of tourism benefits difficult to achieve, and disadvantaged groups are frequently further marginalized (Adams 2010; Pacifico and Vogel 2012).

With the involvement of the UNESCO World Heritage program, the impact of archaeological tourism on local communities becomes more complicated. Although some scholars argue that the link between World Heritage status and increased visitation above existing tourism trends is somewhat tenuous (Landorf 2009), it is widely acknowledged that the process of World Heritage listing, whether intentional or unintentional, can enhance the global visibility of designated sites and contribute to an increase in visitor number and tourism-related incomes (Li, Wu, and Cai 2008). Apart from directly bolstering site visitation, the program also fosters misuse of archaeological sites for state-sponsored cultural hegemony and nationalism, as well as the generation of tensions over ownership and belonging (Rakic and Chambers 2008). Behind the program lies the fact that the designation process, through its multifaceted effects, cultivates a cultural transformation in local communities of World Heritage Sites, with both positive and negative consequences. Scholars have produced a growing body of literature on the social ramifications of tourism at World Heritage archaeological sites over the last decade (see, e.g., Mustafa and Abu Tayeh 2011; Comer 2012; Castillo and Querol 2014; Bourdeau, Gravari-Barbas, and Robinson 2015, 2017; Yan 2018, to name but a few). However, the majority of existing research has concentrated on the period after a site achieves World Heritage status. Rarely has research analyzed the social impacts created during the World Heritage designation campaign – the period in which a site transitions from a local cultural property to a World Heritage nomination.

This article investigates the impact of archaeological tourism on the social values that local communities place on archaeological sites during the transitional period of World

Heritage designation in China. It begins by analyzing how the World Heritage program has influenced the tourism development of archaeological sites in China, and then moves on to a brief discussion of the shifting relationship between archaeological sites and the recognition of social value in the heritage sector. It then critically examines the transformations of two iconic archaeological sites that have recently obtained the World Heritage status – the Daming Palace archaeological site and the Huashan rock art area – under the influence of tourism development and World Heritage designation campaigns. Using the findings of ethnographic studies conducted at the two case study sites, the article scrutinizes local residents' perceptions and attitudes towards the transformation. It then analyzes and compares how the tourism-oriented configuration of the two sites in the immediate years before their designation influenced the social values associated with the sites by their respective local communities. It is the dynamic social repercussions at the local level generated in this unique moment that reveal the challenges and opportunities confronting existing management and development mechanisms of material remains of the past in China and around the world.

### **Tourist Commercialization of Archaeological Sites in China Under the Influence of World Heritage Designation**

State authorities widely regard archaeological sites that have been inscribed on the World Heritage List or are in the process of acquiring World Heritage status as essential tourism assets (Bourdeau, Gravari-Barbas, and Robinson 2017). This is no exception in China. Compared with most countries, China serves as an extreme example when considering the impact of tourism on archaeological sites in the context of World Heritage designation. This is due in large part to the country's distinct historical and socio-cultural backgrounds. A historical overview of the development of archaeological tourism in China, as well as the reasons for the importance placed on the World Heritage program in national cultural policies and practices, have previously been discussed (see, e.g., Gao 2016a, for more details). In short, within four decades, China's archaeological tourism has grown from virtually non-existent to playing an important role in supporting nation-state narratives, reinforcing national identity, and generating tourism income. The World Heritage program has played a remarkably dynamic and complicated role in this process (Yan 2018), as a successfully obtained World Heritage title has been associated with national pride, subjectively guaranteed economic profit, and objectively perceived political benefits (Lv 2011; Xiao and Chen 2003). This article contends that, since the turn of the millennium, the World Heritage designation process has reshaped the evolution of archaeological tourism in China primarily through two ways: (1) the normative pressure of the World Heritage listing process, and (2) the influence of mutual endorsement with a government-sanctioned conservation strategy.

The first way relates to UNESCO's institutional influence, which has prompted national, regional and local governments to improve the conservation status of their archaeological sites in preparation for World Heritage nomination, in accordance with World Heritage criteria. Despite the fact that the World Heritage Convention's conservation mandate does not supersede domestic laws or state sovereignty, the process of World Heritage designation has a powerful influence on state government behavior through the application of UNESCO's non-obligatory political ideals and moral ethics to harness the so-called

“symbolic capitals” (Askew 2010, 21). This influence is not unique to China, but it is particularly noticeable in this country due to the increasing importance that Chinese authorities have placed on the concept of “World Heritage” in recent decades. During the pre-nomination period for an archaeological site to be nominated by state authorities for World Heritage inscription, the local government usually launches several projects to enhance the conservation and management condition of the heritage property. Such an upgrade typically includes plans to renovate and establish tourist facilities, thereby encouraging tourism development (Qiu 2010). Furthermore, the normative pressure of the World Heritage listing process restrains local governments and the private sector from over-exploitation and over-commercialization of archaeological remnants to some extent. However, in many cases, local governments are inclined, in the name of site conservation, to relocate communities that live within or near ancient remains and to demolish structures that do not meet the criteria for World Heritage inscription (Zhu 2012). As a result, the efforts expended to obtain or maintain World Heritage status end up creating tensions between authorities and local populations.

The second way refers to the influence of mutual endorsement that the World Heritage listing process wields with the strategy of converting archaeological sites into heritage parks; a conservation method frequently employed by the Chinese authorities to promote the so-called “Great Sites (大遗址 *da yizhi*)” over the last decade (Li and Quan 2007). As a concept developed around the turn of the millennium, “Great Sites” refer to large ancient cultural remains with diverse contents and outstanding values (SACH 2006). Since 2000, the idea of improving the conservation status of Great Sites has been incorporated into the country’s “Five-Year Plan” (Lu 2005, 120), with the central government gradually increasing allocations for Great Sites conservation (SACH 2009). The government’s enlarging investment in Great Sites has much to do with the successful inscription of several archaeological sites on the World Heritage List (e.g., the site of ancient Koguryo kingdom, the site of Yin Xu, and the site of Xanadu, inscribed in 2004, 2006, and 2012, respectively), after they had received conservation “upgrading” with government funding. Victories in consistently promoting large-scaled archaeological sites in obtaining the World Heritage title, in turn, encourage state authorities to further endorse investments in more such sites. The primary method for conserving Great Sites is to convert them into archaeological heritage parks, which combine the preservation and display of historical evidence with their function as public green spaces (Li and Quan 2007). In 2010, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage established a list of “National Archaeological Heritage Parks” as a new type of cultural property under protection. There have been 36 completed national archaeological heritage parks as of 2018, with another 67 in the works (SACH 2018). Many of these sites, like those designated as World Heritage, have undergone extensive reconfiguration to become heritage parks (Han 2008).

