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A Practice Research on the Framework for Ecomuseum in China: Case Study in Malanyu Town

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Abstract: This paper examines the feasibility of the proposed 'growth framework' for ecomuseum practice in order to address the challenges faced by the existing practice frameworks involving ecomuseums in China. We argue that application of the proposed framework at ecomuseums in China will be greatly beneficial, through optimising community participation and sustaining future community development. The proposed practice framework is validated by an in-depth qualitative case study and fieldwork with practice in Malanyu Town, China. The study found that within a top-down social context, the core of a successful application of a growth framework is to clarify the roles of the stakeholders, so that local government becomes more creative and flexible, external experts become more accessible, and local communities take more responsibility. In addition, a long-term, stable relationship between external experts and local stakeholders should be emphasised to enable a sustainable future development of local communities and the ecomuseums.

Keywords: *Heritage preservation; Ecomuseum; Practical framework; Community participation; Practice research; China*

INTRODUCTION

While preserving the material achievements of past civilisations and protecting the achievements characteristic of the aspirations and technology of today, the new museology – ecomuseology, community museology and all other forms of active museology – is primarily concerned with community development, reflecting the driving forces in social progress and associating them in its plans for the future. [1](p. 116).

Rather than being housed in one or more buildings, ecomuseums are rooted within communities with their natural and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, contained within one geographic territory. The most important characteristic of an ecomuseum is its holistic approach to the community in which it is located since it is 'a community-based museum or heritage project that supports sustainable development' [2](p. 199). Many examples have indicated that communities' contributions to ecomuseums/community museums must not be underestimated. As an example, with a strong sense of revolution and protest, local communities have made impressive contributions to community museums in Oaxaca, Mexico. The community re-built local narratives by promoting local stories and traditions; promoted the regional economy by preserving and developing traditional handicraft; and passed on the home culture by sending out travelling exhibits [3]. In Cape Town, South Africa, the original community made the District Six Museum into an important vehicle for collective memory by continuously sharing old stories, even though the original block had been demolished [4–5]. In

Norway, residents in the community, as volunteers or paid staff, cooperated with experts and scholars to establish a powerful data centre and memory database that has transformed the traditional Toten Museum into the Toten Ecomuseum [6].

Based on a common understanding that community engagement is important to ecomuseums, most practices around the world follow a similar framework. Ecomuseums often experience a tough start and require external assistance, requiring communities to undergo a long-term self-growth process to root the ecomuseum idea within them. The story of the Ak-Chin Him-Dak Eco-Museum, to cite a classic example, demonstrates a practical path and framework that radically enabled the community, which had been in an economic and cultural dilemma, to walk along the road towards independence and confidence [7–9]. It took around four years from the time when the Ak-Chin people of Arizona began to consider preserving their threatened tribal heritage to the completion of the ecomuseum's central building. They set ambitious two-year goals: to educate a community to understand the role of museums and archives; to cultivate the community capacity for internal management; and to design appropriate cultural facilities in the community. To achieve these aims, the community underwent a journey of long-term self-discovery and nurturing, visiting archives, museums and heritage sites, attending regular community activities, and cooperating with the local university. Eventually, they established a common understanding based on long-term development and lifelong learning within the community.

China has a different model of ecomuseum practice, managed through a top-down process led by the government, which fundamentally differs from most other parts of the world and is often criticised for its lack of community engagement. Historically, there have been three generations of ecomuseums in the country, launched at different historical stages from the 1990s to the present. All of them concentrated on contributing to regional economic benefits, e.g., through large-scale infrastructure and developing tourism, but investment in the practices were entirely almost government directed and lacked a bottom-up approach due to centralised government and leadership [10]. The three generations of ecomuseums were all launched by external forces, i.e., governments and external experts, and local communities were rarely consulted in the early stages [11]. The dominant approach in terms of communities participating in follow-up processes was to 'take part in' or 'attend' rather than 'take part in with contributions' since community participation was not understood as a mechanism for self-determinism but rather a process of negotiation between the community and state system [12](p. 226). Consequently, when combined with tourism, communities only acknowledged the economic value and not the cultural value of ecomuseums because they lacked an awareness of the territory's value to them [11].

Some deficiencies in the development of ecomuseums (e.g., decision-making processes) still needed to be addressed, though the awareness of community autonomy has emerged in a few small sample cases [13–14]. To improve the application of future ecomuseums, all stakeholders must respond. Communities should be given more time to truly understand the value of ecomuseums in order to prevent damage to the culture and sustainable development of communities as a result of chasing vested economic benefits [15]. Moreover, the roles played by different parties (e.g., local government, local community, and external experts) need to be repositioned and properly integrated in order to respond when communities are not ready for participating in the practice [16]. These responses are bound to bring changes to the current approach and framework.

This article contributes to the growing scholarly debate on challenges in ecomuseum practice in China: e.g., insufficient community engagement; inadequate readiness and awareness in the

community; and the unreasonable roles of all parties. It engages with literature looking at the social context of community participation in the country and specific issues that exist with ecomuseum practices in China. The article attempts to answer several questions: why did the community lack long-term goals in their ecomuseum practices? In what areas of practice were the community lacking in readiness? What roles should all parties play in the process? The answers address the crux of this paper by proposing a fresh practical framework with which ecomuseums in China can tackle the challenges being faced.

