

Authenticity in Contemporary Cultures: Insights from Gaozhuang, China

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Abstract

This paper presents the recently constructed cultural landscape of Gaozhuang Xishuangjing. It examines the reconstructed authenticity of Gaozhuang through the lens of cultural conservation.

Authenticity is an issue in cultural heritage management: authenticity. Together with integrity, it is one of the qualifying aspects of the outstanding universal value (OUV) assessment conducted through the World Heritage List. Past decades have witnessed much research on authenticity in which attention has shifted from a Eurocentric focus to cultural contexts. Eurocentrism focuses on material, fixed, or formulaic aspects, while cultural emphasis is on associative heritage and values. Although the focus continues to change, it hardly includes reconstructed authenticity.

Therefore, this study elucidates authenticity in the heritagization process on the basis of authenticity in the cultural heritage field. It examines the case of the reconstructed cultural landscape and tourism at Gaozhuang Xishuangjing.

It employs a qualitative methodology, involving a document survey on authenticity. The principles are delineated from articles related to authenticity in cultural conservation and tourism. It also conducts on-site fieldwork involving interviews and observations to collect primary data from Gaozhuang.

Findings indicate that reconstructed authenticity at Gaozhuang could be a new authenticity reconstructed and integrated with current needs and context; it involves three domains that affect people's judgement about authenticity, including local participation which is well-attained.

Keywords: Authenticity, Cultural heritage, Cultural conservation, Cultural tourism, Contemporary context.

Introduction

Recently, authenticity has emerged as a strong concept in cultural conservation practices. It continues to generate significant discussion on the evaluation and assessment of heritage, its values, and the implementation of conservation practices. The primary factor contributing to this issue is largely due to the lack of precision and clarity in the definition (McKercher et al., 2002; Giovanni, 2018). Furthermore, in the realm of philosophy, scholars have delved into the enigmatic nature and inherent coherence of authenticity, exploring its manifestations within dynamic temporal and spatial frameworks. Thus, the concept of authenticity is continuously shaped and reshaped. As Nezhad et al. (2015) and Khalaf (2016) have discussed, authenticity is currently limited to a partial understanding. The transition from a tangible-focused Eurocentric setting to Asia and other cultural landscapes with intangible attachments poses various complex challenges and circumstances. The broader the scope of authenticity, the greater the potential for the involvement of multifaceted elements.

The concept of authenticity is inherently intertwined and closely examined in relation to its context, which in this paper is global cultural heritage. Numerous studies have been conducted from a multidisciplinary perspectives, motivated by the growing acknowledgement of heritage and its

significance. The subject can be categorised into three distinct domains: conservation theory; the practical application of authenticity within cultural landscapes; and cultural tourism. Nevertheless, these studies primarily focus on examining established heritages and their authenticity, with little attention paid to the concept of reconstructed authenticity. Although the concept of authenticity in cultural conservation practices has emerged relatively recently, it continues to generate considerable discussion and interest with regard to the evaluation and assessment of heritage, its inherent worth, and how it is preserved.

Reconstructed authenticity is an articulation of this idea, and has not received sufficient attention or understanding. This study examines it in the context of Gaozhuang Xishuangjing. However, this study does not refer to the restoration or repair of the existing heritage but rather to the recreation and reinterpretation of traditional cultural features into contemporary contexts, which then constructs a new cultural landscape. It is seen as a ‘heritagization process’, which is in line with the current understanding that ‘something does not have to be ‘old’ to be important, for heritage can be produced from the recent past’ (Timothy, 2014). This echoes Hobsbawm’s idea (1983) that ‘a tradition does not claim to be old’.

Therefore, this study examines the reconstructed authenticity of the Gaozhuang cultural landscape and contribute to the understanding of authenticity in the heritagization process. In this regard, it poses the following questions.

- Does Gaozhuang today reflect its traditional landscape and symbolic characteristics? (including cultural attributes/elements)
- Do people think Gaozhuang exemplifies local authenticity?
- What is the identity of Gaozhuang?

Its objectives are:

1. To unravel the concept of constructed authenticity theoretically.
2. To identify how constructed authenticity manifests at Gaozhuang Xishuangjing

Theoretical Framework

Authenticity

Authenticity is conceptualised in different contexts as an ‘ancient concept of ever-changing meanings, functions, and criteria’ (Lowenthal, 1999). The term indicates:

“The true as opposed to the false, the real rather than the fake, the original, not the copy, the honest against the corrupt, the sacred instead of the profane. These virtues persuade us to treat authenticity as an absolute, eternal, and unshakeable value. Yet authenticity is, in fact, in continual flux, its defining criteria subject to constant change”

Lowenthal, 1999:1

Authenticity has its roots in philosophy, referring to an in-depth, fundamental involvement in life at the beginning. However, it has subsequently been examined in multiple academic fields, such as psychology, existential psychotherapy, existentialist philosophy, and aesthetics, to describe personality and self.

