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Crouching the tiger, or hiding the dragon? scale in China's heritage production

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Abstract

In the built heritage studies, the intricate web of social and selective processes that define heritage is evident. These processes are, in many cases, intertwined with the notion of scale, exemplified through the production of heritage sites at the local, national, and transnational scales. While heritage and geography scholars have articulated the role played by scale in heritage-making and argue against a rigid, fixed, and hierarchical understanding of scale, they highlight the constant reproduction of scale. There is, so far, limited explanation of how the perception of scale gets reproduced and how crucial actors manipulate scalar power and resources for heritage making and the reproduction of scale. To fill this gap, this paper delves into mainland China's heritage-making, using the southern Anhui historical villages as an example. Based on intensive 5-month field research, this paper has three findings: 1) The nomination process for a World Heritage Site is notably influenced by politics and selectivity; 2) Diverse stakeholders are pivotal in shaping heritage narratives; 3) Individual contributions to heritage creation directly interact with, and subsequently reshape, 'scale', an entity that is simultaneously discursive and tangible. By integrating the notion of 'scale' into heritage discussions, we illuminate two concurrent processes: creating hierarchies through rule assimilation by interpreting the UNESCO standard internally and evolving socio-spatial dynamics via the manifestation of individual agency with resource manipulation, scale jumping, and reproduction of scale. This approach aligns with the material orientation in human geography and repositions 'scale'. Here, it's not just an epistemological framework but also a tangible force that steers individual perceptions and actions and yields measurable material impacts.

Keywords Heritage, Scale, China

1 Introduction

Critical heritage studies have cautioned the socially constructed nature of heritage, for which deliberate selections and exclusions are inherited steps in the production process (Harrison 2010; Lowenthal 2015; Smith 2006). The establishment and utilisation of heritage invariably involve intricate negotiations, as a multitude of actors choose the historical elements deemed worthy

of preservation (Harvey 2015; Timothy and Boyd 2003; Wang 2019). At the core of our study lies the pivotal concept of 'scale' within the context of heritage creation. Lähdesmäki et al. (2019) argue that while scale has been acknowledged and incorporated into heritage studies, there's a lack of in-depth understanding of how the 'politics of scale' specifically influences heritage scale dynamics and the sociopolitical impacts associated with it. To fill this gap, we specifically examined the role played by politics of scale in the production of heritage.

Consistent with the material turn, we conceive of scale as an epistemological tool encompassing discursive and material dimensions (MacKinnon 2011; Wang 2021). This multi-faceted 'scale' not only orchestrates spatial arrangements and relationships but also exerts influence over individual cognition and behavior (MacKinnon

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2011). Consequently, heritage construction and scale are intricately interwoven, molded by prevailing social structural conventions, which, in turn, can be reshaped through the agency of individuals and organisations.

To address the question of who produces heritage, and the role scale plays in this process, our study focuses on Hui settlements, particularly on the nomination process of Xidi and Hongcun in China. Despite numerous similar vernacular settlements across China's vast landscapes, the choice of Xidi and Hongcun highlights the intricate decision-making process that spans multiple scales, ranging from supranational to local levels. As we navigate the complexities surrounding the selection of Hui settlements, two parallel processes of heritage construction unfold: one revealing the hierarchies in the assimilation of external rules of international knowledge bodies to China's domestic administrative system, and the other showcasing the socio-spatial dynamics evolving along with the negotiations of individual actors. These two processes of heritage construction converge to yield outcomes that are temporally fixed. We argue that integrating the concept of 'scale' into heritage discussions reveals how individual actions and broader social dynamics interact to shape cultural landscapes, highlighting the tangible impacts of these processes on material heritage. This approach not only redefines 'scale' as a critical force influencing human behavior and physical environments but also enhances our understanding of the power structures and personal agency that drive the evolution of heritage sites.