To make the research concrete, an experimental case study was conducted in the community of Malanyu Town, where the most population is made up of the descendants of the tomb caretakers of the Qing Imperial Tombs. The town is the site of centuries of unique culture and history, and some heritage and collective memories have been maintained in the community until today, but the memory and heritage of the community urgently need to be preserved after a period of political and social upheaval. As part of the research, the community was engaged in the early planning stages of an ecomuseum by attending one-to-one interviews, focus group meetings, mapping exercises and community activities. The reactions of the community during the practice were then recorded and analysed in order to answer the research questions.

CHALLENGES TO THE CURRENT FRAMEWORK IN CHINA

The practices of ecomuseums in China have followed an almost identical practice framework, summarised as ‘the falloff framework’ by Li and Selim [17], within which ecomuseums were initiated and led by government, and guided and practiced by external experts, with communities taking part under guidance [18]. Although local government have called on the public to cooperate in the process, communities have never been empowered in the decision-making, and as a result any participation was short-lived [12]. At the beginning of the practices, Su Donghai, the ‘father’ of ecomuseums in China, had highlighted that their sustainability in the country ultimately depended on the involvement of communities who truly owned and controlled their culture [18–19]. However, with ‘most ecomuseums throughout China, community participation has remained a part of the ecomuseum theory but not in practice’ [12](p. 225). Therefore, some challenges have emerged in the practice.

First, it has been difficult for those looking to build ecomuseums to balance the pursuit of short-term economic benefits and considerations of long-term community goals. The first two generations of ecomuseums in China were rooted in remote and underdeveloped ethnic-minority areas with the clear short-term aim of poverty alleviation; therefore, massive infrastructure construction was a crucial part of the project [20](p. 28-29). The third generation (for example, the Anji Ecomuseum in Zhejiang Province) still considered developing the regional economy as the primary goal. To achieve this aim, the Anji Ecomuseum made great efforts to brand local cultural and natural resources [21], resulting in an abnormal development of the ecomuseum, since regional industries were overemphasised [22](p.113). Today, the ecomuseums has been redirected away from preserving heritage to developing the local economy (October 2020, phone conversation with Pan Shouyong, the ecomuseum's founder). Clearly, both local governments and communities have a very strong short-term goal of achieving regional economic development by launching ecomuseums. Developing the tourism brought to regions by the ecomuseums was the primary option, but this also uncovered issues around insufficient long-term aims for preservation and development. Many scholars have discussed the relationship between ecomuseums and tourism in China, and most projects have ended up with difficulties balancing heritage protection and tourism development, e.g. in [15], [23–27]. For instance, ecomuseums could not effectively protect heritage but rather accelerated

the loss of local culture, especially when they were combined with tourism [28–29]. Many precious artefacts collected during the establishment of the first generation of ecomuseums in Guizhou Province were not properly preserved, and local villagers sold them to foreign visitors [30]. Similar tragedies also occurred during the second generation of ecomuseums in Guangxi [31–32].

How goals of preservation and development are set has been influenced by the economic conditions of the communities. Fang [33–34] states that communities must solve the problems threatening their survival before considering cultural confidence and preservation. In destitute areas, individuals might begin to lack confidence in their community's culture and, therefore, become separated from their traditional cultures [35]. For instance, in Longga Village, one of the first-generation ecomuseums, villagers stated that economic benefits and improving living conditions were their priorities, and they wished future generations would receive a better education and escape from their traditional life and culture [29]. The situation would be slightly better in affluent and educated communities: for example, the communities of the Sanfang Qixiang Community Museum, one of the third generation of ecomuseums in Fujian Province. In addition to obtaining the economic benefits brought by tourism, the communities maintained a close relationship with the community museum and participated in preserving their memories and culture [36].

The second challenge is insufficient community participation. On the one hand, it has proven difficult to empower the communities involved, even though scholars have discussed the significance of community participation for the sustainability of ecomuseums e.g., in [11], [37–38], and the national top-down framework is unbreakable. As a result, ecomuseums in China shared a rather utopian nature [39]. The pioneering and revolutionary nature of ecomuseums has therefore been discarded and transformed into a socialist ideology [22]. Aside from ecomuseums, Li et al. [40](p.9) state that the cultural heritage management in China was definitely a government-led process with limited community involvement: 'most properties have insufficient involvement of residents in decision-making, and the focus of management is placed more on the presentation of heritage materiality than the improvement of community traditional life'. In this context the term community has been given more administrative meanings. It was not a bottom-up product but the terminal administrative department set up by the state, playing a connective role by reporting to higher levels and keeping lower levels informed [41](p.154). Even though the community performs many functions to serve its residents, it still represents the interests of the state rather than grassroots enthusiasm [42]. Furthermore, all community or grassroots organisations (e.g., NGOs) need to be empowered by the state in order to achieve legitimacy (ibid.:653). Therefore, 'despite several community-based organisations being set up, in general, residents still lack resources to negotiate with different stakeholders and challenge any government decisions deviating from their interests' [40](p.9).