According to Lowenthal (1999) the worldwide ‘craving for authenticity is the raising of heritage conservation’. It may connect with and accompany the increasing inner demands of people for cultural heritage after WWII, at times when they wanted to seek their missing parts (e.g., belongingness, identities, collective memories, and connections with their culture) among the vast ruins and emptiness. In fact, heritage unveiled its mysterious veil and went down from an elite stage to a public and ordinary floor. By connecting with that heritage, people sought to reconnect with their existence through unchanged objects.

In the cultural heritage field, authenticity is a new concept first mentioned in the 1964 Venice Charter. At the very beginning, it was fixed on predominantly physical attributes. It only referred to the credibility or truthfulness of heritage in its tangible aspects until the shifting attitude towards the definition of heritage and the broadening recognition of cultural heritage began during the 1980s. However, this required wider exploration and recognition of the entire spectrum of its manifestations.

Indeed, apart from shifting away from the Eurocentric focus, an Asian cultural context and background started to be considered.

Nara Documents 1994, with the idea of cultural diversity and emphasising the authenticity of cultural values and conservation practices, is considered a watershed of cultural heritage. Although not the first, Nara Documents meet the Asian-tailored criteria. It echoes the initial meaning of authenticity: the self, which encourages differences that should be respected. Authenticity is thus examined and discussed in a wider landscape, reaching to the intangible cultural aspects and settings. In this sense, authenticity is seen as a fluid process, understood through the lens of constructivism (Vannini et al., 2009; Peterson, 2005; Kidd, 2011; Ken, 2012, 2022; Jokilehto, 2006; Nezhad et al., 2015; Khalaf, 2016), which is relative, not absolute' (Stovel, in Stovel, 2007) and 'malleable' (Khudsen, 2016) and can be 'negotiated' (Vinas, 2002) or another similar concept MacCannell (1973) staged, performed, nowadays even customised.

Accordingly, Vannini, et al. argue that,

'Authenticity is reified in everyday culture and discourse which is rooted in creativity and self-expression rather than in conformity to social forces'

Vannini, et al., 2009:2

In fact, it is also argued that it is,

'some sort of ideal, highly valued and sought by individuals and groups as a part of the process of becoming. It changes with the change of culture; thus, it is a "moving target"'

Peterson, 2005, in Vannini et al., 2009

Kidd (2011) also points out that it 'is, of course, socially constructed'. In this vein, the more recent focus on authenticity can be identified as 'reconstructed authenticity', which is examined and challenged in the context of the reconstruction of World Heritage. As Khalaf (2016) questions, 'If a World Heritage property is destroyed and later reconstructed, could it still be recognised as World Heritage'? In this sense, Cameron (2017) calls for 'new guidance, new ideas, and updated tools for conservation charters.'

In the cultural tourism field, authenticity is a more subjective concept that has garnered much discussion. Indeed, as McKercher et al. (2002) suggest, 'Authenticity lies in the eyes of the consumer'. It is 'something missing from our lives that can be contextualised (Knudsen et al., 2016) for people' to 'escape their mundane routine and repetitive ordinary life' (Oakes, 2006). Tourists want 'authenticity' but not 'necessarily reality'. (McKercher et al., 2002; Asgrowth, 1993). It echoes the idea of 'staged authenticity' proposed for the first time by MacCannell (1973). That is, authenticity that is set up. Thus, authenticity "is neither a 'thing' nor a 'state of mind', but meanings and feelings constructed and lived through the sensuous body" (Knudsen et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, authenticity in the cultural tourism field is examined through the lens of constructivism. In this sense, Wang (1999) introduces existential authenticity. However, existence itself is constructed, especially when it refers to subjective feelings and experiences. The 'being' itself is also constructed, as authenticity 'demands a relation, whether it is within an essence or with the past' (Ringgaard, 2010), whether it is internal or external, there must be something that 'activates the feeling' (Wang, 1999). This activated interaction is the process of construction or reconstruction. Invariably, this brings us to culture within which it manifests.

Culture

Culture gives the identity of an individual, community, and nation. As Smith (2006) points out, it is a 'social practice that embodies its products in heritage through the process of construction, reconstruction and negotiation'.

As a process of evolution, culture is 'developed and reconstructed to adapt different cultural factors through a complex and infinite system' (Luo, 1998). Rapport (1983) distinguishes these cultural factors as 'core elements and peripheral elements, and the change is to adapt [to] its environment'. Julian (1973) describes it as 'cultural ecology', an important creative process induced by adaption to

the environment'. However, Luo (1998) says that 'it is not a purposeful outcome', but instead 'the unintentional product' (Zheng, 2015).

Luo further explains the process as follows:

"The interaction between inter-ethnic and inter-racial One culture is continuously influenced by those factors of foreign culture, which means that the one culture automatically integrates the usefully influenced cultural factors into itself by processing and reforming"

Luo, 1998:354

In contemporary processes of urbanisation, 'culture is the key to make cities attractive, creative, and sustainable, evidenced through cultural landmarks, heritage, and traditions' (UNESCO, 2016). It is seen as a 'symbolic economy, the 'new economy' (Knudsen, et al., 2010) with its great potential interests. City branding or knowledge-based cities are more popular than ever in the process of so-called heritagization. 'Culture as a resource to develop the economy has become increasingly "economised", and is intertwined and linked with the economy due to the increased accessibilities to heritage cities' (Ashworth et al., 2012:587). Interestingly, Seamon argues that culture is a manifestation of place (1979) and positions this within 'place-ballet' and 'body-ballet'. People live in places bodily and produce culture which become the heritage of those people. This indeed, brings us to heritage.