Based on continuous fieldwork conducted since 2013, our methodology included in-depth interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including government officials and personnel from the tourism industry. Interview transcripts were imported into Nvivo and coded into major themes that directly answer the research question: who produced the heritage and what does the heritage mean here? Subsequent sections of this paper will delve into the following: First, we will review the literature that connects heritage and scale. This is followed by empirical explorations of the nominations of Xidi and Hongcun, with a focus on the internalisation of rules and the externalisation of agency. A concluding section that encapsulates our key findings will be given in the end.

2 Heritage production and scale

Scholars in the field of critical heritage studies have conducted extensive investigations into the nature of heritage, its utilization, and the construction of authorised and alternative heritage discourses (Harrison 2010; Smith 2006). Heritage is commonly perceived as a representative, involving the selection of specific heritage sites and artifacts to symbolize broader categories (Harrison

2010). However, it's important to note that the categorisation of heritage sites and artifacts as representative is not inherent; instead, experts actively engage in the selection, shaping, and assessment of these elements based on their own conceptualisations of heritage (Lowenthal 2015; Smith 2006). As such, the process of heritage creation serves various purposes, including the cultivation of national identity (Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010), the development of local identity (Bessière 1998; Cohen 2013), place branding (Connell and Rugendyke 2010), and the stimulation of economic growth (Su 2015).

The process of shaping heritage involves deliberate choices regarding what to include and exclude, making heritage categorisation inherently political and fraught with contested meanings (Svensson and Maags 2018). Smith introduced the concept of 'authorised heritage discourse', which encompasses the 'official' elements and sites designated as heritage through predominantly hegemonic channels, often stemming from a top-down approach. In response to this, alternative heritage discourses, originating from grassroots efforts, emerge to counterbalance these official narratives (Harrison 2010). Within both top-down and bottom-up approaches, stakeholders play a pivotal role in defining heritage based on their interpretations of significance (Harrison 2010). While scale, such as top-down and bottom-up, has been acknowledged and incorporated into heritage studies, there's a lack of in-depth understanding of how the 'politics of scale' specifically influences heritage scale dynamics and the sociopolitical impacts associated with it (Lähdesmäki et al. 2019). Thus, it becomes imperative to introduce the concept of scale to accommodate the diverse array of actors influencing the heritage-making process (Harvey 2015; Wang 2019).

Scale has been approached diversely across various contexts, encompassing fixed states, rescaling processes, the political dimensions of scale, and its production (Brenner 2001; Jessop, Brenner and Martin Jones 2008; Jones III et al. 2011; Marston, Jones and Woodward 2017). Within heritage studies, Lähdesmäki et al. (2019) have conceptualised scale in four dimensions: hierarchy, instrument of power, process, and network. We will sequentially introduce these four definitions. Typically, scale is perceived as a hierarchy in heritage studies, where heritage is categorised within a nested structure of spatial scales, from local to international levels. Originating from regional geography and spatial science, scale was viewed as hierarchical, similar to Russian dolls (Herod and Wright 2008). This hierarchical perspective has been contested by horizontal networks (Marston 2000). Hierarchical scales embed uneven power relations, indicating that certain actors are more influential than others, perpetually producing and reproducing hierarchization. This

notion of scale as an instrument of power stems from political-economy approaches that consider scale as fixed and materially existent (MacKinnon 2011).

'Scale as a Process' emphasises the idea that scale is not fixed but constantly formed and transformed through social processes. It's about how spaces and scales are socially produced and reshaped, reflecting the relational and dynamic nature of space and scale. This view aligns with the notion that heritage itself is a process, evolving and changing over time (Smith 2006; Lähdesmäki et al. 2019). The last theorisation takes scale as network. Scale as a Network shifts the focus from hierarchical levels to the interconnectedness of objects, people, ideas, and technology (Wang and Yao 2024). Unlike the hierarchical approach, the network perspective views the world as interconnected units without strict boundaries, emphasising the flow and politics of connectivity. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding how transnational or interurban networks operate and influence heritage governance. This is a response to the decades-long contestations that let scholars to question binary approaches which might privilege any spatial parameters, such as place, scale, network, and territory, or assumptions of their mutual exclusiveness (Massey 2005, 195). Instead, the call to read places as 'sites of intersection between networked topologies and territorial legacies' (Massey 2005, 102) has compelled an epistemological shift towards a processual approach to the production of scale, in a dynamic interaction with other parameters through the laborious agency of actants. These approaches to scale as process and network rooted from a post-structural reading of scale that is emergent and fluid.