### **Social Value and Archaeological Sites**

Apart from altering the material fabrics of archaeological sites, the tourist-oriented commercialization of these sites under the influence of the World Heritage listing process has a substantial impact on the values associated with the sites. Values have always underpinned the conservation and exploitation of archaeological sites. Traditionally, it is the intrinsic qualities of a site, linked to historical, scientific and aesthetic values, that have

been emphasized. In recent decades, however, the growing presence of minority voices in the heritage field has gradually changed how heritage values are viewed (Díaz-Andreu 2016a, 70–75). The idea of social values, initially recognized in the Burra Charter in 1979, has since become an essential component in alternative heritage management frameworks that seek to go beyond the authorized heritage discourse (Smith 2006). Social value refers to the associations and meanings that a place of heritage holds for a particular community. It encompasses the communal senses of identity, belonging and place, as well as forms of collective memory and spiritual attachments (Jones 2016). When discussing the social values associated with archaeological sites, it is critical to recognize that sites of archaeological remains are not simply a passive presentation of the past, but an active agent through which various information and meanings are created and reformed. As a result, any modification to the appearance, composition and function of the remains, due to causes such as conservation interventions and tourism development, may alter people's perception and experience of the places. These changes, in turn, lead to the renegotiation and reformulation of the social values that people ascribe to material fabrics.

The identification and conservation of social value are believed to encourage community initiatives in preserving the meaning and life of archaeological sites, ultimately promoting equity and democracy (Castillo 2014). Since the 1980s, international documents and guidelines have increasingly emphasized community participation and bottom-up approaches to heritage management, theoretically giving more weight to the consideration of social value in practices concerning archaeological sites. In practice, however, social value remains mostly marginalized in decision-making not only in China (Li et al. 2020) but throughout the world (Díaz-Andreu 2016b). Despite UNESCO's constant efforts in recent years to broaden the public base in the identification, protection, and management of World Heritage properties, the entire World Heritage inscription process has played a significant role in maintaining the intrinsic qualities of heritage sites at the center of mainstream heritage practices (Labadi 2013, 12). The normative activities and ethics embodied in the World Heritage Convention, as well as its essential concept of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), are what stand in the way of a genuine embrace of grassroots participation. While the World Heritage program promotes a democratic process in which state authorities collaborate with other stakeholders, including local communities, it also implies a hegemonic inclusionary logic in which power disparities among stakeholders are ignored and "local communities" are assumed to think, act, and speak as a harmonious entity (Coombe and Weiss 2015; Waterton and Smith 2010). In places where civil society is weak, ruling authorities are also more likely to use and rationalize controversial conservation methods (e.g., spatial cleansing) in order to meet the OUV criteria, further limiting local participation (Bloch 2016; Shepherd 2017). Furthermore, the idea that only experts know how to protect and appreciate heritage sites and their associated values is embedded within the World Heritage designation process, further muzzling the voices and opinions of local populations (Chirikure and Pwiti 2008, 474).

Like most countries, China initially only recognized the intrinsic qualities of archaeological sites, as evidenced by the sole recognition of historical, scientific, and aesthetic values of cultural heritage in legislation (e.g., the Cultural Relics Protection Law of the People's Republic of China). In the last decade, however, both the country's authorities and academic professionals have expressed a growing appreciation for the extrinsic values associated with physical remnants of the past. This is a result of the social,

economic, and political consequences of commodifying the past, as well as the growing influence of international political and ideological trends. These value-assessment reflections have also led to significant changes to official heritage instruments. For instance, the social and cultural values of heritage sites are explicitly recognized for the first time in the 2015 revision of the China Principles, a national instruction document on cultural heritage conservation practices developed collaboratively by ICOMOS China, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Australian Heritage Commission and first published in 2000 (Li 2019, 97). Chinese scholars have also paid more attention to issues pertaining to the relationship between heritage and the public (e.g., Yan 2014; 2018), with increasing discussions of an alternative value assessment mechanism that would go beyond the traditional focus on the material aspect of heritage (e.g., Liu 2011). Nonetheless, social value remains a little-discussed topic in China's heritage sector, in contrast to the rising controversies that have emerged during the country's rapid development of using the past to serve the present.

### The Daming Palace Site and the Huashan Rock Art Area: From Anonymous to World Heritage

The research focuses on two iconic archaeological sites in China – the Daming Palace archaeological site and the Huashan rock art area (Figure 1) – to gain a better understanding of how tourism development of archaeological sites affects the attached social values



**Figure 1.** The location of the Daming Palace archaeological site and the Huashan Rock Art Area.



by local communities during the World Heritage nomination period. The Daming Palace site obtained the World Heritage status in 2014 as part of the serial nomination “Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor.” Two years later, the Huashan rock art area became the first rock art heritage in China inscribed on the World Heritage list, with the name “Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art Cultural Landscape.” The following sub-sections examine and compare their transformations from local cultural properties to World Heritage Sites.