On the other hand, the capability and readiness of communities to participate in ecomuseums was also questioned. Head [43](p.452) argues that in China 'the capacity and motivation of citizens to participate effectively, or to create alternative forums, remains a weakness in community engagement strategies.' For instance, Safford [44](p.2) states that one challenge is 'the absence of knowledge among ordinary Chinese of their long and complex history'. The insufficient readiness was more pronounced in rural and impoverished areas, in which precious heritage was often dismissed as worthless, and intangible heritage (e.g., traditional customs and handicrafts) was considered inelegant by local villagers [45].

The final challenge is that the establishment of ecomuseums was often anticlimactic.

Erecting an ecomuseum in China was not difficult since it relied on local government and external experts but maintaining one was tough as its sustainability requires long-term contributions from the local community [18]. One reason for the unsustainability of ecomuseums initiated by local government was the weakness of long-term financial support from the government, while communities were not capable of participating in negotiating and raising funds [14]. On the other hand, the current framework emphasises political achievements and economic benefits rather than the self-growth of communities [28]. The external experts have assumed the responsibility for discovering, preserving, narrating and promoting local heritage in order to rapidly establish the 'institution', but communities were incapable of performing those duties once the experts had left (ibid.). For example, after the withdrawal of the external experts from the memory project at the ecomuseums in Guizhou, the project was halted for ten years until other researchers arrived, with many changes over the years going unrecorded, resulting in a serious loss of local culture [30].

The authors of one critical review proposed a workflow for a 'growth framework' for ecomuseum practice in China [17], of which long-term and in-depth consultation were the core. The complete 'growth framework' proposed in this paper will ideally be conducive to the self-nurturing of the local community and government, supporting them to establish long-term and sustainable goals. To verify the proposed framework in practice, an experimental case study was conducted as part of this study, adopting several qualitative research methods inspired by other studies.

BUILDING AN ECOMUSEUM IN MALANYU TOWN

Depth was an important characteristic of the case study [46], which was the crucial reason for adopting the methodology. Malanyuzhen Town is one of the communities of descendants of the tomb caretakers at the Imperial Tombs of the Qing Dynasty, located in Zunhua City (a county-level city), Hebei Province, close to the World Heritage Site of the Eastern Qing Tombs (Fig.1). Following China's ancient and long-running funerary culture, the community existed from the seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century as the caretakers of the Eastern Qing Tombs. They were moved to this site in an organised way when the Qing Emperor began to build the garden of tombs and settled there to take care of the tombs for generations to come. During this period, the group developed a unique culture and identity. However, the community of the descendants of the tomb caretakers has lost much of its distinctive memory and culture. Li and Selim [47] narrate and demonstrate the cultural and identity changes that the descendants of the caretakers of the Qing Imperial Tombs have undergone over many years, based on oral history and observation within the community. As a result of political and social upheavals, the tangible carriers of the community's memory and culture (e.g., architectures and living spaces) and their intangible carriers (e.g., family stories and old customs) have been severely damaged. This led to the transformation, chaos and then fragmented reconstruction of the community's identity, and this incomplete reconstruction of their identity and culture has had a negative impact on preserving and promoting local heritage and memory.

therefore, the groups were classified into three orientations: the culture and history group; the traditional (gold- and silverware) handicraft group; and the agricultural products (chestnut planting and processing) group. The classification took into account the community's concerns about preserving and improving local memories, heritage, environment, and traditional industries. The attendees invited were selected and recommended by both the authors (based on the outcomes of one-to-one interviews) and local government. Discussions in each meeting included slight differences according with the groups being organised in order to collect multiple views. The final group meeting invited mixed-role attendees to discuss and verify the plans for building the Malanyu Ecomuseum, and the idea of the ecomuseum was formally introduced to all the stakeholders for the first time.

Tab. 1. Detailed information of focus group meetings

Date	Place	Theme	Attendance
15 Oct. 2020	Meeting Room in the Hall of Malanyu Town Government	History, Sites, Memory of the Community.	Villagers: 5 Local government: 2
20 Oct. 2020	Meeting Room in the Hall of Malanyu Town Government	Handicrafts and Related Industries of the Community.	Villagers: 7 Local government: 1 Outside expert: 1
21 Oct. 2020	Meeting Room in the Hall of Malanyu Town Government	Resources and Related Industries for Agriculture of the Community.	Villagers: 4 Local government: 1 Outside expert: 1
30 Oct. 2020	Meeting Room in the Hall of Malanyu Town Government	Detailed introduction to the idea of ecomuseums, discussion and review of the draft Malanyu Ecomuseum Plan.	Villagers: 3 Local government: 3 Local entrepreneurs: 1 Manager at the Eastern Qing Tombs: 1 Outside expert: 1

In the experimental phase to launch the plans for the Malanyu Ecomuseum, 36 volunteers from the community were recruited, with the assistance of local government, so that some community activities were carried out. This phase validated the proposed improvements to the current practice framework for ecomuseums. The volunteers were assigned to five programmes within the ecomuseum's Community Memory Project to enable self-discovery of the community and given nine hours' training. The readiness and changes in the community before and after training were observed to examine the validity of the intervention. Members of the 'culture and history group' were asked to provide clues and guidance to the volunteers investigating the heritage and memories of the community, and their interaction was observed to evaluate the collaboration in the community participating in the project.