In this paper, we perceive scale as socially constructed yet still hierarchically structured (Taylor 2004). This comprehensive view of scale allows us to understand how scale influences practices and how it evolves in response to emerging social processes. Under this circumstance, scale is produced along both discursive and material dimensions by agency of actors, who are, at the same time, embedded in and thus shaped, limited, and conditioned by the existing scalar structure. Specifically, scale shapes cognitive patterns and actions, either enabling or constraining ways of thinking and behaving (Moore 2008). Moreover, individuals and organisations play pivotal roles in either (re)producing scales or transcending predefined administrative boundaries, further intertwining with the discursive and epistemological construction of scale (MacKinnon 2011; Moore 2008; Wang 2021).

Heritage scholars examine the act of heritage-making by a variety of actors to explain the output of heritagisation of sites (Wang 2019). Within the realm of heritage-making, distinct groups of actors adopt specific

heritage discourses that mould their perceptions and actions (Smith 2006). These discourses are deeply rooted in sociocultural contexts that define heritage values. The perceived authority or international power of UNESCO could be manipulated to legitimise certain narratives or discourses, which might induce conflict among narratives from the local with discourses such as 'local', 'community', or 'home'. Guided by their perspectives on heritage, individuals may strategically employ their social and cultural capital to assert their voices and influence decisions (Svensson and Maags 2018). It's important to recognise that heritage professionals wield substantial authority within the heritage-making process (Waterton and Smith 2010), and those connected to these experts often enjoy greater opportunities to shape these decisions. While individuals lacking expertise or social connections in the heritage field may find themselves marginalised and excluded from the heritage-making process, nevertheless, there is space for indigenous actions.

Discussions on heritage formation and scale can be encapsulated within several distinct dimensions. Initially, the creation of heritage, inclusive of world heritage sites, represents a collaborative and negotiated process across various scales. Bendix et al. (2013) elucidate that while entities such as UNESCO and ICOMOS hold nominal authority over heritage designation, the substantive influence and interpretative power reside with national entities. These state actors customise UNESCO's guidelines to fit local contexts, thereby indigenising global heritage standards and manifesting heritage as a layered and often discordant concept across different scales. Furthermore, scholars like Harvey (2015) have explored 'downscaling' in heritage research to incorporate more intimate themes like community, family, and personal heritage. In this discourse, the micro and macro scales are interdependent, with actors at subordinate scales reshaping and propagating heritage narratives from dominant scales, thus affecting the evolution and dissemination of these narratives into actual heritage practices. Heritage, as such, embodies 'dissonant qualities' in terms of identity, meaning, and scale (Harvey 2015, 579).

To comprehend the nuances of heritage creation and the politics of scale, particularly in the Chinese context, it's essential to understand the evolving concept of scale. Scale was initially perceived as a static measure but has come to be recognised for its dynamic nature, continually reshaped by the interplay of capitalist production, social reproduction, and consumption (Herod and Wright 2008; Wang 2021). Drawing on Brenner's concept of the politics of scale, Zhu (2019) applies the ideas of 'upscaling and downscaling' to illustrate the adaptation of global cultural values across national, community, and individual heritage levels and the expansion of grassroots

actions to broader stages. This perspective also examines how cultural heritage institutions leverage scale to establish authority and hierarchies, the influence of global heritage discourses through downscaling, and the emergence of local initiatives challenging and negotiating with heritage authorities by navigating between scales.