Heritagization

Harrison (2013) defines heritagization as 'the process through which objects, places and practices are turned into cultural heritage'(Sjöholm, 2016). Heritagization 'means an aestheticisation of the material world'(Arosson, 2017), and the appearance of mental distance and alienation; creation of a new cultural heritage, followed by aestheticisation and valorisation processes; appearance of 'vacant spaces' (Stromberg, 2017).

Heritagization swept across Europe in the post-war period in response to the dramatic multi-dimensional changes that took place throughout the region. It was a 'heritage boom' and an 'abundance of heritage period' (Harrison, 2013b). It is an intentional process through which 'the present selects an inheritance from an imagined past for the current use and decides what should be passed on to an imagined future' (Tunbridge, et al., 1996). Indeed, heritagization is the process of making heritage, underscoring the idea that heritage is inherently negotiated. Thus, everything can be heritagised, but only if the 'heritage' is selected by the present.

More recently, heritagization has been expressed through the concept of 'contemporary cultural property', which was introduced in 20023 by the Polish Act on Spatial Planning and Development. The new term is defined as:

"Cultural property, other than historical monuments, which includes memorials and statues, places of remembrance, buildings, their interiors and details, building complexes, urban and landscape planning schemes, being a recognised output of the contemporary generations, if they are characterised by a high artistic or historical value".

Act on Spatial Planning, in Siwek, 2017: 114

Thus, it is understood that authenticity, culture and heritage and intertwined and one cannot exist without the other. People live everyday ordinary lives and in so doing produce culture. Invariably, as things move to the past, while existing in the present, heritage is produced, through they develop identities and sense of belonging to the things that register the valued cultural facets. Authenticity manifests spontaneously as being the trait that defines the core of that identity.

Literature Review

Many studies have examined the nuanced meanings of heritage, culture and authenticity. In fact, reconstructed authenticity is not a new concept in research on cultural heritage conservation. However, much of it is Eurocentric. For example, Graham, (2002) points out that reconstruction embodied in heritage is driven by the 'present society's change or even when pasts have to be reinvented to reflect

new presents.’ He considers that ‘heritage knowledge is time-specific; thus its meaning(s) can be altered with the changing situations’ (Graham, 2002). Arosson (2017) posits that these changes that ‘create possibilities and a need for the making of new heritage’. Moreover, Graham and Ashworth (2012) have talked about ‘planned heritage cities’ and how European heritages have been re-conceptualised since 1945. In this line of thinking, Smith (2006) has introduced the concept of Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), in which heritage is planned and used by the authorised community. Accordingly, since heritage is purposefully made, so is its authenticity.

However, Bilige (1999) has proposed ‘that our social memory is chosen, subjective, and sometimes even fabricated’ (translated by the author) and ‘heritage is what humans inherit from the past and live upon it, where humans may falsify history’ (Ken, 2004). Accordingly, the real authenticity being conserved may occasionally be fabricated by the nation, culture, or social entity and may be false.

The AHD, ‘planned heritage’ or ‘branding cities’ all refer to the same essence as what Hobsbawm (1983) proposed in his ‘invented tradition’. In this lens, authenticity is a fluid concept tested in time-specific and place-specific contexts. According to Ming (2007), the ‘original, pure and static authenticity of traditional culture does not exist after globalisation’. Thus, authenticity can only reflect a particular period or fragment of a culture, or even shorter, the current phase.

“Because no message — whether it is a brand slogan or an encyclopaedia-length book — can actually present a totally comprehensive and accurate picture of the location”
OOI, et al., 2010:76

Thus, ‘authenticity needs the passage of time’, in particular in the wider cultural landscape (Nezhad, et al., 2015). The ‘cultural change over time exemplifies authenticity’ (Ken, 2022). Consequently,

“The process for the determination of the authenticity of a heritage property is not about judging its cultural significance, but rather the internal logical coherence of the statements made by a certain community about that significance”

Giovanni, 2018:12

There are not many studies on Gaozhuang. Of the few, previous studies have focused on the use of cultural resources in Gaozhuang, as discussed in Du (2019), Zhang et al. (2018) and Yu (2021). Zhang and Yu consider that cultural symbols and elements are ‘superficially used’ in Gaozhuang, while Du and Han (2013) have elaborated in more detail on their value and meaning. Fang et al. (2021) has adopted the lens of Lefebvre’s theory to discuss space and production. Thus, there is an abundance of research on authenticity as well as constructed authenticity as related to the wider West, but very few as related to the Asian context, especially places such as Gaozhuang. This paper fills this knowledge gap examining it through the lens of authenticity.

Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative methodology. It includes a survey of documents on authenticity, a case study and on-site semi-structured interviews and observations. The interviews were designed with three major questions according to the study objectives, as shown below:

- Does Gaozhuang today reflect its traditional landscape and symbolic characteristics? (including cultural attributes/elements)
- Do you think Gaozhuang exemplifies local authenticity?
- What is the identity of Gaozhuang?