Next, community mapping exercises were started looking at local heritage, with the community asked to list local heritage sites (e.g., ancient sites, historical buildings, original heritage locations, and routes through natural resources and provide corresponding evidence (e.g., photos, maps, sketch, and stories). The authors mapped the places on Google Maps for the community to see because of the Internet restrictions and technical limitations in the community. Most of the outcomes from the exercise were then used to form the layout of the ecomuseum: i.e., cognitive centre, theme pavilions, terminal satellites, and hiking trails. The exercise uncovered the capability and limitations of the community in terms of narrating local culture and memory.

Community interactive workshops recruited members from the community, who knew the

traditional culture or engaged in traditional handicraft, to conduct four rounds of workshops for local children, i.e., Traditional Culture and Language of Manchu, Iron Painting (*tiě huà*) Handicraft, Gold and Silver Engraving Handicraft, and Traditional Pastry Making (Fig. 2). The reactions and feedbacks from both children and ‘teachers’ were observed and recorded to evaluate the activities, and so that the community’s willingness to pass on their heritage and memories was revealed. In addition, the applications of online communication, e.g., WeChat, and Tencent Meeting, were fully utilised in the research to achieve timely communication and observation among all parties.



Fig. 2. Four rounds of interactive workshops for children in the community
Source: photographed by the authors and EH3

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: SUCCESS IN FAILURE

The findings of this research focus on the community’s perceptions of long-term goals and short-term benefits, the community’s readiness, and the roles of local government and external experts. On the one hand, the findings reveal the in-depth causes of the challenges in the current framework, while on the other hand, they indicate the feasibility of the core workflow proposed to modify the current framework.

A. Social process-determined goal-setting

The study indicates that the contradiction between short-term benefits and long-term goals in the current framework cannot be completely attributed to the top-down social system or the economic development level of the community at this stage. The community selected for the case study is neither among the most developed nor the most underdeveloped parts of China, though there is a certain wealth gap within the community. When asked about their expectations and views on preserving the local heritage and developing the community, regardless of the respondents’ personal wealth levels, most acknowledged that it would bring tourist developments to the community. Many long-term goals, which require more patience, community initiative, dedication and responsibility to achieve and which importantly may lack direct economic benefits in the short term, were out of their scope. In this case, the local community was highly aligned with the local government in prioritising short-term benefits. A senior official in the local government stressed that ‘the ecomuseum practice must benefit the local economy’ (EG3).

The economic strength of members in the community does not seem to determine whether

or not they focus more on the long-term community goals of heritage preservation activities or are more patient or public-minded. For example, a member of the community (belonging to the middle- and low-income group) raised concerns about improper reconstruction and restoration of local culture and heritage in the community, and that inappropriate and blinkered tourism would affect the authenticity of the community's memories and cultural inheritance (EV1). He also mentioned that memory and cultural transmission would be completely interrupted with the passing away of elder community members (ibid.). It was suggested that the community might donate money to repair some historic sites for community use (ibid.). In fact, there were many considerations for the long-term development of the community in these discussions, such as accurate community self-discovery, sustainable tourism development, sustainable inheritance and education about local culture in the community, and development of community public welfare. Another member of the community (belonging to the middle- and high-income group) agreed that heritage preservation should be considered as having long-term significance for the community, e.g., long-term passing on of culture and memory (EE4). However, he believed that the key to sustainability was to make money from heritage projects rather than the pure dedication of community members (ibid.). The community and local government needed to secure hope and benefit immediately from the practice, so that more resources would be drawn to it (ibid.). Some members of the community with the potential to contribute to the long-term goals of the community had not considered making a contribution. For example, one member with a large personal collection that reflected the culture of the community was asked if they considered making the collection part of the ecomuseum to benefit the whole community, but he said had not thought about it (EV8). The reason for these contrasts is 'it is easy for people with no economic power to mention giving, because they would not really give anything from an economic point of view, while people with economic power will not easily say giving, because they actually have something to give' (EV9).

A Chinese expert in the field of museums and heritage explained the 'apathy' of communities:

I do not think it is the right time for private museums in China. Because China has just had its first generation with real wealth, compared with the UK or the US, [where] they are the old money. The wealthy in China have worked extremely hard to accumulate wealth and have yet to enjoy it, but you ask them to immediately contribute to society, which is unrealistic... Therefore, [I doubt] if people know what a museum is: it is completely public and if you contribute your stuff, you will never get it back, nor get any benefit from it. (CS1)

The wealth level of each member in the community is not decisive at the present stage; what really determines the community's sense of responsibility and its cognition regarding establishing long-term goals is the degree of wealth accumulation in society, in other words, the process of social development. On the one hand, at this stage, we might not be able to rely on the grassroots spontaneously formulating sustainable long-term goals for ecomuseums; on the other hand, it indicated that there was still a lot of room for the community to be motivated by the practice, which was one aim of adjusting the framework.

