

How the Social Imaginary Gives Rise to Co-action:

Contradictory Values and Intangible Cultural Heritage Consensus in Beijing's *Jingxi Fanhui*

I XI JU is Associate Professor, School of Sociology, Beijing Normal University. No. 19, Xijiekouwai St, Haidian District, Beijing, 100875, People's Republic of China (jessyca_ju@bnu.edu.cn).

ABSTRACT: The concept of community has become the dominant focus of academic discussions in the field of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) research. Some scholars have criticised the idealised usage of this concept as obscuring the empirical tensions and suggest that it should be replaced by “actor-network.” Instead, this article argues that even when there is no real network among actors, heritage community may still rely on social imaginary to exist. It is the relationship that people establish between the present and the past that is key to understanding the safeguarding of ICH. This article focuses mainly on the *Jingxi fanhui*, a national ICH festival in Beijing's western suburb. The entire area has been almost deserted for nearly 20 years, as the villagers are now dispersed in Beijing city. But every year during the traditional Lantern Festival days, former villagers still return to the abandoned villages to attend the parade ceremony, even though there is no real social network linking them. People are driven by different values, which are often diverse and contradictory, to participate in the ceremony. The common imagination of their community is rooted in a shared understanding of what heritage means to the groups. It's under the flag of national ICH that the consensus is reached, a sense of community is fostered, and the village festival continues, even after village life has ceased to exist.

KEYWORDS: intangible cultural heritage, social imaginary, heritage value, heritage community, *Jingxi fanhui*.

Question of heritage community: Actor-network or imagined community?

China ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to as the Convention, and intangible cultural heritage as ICH) in 2004. Since the elaboration of this text, the Chinese government has maintained an intense involvement in domestic policies regarding ICH, in contrast with other countries where civil society plays a significant role (Song and He 2019). Whether at the governmental level or at the level of nongovernmental initiatives, the notion of community has become an essential keyword in studies and practices of ICH all over the world (Noyes 2006; Adell et al. 2015: 8-18; Jacobs 2018). It was already the case in the 2003 Convention and the following explanatory documents, where the notion of community was given preeminence. Nevertheless, in its Chinese utterances, this somehow ubiquitous notion has never led to a consensus. Close to the concepts of collectivity and identity, it is heatedly discussed in folklore studies (*minsuxue* 民俗學) from the perspective of its

political significance. While some scholars consider ICH as a new tool of governance, allowing new ways of building authority over vernacular culture and local communities (Liu 2013; Yue 2020), others stress the role played by the ICH movement in favour of political equality and society rebuilding, considering community, instead of the state, as the primary impetus of cultural dynamism (Gao 2017: 177-8). In line with the latter approach, ICH is deemed to create a public sphere and even shape a kind of “human destiny community” (An 2018). Although both groups emphasise understanding and safeguarding heritage in terms of community, it is clear that they have not used this concept in the same sense.

Some scholars have pointed out the blurring capacity of a concept such as community: “Community is so powerful symbolically that we can hardly assess it empirically” (Noyes 2006: 28). Even if we only consider it on a local scale, the fact is that competition and tension exist within and between communities simultaneously. For example, when participatory development policies are applied, a heritage community is often seen as a natural social entity, leading to an unjust and illegitimate exercise of power (Cooke and Kothari

2001). A community could turn ICH into commodities to meet economic needs or use it as resources to cater to political interests (Xu and Huang 2013), not to mention that complex power relations within the community often cause fierce struggle for identities. It might result in ICH participants becoming political parties' representatives (Noyes 2006). Therefore, some scholars stand against communitarianism (*shequ zhuyi* 社區主義) in safeguarding ICH (Lü 2018), or advocate the notion of actor-network in place of an ideal community (Jacobs 2019).

Inspired by Bruno Latour, the concept of "actor-network" used by Jacobs pays more attention to specific actions and concrete connections between actors in safeguarding heritage. Action, which can be observed empirically, is considered the essence of producing inheritors and heritage communities (Jacobs 2019: 26-7). Avoiding the idealisation of community, the concept of actor-network has gradually become popular in China. However, this paper argues that actor-network, a concept that eliminates imaginary and idealisation, is not perfectly suitable for analysing the kind of ICH that is based on a certain "sense of identity and continuity."¹ As Dorothy Noyes points out, we can distinguish between two types of communities: one is "the empirical network of interactions in which cultures are created and moved," and the other is "the community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance" (Noyes 1995: 452). In the villages studied in this article, the empirical network of interactions has disappeared for almost 20 years, but a community of the social imaginary has always existed and emerges in every annual festival performance. A performed identity or a felt reality can be both real and strong (Anderson 1983; Noyes 1995), and ICH can also be rooted and safeguarded in an imagined community. In this case, social imaginary, not the action, is the keyword. Charles Taylor has pointed out that "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004: 23). As for ICH, since heritage comes from the crisis of time and expresses a certain order of time (Hartog 2003: 152), it is the social imaginary of the "past" that determines heritage value and motivates people to engage in. The actor-network can only be formed afterwards. Based on these theoretical discussions, the primary purpose of this article is to explore how different actors imagine and recognise the value of heritage, what motivates them to engage in the ceremony, and, when values contradict each other, how the different groups come to a consensus.

The *Jingxi fanhui* (京西幡會, western Beijing streamer association)² discussed in this article is a ceremony that takes place at Qianjuntai and Zhuanghu in the Datou Subdistrict, Mentougou District in western Beijing during the Lantern Festival every year. The villages where it is held have not accommodated permanent residents for nearly 20 years. The former villagers have scattered all around urban Beijing and barely have social relations or keep in touch in daily life. If not for the two-day festival, which falls on the 15th and 16th days of the first lunar month every year, they would not get together or be in any social network. It is the ceremony itself, as a performance with its imaginary and symbolic structure, that has been the impetus to and predetermines the actor-network.