These three questions were first drafted in English and then translated into Chinese. The keyword authenticity was translated as *di dao* and *ren qing wei*. Interviews were conducted in English, Mandarin Chinese, and the Yunnan dialect with 54 interviewees from local and non-local residents. These questions were considered to adequately reflect the issue of authenticity from different sensual perspectives, both tangible and intangible.

Tourist respondents were randomly selected to have representation from local and nonlocal individuals. Local community and neighbouring villagers were introduced individually and considered

key informants (the manager and the leader of the village, different age groups, local residents, and the Dai group). Business groups were introduced by the Jing Land cultural tourism company and other business people. Local authorities were selected according to the topic in question (cultural tourism officer and the Jing Land cultural tourism company, the designer and the developer). Scholars were selected who studied Dai–Thai culture, local art, and cultural communication. The research participants were divided into five groups to collect information from multi-dimensional perspectives, as follows:

- 1) Local community residents and neighbouring villagers (15)
- 2) Businesspeople and vendors in Gaozhuang (15)
- 3) Local authorities (5)
- 4) Tourists (15)
- 5) Scholars (4)

The process involved formal and informal conversations in person and online (through WeChat, Tencent and Zoom meetings). Each interview took an average of 30 minutes for each person from the Jingland Company, Cultural and Tourism Department of Jinghong, shops and stalls in Gaozhuang tourism attraction, Man'dou village, Xishuang Banna Newspaper Agency, private studios, Xishuang Banna Vocational and Technical College, restaurants and coffee shops outside of Gaozhuang, and the scholars' studios.

Observations were conducted in Gaozhuang and Man'dou, Man'diu, Man'yuan, Man'zhang, and Man'nong feng villages, which are still well conserved in the cultural landscape of Jinghong city. The author attended local fresh markets and Gan'bai festivals in the botanic gardens in Jinghong in April 2022 and Man'zhang village. Local activities such as Buddhist festivals, wedding ceremonies, and Zhang'ha meetings were observed to collect as much data as possible to compare authenticity of Gaozhuang as perceived by the locals. Observations were recorded with photographs.

The document survey focused on Nara Documents (1994), Operational Guidelines (2021), China Principles (revised 2015), Hoi An Protocol (2009), Cultural Expression (2005), and Culture Urban Future (2016). The survey aimed to study the Asian-based context guidelines and the shifting recognition of cultural heritage and authenticity that were applied in the Gaozhuang case.

Case Study

Case study of Gaozhuang Xishuangjing (hereafter referred to as Gaozhuang) as a method is used in this paper to examine reconstructed authenticity.

Gaozhuang Xishuangjing is a term in the local Dai language that means nine pagodas and twelve walls (communities; Gaozhuang: nine pagodas; Xishuangjing: twelve cities). It is a Dai–Thai group landscape of ancient Jinghong. Inspired by this concept, the developer's initiative for Gaozhuang was to 'bring back the lost Xishuang Banna', referring to the traditional Dai–Thai cultural landscape before the strong influences of 'educated youth culture', 'Han culture', and the rubber plantation landscape. Construction was initiated in 2009 and has been operating for more than a decade. It aims to represent the prosperity of the Dai group in ancient times. Meanwhile, based on the concept 'one river, two states, nine pagodas, and twelve cities', Gaozhuang targets the Southeast Asia tourism market, which has upgraded Dai traditional cultural resources and integrates the Mekong basin Dai–Thai cultures to establish a comprehensive resort for meeting contemporary needs, such as cultural tourism, leisure tourism, entertainment, business, and residences (Gaozhuang Tourism Office, 2021).

It covers approximately 1.3 million km², which are divided into four major sections, namely, the Mekong night market, six countries' floating market, the Jing Land hotel, an art museum, and six countries' shopping malls, including Dai traditional architecture and contemporary Dai architecture, shopping areas, and themed apartments and residences.

As a newly constructed landscape, Gaozhuang has become the landmark of local and provincial culture with its distinguishing cultural attributes. It attracted millions of tourists, even during the COVID period. It provides an economic boost and draws an influx of people, making the landscape a check-in photo shoot site. The Gaozhuang night market was honoured as one of the national-level night cultural and tourism clusters in China in 2021 and as one of the tourism clusters of Yunnan Province in 2022.

However, despite the reconstructed landscape of Gaozhuang attracting a wide cross-section of voices from different perspectives, it has barely attracted academic attention and is rarely discussed

from the perspective of cultural conservation. Moreover, no mention is made of the authenticity issue, which poses a challenge to the case of Gaozhuang.

Findings and Analysis

Findings

Resources of findings came from:

- Interview respondents' information
- Observations
- Document survey
- Secondary sources of Information

The interview results were based on, but not limited to, the three major questions, which were recorded by audio, video and note-taking. Data were first processed according to the respondents' answers using keywords and related words connecting to the concept of authenticity from five groups. The most mentioned words and issues are shown in the Table 1, coupled with the author's observations.