B. Readiness of community in multiple dimensions

The issue above has long been considered as an ingredient of insufficient community engagement, which also has been attributed to communities being insufficiently ready. This paper acknowledges that community's readiness should be included within the scope of examining community participation. However, it would be imprecise to attempt to define the community's readiness in a general way after stripping out the complex social issues mentioned above. The research suggests that whether or not the community is ready to be empowered and

deeply involved in ecomuseum practice needs to be examined from at least three dimensions, including readiness in terms of knowledge, skills, and mentality. The findings reveal that the community's readiness in terms of knowledge should not be underestimated, even if its readiness in terms of skills and mentality were insufficient at the time.

Readiness in terms of knowledge is knowledge reservation, in a broad sense, which is the foundation, and affects the depth and breadth, of communities' understanding of their cultures. The members of the community in this study had a much better understanding of local memories, culture, and history than expected. For example, a community representative proposed 14 suggestions for how to trace and preserve their heritage and memories, as well as some ideas for developing local community industries during the 'culture and history group' meeting (EV1). Based on the proposals, other group members contributed several comments to generate a detailed construction plan for the ecomuseum based on local heritage and memories (EG1, EE4, EV9, EV10 and EV12). Before and during the meeting, attendees were not presented with the layouts and practices common with ecomuseums. However, the final outcomes covered most of cultural and natural elements, both tangible and intangible, contained in an ecomuseum, which meant no major changes were needed to generate a blueprint for their ecomuseum layout. The blueprint included the sites selected for the information centre, the distribution and themes of the theme pavilions, the planning of the natural ecological routes, the setting of the terminal satellite points, and the types and planning of public facilities and activities.

Although it seemed that the community's readiness in terms of knowledge was sufficient, their in-depth engagement was directly blocked by insufficient readiness in terms of skills and mentality. The readiness in terms of skills included effectively organising tracing, preserving, narrating, and promoting the community's memories and heritage. In this case, most of the community members were unfamiliar with the above skills, with a few of them knowing about them but being very inexperienced. For example, some members of the community who might be called 'uncrowned cultural experts' (people with pertinent knowledge and experience but without reputation or formal qualifications) held personal collections but such activities were mostly carried out by individuals and limited to collecting. One of them spent many years collecting numerous items that reflected community memories and culture, such as old clothes, old furniture, and land deeds (EV8). In the clothing collection of the tomb caretakers, there were common clothing and official clothing for the four seasons, as well as clothing for men, women, and children (ibid.). The land deeds collected over different years were very precious; some could even be called national treasures (ibid.). Another member of the community had collected many traditional weapons from different periods, which were closely related to the garrison culture in local history (EV9). In addition to items there were a large number of historical documents and archives in the community. A member of the community had copied original historical archives from the National Archive of History by hand over decades and kept the manuscripts in his home, which contained detailed events closely related to the community (EV1). Another one had spent many years collecting electronic documents, pictures and diagrams about the community; he had also transferred paper documents into a computer as a rudimentary digitisation with which to build his electronic database (EG1). Another member of the community had also spent years using personal networking to track down and retrieve architectural components that had been lost during the turbulent times, which were a crucial part of narrating community history and memory (EV15). These behaviours indicated that the members of community were capable of some basic fieldwork techniques, documentation, collection and preservation. However, based on their behaviour they were not capable of

sharing the benefits of these techniques to help the community and manage external promotions.

Many respondents (e.g., EG4, EV8 and EV9) believed their main limitation was not a lack of skills but a lack of the funds needed to build their museums to display the collections, but that was not the case. For example, a village in the community had been trying to build a village history museum, and the construction was making slow progress (led by EV15). Their approach still adhered to the 'object-centred' approach of many years ago, that museums were places where collections were preserved and displayed. However, museology has been surging forward for a long time, and the community was unfamiliar with newer ideas, such as a people-centred approach, human and object interaction, and the application of digital technology. As for the majority of community members who did not launch heritage protection activities, they were often mistakenly considered as lacking understanding of the community culture. In fact, many of them could tell old stories about the community's memories or identity (e.g., EV5), or some changes in space and environment around the community (e.g., EV7). Therefore, the study indicates that insufficient skills have severely restricted the community's participation in expressing community memory and heritage.