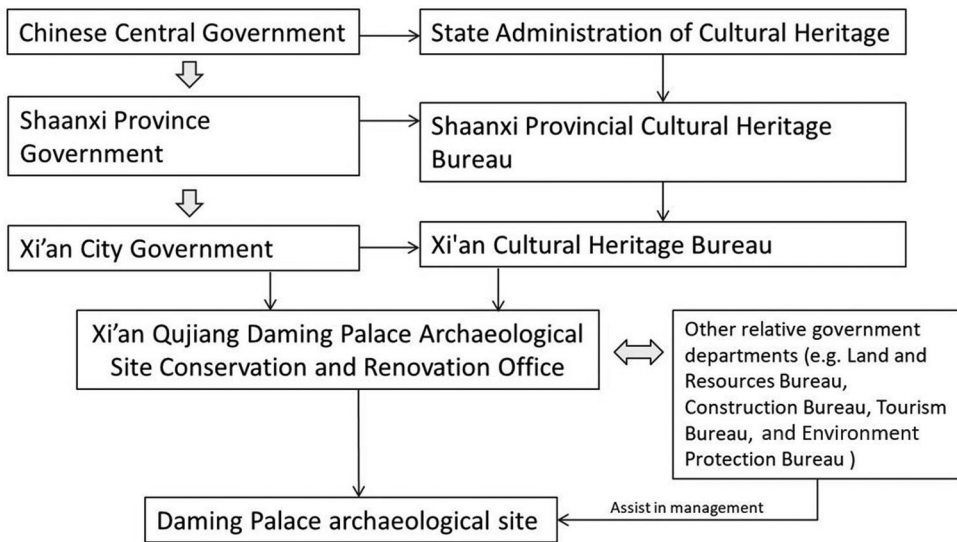
### **The Daming Palace Archaeological Site**

The Daming Palace archaeological site, located in the northern suburbs of Xi’an City, Shaanxi Province, contains the ruins of a magnificent Tang Dynasty (CE 681–907) royal palatial complex. The land comprising the palatial remnants had been used as farmland for over a thousand years, covering an area of approximately 320 hectares. In the early twentieth century, a railway company transformed the fields into a residential area, which has been referred to as “Daobei (north of railway)” ever since. During the Second World War, Daobei housed a large number of domestic refugees. After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, Daobei gradually developed into a mixture of urban and rural areas, with a disorganized layout of shack-houses, farmsteads and industrial constructions. The local government had not planned any major urbanization development for this region for nearly half a century due to the presence of large-scale archaeological ruins and the complex street network layout. Despite the fact that archaeological excavations on the site have yielded a number of significant discoveries, the material remains are mostly weathered rammed earth foundations of the ruined palace, which is neither appealing nor easy to understand for the general public.

The site’s tourism transformation began around the turn of the century, with the growing influence of the World Heritage program and China’s accelerating cultural commodification. The Xi’an government’s investment in the site’s conservation was prompted in part by the fact that it is eligible for inclusion in the serial World Heritage nomination of the Silk Roads (Guo 2009). Meanwhile, with the support of the Xi’an government, many of the city’s cultural heritage sites have been reconfigured as tourist attractions with significant investments from profit-driven developers. During this process, the government of Xi’an’s Qujiang New District took the lead in incorporating a Public-Private Partnership business model into the development of several historic monuments through tourism (Wang, Wei, and Liu 2011). In this model, the government granted real estate companies the right to use the land surrounding heritage sites in exchange for investments to cover the costs of conservation and tourist infrastructure (Suo 2011).

This model, named as the “Qujiang Model,” was applied to the development of the Daming Palace archaeological site. In 2007, the Xi’an government set up a special office in charge of the reformation (Figure 2), with primary investments from a Hongkong company, transforming the site into a large-scale archaeological heritage park as well as the focal point of newly developed commercial areas. Approximately 100,000 residents were relocated from the site between 2008 and 2010 (Xi’an Qujiang Daming Palace Heritage Site Conservation and Renovation Office 2015). Modern features such as archaized décor and artistic sculptures can be found in the heritage park, while archaeological remains are protected and displayed through *in situ*



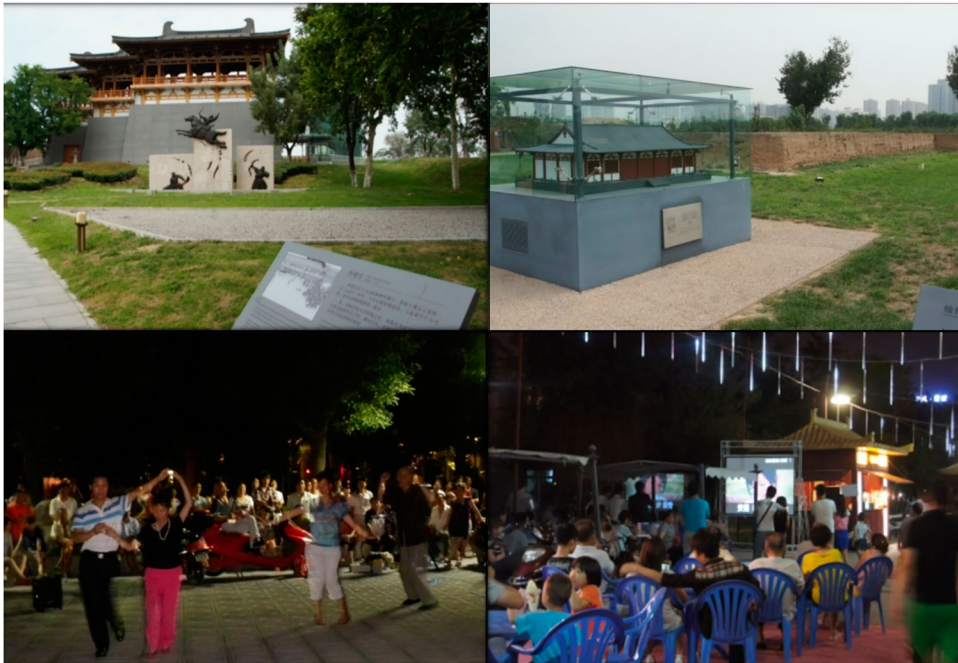


**Figure 2.** The Daming Palace archaeological site's management structure during the World Heritage designation campaign.

preservation, partial restoration, museum presentation, reconstruction with modern materials, and replication by scale models. Some remnants that are too fragile to be exposed, such as remains of the Hanyuan Hall and Linde Hall, are preserved by protective layers of brickwork and concrete that envelop the original fabrics (Hou, Wang, and Yan 2012). The park also includes an archaeology discovery center and a 3D cinema with a movie created specifically for the park and routinely shown to visitors. Since the park's grand opening on Chinese National Day in 2010, the Xi'an government has established a management company to oversee its daily operation and maintenance. With two-thirds of the park open to the public free of charge, it has been a success as a green space for local residents to relax and enjoy leisure activities (Figure 3). Since the upgrading of this previously underdeveloped region, the real estate prices of the adjacent lands have also increased (Gao 2016b).