Table 1: Highlighted keywords from respondents

Source: Author

Local group	architecture, food, Buddhist activities, local and Southeast Asia atmosphere, natural environment, symbols, night market, Gan'bai; over-commercialised and few local participants, lack of local authenticity.
Business group	architecture, food, local life and night market and Gan'bai, local and Southeast Asia atmosphere, symbols; over-commercialised and lacking local participants and authenticity, not well management.
Tourists group	architecture, local and Southeast Asia atmosphere, costumes, food, Southeast Asia atmosphere, night market and Gan'bai; over-commercialised, lack of local participants, authenticity and handicrafts.
Local authorities	Dai–Thai Buddhist cultural landscape, Dai festivals and various cultural activities and communication, architecture, symbols; local participants (intangible heritage presentation).
Scholars	Local Dai daily life landscape (Gan'bai and night market), Hinayana Buddhist landscape, artificial social landscape, business centre, resources integration, traditional landscape in contemporary context; cultural conflicts

Observations

Observations were made mainly in the Gaozhuang and Jinghong areas (due to COVID-19 restrictions). Information is classified into two aspects.

Dai–Thai cultural attributes: wooden architecture and stilt style architecture, religious architecture, Dai cultural symbols, traditional religious and cultural activities and festivals, local and Southeast food, contemporary cultural activities such as Dai Lue cultural festival, Lemon music festival, Dai salad competition; non-local businesspeople and tourists far more than locals, Gan'bai, and night market.

Contemporary landscape: crowded photo-shooting check-in people, changing landscape, fully packed night market, Gan'bai, commercialised context with homogenous products.

Secondary Sources

Four secondary sources of information were used to collect data, including Han (2013), Du (2019), Zhang et al. (2018), and Yu (2021). Han (2013) provides information and data about substantial pre-design fieldwork in Jinghong and Southeast Asian countries and how the Dai–Thai cultural roots and features have been integrated into design in the contemporary context. These were analysed through the lens of the so-called 'original authenticity' in the design, location, setting, and even the original materials. Zhang et al. (2018) and Yu (2021) mention these distinguished cultural symbols and features in Gaozhuang. Du (2019) demonstrates more details on how Dai cultural resources have been presented and reconstructed in Gaozhuang. These materials are evidence of the reconstructed authenticity in some aspects. However, the landscape of Gaozhuang has been evolving and changing, especially during and

after the Covid pandemic. These changes challenge the authenticity of Gaozhuang, as examined and discussed in the previous studies.

Document Survey

“Cultural heritage diversity exists in time and space, judgements of values and authenticity may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors”

Nara Documents, 1994:2-3

The highlight in the Nara Documents is the recognition of the changing heritage; therefore, judgements of authenticity should include the changing factors except materials and substance. Operational Guidelines (2021) reaffirm these eight aspects proposed in the Nara Documents.

The revised China Principles suggest authenticity ‘resides in the original materials, workmanship and design of a site and its setting, as well as in its historical, cultural and social characteristics and qualities’ (China Principles, 2015:67). These documents focus on authenticity’s accuracy, credibility, and originality and rarely accept recreation.

However, scholars and their dynamic contexts have questioned and challenged these standardised principles. Culture and heritage as resources can be used to brand a city and make a city alive, as heritage is considered a ‘social and cultural process and sometimes purposely made’ (Smith, 2006). This process can be ‘rewritten and redefined for the needs of the present’ (Khalaf, 2017). If recreation meets these three factors, will it still be considered authentic? Is recreation one of the aspects of cultural diversity and expression?

While the Hoi An Protocol may open a room, it suggests that the ‘conservation of heritage should be a negotiated process to reconcile the different values of various stakeholders’ (Hoi An Protocol, 2009:4).

More flexibility may be seen in The Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005), which emphasises that ‘culture is a strategic element in national and international development policies as well as in international development cooperation’. It defines cultural expression ‘as those expressions that result from the creativity of individuals, groups, and societies and that have cultural content’. Culture and Urban Future (2016) emphasises culture as the key role in the future of urbanisation that makes cities creative.

In this sense, is not the reconstructed authenticity of Gaozhuang one of the cultural diversities and expressions of the Dai–Thai cultural content? Is it not a cultural landmark that makes the city attractive and vibrant?

Discussion: Conceptualizations of Reconstructed Authenticity - Interviewees

Table 2: Authentic cultural elements in local context and Gaozhuang
Source: Author

Key ‘original’ cultural authentic elements in Jinghong	Major cultural elements presented in Gaozhuang	Major reconstructed authentic elements in Gaozhuang
Stilt style wooden architecture, Hinayana Buddhist temple, pagoda, and decorations. Layout: the community surrounding with Zhai Xin (the heart of Dai village), Gan’bai and market. Water resource Symbols (elephant, peacock, silver). Various cultural festivals. Dai group and residents.	Wooden architecture, Stilt style architecture, Hinayana Buddhist temple, pagoda, statues, symbol (spire roof) and decorations, Symbols (elephant, peacock, silver, wood curving Buddha statues) Layout: Zhai Xin Water resource, Traditional cultural festival and Buddhist activities, Gan’bai and night market.	Concrete stilt style architecture, Layout: new representative of Zhai Xin (The Great Golden Pagoda), Spire roof elements fused in contemporary buildings, Contemporary cultural events and activities: Dai Lue cultural festival, Dai salad competitions, costumed photography competition, Lemon music festival, Loy Krathong festival. Traditional cultural events and activities: water sprinkle festival and water collecting girl’s competition, religious activities in The Great Golden Pagoda, Cultural communication platform: Mekong River basin photo exhibitions, Six countries’ cultural festival, local intangible heritage performance and exhibitions. New ‘residents in twelve Jing’, New landscape and interpretation of Dai–Thai cultural landscape.