When considering scale within the Chinese milieu, it's evident that administrative hierarchies align with the traditional hierarchical notion of scale. However, this rigid interpretation has been critiqued for oversimplifying scale as a fixed, Russian doll-like structure. Our research adopts a post-structuralist approach, viewing scales as socially constructed yet maintaining a hierarchical essence. This approach underscores the significance of key actors who manipulate their resources and capabilities in heritage creation. It highlights the importance of these actors' agency in utilising scale as a geometric power while questioning the rigid hierarchical interpretation of scale, especially within the Chinese context where administrative hierarchies tend to reinforce a hierarchical understanding. Therefore, our paper argues that recognising local agencies' ability to navigate rigid scales is insufficient; it's more crucial to understand scale as a network and to appreciate its significance in heritage creation and interpretation.

3 The transnational scale: shifting paradigms and power dynamics in world heritage inscription

3.1 China's shift from elite culture to settlements

China, a relatively recent participant in UNESCO's World Heritage inscription practice formalized in 1985, swiftly emerged as a prominent contender. Driven by the aspiration for international recognition and bolstering national pride, China has actively engaged in learning international values, rules, standards, procedures, and modes of arbitration. From 1987 to 1996, China's inscriptions predominantly featured elite cultural sites, encompassing imperial palaces, monumental military structures, and centers of various cultural and religious philosophies, like the Confucius and Kong family residences, Potala Palace, and Wudang mountains. China promptly responded to the call for diversity within the 'Global Strategy', evidenced by its shift towards including vernacular settlements scattered across the nation. In 1997, China nominated non-elite settlements, namely, the historical towns of Lijiang and Pingyao, and Suzhou's classical gardens.

Against this backdrop, attention turned to the Hui merchant settlement. On one hand, it aligns with China's pattern of nominating vernacular settlements contextualised within a 'broad anthropological context through

time', addressing a gap identified in UNESCO's studies. On the other hand, this settlement possesses a distinct Chinese character that extends beyond the universal traits of human settlements. Consequently, its nomination possibly served as a strategic maneuver to bolster China's national image and establish a unique position amidst global competition among nations. Here, the real control over heritage designation lies with individual states rather than UNESCO or ICOMOS. States interpret global standards in their own ways, resulting in a localised and often inconsistent understanding of world heritage across different regions. This underscores the complexity and varied nature of heritage as a concept (Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013).

3.2 Narrating the hybridity of universalness and Chineseness

Rakic and Chambers (2008) have explored the tension between the "universal" of world heritage and national that represent national identities. Here, we explored the hybridity of universalness and Chineseness of the World Heritage Sites narratives in the case of Hongcun and Xidi. The dossier prepared by China and endorsed by UNESCO established the two villages as geographic illustrations of how economy, culture, and landscape can be integrated within an enduring rural settlement. Remarkably, the two villages demonstrated their universal outstanding value in three key ways:

Criteria (iii): The villages of Xidi and Hongcun are graphic illustrations of a type of human settlement created during a feudal period and based on a prosperous trading economy. Criteria (iv): In their buildings and their street patterns, the two villages of southern Anhui reflect the socio-economic structure of a long-lived settled period of Chinese history. Criteria (v): The traditional non-urban settlements of China, which have, to a considerable extent, disappeared during the past century, are exceptionally well preserved in the villages of Xidi and Hongcun. (UNESCO 2000)

The universal values reflected in the text emphasize the importance of preserving historical, cultural, and socioeconomic aspects of human settlements, offering insights into past societies and underscoring the importance of heritage conservation. The phrasing employed here reflects a high degree of standardisation, employing terminologies from the WHC that can be applied to a wide range of globally recognized human settlement sites celebrated for their value, namely, the value of universalness.

However, when readers click into the detailed information of the sites, which can be found as an appendix on the webpage, one will find a distinctive narrative that is

dedicated to an image of Chineseness. The detailed portrait of 'Chineseness' of the sites entails their aesthetic excellence, from spatial arrangements premised upon Fengshui to intricate architectural design, a graceful colour palette, elaborate carvings, and refined interior décor. These aesthetic attributes are attributed to their inhabitants, the Chinese Confucian merchants, known as 'rushing', celebrated for their distinctive amalgamation of Confucian principles, educational pursuits, clan-based social structure, and commercial endeavours. This depiction resembles scholars' articulation of heritage and national identity (Graham and Howard 2016; Soper 2007). According to Soper (2007), world heritage sites are often leveraged as symbols or tools by modern nation-states to create and promote a specific image of the past that aligns with their desired national identity.