I completed this article based on fieldwork carried out for more than a decade. During the Lantern Festival in 2006, I visited

Qianjuntai for the first time to survey the *Jingxi fanhui* ceremony. It happened to be the year when the ceremony's music, named *Jingxi fanyue* (京西幡樂, western Beijing streamer music), was included on the Beijing ICH list. Over the same period, I saw the whole ceremony included in the "Festival and Ritual" category of the national ICH list in 2014. From then on, every year during the Lantern Festival, the slogan "Safeguarding national intangible cultural heritage" has been pasted on the walls, stressed and reiterated by the ceremony's organiser, and soon became well known. I also observed with amazement that even though the two villages could no longer provide basic residential necessities, more than 1,000 villagers spontaneously came back for the ceremony, and about 10,000 tourists flooded the narrow paths of the valley. The only cancellation of the ceremony was due to the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. The tremendous publicity and influx of visitors brought no commercial return; millet congee with pickles was still offered to tourists for free, and villagers and volunteers who joined the ceremony received only a towel or soap bar as a souvenir. There was no market, no restaurant, or any other venue for commodities. Over so many years, the only things I saw that might be called a commodity were handmade pinwheels sold to children by an elderly man. From 2017 to 2018, I spent four months conducting interviews and participant observations to answer the question that has long been in my mind: Without any substantial community, nor any visible economic or political benefits, what motivates so many participants to safeguard ICH with such great enthusiasm?

This article aims to show how the different actors engage in the festival with various values and motivations when there is no social network in daily life, and how a consensus on safeguarding ICH is reached. In the following parts, a brief introduction to the history of *Jingxi fanhui* will be first given, followed by an analysis of the different motivations associated with specific groups. This article will end with a discussion of how the concept of heritage functions as the basis of consensus among different groups. In this case, the heritage is not only a bond that drives people to act together but also a promise that carries their hope for the revival of the villages.

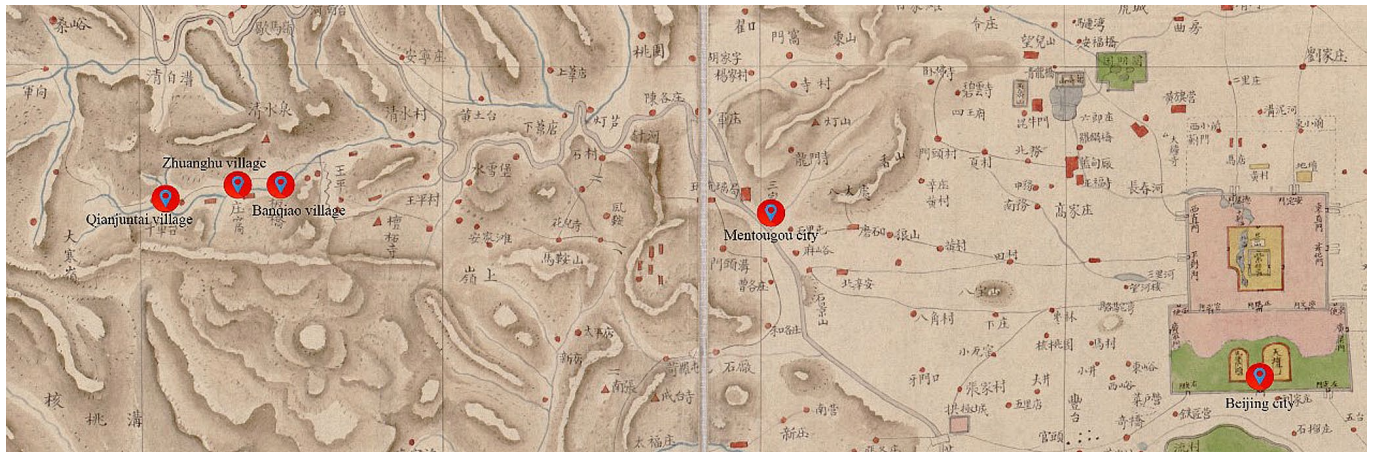
History of Jingxi fanhui

Compared to the Lantern Festival activities commonly known as *shehuo* 社火 in Northern China, the *Jingxi fanhui* is the same in terms of timing, performance, and collectivity. The fact that it displays more similarities to festivals in Shanxi Province than to those in Hebei Province and Tianjin suggests that the *Jingxi fanhui* has some connection with the western part of China. During the main ceremony of the *Jingxi fanhui*, people carry streamers and banners and give performances while parading along the road between the two villages, Qianjuntai and Zhuanghu. In the procession, 18 large streamers and three great banners are the most notable, and thus the parade is also known as the "Streamer-

1. See the Article 2.1, UNESCO, 2003, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (accessed on 14 February 2023).

2. In Chinese 會 (*hui*) can be translated as "association" as well as "festival."

Figure 1. Map of the three villages



Source: based on the 1886 map of Beijing and its environs, from the Library of Congress online map.

banner Association of the Two Villages.” Many have claimed that the ceremony originated during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and was later honoured by an emperor of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), but there is no evidence to prove that. We do know that the festival took its current shape during the nineteenth century. At that time, apart from the ceremonies during the Lantern Festival, in the spring, the villagers would take their streamers and banners, as well as musical instruments, to go on a pilgrimage in the nearby mountains. This pilgrim association, though a bit smaller in scale, was similar to the parade organisation during the Lantern Festival. Another village nearby, Banqiao, was also included in the parade ceremony in the nineteenth century, thus forming a three-village association, and the procession during the Lantern Festival lasted three days, with a parade in Banqiao on the 14th day, in Qianjuntai on the 15th day, and in Zhuanghu on the 16th day. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Banqiao pulled out of the ceremony due to a conflict, the cause of which is unknown today, and only rejoined the festival in 2011. To this day, there are few participants from Banqiao, and their position in the activities is marginal, so the *Jingxi fanhui* is considered a heritage belonging to Qianjuntai and Zhuanghu Villages. The ritual leaders from these two villages, five and seven people respectively, have been designated the inheritors of this national ICH.