From the above collected data resources, the major cultural elements and features in the local context and Gaozhuang have been classified and summarised as shown in the Table 2 below.

All the data and information from the interviews were collected mainly in 2022 in Jinghong City, Gaozhuang, and Yuxi, both online and offline. The words and phrases presented in the Table 1, in particular the first three groups, have been mentioned by every respondent. Accordingly, it can be interpreted that, although respondents hardly experienced ‘local authenticity’, they recognised the Dai–Thai cultural symbols and features in Gaozhuang. In this sense, Gaozhuang has been considered a distinct ‘cultural landscape’, regardless of whether it was an artificial social landscape or an imitation. It constructed the cultural landscape and reconstructed the cultural features in a contemporary context.

Interestingly, although Gaozhuang is considered over-commercialised and inauthentic, except for one respondent from a scholarly group, the rest of the research participants from local businesses, public authorities and scholarly groups indicated that they would recommend or bring outsiders and friends to visit Gaozhuang because it is a local landmark and a convenient tourist attraction where people can experience the local atmosphere, even if it is superficial. Meanwhile, the local respondents mentioned that, although they hardly ever visited Gaozhuang, they would still recommend or bring friends to Gaozhuang for a visit.

Regarding the issue of ‘originality’, two interviewees mentioned that the developer went to the local Dai community to buy the wooden material for the wooden construction in Gaozhuang. ‘He (the developer) wanted to present the ‘original authentic’ Dai architecture in his project’. (local resident respondent, male, 45–55). ‘The size and distances were studied and designed according to Dai traditional houses’. (Respondents: the local official, the designer, and one female businessperson in Gaozhuang). Based on its originality, the designer of the first project (the Great Golden Pagoda and stilt-style wooden architecture) adapted the architecture to be more functional for contemporary use. ‘The traditional stilt architecture is used for living, but I need to integrate it into a contemporary commercial context; the point is the cultural root and its continuity’ (Respondent: the designer).

In this respect one local officer respondent stated:

“The design of traditional Dai architecture in Gaozhuang is more ‘authentic’ than most Dai buildings outside. They (designers and developers) studied the styles and materials of ordinary houses, royal palaces, and Buddhist architecture, so the architecture of the first project is closer to real traditional Dai buildings. People have said that Gaozhuang is a copy of Southeast Asian countries and does not have local culture. However, it does have local cultural elements; the distance of statues and roads is not random but measured and studied. Moreover, Dai–Thai culture is a cross-border group that has developed cultural similarities over hundreds of years of cultural communication and exchange. Therefore, it is not easy to say who has ‘copied’ and ‘who learns from whom.’”

Male respondent, local official officer, aged 45–55

However, one investor respondent commented on Gaozhuang as follows:

“If you want to discuss authenticity, the fact that a non-Dai developer built a Dai–Thai project is inauthentic.”

Male respondent, local investor, aged 45–55

One local respondent gave a similar answer from the same perspective:

“There are many factors that influence authenticity. For instance, in the ingredients of Dai sauce, different people make different flavours, and the most authentic herb grows only in one place, so which one is authentic?”

Male respondent, local, aged 55–65

A foreign tourist made the following comment with reference to authenticity:

“I don’t know if it is authentic or not because there is no comparison with Gaozhuang. Maybe the food in this remote village is authentic, but who knows?”

Male respondent, tourist, 35–45

These responses directly question the three standards about what is considered original, credible and truthful, which also echoes Giovanni's (2018) argument on the 'statement community who decide(s) these three standards?' What are they referring to? In this clue, authenticity may easily change due to different statement communities or stakeholders. Further, Giovanni discussed deeper with more examples about the factors that affect and decide authenticity. If these standards refer to 'the specific time, the specific space and the specific creator,' (Giovanni, 2018), then there is no such thing as authenticity. As Oakes (2006) stated: 'it vaporises only when you look for it'. Thus 'trying to find a method by which authenticity can be assessed in all countries had failed'. (Stovel, 2007, in Nezhad, et al., 2015). At this point, authenticity is untenable. Meanwhile, feedback also evokes the following question: In what stance of period do people assess authenticity, the past, the present or the future? This aspect is important and makes sense, because people evaluate and value the authenticity of heritage or culture based on its diachronic view. In other words, a comparison with and reference to historical evidence exist for assessing authenticity.