### **The Huashan Rock Art Area**

The Huashan rock art area consists of approximately eighty-one rock painting sites and is located in a sparsely populated region of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The sites are spread out along the Zuojiang River Valley in a scenic landscape with limestone peaks, zigzagging water, and interspersed tablelands. The majority of these sites are on water-facing cliffs and feature highly standardized anthropomorphic images painted in a reddish color (Qin et al. 1987). These paintings are believed to have been created between the Warring States Period (403-221 BCE) and the Eastern Han Dynasty (26-220 CE) by the Luoyue people, an ethnic minority group thought to be the ancestors of today's local Zhuang people (Gao 2013). The entire rock art area is named after the eponymous Huashan rock art site of Ningming, which is arguably the area's most spectacular site.



**Figure 3.** The Daming Palace archaeological site after its transformation into a heritage park (photos taken by the author).

In the 1980s, the Guangxi government launched an investigation to verify, record, and research all pictographic sites discovered along the Zuojiang River and its tributaries (Qin et al. 1987), which resulted in the Huashan site of Ningming being designated as a “major historical and cultural sites protected at the national level,” and the other sites as “historic and cultural properties” under lower levels of protection. As the 1990s progressed, the Huashan site of Ningming became a tourist destination, with newly constructed facilities such as an observation pathway, fences, roads, and a port (Ma 1994, 178). However, the site’s tourism development hastened the deterioration of the paintings due to direct contact from visitors walking beneath the painted cliff (Yin 2009).

Around the turn of the century, the Guangxi government began planning a World Heritage nomination for the Huashan site of Ningming alone, and later for the entire rock art area as a cultural landscape (Pang and Zhou 2016). The pre-nomination campaign quickly became the most significant impetus for the area’s tourism development. The campaign’s first victory came in 2004, when the Huashan site was added to China’s World Heritage Tentative List (Zhou and Yang 2016). The outcome coincided with the authorities’ decision to prohibit tourists from walking beneath the site’s rock paintings (Huang 2007). However, in order to capitalize on potential economic profits, the local government and private sector planned a series of commercial projects connected to the site (Lv 2011, 194). Due to restrictions later imposed by higher authorities to safeguard the possibility of the rock art area being nominated for World Heritage designation, most of the planned projects were stopped before construction (interviews with officials of the Chongzuo government, 2014).

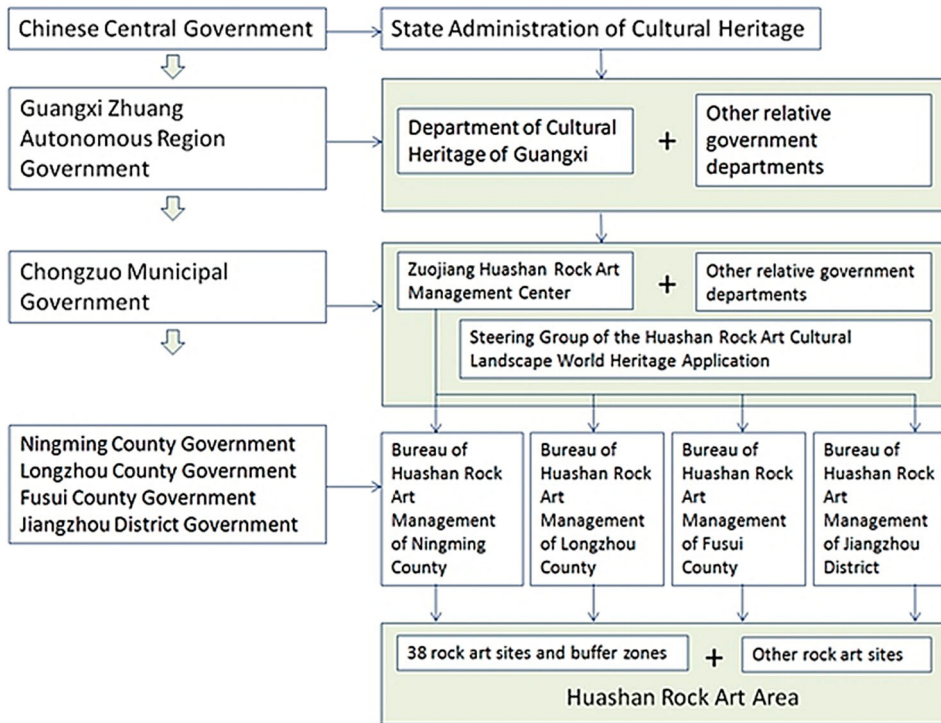
Since 2012, the Huashan rock art area has gradually risen above all other candidates on China's Tentative List to become a World Heritage nomination (Xiao 2015, 11), under the name "Zuojiang Huashan Rock Art Cultural Landscape." In preparation for designation, the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage was tasked with carrying out major conservation works on the sites (Guo 2016; Wang and Wu 2016). In addition, the provincial and local governments launched a number of projects to protect and promote the area. However, when compared to the Daming Palace archaeological site, the Huashan rock art area received far less investment for tourism development. The development included a modest renovation of tourist facilities, the establishment of a few new tourist features (such as a museum and viewing platforms), the implementation of environmental protection strategies, and the (re)invention of cultural festivals, events, and traditions, all of which contributed significantly to the area's archaeological tourism (Wang 2016).

For instance, the Ningming County government has hosted an annual "3rd March" cultural festival since 2011, which includes large-scale performances of reinvented ethnic traditions, such as a grand ancestral worship ceremony honoring the "King of Luoyue," symbolically the ancestor of the local Zhuang people. The statue of the "King of Luoyue" at the ceremony is based on the frontal-view human motif of the Huashan rock art site, depicting a tall and imposing figure with a feather headdress and a sword, as seen in the rock paintings. Furthermore, using the Huashan rock paintings as inspiration, local arts and crafts institutions designed and produced a variety of handicrafts, including bags, drapes, brocades, and embroideries. The pictograph motifs have also been widely used on tea sets, watches, leather goods, calendars, and telephone cards, and are offered in the tourism market as typical ethnic art products of Guangxi (Qin 2017).