The community's lack of readiness in terms of mentality is an interesting finding, which makes up for the one-sided view from previous studies, especially from the Western perspective that the top-down state system prevents community participation. This study finds that mental dependence on government was extremely high in the grassroots movements. When asked who should be primarily responsible for the practice of preserving the community heritage, all respondents, across different age groups and social roles, gave the same answer: the government. Everyone agrees that individuals should respond to the call of preserving the community's heritage and collective memory, but the leader and principal practitioner must be the government. In the absence of heritage protection, even the younger generation of the community attributed the situation to the performance of the government because 'nobody is taking the lead in preserving the community culture now; it has to be led by the government' (EE1). Some other respondents also complained about the absence of government action to preserve community heritage and memory over the years (e.g., EV1 and EV14). However, when asked whether a grassroots organization could replace the government and lead the whole practice, they still believed that the government should take the lead (*ibid.*). This was not the respondents hiding their true views; if understood from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture and its effect on society, this view seems reasonable. On the one hand, Chinese collective consciousness operates at a much higher level than individual expression, and collective action inevitably requires leaders or organisers; therefore, governments have played a role. On the other hand, the relationship between the Chinese people and their government is not a simple relationship between taxpayers and service providers. In China, ordinary people often refer to government officials as 'fù mǔ guān' ('officials as parents', EG3 claimed himself). To some extent, the term implies that in addition to its basic responsibilities and obligations, the government also assumes more mental dependence from the people, just as children are dependent on their parents. From another point of view, it indicates that a top-down state system is actually an interaction that also enjoys tremendous support from the grassroots.

In short, the results show that, at this stage, the community was not completely unprepared to participate in an ecomuseum practice. The community's readiness in terms of knowledge did not need to be intermediated, but their skills and mentality could be improved by strengthening the workflow with sufficient consultation at its core, without challenging the state's unbreakable top-down framework.

C. Playing the appropriate roles

Reconciling all parties to each play their roles in the workflow and act appropriately is the crucial role of the local government in this research, since this study was unable to move from field investigation to experimental practice research without the interaction accidentally established between the authors and local government. Apart from one-to-one interviews and observations, all other fieldwork approaches were applied with the assistance of the local government. The local government had the strongest convening and organising capacity, using its administrative powers to mobilise public resources and participants. For instance, the local government was capable of supplying venues and recruiting attendees for the focus group meetings, community training, and interactive community workshops.

The study also found that the credibility of the local government was important to grassroots groups since it could also grant legitimacy and reduce risks to the practice. For instance, members of the community were proactive in contributing to the ecomuseum practice after being reassured that local government was engaged and serious about the practice. One such member provided a private venue for establishing the community activity centre and expressed more than once that the practice must be launched with the support of the local government (EE4). The most common explanation from the community was that, in China, practices would not be undertaken without the government's support (e.g., EV1, EE4, EV8 and EV9). In addition to granting legitimacy and reducing risks, the engagement of local government meant obtaining funds was virtually guaranteed (EE4, EE2 and EE5). This indicates the important functions of local government in current ecomuseum practice: to ensure the legitimacy and smoothness of the practice and to help raising funds.

External experts were also stakeholders, who acted as short-term, high-intensity interveners: in other words, real practitioners in the current framework. This study indicates that external experts have a very strong influence on the practice from the beginning. However, they need to establish a long-term, stable interaction with the local community and government in order to continuously and positively support the practice. Furthermore, the role of external experts should include coordinating the relationship between local government and community, supplying long-term technical support, and providing long-term guidance on mentality for the local community and government.

In this study, the authors played the role of external experts who were also the focal point of external assistance. Two other experts were invited by the local government: one of them dedicated to creativity and marketing (OE1), and the other in ancient architecture (OE2). To demonstrate the influence of external experts, the practice was divided into three phases. The first phase would be the 'intensive stage', in which the external experts engaged frequently and closely with local community and government to guide and train them in their practices. The second phase would be the 'semi-disengagement stage', in which the authors were away from the field but in close contact with the community and government remotely, continuously guiding and observing the practice. The third phase would be the 'full disengagement stage', in which the external experts leave the area without initiating contact with the local community and government but retain a few representatives to receive continuous feedback.

All community activities were conducted in the first phase. It was found that after some simple training, the members of community proved well qualified for a lot of early-stage collecting and organising work. The cultural atmosphere in the community had obviously changed a lot, with both the local government and community showing very optimistic and positive attitudes. In the second phase, the authors left the site, but another expert remained. It was found that the positive after-effects of the first phase still existed, with the local government

and community actively contacting the external experts. Importantly, at this stage, the community had formed some sense of spontaneous activity: for example, setting up the community's literary and art groups (Fig. 3, led by EE4 and guided by OE1), and organising community interactive workshops and events at traditional festivals (led by local government and guided by OE1). Moreover, some costless constructions were launched. A local government-funded cultural corridor was constructed on the planned 'cognitive centre' in a private site provided by a member of the community, planning to display local culture and history (EE4). Furthermore, in the centre, the community transformed a room into a reading room to improve their insufficient cultural facilities. What happened in the third phase reveals the importance of 'long-term' relationships between external experts and local stakeholders. At this stage, things started to go downhill rapidly since all the external assistance had been withdrawn from the area. The local government no longer paid attention to the practice, and community participants gradually lost confidence. The cultural atmosphere that gradually formed before in the community has disappeared (EV1). According to the latest report received from the community representatives on 22 September 2021, there were even attempts to destroy an ancient bridge (EV9 and EV1) on the site.