Accordingly, authenticity involves the value bestowed by time. It is similar to culture or heritage. Specifically, heritage gets value in time. Simply put, the past is a hidden premise of heritage assessment. Once again, it echoes the paradox mentioned by Giovanni about the ship of Theseus. Another scenario emerges: people assess authenticity of Gaozhuang from the stance of the current perspective. How does it work and make sense? The Nara Document proposes diverse forms of authenticity; but how diverse can it be? To what extent does diversity meet contemporary human needs?

The key of authenticity should be 'its continuity from the cultural context' (Respondent, the designer). The continuity of the cultural context is threaded by every present generation and concerned communities.

As Khalaf stated:

“He
ritage-related decisions neither the past nor the future, it is the present, thus about reconstruction, it should be made to respond to the present, not to commemorate the past or to imagine the future”.

One respondent commented:

‘Authenticity is not the issue of fake or real. It matters in people’s current lives. Does it integrate into contemporary situations and meet the present’s needs? If the heritage or the culture is not needed or used by the present, how would it survive and be carried forward?’

Scholar group, male, aged 55–65

However, almost all respondents from local, business, and tourist groups (except four respondents) thought Gaozhuang did not reflect local authenticity, except for a few superficial cultural symbols. Local respondents identified Gaozhuang as Dongbei Gaozhuang and Dongbei market as Dongbei group as the most 'attractive' in the Gaozhuang landscape, not because of the quantity but because their behaviours and habits cause cultural shocks and misunderstanding. Five local respondents mentioned that food is Dongbei-lised and inauthentic. While 10 tourist respondents mentioned food as one of the local cultural features in Gaozhuang, and 11 business respondents thought the same. A Dai salad competition is now held in Gaozhuang. This coincidentally revisits the above question: who decides the standards for judging authenticity? The answer is in the stakeholder's statement. Yet, the stakeholder can be anyone; thus, authenticity is understood and interpreted from different perspectives.

Coupled with the inauthentic food, the Dai costume is another 'inauthentic' aspect criticised by 10 local respondents. They commented, 'It creates a misleading understanding of Dai clothing and culture. The traditional clothing tourists wear to take photos is not proper, authentic local Dai clothing'. The local authorities mentioned that they informed customers about the proper clothing at the photo shooting shops. From the author's observation, customers hardly wear 'proper and authentic' clothing, because they do not know what is authentic and proper local Dai costume.

In this respect, one of the scholars commented:

“It could be a try. Gaozhuang is a commercial area, but it provides a possibility to locals with totally different views, letting them know that the costume could be in this style or the house could be used in this way. It changes, and there is no right or wrong. No one knows if it will be the new style in the future, and we do not know the ‘proper costumes of our ancestors. Time will tell.”

Male, scholar group, aged 45–55

His comments echo Hobsbawm’s idea of invented traditions and further invoke deeper thinking: if the present has the right to reconstruct the past in terms of cultural conservation, what content and in what way are they acceptable? Should cultural conservation follow original authenticity, or can it provide more possibilities and interpretations? Khalaf (2017) answers that ‘a reconstruction in the present is a layer in the continuous process of evolution of a destroyed WHS. That layer is altogether a ‘contemporary stamp’ (Khalaf, 2017:10). Although she is referring to the WHS reconstruction, there is no big difference in non-WHS ‘reconstruction’. The present layer, or contemporary stamp, can be interpreted as new possibilities.

Apart from the above, 51 respondents mentioned the over-commercialisation and the lack of local authenticity. Although local respondents agree that there are local features, only few are not local landscape or cannot reflect the local landscape. It is more like the Southeast Asia style. Seven tourists think it is Southeast Asia style and not Jinghong.

In this regard, one respondent commented:

“It is Disneyfication. It is not local” (Male, tourist group, non-local, aged 65–75).

It can be assumed that ‘local authenticity’ is closely connected to the proportion of local participation, which followed the comments about ‘too many outsiders with hardly any local participants, whatever it is in business or tourists’. It results in partial commercialisation, where the rental fee is expensive for the local people. Another reason locals, public authorities, and business respondents mention is that most local people have their own jobs or work; they do not have the time and energy to run a business in Gaozhuang after working. Moreover, the local authorities mentioned transportation and the distance from local people’s houses to Gaozhuang, which is also a concern and a reason for low attendance by the locals.

Another respondent argued:

“I do not think commercialisation contradicts cultural conservation. The point is how to develop and manage a positive business cycle with local cultural elements.”

Female, tourist group, non-local, aged 35–45

The issue in terms of the local participants and commercialisation raises a question: is it authentic with a high proportion of local people’s engagement? Will it not be commercialised if Gaozhuang has a higher proportion of locals? Should locals’ participation be the criteria for reconstructed authenticity? If nonlocal people interpret the reconstructed authenticity of ‘living culture’ well, will it still be authentic? ‘The crucial questions to be answered are not ‘what is authenticity’ but ‘who needs authenticity and why?’ and ‘how has authenticity been used?’ (Bendix, 1997, in Kidd, 2010:6).