In the 1930s and 1940s, when the Japanese army invaded Northern China, the perilous mountains in the Mentougou area became a major battlefield. Villagers had to flee to the mountains to hide, and most of the buildings in the villages were burned to ashes. The streamers and banners of Qianjuntai were burned; fortunately, those of Zhuanghu survived. For 20 to 30 years, ceremonial parades ceased. After the 1950s, the People’s Commune at Datai mine (*Datai kuang renmin gongshe* 大台礦人民公社) was established, and most of the villagers resumed their old mining jobs. In 1962, with the recovery of the village economy and the collectivist culture under the socialist regime, Qianjuntai villagers spontaneously contributed money and cloth coupons to remake the streamers and banners according to the elders’ memories. Meanwhile, Zhuanghu villagers also repaired their equipment. They resumed the ceremony in the first lunar month of 1963, but ceased again in 1968 because of the

Cultural Revolution. The festival did not occur again until 1982, when the cultural work office of Mentougou government offered support.

Since its resumption, the ceremony has mainly had three parts: “welcoming gods,” the parade, and “farewell to gods.” A typical procedure is as follows: first, on the 14th lunar evening, people welcome gods in the temple of each village by burning joss sticks and candles, offering sacrifices, and worshipping; while participants make sure that the streamers and banners are in good condition, dozens of gods whose images are displayed on them are invited to the village one by one.³ The next morning, the parade starts from Qianjuntai’s eastern entrance, where the villagers wait for Zhuanghu’s team. The two teams merge, go through the village, and stop at the remains of Tea House Temple on Northern Peak (*Beitai chapeng miao* 北台茶棚廟), which was once located outside the Qianjuntai’s north-western entrance. Here, ceremonial performances begin in a spacious square in front of the temple’s remains. At the end of this day, the streamers and banners are put back into the temples of their respective village. On the 16th day, the two teams assemble at the western entrance of Zhuanghu and then go to the Treasure Hall of Three Religions (*Sanjiao baodian* 三教寶殿)⁴ outside the eastern entrance. After the performances in the temple, the ceremony comes to an end. Organisation and preparation work for the whole ceremony take half a month in general, which means after New Year’s Day, the organisers (association heads, *huishou* 會首) begin to discuss, plan, and prepare the annual festival through several meetings. As the ceremony does not change much from year to year, there are few issues to discuss. Once the plan is set up, the heads assign tasks to subgroup leaders, who take charge of calling the members and preparing the performances.

3. I will identify these gods later in the article.

4. It used to be called Temple of Dragon Spring (*Longquan an* 龍泉庵) and was given its current name after it was rebuilt in 2005.

Figure 2. Streamer and banner teams in front of the Treasure Hall of Three Religions on the 16th day of the first lunar month, 2017



Credit: Ma Zhijiang 馬志江 (www.quanjing.com).

The annual ceremony enjoyed its best years from the 1980s to the 1990s. With the respective high profitability and revenue of the coal mines owned by the two villages, the villagers could organise more activities. On the 14th lunar evening, villagers put on performances and opera plays in their own villages. On the 15th evening, Zhuanghu villagers who had completed the parade in Qianjuntai delivered performances to their hosts. On the 16th evening, it was the Qianjuntai villagers' turn to give plays at Zhuanghu. However, following the shutdown of the coal mines and collapse of the village economy, such evening shows stopped.

In 2001, the Beijing government closed all small coal mines, and people who lost their source of livelihood began to leave their hometowns. In 2006, with very few exceptions, villagers had to move away following the collapse of the abandoned mines; the two villages merged into one, administered by the Qianjuntai committee. In 2008, in order to fight haze and fog, villages in the Beijing outskirts were required to gradually reduce smoke emitted from fireplaces, with a ban on burning straw and coal. The few villagers who had stayed lost their only means of heating and could no longer live there, as the average winter temperature in the mountains is below freezing point. Nowadays, some villagers still try to keep their houses liveable, with dozens of them returning to the villages during the summer vacation to enjoy the fresh air of the countryside. No more than 20 old people are willing to live there permanently, and their children often take them into the city during winter. On the whole, the two villages are now hollow villages.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the idea of ICH began to be popular in China. Even before this notion was officially introduced, the streamer association (*fanhui*) had been labelled by folkloristic scholars as a typical representative of the traditional culture of farmers (*nongmin chuantong wenhua* 農民傳統文化). In 1985, not long after the resumption of the *fanhui*, the president of the China Folklore Society, Zhong Jingwen 鍾敬文, visited the villages and spoke in favour of the *fanhui*, together with two renowned folklore professors, Zhang Zichen 張紫晨 and Zhang Zhenli 張振犁. In 1986, Ms Katou Chiyo 加藤千代, secretary general of the Japanese Folklore Society, attended the *fanhui* performances with Professor Zhang Zichen. Among all

these scholars, Bao Shixuan 包世軒, who was then working in the cultural work office of Mentougou, conducted many studies and had the most profound influence on the ceremony. His support was paramount to the return of the *Jingxi fanhui* parade in 1982. Not only did Bao Shixuan continuously seek out and collect materials about the festival, he also directly formulated the standard procedure for the parade and pushed this ceremony as well as its music into the representative list of ICH. In 2006, three years after China's ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, *Jingxi fanhui* was included in the first list of Beijing's ICH and was subsequently included in the national list in 2014. In the application for representative elements of national ICH, the value of *Jingxi fanhui* is summarised as follows: "As a long tradition in history, it fosters harmonious relationships between the people and villages and enriches the folk arts."⁵ Traditional and harmonious are the adjectives used by most folklore scholars when they discuss the value of the ceremony, although as we have seen from its history, it was essentially reinvented in the early 1960s. And as we are about to see, there is not so much harmony among the participants.