Between 2014 and 2016, provincial authorities prohibited the local government from entering into any new commercial agreements involving projects to be carried out within the buffer and core zones of the cultural landscape (Gao 2017). During the World Heritage campaign, because the delimited cultural landscape crosses the jurisdiction of four counties (Ningming, Longzhou, Fusui, and Jiangzhou), a variety of government departments at different levels were involved in the management structure. To coordinate arrangements, the Chongzuo Municipal government established a steering group, in collaboration with a management center and other relevant departments, to oversee the area's management (Figure 4). With all of these efforts, the area was designated a World Heritage Site in 2016 (Figure 5).

### ***Daming Palace Archaeological Site and Huashan Rock Art Area: A Comparison***

The two archaeological sites were chosen for this study because they both underwent significant tourism-oriented development during the local governments' campaigns for UNESCO World Heritage designation, and as previously stated, both sites have recently received the World Heritage title. Besides that, during the preparation for World Heritage inscription, both sites were transformed from relatively unknown heritage places to sites considered to have OUV. Furthermore, changes brought about by tourism development and the World Heritage designation campaigns have had a significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of their respective local communities.



**Figure 4.** The Huashan rock art area's management structure during the World Heritage designation campaign.

A comparison of the two sites reveals significant differences in their nature as well (Table 1). Such differences resulted in distinct approaches used in their transformations: one acquired active commercial investments, whereas the other had commercial projects halted to safeguard the cultural property (Ma and Zhang 2015); one received heavy-handed presentation techniques, such as physical recreations, whereas the other obtained significantly less intervention (Wang 2016; Zhou 2009). Their management structures also differ considerably, as the Daming Palace heritage park is more involved with the private sector and is managed by a government-run company (Fu 2014); The government bodies in charge of managing the Huashan rock art area, on the other hand, have a closer relationship with the local communities because of the ethnic settings: many local government officials are also from

**Table 1.** The differences in the nature of the two case study sites.

	Daming Palace archaeological site	Huashan rock art area
Type of World Heritage site	Part of a serial and transnational listing	Cultural landscape
Relationship with surrounding environments	A created heritage park located within a large urban city	An area with multiple components located in a sparsely populated region
Tourism development approaches	To create a green space in an urban environment	To establish new infrastructure in an underdeveloped region
Relationship with local residents	Former occupants are dislocated from the site	Local ethnic population has a strong cultural bond with the sites





**Figure 5.** The Huashan rock art area and the efforts made during the campaign to have it designated as a World Heritage site (photos taken by the author).

the Zhuang ethnic group and thus share similar cultural backgrounds with the local residents (interviews with officials of the Chongzuo City and subordinate local governments, 2013 & 2014).

As previously stated, since the turn of the century, the World Heritage designation process has mainly influenced the tourism development of archaeological sites in China in two ways. Based on the examination of the two archaeological sites' tourism development, as well as reasons for such development, this article proposes that, for the Daming Palace site, the World Heritage listing process has reshaped its tourist exploitation primarily through the influence of mutual endorsement with the conservation strategy of converting Great Sites into archaeological parks. In comparison, the normative pressure of World Heritage designation has been the most powerful factor in directing the tourism-oriented transformation of the Huashan rock art area.

## Methodology

To understand how tourism development of the two archaeological sites under the influence of UNESCO World Heritage designation process has affected the social values attributed to these sites by local residents, a qualitative, ethnographic study was conducted to examine and compare local populations' perceptions and attitudes towards changes engendered by the development. Methods employed mainly included participant observation, as well as unstructured and semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 2005). Participant observation was used to document interactions between local communities and archaeological sites, and the data gathered served as foundation knowledge for the interviews. In both case studies, I determined which interview method was more appropriate based on the circumstances. Nonetheless, all interviews were conducted in an informal, face-to-face, open-ended format, with interviewees from a diverse range of backgrounds (Figure 6). For the two case studies, two sets of similar questions were designed for semi-structured interviews. In practice, the questions changed depending on how the conversations progressed. Because the research topic was deemed sensitive, most informants were unwilling to have their conversations recorded. As a result, the interviews were recorded with notes in Mandarin Chinese. Using NVivo, fieldwork data were analyzed and coded to identify prominent themes related to local residents' understandings and perspectives on tourism development at the two archaeological sites during their transitional periods.

Fieldwork was conducted around the Daming Palace archaeological site in July and August 2014, beginning with participant observation to record day-to-day interactions between local residents and the heritage park, specifically how they used it for relaxation, exercise, and social and cultural activities (e.g., outdoor movie theatres, open-air fitness dancing). The primary observation technique used was behavior mapping, which I conducted for two weeks and generated annotated maps, along with notes and photos, detailing the activities that people were displaying at various locations both inside and outside the park. During the same weeks, unstructured interviews were conducted with 24 informants (6 tourists, 2 local government officials, and 16 local residents). Aside from the government officials with whom I had previously spoken, other interviewees were chosen at random and approached throughout the park, particularly at the



**Figure 6.** Background information on the local residents with whom I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews at the two case study sites.

Danfeng Gate Square, a large plaza at the park's front entrance, the underground museum within the park, and its various resting areas.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 97 people (67 relocated residents, 19 residents from neighboring estates, and 11 other Xi'an citizens). The interviewees were chosen using the snowball sampling method, with an initial shortlist of key informants suggested by my personal contact with the relocated communities and the two local government officials via their personal networks. Following each interview, I would normally ask the informant to introduce me to people they thought might be interested in participating in the research. The majority of the interviews were conducted at people's homes, restaurants, and coffee shops. It should be noted that some of the community members interviewed viewed the research topic with skepticism and thus refrained from providing detailed responses to the questions, resulting in 29 interviews that were extremely brief. Similar incidents occurred during the fieldwork at the Huashan rock art area.