The answer is clearly elicited from the words of an Indian tribal spokesperson, who responded to attempts by so-called experts to question traditional interpretations of his site this way: ‘This is our heritage and history and we do not have to prove it to anyone by footnoting’ (in Lowendal, 1996: 127; Giovanni, 2018:12). That is, authenticity is established by the seekers, not the holders; the outsiders, not the insiders; and the others, not oneself. The self seeks authenticity through heritage because ‘it connects the past and strongly influences the present and future’ (Al-eqaby et al., 2023). People seek

authenticity to resist change and ‘alienation’ (MacCannell, 1976). Authenticity reflects the existing moment and period, which is far from the present, with the message of time.

At this point, this argument is, once again, not only in line with Knudsen’s (2016) idea that authenticity is a malleable fantasy but also examines Oakes’ (2006) idea from the observation in the Miao village of seeking difference to verify the observation. There is no big difference between the heritage realm and a knowledge-based city. To avoid the alienated daily landscape generated by universalisation and modernisation, the further the differences, the more authentic; the more unfamiliar, the more real it is. Thus, newly reconstructed authenticity is too close and familiar to be accepted as truly authentic.



Fig. 1: Some interviews in Jinghong and online in 2022

Source: Author

Reconstructed Authenticity as Observed

From the author’s observation in Gaozhuang and Jinghong city, various Gan’bai, fairs, and religious activities are local people’s, especially the Dai group’s, ‘body ballet’ and ‘place ballet’ engraved in the Hinayana and stilt style architecture landscape. Gaozhuang is reconstructing them into a new ‘body ballet’ and ‘place ballet’ with a new community. It has three major new features: reconstructed local attributes, new interpreters and residents, and a contemporary commercial context. Gaozhuang cooperates with the local government, organising around 30 different cultural festivals and events throughout the year (Xishuang Banna Government official website online: 2018). The Dai Lue cultural festival, Loy Krathong festival, Lemon music festival and water-collecting girls’ competition in water sprinkle festival are the highlights and the designed cultural products of Gaozhuang. This is missing information that is barely mentioned by tourist and business group respondents.¹ However, it should be one of the main aspects for assessing its reconstructed authenticity.

Another missing piece of information regarding authenticity is interpretation (only three local respondents and two tourists mentioned this issue). This affects authenticity (Boccardi, 2018). There is no interpretation service in Gaozhuang. Respondents from tourist groups and eight business respondents did not know about the concept ‘Gaozhuang Xishuangjing’, as it has not been even mentioned in the information. Even one local respondent who worked in Gaozhuang did not know the concept of ‘Gaozhuang Xishuangjing’. This may cause problems in understanding authenticity, especially ‘reconstructed’ authenticity (Boccardi, 2018).

¹ Interviews were conducted from February to April in 2022. It was still during the lockdown period, therefore, cultural festivals and events had been cancelled for three years and those activities are seasonal or based on particular time periods. This may be why cultural festivals and events are hardly mentioned by the three groups (in particular tourists).



Fig. 2: Layout of the core area of Gaozhuang, drafted layout of traditional Dai village and renderings of Jing'liang village in Gaozhuang
Source: Clipped from Han (2013) by the author



Fig. 3: Architecture and landscape in Man'yuan Dai Village

Fig. 4: Architecture and landscape in Gaozhuang

Source: The author in 2021 Man'yuan, 2022, 2023 Gaozhuang



Fig. 5: Gan'bai market in Man'zhang Dai village and Botanic Garden

Fig. 6: Gan'bai and night market in Gaozhuang

Source: The author in 2022 in Man'zhang village and Botanic garden, 2022, 2023 Gaozhuang

Conclusions

This paper examines the reconstructed authenticity in Gaozhuang through the lens of cultural conservation. The emphasis is anchored in the contemporary context rather than 'original' authenticity, i.e., reconstructed authenticity in the process of generating a new cultural landscape. The focus lies on the role of culture in the process of heritagization.

The data collected from three different resources presented above are classified below with reference to reconstructed authenticity:

- Reconstructed tangible authenticity: includes architecture, religious architecture and the landscape;
- Reconstructed intangible authenticity: includes Dai–Thai cultural activities and events;
- Reconstructed new authenticity: refers to new interpretations and integration.

Furthermore, authenticity varies across individuals affected by the three domains summarised from the above data:

1. The basic knowledge level, which refers to the individual's previous knowledge and understanding of Jinghong and Dai–Thai culture;
2. Psychological demands, which refer to the subjective personal experience and needs of Gaozhuang and its reconstruction;
3. Philosophical grounds, which refer to the definition, recognition and perception of authenticity.

The findings indicate the crucial challenges to reconstructed authenticity, including a low level of local participation in Gaozhuang's activities and over-commercialisation. It underscores the importance of locals' role in reconstructed authenticity and opposing commercialisation. Local authenticity referring to local participation is considered attainable according to the suggestions from 49 respondents.

In the light of the above findings, it is argued that authenticity can be reconstructed. In this case, it has been reinterpreted and reconstructed in the Dai–Thai cultural landscape. Indeed, it is a manifestation of cultural diversity and expression in the contemporary context. With the value of time, the new ‘body ballet’ and ‘place ballet’ may represent future authenticity. Thus, it is suggested that reconstructed authenticity should be considered as the present cultural layer of Gaozhuang.

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