In their search for the next candidate for WHS application, China's heritage authorities' swift shift from grand monuments of elite culture to indigenous settlements demonstrates an instant adaptation to the newly revised rules at the transnational level. China's warm embrace of the new rules, perhaps, is not dependent on the content or nature of the rule itself, but a confirmation of a rule, or any rules, that has been institutionalised at the transnational level (Zhang 2017; Winter 2019; Wang 2019). As such, the image of Chineseness is deliberately nested under that of universalness in the official narrative. As Wallerstein (1991, 194) has pointed out, this concept of world culture is a double-edged sword, as 'the planners of cultural resistance are, in effect, legitimating the concept of universal values' because they are then 'pressed to prove the validity of their asserted value in terms of criteria proclaimed by the powerful'. The increasing recognition of cultural diversity by WHC's Global Strategy might not be reduced to a straightforward promotion of world culture and multiculturalism, but also allow another round of down-scaling of hegemonic power when national and regional states adhere to the political authority of rule making at the supranational scale (Wang 2019).

The down-scaling of hegemonic power when national and regional states adhere to the political authority of rule making at the supranational scale reveal Rules as a hegemonic power along the discursive dimension. Since the establishment of the concept of 'world heritage sites' in 1972, recognized for their 'universal outstanding value', there has been a notable expansion in the list. However, this growth brought to light concerns about list imbalances, leading to calls for a more inclusive approach. In response, the 'Global Strategy' was introduced in 1994 to foster a more representative World Heritage List, addressing key gaps in the representation of human coexistence with nature and society by proposing the

inclusion of 'Settlements' as a category to bridge these gaps (UNESCO-WHC 1998). The implementation of the Cairns Decision in 2000, after 6 years of negotiation, introduced a quota system limiting states to one nomination per year, aimed at ensuring a more equitable list (Labadi 2005). This quota system and the broader Global Strategy incited a shift in the competitive dynamics among regional governments, moving decision-making and evaluation from the international to the national level, thus altering stakeholder dynamics and emphasizing the role of state actors in the nomination process (Zhang, 2017).

China's shift from nominating elite cultural sites to embracing vernacular settlements highlights a strategic adaptation to global heritage norms and criteria. This move not only demonstrates China's willingness to align with international standards but also its ambition to showcase the diversity and richness of Chinese culture on the global stage. Furthermore, the nomination of sites like the Hui merchant settlement and the villages of Xidi and Hongcun illustrate a deliberate blending of universal values with distinct national and cultural identities, embodying the hybridity of 'universalness' and 'Chineseness'. This strategy effectively leverages global recognition to bolster national pride and identity, while also contributing to the broader discourse on the value and significance of cultural diversity in heritage conservation.

4 National scale: balancing regional development, fostering cooperative local government, and internalising world heritage requirements

Originally, the Hui settlement was envisaged as an integral component of a proposal seeking recognition for Mount Huang in 1989 (interviews, 2014). Distinguished cultural experts and professionals at the national level embarked on extensive visits to numerous sites located within Huangshan City, with their historical value fluctuating in terms of recognition and significance. These sites spanned four sub-city administrative regions, specifically the Yi County (comprising Xidi and Hongcun villages), the Huizhou District (including Chengkan village), the Tunxi District, and the She County (encompassing the Tangyue memorial arches). To the astonishment of many local officials and experts, the candidates hailing from the Yi County (Xidi and Hongcun villages) emerged victorious in the final selection despite their relatively lower perceived value in the eyes of some. Multiple sources corroborated the substantial influence wielded by provincial and city officials in shaping the site selection process, thereby necessitating further inquiry into the rationale underpinning their modified decision-making. Based on our ethnographic fieldwork, we summarized the

following three points that play a crucial role in producing the Hui settlement into the world heritage site.