In a word, the *Jingxi fanhui* we see today, as a national ICH, is conducted with the joint participation of villagers, tourists, local government, and folklore scholars. But between the different groups, or even within the same group of people, there are different value orientations and motivations, which will be discussed below.

The different motivations of the participants

Among all the participants in today's *Jingxi fanhui*, the former villagers play a central role. During the Lantern Festival, more than a thousand villagers participate in the ceremony in various ways, taking part in its organisation, in the parades, in the performances, or providing services and helping with its management. Of course, differences exist between organisers and participants, men and women, and above all between age groups, meaning the older generation who retain the memories of the people's commune and the new generation born after the reform and opening era.

Besides villagers, visitors, scholars, and staff from local government all have their own view on the *Jingxi fanhui*, and every identified group can be further divided as time goes by. In contrast, the motivations for people to participate in the festival are limited, which includes the following five situations.

"This is our ancestral heritage"

Throughout its history, the *Jingxi fanhui* was closely related to local villagers' livelihood, centred around coal mining. In the mountains west of Beijing, the climate is cold and arid, with floods in summer and droughts during spring and winter, and there is almost no arable land (Zhang 1994). The only reason for people to live there were the abundant coal reserves. After the eighteenth century, this area had the highest concentration of coal mines around Beijing. Almost all the villagers made their living from coal production (Li 2008). However, coal mining was a dangerous job; it required people to have great courage, mutual help, and belief

5. Unpublished document from the culture administration department of Beijing municipal government.

in sharing lives and deaths together (*sheng si yu gong* 生死與共). The dry climate also required people to save every drop of water for surviving. These requirements formed the community culture. As an inscription in a local temple states: “share every grain of rice” (*li mi tong shi* 粒米同食).⁶ Often followed by “share every drop of water” (*di shui gong yin* 滴水共飲), this sentence is commonly seen in Chinese Buddhist temples. It emphasises equality between people and opposes private property. Although the villagers were lay people, they still pursued a simple and collective lifestyle, as the inscription suggests, that was the only way to survive in such a harsh environment.

In the 1950s, after the completion of the socialist revolution, small private mines were integrated into one, collectively owned by the village commune. All the villagers became employees, the former village leaders became the coal mine heads, and the Lantern Festival was transformed into the most important holiday for the workers, as it symbolised their collective lifestyle. The *fanhui* festival was resurrected in the 1960s, before being cancelled when the Cultural Revolution began. In the 1980s, the *fanhui* associations of the two villages were rebuilt with the same structure and continue to this day. Each of them is composed of more than 15 subgroups (*huidang* 會檔, which literally means association sections). Each streamer or banner is held by a group of young men from the same family (or extended family), which I will discuss further below. Since the streamers and banners are extremely heavy, holding them steadily is considered a display of strength and courage. Before 2001, these men were the labour force who excavated coal and transferred it over long distances, an activity that was the primary source of income for the villagers. Besides, there are also musical groups for religious scripture singing, instrument playing, drum beating, etc. Since ancient times in China, music has long been considered the representation of wind, able to regulate the customs and guide people to good, an idea still prevalent in North China nowadays (Zhang 2002). The religious scripture singing group (belonging to Qianjuntai) and the drum beating group (belonging to Zhuanghu), essential for the ceremony, are respectively composed of about ten elderly men. Most of the current and former heads of the *fanhui* association are members of musical groups, as well as village leaders. They organise the entire ceremony and are now the legitimate inheritors of national ICH. In addition to streamer and banner groups and musical groups, there are also rural folk dance (*yangge* 秧歌)⁷ groups, lion dance groups, and waist drum dance groups performing in the parade. Women and children are the main actors in these parts. They dress up as animals, elves, and opera characters, walk interspersed in the parade and represent creatures blessed by the gods. The oldest people do not participate in the parade, but they still try their best to provide such services as distributing boiled water, making tea, and cooking. In short, the so-called *fanhui* is actually an association attended by all the villagers, namely the coal miners and their families. The subgroups are a reflection of the internal division of labour and political structure of the village: young men dig coal and they hold the flags; some of the older men are responsible for the music, as well as for the management of the village; women and children are dancers representing nurture and happiness, and the retired people do their best to help. The people in the two villages carrying flags, visiting

each other, and performing in each other's temples, express a relationship of competition and cooperation.

Decades after the mines were closed, villagers in their fifties or sixties still hold intense feelings for the “good collective life of the past,” as they often say. For them, the *fanhui* is proof that coal mines and communes had once thrived and continue to exist in some other form, as well as a souvenir of the collective lifestyle. Going back to their villages once a year to participate in the parade allows them to relive the glory of being coal miners in the era of “the working class as masters.” After the shutdown of the coal mines and the collapse of villages, the *fanhui* remained the only available collective property left behind by the commune. By coming together in the annual festival, the workers unite again, like in the past, and have the chance to remain informed of the ownership of the property that was once village-owned. During my fieldwork, the villagers were continuously petitioning and protesting about the problems left unsolved since the mines went bankrupt, such as pensions, insurance, and housing property rights. Protest actions are often limited to the several days before and after the festival. Once the villagers are scattered around the city, it is not easy for them to organise. But as long as the *fanhui* continues, the claims and struggle for their rights will not end.

It is because the villagers believe that the *fanhui* is their collective property, a product and symbol of the collective life for several hundred years, that they would not let other people take it away. During the 2012 Lantern Festival, a power grab incident occurred when the local association for cultural relics protection became the authorised representative of the *fanhui* heritage. Although its vice-presidents were the heads of the *fanhui* from the two villages, the president himself was not a local villager because the local government believed that the appointed inheritor should be relatively detached from the two villages to ensure impartiality. This appointment aroused tremendous dissatisfaction among the villagers who considered *fanhui* as their property. In opposition to the officially appointed inheritor, a violent clash broke out on the parade day, the police intervened, and some villagers were injured. The conflict was eventually appeased, but the confrontation vividly reflected the value of the *fanhui* as an ancestral heritage in the villagers' hearts.