Fieldwork for the Huashan rock art area began in March 2013, with a follow-up in July 2014, yielding a total of 89 interviews (32 residents of the Zuojiang River Valley, 47 residents from neighboring towns, and 10 local government officials). In 2013, the fieldwork began with participant observation and behavior mapping to document local people's daily activities and interactions with rock art sites in nearby villages (Yaoda administrative village, including Laijiangtun and Bayuetun). Unlike at the Daming Palace site, where thousands of local residents used the park on a daily basis for exercises and relaxation, the daily interactions between locals and the rock painting sites were subtle and less observable. Nonetheless, the observation provided me with insights into how villagers went about their daily lives, interacted with visitors, and perceived the rock art heritage in general. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with local government officials and residents, who were approached either via pre-established personal contacts or through random encounters in the villages and the neighboring town.

In 2014, the majority of the fieldwork was conducted through interviews. The fieldwork included 5 days during which I was invited to join a team of international experts to inspect the Huashan rock art area, an event organized by the Chongzuo government and the Bradshaw Foundation following the 2014 International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO) Guiyang Congress. During the event, I met several local government officials and villagers, which allowed me to learn more about the development of archaeological tourism and the authorities' preparations for World Heritage inscription through unstructured interviews. After the event, I carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with a small group of key informants chosen from the network established during the two phases of fieldwork. Using snowball sampling, I was able to interview a larger group of local residents about their opinions and experiences with the tourism development and World Heritage designation campaign. It should be noted that many elder residents did not speak Mandarin Chinese during both phases of fieldwork, and interviews were only possible with the help of three volunteer interpreters.

### **The Perceptions and Attitudes of Local Communities to Archaeological Tourism Development**

In terms of local communities' perceptions and attitudes toward tourism development at archaeological sites during World Heritage designation campaigns, content analysis of



**Table 2.** The themes in relation to local communities' perceptions and attitudes towards the development of tourism at the two archaeological sites during the transitional period of World Heritage designation.

	Daming Palace archaeological site	Huashan rock art area
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements in physical and conceptual living environments</li> <li>• A public green space for leisure and entertainment</li> <li>• Easier access to archaeological heritage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An increased level of pride</li> <li>• Heightened awareness of environmental issues</li> <li>• Enhanced public representation</li> <li>• The revival of ethnic traditions</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discontentment with development model and cost</li> <li>• Dissatisfaction towards how the archaeological remains are preserved</li> <li>• A lost sense of belonging</li> <li>• Displeasure to images of neighborhood identity</li> <li>• Dissatisfaction with current living conditions and relocation compensation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns over costs and outcomes</li> <li>• Mistrust of government motivation</li> </ul>

fieldwork data revealed eight themes in the case of Daming Palace and six themes in the case of Huashan rock art area (Table 2). Because these themes have already been discussed in depth in previous publications (Gao 2016b; 2017), the following discussion provides a summary of the various perceptions and attitudes, leading to a comparison of the two case studies.

In the case study of the Daming Palace site, local residents' positive perceptions of changes brought about by tourist transformation of the site were primarily linked to improvements in physical and conceptual living conditions, the site's new function as a public green space, and improved accessibility of archaeological heritage. Despite the fact that many local residents were opposed to the redevelopment of the entire region, the majority of interviewees saw the enhanced living environments as a positive outcome. Furthermore, despite the fact that only seven interviewees mentioned regional prejudice, with the demolition of slums and shabby houses, regional preconceptions against the former Daobei neighborhood gradually faded away (Gao 2016b, 220–221). It is not surprising that approximately three-quarters of the interviewees expressed appreciation for the site's additional function as a public green space. Observations made during fieldwork also confirmed that the presence of a large park in a densely populated suburb area facilitated people's needs for open spaces for recreation while also encouraging new social and cultural activities among people of all ages (Gao 2016b, 221–222). Another highly recognized benefit (by about 63% of the interviewees) was improved access to archaeological heritage, which resulted in increased interest and knowledge of the subject, referring to the park's interpretation boards and educational facilities (Gao 2016b, 223).

In contrast to the recognized gains and positive perceptions, there were strong opposition and negativity from the local residents towards changes brought about by the transformation. One major source of concern was the used business model and the associated costs. The notion that the true motivation behind local governments' efforts was to increase revenues through collaboration with the real estate sector became widely accepted among interviewees. Local residents were also worried that the site's business strategies would alter the city's urban and memory landscapes beyond

recognition (Gao 2016b, 224). Moreover, the physical interventions performed on the archaeological remnants elicited another level of dissatisfaction among local residents, with two-thirds accusing the park of lacking content and some conservation methods of depriving the feeling of vicissitudes (Gao 2016b, 224–226). The sense of loss of belonging was especially strong among community members who had been relocated from the site. About 42% of interviewees openly expressed their nostalgia due to the dissection of both physical and emotional attachments (Gao 2016b, 226). Furthermore, approximately 27% of interviewees voiced displeasure with how the authorities had purposefully portrayed their old neighborhood as a place of extreme backwardness in order to justify the reformation project (Gao 2016b, 226–227). The final negative opinion identified was about the sacrifices that local residents were forced to make during the reconfiguration process. These sacrifices included not only disagreements over relocation compensation, but also a sense of abandonment and neglect inflicted by the government (Gao 2016b, 227–228).

In the case of the Huashan rock art area, favorable perceptions and attitudes among local residents toward changes brought about by tourism development under the influence of World Heritage designation stemmed primarily from three arguments. The first reason was the belief that the World Heritage pre-nomination campaign would increase the visibility of not only the rock art heritage but also the entire region, which had suffered from poverty and lacked any advantage to compete with other tourist destinations in the province (Gao 2017, 89–90). The second reason for support was that local governments' tourism promotion efforts in the campaign were seen as a way to preserve the traditional values that the rock art sites represented. These efforts included enhanced environmental awareness (mentioned by 79% of the interviewees) and relatively minor renovations of infrastructure and tourist facilities (pointed out by 63% of the interviewees). These efforts improved public representation of the pictographic sites and established an efficient process for underpinning the significance of the Zhuang ethnic culture, honoring regional pride, and refreshing memories of local and ethnic history (Gao 2017, 90). The third reason referred to the local government's attempts to (re)invent ethnic traditions by promoting cultural festivals and events related to Huashan rock art. Although this is a phenomenon of inventing tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), more than half of the interviewees associated these events with ethnic pride, and these efforts were successful in reviving grassroots support for tourism development and the World Heritage campaign to some extent (Gao 2017, 90–91).