4.1 Balancing regional development

In China, the Hui settlement is just one among numerous vernacular settlements with the potential to establish universal outstanding value. Indeed, a nationwide campaign was undertaken to search for such settlements, recognising that diversity and multiplicity were essential for employing vernacular settlements in the image construction of an entire country (Hevia 2001; Wang 2010; Yan 2015). In the process of selecting nominees for the 2000 World Heritage Sites (WHS) list, vernacular settlements in two distinct regions garnered national-level attention: the Hui settlement in the southern part of Anhui province and the Jiangnan settlement in Zhejiang province. Both settlements are characterized by clan-style clusters that evolved through prosperous trading economies, with Hui merchants primarily engaging in land-transportation trade, while Jiangnan merchants relied on waterways. Despite these similarities, the Hui settlement was ultimately chosen. An interview conducted with a government official in Huangshan City shed light on the rationale of the national authorities:

'During that time, I worked in the WHS Office in the city of Huangshan on a project applying for WHS status. We mainly competed with some historical villages near Shanghai, such as Tongli and Zhouzhuang. The (national) state considered this issue at the national scale and chose southern Anhui province for balance' (Interview with government officials from the Huangshan Tourism Administration, 06/21/2013).

The term 'balance', as articulated by the government official, referred to the equitable distribution of economic progress across various sectors within China, a matter of national concern in the latter part of the 1990s. Beyond its symbolic significance, the designation of a World Heritage Site title has been substantiated by its economic benefits, as evidenced by cases such as Lijiang ancient town (Su 2015). It is not surprising that both national and subnational entities associated heritage inscription with economic advancement.

As explained by Fan (1997), in the Post-Mao era following Deng's rise to power, the primary focus of regional development was directed towards the eastern coastal region, which was designated as an area open to foreign investment for rapid economic expansion. While this strategy was largely successful, it inadvertently exacerbated regional disparities within China. Simultaneously, leaders in inland provinces harbored discontent with the

central government, exacerbated by ongoing ethnic conflicts, particularly in border provinces, intensifying concerns regarding regionalism (Fan 1997). In response to political pressure and the central government's apprehensions about 'regionalism', the strategy of uneven development was abandoned. Consequently, the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996–2000) revised the development approach, aiming to narrow regional disparities and foster regional growth.

In line with this overarching national ideology, Anhui province, located in the central part of China, received heightened attention from the central government. As a result, the opportunity to pursue designation as a World Heritage Site in the late 1990s was extended to southern Anhui province, instead of the Yangtze River Delta region. This decision was rooted in the expectation that the symbolic prestige associated with being a World Heritage Site would ultimately drive economic growth in the region.

4.2 Cooperative local government

A cooperative local government is also crucial in the application of world heritage site process. During our fieldwork, numerous informants emphasised that it was the exceptional enthusiasm exhibited by Yi County that set it apart from the other candidate sites. While Yi County earned accolades for its cooperative approach, other locations faced criticism for their inaction in response to directives from higher-level government authorities. A government official in Huangshan City further remarked:

'The government leaders in Yi County were highly enthusiastic about this undertaking, and that's why they selected Xidi. It's important to note that this choice was not a reflection of the inadequacy of the other villages in meeting the requirements. Rather, this process demanded substantial government engagement.' (Interview with a government official in Huangshan, 06/21/2013)

Similarly, the strategy of 'attributing blame to uncooperative attitudes' found its application in another book chronicling the evolution of Xidi as a historic village. The author, Hu (2017), sought to defend Yi County, his place of origin, by portraying its government as responsive to directives from higher authorities:

'Xiaoqin Wu, the former Vice President of the Ministry of Construction in Anhui province, held responsibility for the World Heritage nomination in Anhui province. Initially, Wu initiated discussions with government officials in She County regarding the WHS application. However, the local gov-

ernment in She County did not display a positive response. Faced with limited alternatives, Xiaoqin Wu engaged in discussions with government officials in Yi County.'