“When I come to the festival, I find myself different”

Understandably, the villagers over 40 years old who grew up in a collectivist environment have a deep emotional connection to the *fanhui*. What about the new generation with no memory of the commune?

Young children aged nine or under mostly go back to their hometown with their parents, happy to be on holiday. Older

6. The stone tablet inscribed by Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 in 1785 is located in the Guanyin Bodhisattva Temple, four kilometres west of Qianjuntai.

7. There are two kinds of *yangge* dance here, one is called big (*da yangge* 大秧歌) and the other is local (*di yangge* 地秧歌). The big *yangge*, originally a folk dance in northern Shaanxi, was reformed during the 1940s in the New *Yangge* Movement by the revolutionary artists in Yan'an and was then promoted to the whole country as a symbol of revolutionary dance. Today, it is one of the most popular dances in China; this dance and its variations can be seen on almost any square in Chinese cities. Compared to the political aspect of big *yangge*, the local *yangge* is vernacular and less circulated, with actors often performing as animals and elves from local myths and legends, and there are many sex-related movements in this dance.

children and teenagers aged ten to 15 usually say they are motivated by curiosity and enjoyment. Some roles are specially reserved for them, like performing the lion dance, the *yangge*, and some percussion music. Under the applause of villagers and tourists, they feel self-confident and proud to be performing with adults. As for the young adults around 20, they feel honoured to be actors because the ceremony is deemed unique.

The generation born in the 1990s grew up in the city like any of the tens of millions of ordinary Beijing residents. But it is this very generation that grew up when the *fanhui* as folk culture became honoured and appreciated. Each year, they go back to the villages for the parade, a ritual that has become a part of their lifestyle. Participating in the ICH *Jingxi fanhui*, like participating in a joyful party, has become for them a routine or a habit. More importantly, as young Beijingers, almost all of them have had the opportunity to learn artistic skills: some learned hip-hop dancing, played the violin, or trained in gymnastics. The physical training brought by these “urban arts” makes them approach their participation in the *fanhui* as a familiar yet original performance art. Hence, a collective activity aptly meets the individualised needs of modern citizens, which is an important reason why the young generation has gained the momentum to continue taking part in the *fanhui*. However, it is undeniable that the atmosphere created by collectivism no longer exists in the daily life of young people. To them, the *fanhui* is not a political organisation or a religious ceremony that had been indispensable to the villages, but rather a holiday show in some ways similar to a play. Their motivation to participate is substantially different from that of the older generation.

A sense of the sacred

A discussion on a sense of the sacred herein does not refer to the sacred as opposed to the profane defined by Durkheim (1960: 49-58), but mainly points to a series of similar or closely related feelings, such as a recognition of the efficaciousness of gods, an identification of the symbolic meaning of signs, or of faith and pride in certain values, etc. It spans from religious faith, judicial limits, political awareness, and social behaviour, but fundamentally cannot be the product of commercial exchange, as Godelier stated (1996: 288-91). With the shutdown of the coal mines and the decline of the villages, the religious character of the *fanhui* has diminished but has not yet come to an end. The villagers’ worship of ancestors and lineage, their reverence towards the gods, and the authoritative aspect of the ceremony all contribute to a sense of the sacred.

As mentioned above, in the *fanhui* parade, each streamer or banner is held up by five or six strong adults, who always belong to the same family (or extended family). The authority of holding up a specific banner cannot change arbitrarily; it must be passed down from father to son or from elder brother to younger brother. Only when there is a shortage of manpower within a family can the transmission go beyond direct descendants and extend to relatives such as cousins or nephews. But in people’s minds, this is only an option that had to be considered with the one-child policy. Ideally, one single streamer or banner represents a family. People talk about holding up the banner as such: “It’s better when a family has three sons, so that the father and his brother pull the rope and the three sons hold the banner.” Such a group of five people, which

constituted an ideal close-knit family, used to be seen as a basic unit of society. Even today, people still hold the strong belief that “Whether our banner can be lifted up implies that our family thrives in the village.” That is to say, the status of a streamer or banner is associated with the property, reputation, and flourishing offspring of a family. As long as the concept of family lineage and continuation remains, the emblem of a family – the streamer and banner – should never fall.

The streamers and banners are symbols of the families’ glories. In addition, the reverence for the gods is still at the centre of the sense of the sacred. Like most Chinese, the villagers hold a practical attitude toward gods: “not believing all, not believing none” (Chau 2019a: 34-59). As such, they take the *fanhui* ceremony seriously, believing that one wrong step in the ritual would cause misfortune to befall. As mentioned above, each streamer or banner has a deity embroidered on it, and at least from the early twentieth century to today, their identities have not changed significantly. These gods vary in status; some were the gods venerated by the imperial state, such as Guandi 關帝 and Zhenwu 真武, some are prevalent local gods such as Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君 and Wang Lingguan 王靈官, and others are related to the coal industry, such as the Kiln God (*yaoshen* 窯神, to ensure the safety of coal mining) and the Horse King (*mawang* 馬王, to protect transportation). Once the streamers and banners have been lifted up, the gods are invited to attend the ceremony, and a host-guest relationship is built between the holder families and the gods. Whether a host serves the gods well in conformity with the rites will affect the host’s destiny (Chau 2019b), and any mistake in the parade may lead to the gods’ retribution. Many villagers told us about an accident that happened a few years ago: “As they carried the banners into the village, the eaves broke and the accident happened that night.” The accident that was engraved in their minds was a fire caused by a brawl. Because the villagers firmly believe in the efficaciousness of the *fanhui* ceremony, it must be carried out as it used to be, without any mistakes or changes.