Fig. 3. Various folk-art groups spontaneously formed by the community
Source: photographed by OE1

Of the three phases, it is considered that the first stage was the most important, which only lasted for two months but its positive after-effects would last for nearly the next six months. This indicates that external interventions were effective in motivating local communities and governments, but the length and depth of the interventions were insufficient. Furthermore, it shows that it was necessary to extend the interventions by adopting an in-depth consultation process, thereby addressing the issue of the inadequate role played by external experts under the current framework.

D. Frameworks that work and practices that fail

Therefore, this paper proposes a 'growth framework' (Fig. 4) to improve the defects in the current 'falloff framework' for ecomuseum practice in the Chinese context. The proposed framework takes the focus off the specific initiator of the ecomuseum practice, as the results show that the most important factor was not the initiation but the practice process after initiation. The second step in the framework emphasises that the role local government should play is that of a coordinator that would creatively use the advantages of administrative power.

This study finds that local government possess the potential to achieve this aim; for instance, the top official in local government proposed establishing a ‘workstation of talented people’ under the supervision of the local government (EG3). The workstation would attract talented people from all over the country and even the world to work in various fields conducive to developing local communities (ibid.). This was a very ambitious and creative idea and indicated the wisdom and potential of local government.

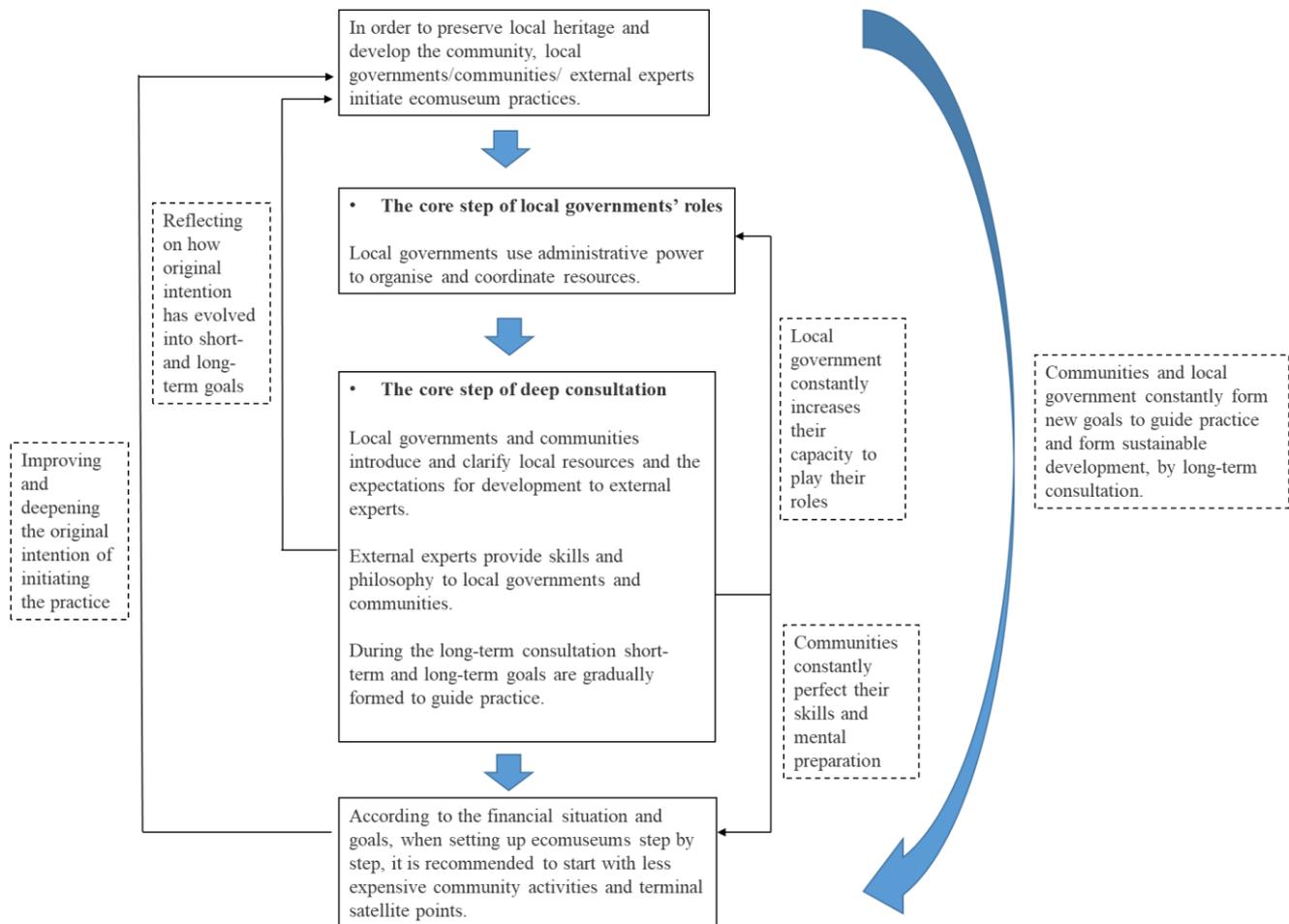


Fig. 4. A proposed ‘growth framework’ for ecomuseum practice in China

The third and most critical step, in-depth consultation workflow, redefines the roles of local communities, governments, and external experts. During this step, external experts should act as intermediaries and treat the community consultation with great patience so that the process lasts long enough. The community consultation is not only an academic fieldwork that focuses on the heritage of the community but also a process through which external experts helping to negotiate between local stakeholders. The negotiation includes learning and reconciling, and the external experts should learn from local communities and governments about local culture and norms in order to generate acceptable guidance. Communities and local governments will then obtain technical and mental guidance from the interventions by this external assistance.