Along with the generally positive attitudes and stances toward changes brought about by the campaign-driven promotion of rock art tourism, there were openly expressed dissatisfactions with, in particular, the political aspects of the development projects. The cost and outcome of the campaign were major concerns for local communities, with 43% of interviewees questioning the profitability, source, and merit of the investments made. Aside from that, another negative perception stemmed from local residents' mistrust of the true motivation behind local government officials' enthusiasm for World Heritage inscription. This mistrust was exacerbated by a lack of transparency in the government's decision-making processes, with a small number of interviewees believing that local voices and opinions had little weight in policymaking (Gao 2017, 91).

A comparison of these diverse perceptions and attitudes reveals that local residents of the Daming Palace site expressed a higher degree of dissatisfaction with the tourism

development of archaeological sites, in contrast to the generally more positive perceptions and attitudes of residents living adjacent to the Huashan rock art area. This article contends that the contrast is driven by a variety of issues, including changes in quality of life and socio-economic status, the fluidity of local cultures and values, the decline and revival of traditions, increased and decreased economic opportunities, community involvement, and rights and control over heritage management. An examination of these issues reveals that, while the challenges and opportunities posed by tourism and World Heritage designation differed significantly between the two destinations, personal sacrifice and development method used were the two critical factors that played a vital role in reshaping local communities' perspectives and attitudes.

Mr Xiao, a former Daobei resident, stated,

most of us don't mind moving to new houses, as long as we're all properly and equally compensated for our losses. We would have liked to see the cultural relics (the Daming Palace archaeological site) protected, as long as the authorities did everything properly and for the sake of protecting the cultural relics.

Mr Qin, a Zhuang resident of Ningming County, expressed a similar opinion, claiming that

the government first prohibited river sand dredging, and now we are not allowed to have net box fish farming on the Mingjiang River. We don't like the changes, but we live with them. After all, our forefathers left us with the rock art. Even though sand dredging and fish farming are prohibited in this river, other rivers exist.

These two comments reflected a common perception and attitude among local residents of the two archaeological sites. There was a general sense of support for the development of archaeological sites for tourism as a means of achieving social and cultural wellbeing. However, the level of support varied, owing primarily to how such transformation was implemented and the extent to which personal interests were affected in this matter.

With respect to the finding, it is clear that there is a fundamental deficiency in China's archaeological tourism development: an imbalance in power distribution in the use and management of archaeological sites. Tourism development and World Heritage designation are conducted top-down by powerful ruling stakeholders, namely government authorities and profit-driven developers, while the general public barely has any say in the decision-making process and is frequently asked to sacrifice personal interests for the sake of government agendas. Although the authorities claim that the sacrifices made by local residents will be compensated by potential economic benefits such as increased regional income, job creation, and entrepreneurialism stimulation, whether the expected outcomes will be realized remains uncertain. Follow-up studies focusing on the two regions' socio-economic development after the World Heritage inscription of the two sites are required to provide further empirical evidence.

### **The Changes in Social Values Attributed to Archaeological Heritage by Local Communities**

Changes in the appearance, composition, and function of an archaeological site, as previously discussed, can alter an individual's perception and experience of the site, resulting in a shift in the social values associated with it. Based on the above examination of local

residents' perceptions and attitudes, this session investigates and compares how tourist transformation of the two archaeological sites in the years preceding their inscription on the World Heritage List has influenced the social values ascribed to the sites by their local populations.

Prior to the construction of the heritage park, the Daming Palace site was barely associated with any form of social value by residents geographically linked to it, because the local population did not have a noticeable emotional or cultural bond with the archaeological remnants. Despite the fact that a small number of former residents expressed nostalgic feelings toward some of the archaeological remains, local residents expressed varying degrees of indifference or even resentment towards the archaeological site. Former residents widely agreed that the site not only failed to provide them with any benefit, but also impeded the neighborhood's urbanization progress. Even for the Xi'an citizens who had a cultural connection to the archaeological site, it did not embody obvious social values when it was hidden in a remote neighborhood with no adequate protection or display.

The conversion of the site from neglected archaeological remnants to a heritage park transformed it into a focal point for various community members' diverse sentiments and perceptions, creating and redefining a range of social values. These values refer to its ability to enhance the physical and conceptual living environments of its residents, its capacity to improve local livelihoods, its function as a space for leisure, recreation, and education, its role in maintaining a sense of belonging and regional pride, and its ability to meet social expectations. To some extent, the region's improved environments, the creation of a large public green space, and increased public access to the archaeological site have all contributed to the variety and measure of social values ascribed to the site by local residents. However, these newly emerging social values were also thwarted by the unintended consequences of tourism development. Concerns expressed by local residents about the negative effects of tourist commercialization, such as over-reliance on the real estate industry in heritage exploitation, deprivation of the authentic experience caused by conservation approaches, and sacrifices made by local residents without appropriate compensation, have all contributed to a reduction in the generated social values.

In comparison, in the case of the Huashan rock art area, the local Zhuang communities ascribed profound values to the rock art sites long before the beginning of rock art tourism and the World Heritage pre-nomination campaign. Such values referred to the perceived meanings from rock art sites that embody a connection between the Zhuang people and their ancestors, as a reference point of ethnic and regional identity, and of qualities that complement traditional activities (see, e.g., Gao 2013, for a detailed discussion of the cultural connection between the Zhuang people and the Huashan rock art heritage). In other words, the rock art heritage has already provided the locals with a strong sense of place, identity, and belonging, in terms of feelings of regional and ethnic pride, nostalgia, as well as collective memories and activities. As a result, any change in those feelings and emotions has an impact on the social values that the local population associates with the heritage.