“This is a flower of an ancient folk art”

Driven by the motivations listed above, most villagers from Qianjuntai and Zhuanghu insist on returning to the villages for the festival every year. When the ceremony is held, visitors keep setting new records. The Lantern Festival of 2017 fell on a weekend. According to rough data, the number of tourists attending the ceremony reached 8,000 to 10,000 that year, and there were 2,000 to 3,000 vehicles on site. The narrow valley, dried waterway, mountain trails, and even hillsides were crowded with standing visitors. In addition to relatives of local villagers who came for the festival, most tourists were attracted by the fame of national intangible cultural heritage. The ICH value of the *Jingxi fanhui*, illustrated by the folklore fellows, photographers, and local cultural cadres, explained the visitors’ enthusiasm.

Folklore fellows were the first visitors attracted by *Jingxi fanhui*. In their view, the *fanhui* has an unchanged value: the ancient art of the farmers living in harmony. Their interest in *Jingxi fanhui* began with folk music. They regarded the music in the ceremony as a living fossil of traditional music. Its very long history is the value researchers are most concerned about. The heads of the *fanhui*,

who control the music, organise all of the festivities, and manage the village affairs as mentioned above, were described as folk artists by the scholars. In 2011, Bao Shixuan, the earliest researcher who studied the *fanhui*, explained his motives as such:

Out of my sense of responsibility for folk art, I hereby produce this article and publicise the existing ancient banner ceremony in Beijing. By doing so, people will know that a flower of an ancient folk art is still flourishing in the remote villages amid the high mountains and lofty hills of western Beijing. (2011: 325)

Driven by this motivation, Bao Shixuan states that the “original form of the festival activities goes back in its inception to the Ming dynasty,” and concludes that the original form of the ceremony according to the elders’ memory and literature records later became the standard procedure for the parade (Bao 2011: 325-9). Owing to the continual emphasis on ancient folk traditions by folklore fellows and photographers, tourists flock to the villages for this ancient spectacle and “living fossil” year after year. More interestingly, villagers themselves have adopted the ceremony form designed by Bao Shixuan and are willing to turn their vivid festival into a static and grandiose spectacle to create an “ancient wonder.” Two reasons contribute to this adoption. On the one hand, due to the imbalance of power between the visitors and the villagers, the festival was rebuilt as a theatre stage similar to a theme park (Lowenthal 1998) to satisfy the visitors’ curiosity. On the other hand, this is related to the villagers’ objection to the commercialisation of the *fanhui*. To preserve their ancestral heritage and prevent other forces from seizing ownership in the name of commercial development or innovation, the villagers refused any changes to the ceremonies. The original form certified by the scholars thus became their necessary evidence and weapon. This confronts the idea of tourism development that the local government and tourism companies wish to implement.

“Develop a tourism economy through the Jingxi *fanhui*”

For the *Jingxi fanhui* today, the biggest issue lies in the dispute between cultural conservatism and social development theory. ICH experts want to protect the tradition, villagers expect a village revitalisation, while the government favours economic development.

Like governments in many developing countries, the local government of Mentougou District views tradition as cultural capital and regards it as a raw material of commodity business (Noyes 2006). After 2010, China began to conduct a campaign to protect traditional villages, and in 2018, Qianjuntai Village was selected as one of the first batch of municipal traditional villages in Beijing. Therefore, the local government provides human, material, and financial support, hoping to attract tourists through the festival, so as to develop the local tourism economy. This has contributed to the continual development of the *Jingxi fanhui* as an ICH element. In 2014, the government of Mentougou engaged the Beijing Municipal Institute of City Planning and Design (*Beijing chengshi guihua shejiyuan* 北京城市規劃設計院) to design a landscape plan for the two villages. A plan for traditional village protection (*chuantong*

cunluo baohu guihua 傳統村落保護規劃) was then completed and included in the first batch of Chinese village planning models (*Zhongguo shoupi cunluo guihua shifancun* 中國首批村落規劃示範村). In light of the ideas put forward in this plan, the two villages were designed as a vast stage to highlight the travelling routes of the parade, in order to entertain and guide the expected travellers. But due to the difficult geographical conditions in the remote mountains, the number of tourists during the festival has already exceeded maximum capacity. Outside the festival period, the tall mountains, distant location, and water shortage prevent tourism development. As a result, the plan for traditional village protection has yet to be applied, even though it won numerous awards.

So far, business and tourism have not played an essential role in the *fanhui*, but the government’s incentive to develop tourism has given rise to continuous discussions among villagers. People want to rebuild their hometowns and revitalise their villages, which inevitably leads to the issue of economic growth. A minority of them do not trust the government to implement its plans and would rather endorse tourism companies. They believe that the *fanhui* must undergo a thorough business-minded reform if long-term development is the goal. Since it is impossible to reopen the coal mines, transforming the two villages into a single tourism company appears to be the only way to ensure their vitality. In this case, an injection of commercial capital would be necessary. Most village leaders agree that although tourism development seems to be the only choice under realistic circumstances, considering that the *fanhui* attracts tourists as an “ancient wonder,” tourism development requires maintaining the villages and ceremony as “natural and simple,” and “ancient and traditional” as possible. Commercialisation is an inevitable trend, but imprudent transformation must be avoided, not to mention undermining the villagers’ authority in the *fanhui* association. In fact, this opinion is not far from the local government’s point of view.

The value of the past and the concept of heritage

To conclude, in a harsh natural environment and coal mine industry heartland, the *Jingxi fanhui* was born as a product and symbol of the villagers’ collective way of life. It reached its peak along with the enrichment of the two villages’ collective economy. When the mines closed down and the villages lost their inhabitants, the ceremony itself became the only reason for local people to come together and generate action. Today, no local community remains physically in either village, and it is impossible to understand only from observing their actions why people participate in the festival: on the surface, they seem to be repeating the traditional performance and parading in a unified team, but behind the same acts, diverse motivations drive different people. As we have seen, the participants do not share a unified understanding of the value of the ceremony: the old generation is nostalgic for collectivism, while the young do not have that attachment to the past but emphasise various individual interests, which dispels the connotation of the *fanhui* as a mere symbol of collectivism. Folklore fellows help villagers develop standardised procedures, which become theoretical tools to withstand commercialisation. Villagers

consider the *fanhui* association to be their own property and insist on their ownership of the ceremony, while the local government's goal of economic development partly coincides with their desire to rebuild the village. This diversity is always present and sometimes even leads to more or less open conflicts. Therefore, a further and vital question is how people unify their actions in the *Jingxi fanhui* if there is no identification to a same set of values. Or, what is the commonly shared social imaginary of the people who devote themselves with great enthusiasm to the annual festival, from which emerges an imagined community?