The research amply demonstrates the validity of interventions in several ways. For instance, skills training for the community was effective in promoting self-awareness and self-discovery among the community. After interviewing the elderly in the community, the members of the

'oral history programme' held a community story-sharing meeting, during which they excitedly recalled the collecting process of oral history and talked about the importance of memory inheritance. The mental guidance provided to both local community and government through various community activities also obtained positive feedback. For instance, by conducting interactive workshops for children in the community, the interest of the next generation in traditional culture was motivated and the confidence of cultural inheritors was enhanced. A recruited member who taught in the workshops suggested that this kind of activity should be organised regular for the community (EE5), and after the workshops, many local children were asking for the time of the next activity (reported by OE1). Moreover, both the local government and community gradually came to believe that the ecomuseum plan would be feasible and conducive to local sustainable development through witnessing and engaging in subtle changes in the community (e.g., EG3, EG1, EE4 and EV1). They also developed a series of community education plans, such as regular training, sharing meetings and activities (EG3, EG1, EE4, guided by OE1). Importantly, one member of the community began to seriously consider securing cooperation with a local vocational school through personal networking in order to train young people in the community (EE4). A similar approach was adopted in the Ak-Chin practice, although the participant was never aware of the case.

However, it must also be acknowledged that while the proposed framework was effective, the practice of the Malanyu Ecomuseum was not a success. There were five main reasons for its failure. Firstly, at the end of the second phase, one of the top local government officials (EG6) was transferred away and his successor was unable to build confidence in the project and external experts over a short period (reported by OE1), which affected the interaction between external experts and local government. Secondly, although the local government initiated the 'workstation of talented people', it did not put forward further plans for construction; therefore, the workstation did not fulfil its proper function. Thirdly, it was difficult for the community and local government to reach consensus on how to raise and use the funds; as a result, many plans were difficult to implement. Fourthly, the input of the external experts (excluding the authors) was insufficient. One of them did not pay much attention to the practice (OE2), and another one was less active so as to avoid some local conflicts (OE1). Last but not least, as the core of external assistance, the authors did not have a chance to spend sufficient time in the field, which resulted in the critical in-depth consultation process not reaching its optimal length and depth.

The above points also highlight the importance of the key steps in the proposed framework from another perspective. The first three reasons belonged to the second step of utilising government functions, and the last two reasons relate to the interventions in the third step. Guidance from external assistance was also crucial for supporting local government to enable them to play their role effectively. Since the consultation with local stakeholders was insufficient, the creative potential of local government was not completely activated. The absence of sufficient consultation also resulted in inadequate skills and mental guidance for the local community. In short, the findings demonstrate that, at present, a 'growth framework' is necessary since best practice for ecomuseums was not a short-term exercise but required a great deal of patience, in 'the spirit of missionaries' (CS1).

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the challenges to the practical framework of ecomuseums in China and looked at an experimental case study of the building of the Malanyu Ecomuseum. The research reveals that the practice of ecomuseum in China currently stands at a crossroads since the country is rapidly developing and the social process continuously progresses. This paper

suggests that duplicating practices from Western countries cannot solve the challenges (e.g., community participation) that exist in China. However, it is certainly advisable to draw lessons from some approaches in other regions to adjust the current practical framework within a social context suitable for top-down governance.

The case of the Malanyu Ecomuseum demonstrates that a 'growth framework' with long-term in-depth consultation at its core can help address some of the challenges in the current 'falloff framework'. In the proposed framework, we have argued that the community was not completely unprepared to launch an ecomuseum. The paper states that the cultural awareness and pride of the community should not be underestimated at this stage. We also acknowledge that the community's insufficient readiness in terms of skills and mentality blocked their participation, but it can be improved through long-term consultation and guidance from external assistance. Therefore, the research questioned the short-term, high-intensity intervention from external experts found in the current framework. We suggest that a longer, more stable and sustainable interaction between external experts and local stakeholders is more conducive to community participation and sustainable ecomuseum practices. This is also inseparable from local government playing an appropriate role, and it is suggested local government should play the roles of organiser and coordinator by creatively using their administrative power. Importantly, local governments need to be creative in establishing a long-term mechanism to maintain the sustainable relationships between the local parties and external assistance.

In short, the current ecomuseum practice in China lacks patience. The proposed framework is more patient in order to build sustainable practice and development, to correct the current situation whereby ecomuseums are eager for quick success and instant benefits. The study also acknowledges some potential challenges in the proposed framework coming from all parties, which requires more practical research in future.

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