The campaign-driven tourism development resulted in not only a physical transformation of the area, but also a shift in people's emotional attachment to the rock art sites. Because the rock art area had been constrained by its geographical location and a lack of distinct advantage in the tourism market, the higher authorities' recognition was

interpreted as a recognition of the local population's regional prestige. The relatively modest renovation of tourist facilities improved the representational environment for the rock art sites. The sense of wellbeing generated by this environment boosted local residents' confidence in their culture, values, and social standing, prompting them to learn more about the significance of the rock art heritage. The increased environmental awareness among local residents as a result of the World Heritage campaign provided a context from which they derived a sense of self-esteem to reinforce their cultural identity and ethnic pride. The revitalization of ethnic traditions through reinvented cultural activities also helped to foster a sense of belonging, pride, and identity, as well as collective memory, among local residents.

Despite the positive effects, the social values associated with the rock art area were jeopardized as a result of the local population's various concerns and mistrust of the campaign-oriented development. These negative feelings and emotions arose in response to deficiencies in China's archaeological tourism development mechanism, which were exacerbated by the UNESCO World Heritage designation campaign. There is an absence of community participation in decision-making by authorities, as well as a lack of transparency in government financing. Over time, these deficiencies may lessen the positive influence on the social values ascribed to the rock art heritage, and may endanger the very foundation upon which the social values were established.

The research conducted in the two case studies reveals that the impact of tourism development on the social values ascribed to archaeological sites by their local residents during the transitional period of World Heritage designation varies greatly depending on a range of factors. This study argues that these factors include (1) the strength of the cultural bond between the heritage and the relevant communities, and (2) the extent to which the development process has modified the function and meaning of the heritage site. As demonstrated in the case of the Daming Palace site, the impact of tourism development on the social values that local communities attributed to the site was direct and visible. This was due to the site's transformation from neglected archaeological ruins to a heritage park with a World Heritage title, which created a variety of new values by modifying and increasing the site's function, meanings, representation, and capacity. In comparison, tourism development had a subtle and indirect impact on the social values ascribed to the Huashan rock art area by its local residents. This was owing in large part to the fact that there was a strong cultural and social bond between the rock art heritage and local communities prior to tourism or the World Heritage designation campaign enacting any change. Moreover, as a result of the World Heritage listing process's normative pressure, local governments' tourism promotions were modest enough to benefit preserving and strengthening pre-existing social attachments. In both cases, the World Heritage designation campaign has exacerbated the deficiencies and unintended consequences inherent in China's tourism development paradigms, potentially imperiling the social values associated with the sites.

### **Archaeological Tourism, World Heritage, and Social Value Under the Looking Glass**

The analysis of changes in social values assigned to the two archaeological sites by their respective local communities is a first step toward gaining a comprehensive

understanding of the social and community impact of tourism development at archaeological sites in preparation for World Heritage designation. In view of the interaction between tourism development, the World Heritage designation process, and the social values associated with the two case study sites, the question remains of how to identify, preserve, and enhance the social values that local communities attribute to archaeological sites using the seemingly invincible power of a market-driven economy and the World Heritage program. One obvious solution is to encourage community involvement at various stages of heritage preservation and development. Community participation has become a mandatory requirement for state authorities in the nomination and management of World Heritage Sites, as well as an ethical obligation to authorized heritage practices worldwide. In practice, however, the application of participatory approaches faces a number of challenges and opportunities at the international, national, and local levels (e.g., Díaz-Andreu 2016b, Jones et al. 2018, Plummer and Taylor 2004, to name but a few).

The Chinese government has been working to incorporate elements of participatory approaches into cultural heritage governance and management, as evidenced by recent policies on making cultural heritage “alive” and growing support for grassroots initiatives in heritage protection. In theory, these efforts improve the identification and preservation of social values associated with archaeological sites by their local communities. Nevertheless, archaeological sites in China are frequently contested spaces where the intersecting interests of dominant stakeholders overshadow local residents’ voices and opinions (Shan 2015). These interests refer to the sometimes conflicting objectives of influential decision-makers, such as the state government’s overall goal of promoting continued economic prosperity while sustaining social stability and governance legitimacy, regional governments’ general interests in increasing access to capital and political power (Nitzky 2013, 208), and profit-driven developers’ imperative of profit maximization. Therefore, current community collaboration in the conservation and management of archaeological sites only scratches the surface of the issue of “participation.” Local residents’ involvement is limited to passive attendance after the development stage of a project is completed, and their emotional, cultural, and social attachments to an archaeological site play a minor role in decision-making processes.

Understanding the diversity and variation of social values attributed to archaeological sites by local communities facilitates genuine and meaningful community participation in heritage discourses. In current contexts, prioritizing emotional connections between people and places as a primary means of conservation remains difficult. Heritage professionals and policymakers are grappling with how to incorporate social value considerations into macro decision-making frameworks alongside professional concerns (e.g., historical, scientific, and aesthetic qualities) and practical imperatives (e.g., economic demands) (Robson 2021). A sensitive decision-making framework necessitates not only identifying the social values attributed to heritage sites, but also a nuanced understanding of how these values are influenced by various changes and what the key factors determining the influence are.

The findings of this article revealed two key factors in determining the impact of tourism development on social values attributed to archaeological sites by local communities during the World Heritage designation process, referring to the strength of pre-existing cultural bonds and the extent of modification caused by development activities. These two factors are related to the *resilience* of archaeological sites and their local

communities in the face of changes such as tourism development and World Heritage designation-related campaigns. On the one hand, the role that an archaeological site plays in its local community's collective sense of belonging, place, and identity, as well as the importance of the site to the community's cultural and economic wellbeing, are indicators of how the site contributes to the community's overall resilience in the face of change. On the other, the ability of an archaeological site to sustainably provide emotional, cultural, and economic opportunities to its local community in the face of physical changes indicates the resilience of the site. When considering tourism development or World Heritage designation for archaeological sites, decision-makers should give greater pause for reflection to sites that play a significant role in supporting local communities' overall resilience while also having a low resilience to sustain the associated social values in the face of interventions. More research is needed to determine how this proposal could be implemented. Nevertheless, a thorough and comprehensive understanding of how social values change in response to various interventions is required for a decision-making framework that genuinely promotes people-centered approaches. This article contributes to the development of such a framework by conducting a comparative study in the context of China, with the goal of encouraging further reflection on the existing mechanisms for the management and use of archaeological sites in China and around the world.

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