Amid this diversity, we note that the participants are consistent in one thought: the past, as root and resource of the present life, has an incomparable value. Current actions must be defined through the past, and the concept of ICH perfectly matches the imagination and need of the past.

As Hartog puts it, there are different relationships with the past in Western history. Historically, the interest in heritage represents a new way of relating to the past, that is, a new regime of historicity. Heritage makes visible and expresses a certain order of time, in which the dimension of the past is the most important, but it is the present that functions as the sole driver in discerning and identifying the past, and it constructs the past as heritage and memory. Hartog calls this regime of historicity presentism (2003). What we have seen in the *Jingxi fanhui* is not far from this judgment. The participants do emphasise the notion of heritage to deal with the relationship between the present and the past, and the visible embodiment of a certain past is essential to the present. But in this case, different participants have different relations to the past. If heritage means presentism, there would be subtle differences within this concept.

For the old villagers, the *fanhui* is regarded as an inheritance left by ancestors, which is not only a cultural item but also a real wealth. When the other properties, such as coal mines, houses, and land, have gone, the *fanhui* must be preserved as the only existing heritage and passed down to future generations. For the actors involved, past, present, and future are in continuity, and the *fanhui* association and ceremony are the evidence of it. However, for villagers born in the 1990s, the *fanhui* brings back childhood memories and is part of their personal history. They define their identity through this heritage-related past, illustrating Eriksen's idea that "identity, belonging and roots seem to be the main issues when speaking about heritage" (2014: 4). Unlike the elderly, heritage for the younger generations does not refer to continuity but is the very product of a fracture. This fracture is caused by economic reform, as well as by the gap between urban life and festival activities in the villages. For folklore fellows and tourists who believe the *fanhui* is a "flower of an ancient folk art," heritage revives a remote past. Spectacles performed in the villages are the "remote past of ourselves," the reappearance of ancestors, the origin of ethnic culture, and evidence of the national spirit to some extent (Hafstein 2004). Companies and local officials hoping to develop tourism have different ideas from the above. They rarely mention nationalism, paying more attention to the attribute of heritage as an asset and expecting it to lead to future wealth. The government and most villagers are brought together by their shared belief that the past can engender capital for the future. In other terms, we

have underlined four different relationships with the past, resulting in three kinds of imagined community. First, it is believed that community existed in the remote past, which was the foundation of the nation. Second, the community was created in the past and survived to this day without interruption, and as long as the *Jingxi fanhui* ceremony is ongoing, the community will continue to exist. Third, there is no more actual community, but a sense of community is still alive, which will lead to the creation of a new community in the future, different from the old one, but still a firm community.

It is remarkable that the Chinese translation of ICH, *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產, encapsulates all the above meanings, and through this integration becomes the foundation of a common social imaginary. The word heritage (*yichan* 遺產) is not an original Chinese word but a translation that eventually found its way in the jurisprudence domain in China. Thanks to the popularity of UNESCO's series of heritage conventions since the 1970s, this term became popular among Chinese people. It is now seen foremost as UNESCO's design blueprint for humanity's shared future, but also as a combination of inheritance (*yi* 遺) and property (*chan* 產). Heritage is thus not only the inheritance of a remote past and ancestral culture but also an asset that we own, ready for valorisation. The reputation of UNESCO endows it with a legitimacy towards the future as well, allowing the aforementioned different relationships with the past and the three kinds of imagined community to be unified in it. The very name of ICH has become a valued bond to create consensus and cooperation. And it is on this basis that the *Jingxi fanhui* continues, without commercialisation, without villagers living there permanently, and without large-scale investment from the local government.

When the name of ICH became the bond of an imagined community, the intentional stabilisation and even reification of the *Jingxi fanhui* began; this in turn led people to take part in turning their festival into an exhibition and not allowing it to evolve any further. An explanation for this phenomenon has two sides: on the one hand, under the current ICH policy, local culture inevitably loses part of its density of meaning and diversity (Noyes 2006: 42); on the other hand, embracing the reification is also a collective decision. Thanks to the repeated appearance of the past as a tradition that never allows change, the expectations of different groups are satisfied. Undeniably, dynamic and changing practices that adapt to different contexts define what we call culture, but the static performance of an imaginary past is also linked with people's real needs. In the case of *Jingxi fanhui*, only by this means can the consensus be generated, joint participation and cooperation become possible, and hope for achieving the goals of self-empowerment and revitalisation of the vernacular society become realistic.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Florence Padovani and Guillaume Dutournier for their great help in the writing of this article and to the reviewers for their professional comments. Any errors of fact or analysis are, of course, my sole responsibility.

Manuscript received on 24 April 2021. Accepted on 30 June 2022.

References

- ADELL, Nicolas, Regina F. BENDIX, Chiara BORTOLOTTI, and Markus TAUSCHEK (eds.). 2015. *Between Imagined Communities and Communities of Practice: Participation, Territory, and the Making of Heritage*. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen.
- AN, Deming 安德明. 2018. “以社區參與為基礎構建人類命運共同體：社區在非物質文化遺產保護中的重要地位” (*Yi shequ canyu wei jichu goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti: Shequ zai feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhong de zhongyao diwei*, Building a community of shared future for mankind based on community participation: The important position of the community in the protection of intangible cultural heritage). *Xibei minzu yanjiu* (西北民族研究) 2: 5-11.
- ANDERSON, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- BAO, Shixuan 包世軒. 2011. “千軍台和莊戶村古幡會調查報告” (*Qianjuntai he Zhuanghu cun gu fanhui diaocha baogao*, Survey report on the ancient banner associations in Qianjuntai and Zhuanghu village). In BAO Shixuan 包世軒 (ed.), *西山問道集 (Xishan wendao ji, Xishan doctrine pursuit collection)*. Beijing: Beijing Yanshan chubanshe. 325-39.
- COOKE, Bill, and Uma KOTHARI (eds.). 2001. *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.
- CHAU, Adam Yuet. 2019a. *Religion in China: Ties that Bind*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 2019b. “Hosting as a Cultural Form.” *L’Homme* 231/232: 41-66.
- DURKHEIM, Émile. 1960. *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life). Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- ERIKSEN, Anne. 2014. *From Antiquities to Heritage: Transformation of Cultural Memory*. New York: Berghahn.
- GAO, Bingzhong. 2017. “The Social Movement of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the End of Cultural Revolutions in China.” *Western Folklore* 76(2): 167-80.
- GODELIER, Maurice. 1996. *L’énigme du don* (The Enigma of the Gift). Paris: Fayard.
- HAFSTEIN, Valdimar. 2004. “The Politics of Origins: Collective Creation Revisited.” *Journal of American Folklore* 17: 300-15.
- HARTOG, François. 2003. *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time). Paris: Seuil.
- JACOBS, Marc. 2018. “不能孤立存在的社區：作為聯合國教科文組織2003年‘保護非物質文化遺產公約’防凍劑的‘CGIs’與‘遺產社區’” (*Buneng guli cunzai de shequ: Zuowei lianheguo jiaokewen zuzhi 2003 nian “baohu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan gongyue” fangdongji de “CGIs” yu “yichan shequ,”* Never alone: “CGIs” communities and “heritage communities” as antifreeze for UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage). *Xibei minzu yanjiu* (西北民族研究) 97(2): 12-23.
- . 2019. “城市中的社區，群體，個人：保護非物質文化遺產，行動網與邊界對象” (*Chengshi zhong de shequ, qunti, geren: Baohu feiwuzhi wenhua yichan, xingdongwang yu bianjie duixiang*, CGIs in the city: Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, action nets, and boundary objects). *Yichan* (遺產) 1: 15-36.
- LI, Xiushan 李秀山. 2008. “大台地區：概述” (*Datai diqu: Gaishu*, Overview of Datai area). In Editorial Committee of Beijing Mentougou Village Culture Chronicle 北京門頭溝村落文化志編委會 (ed.), *北京門頭溝村落文化志(三) (Beijing Mentougou cunluo wenhua zhi (san)*, Notes on the villages’ culture in Mentougou district in Beijing (Volume 3)). Beijing: Beijing Yanshan chubanshe. 1115-6.
- LIU, Tieliang 劉鐵梁. 2013. “非物質文化遺產：作為發展的話題” (*Feiwuzhi wenhua yichan: Zuowei fazhan de huati*, Intangible cultural heritage: A topic of development). *Zhongguo shehui kexue bao* (中國社會科學報) 26 April: 2.
- LOWENTHAL, David. 1998. “Fabricating Heritage.” *History and Memory* 10(1): 5-24.
- LÜ, Wei 呂微. 2018. “反對社區主義：也從語詞層面理解非物質文化遺產” (*Fandui shequ zhuyi: Ye cong yuci cengmian lijie feiwuzhi wenhua yichan*, Against communitarianism: Understanding the intangible cultural heritage from the linguistic perspective). *Xibei minzu yanjiu* (西北民族研究) 2: 24-32.
- NOYES, Dorothy. 1995. “Group.” *Journal of American Folklore* 108(430): 449-78.
- . 2006. “The Judgment of Solomon: Global Protections for Tradition and the Problem of Community Ownership.” *Cultural Analysis* 5: 27-56.
- SONG, Junhua 宋俊華, and HE Yan 何研. 2019. “學科視野下的非物質文化遺產保護能力建設：‘非物質文化遺產保護能力建設國際學術研討會’綜述” (*Xueke shiye xia de feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu nengli jianshe: “Feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu nengli jianshe guoji xueshu yantaohui” zongshu*, The capability-building of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding with the view of discipline: The review on “capability-building of ICH safeguarding international seminar”). *Wenhua yichan* (文化遺產) 6: 152-7.
- TAYLOR, Charles. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- XU, Ganli 徐贛麗, and HUANG Jie 黃潔. 2013. “資源化與遺產化：當代民間文化的變遷趨勢” (*Ziyuanhua yu yichanhua: Dangdai minjian wenhua de bianqian qushi*, Resource- and heritage-oriented: The changing trend of contemporary folk culture). *Minsu yanjiu* (民俗研究) 5: 5-12.
- YUE, Yongyi 岳永逸. 2020. “本真，活態與非遺的館舍化：以表演藝術類為例” (*Benzhen, huotai yu feiyi de guanshehua: Yi biaoan yishu lei weili*, Authenticity, liveliness and “guesthousisation” of intangible cultural heritage: Taking performing art as an example). *Minzu yishu* (民族藝術) 6: 79-87.
- ZHANG, Guangren 張廣仁 (ed.). 1994. *門頭溝區水利志 (Mentougou qu shuili zhi*, Water conservancy records of Mentougou). Beijing: Water conservancy records.
- ZHANG, Zhentao 張振濤. 2002. *冀中鄉村禮俗中的鼓吹樂社：音樂會 (Jizhong xiangcun lisu zhong de guchui yueshe: Yinyuehui*, Music Associations of Villages Rituals in the Rural Areas of Hebei Province). Jinan: Shandong yishu chubanshe.