In this excerpt, Hu portrays the She County government as unresponsive, even during informal interactions with the provincial government official responsible for heritage nominations. In contrast, the Yi County government is depicted as displaying unwavering commitment to cooperation. It was only when Xiaokang Qian, the party secretary of Yi County, and Zhen Yang, the county magistrate, pledged their support that the provincial Ministry of Construction extended a formal invitation through official administrative channels.

During the same year, the vice magistrate of Yi County attended the World Heritage Site (WHS) nomination conference in Hefei as an invited delegate (Hu 2017). In essence, heritage authorities at the provincial and city levels acted as gatekeepers, aided by their discretionary powers within the administrative framework. For institutional units positioned lower in the hierarchical structure, their access to the nomination process largely hinged on their willingness to adhere to the directives of their superiors. Heritage making in China goes through the structured administrative system (national-provincial-municipal-county) where the nation's image, shaped by discussions around heritage, assists in global interactions and reinforces local governance. To be acknowledged or preserve their heritage status, sites are required to comply with stringent policies and values dictated from higher authorities.

4.3 Internalising world heritage requirements

The internalisation of the World Heritage Convention's beliefs is revealed in two aspects: the search for settlement-type heritage and the creation of preservation plans. Originally, the Hui settlement was envisaged as an integral component of a proposal seeking recognition for Mount Huang in 1989 (interviews, 2014). However, during that historical epoch, the predominant emphasis on elite culture posed formidable challenges in advocating for vernacular settlements akin to those nestled at the base of Mount Huang. It was not until the emergence of UNESCO's 'Global Strategy' in 1996, which underscored the pivotal role of settlements, that led to a renewed application.

According to the official explanation, the Yi County beat all other candidates because it had prepared a conservation plan, which is one imperative component of the nomination dossier according to UNESCO's guidelines. One government official in Huangshan City clarified:

We had somewhere between three and five potential villages. Xidi and Honggun were chosen because they had plans...Other villages did not have plans. It is required by UNESCO to have a plan to get in... As a result, other villages, such as Chengkan, were taken out of consideration because of this reason. (Interview with government officials in Huangshan, 06/21/2013)

The credibility of this explanation, however, came under scrutiny. Official documents and meeting minutes from the nomination process revealed that the conservation plan was formulated subsequent to the selection of Yi County:

In 1996, the Anhui Provincial Construction Department designated Xidi and Hongcun as the nominated villages. Developing a preservation plan is a prerequisite for World Heritage Site (WHS) applications. Therefore, in 1997 and 1998, the Yi County government entrusted the Huangshan City Planning Design Institute with the task of creating this plan (Huangshan Local Chronicles, 2010, pp. 2390-2391).

Under this circumstance, the international rule of conservation plan was deployed as a disciplinary force for scaling down power through the Chinese administrative apparatus. The critical factors lay in the diverse modes of interaction and dynamics that unfolded during the process of power diffusion among authorities at the national, provincial, municipal, county, and individual levels.

Other nearby villages, such as Chengkan, attribute their failure to the lack of comprehensive documentation, such as a preservation plan. Consequently, they later adopted a diligent approach to developing a conservation plan. Chengkan village, in particular, undertook significant efforts, including confining their livestock, refurbishing their infrastructure, and, most crucially, meticulously crafting a conservation plan in anticipation of a second attempt at obtaining heritage recognition. A government official from Chengkan town government, expressing their determination, noted:

'After our initial unsuccessful application for World Heritage Site (WHS) status, we endeavored to reapply. However, our efforts have not yielded success. We have diligently compiled comprehensive documentation, and our management practices are sound. Nevertheless, achieving inclusion in the World Heritage list remains an exceptionally challenging endeavor. It was a substantial setback to have lost to Hongcun on the previous occasion. We firmly believe we deserve WHS status.' (Interview with a government official in Chengkan town government, 06/06/2013)

In a document titled ‘She County: Excelling in Heritage Conservation Planning for Hui Culture’, which She County presented to the provincial Bureau of Culture, the county administration emphasised the significance of planning within its operational agenda. The incorporation of professional heritage principles was accomplished through the implementation of three distinct plans: ‘Planning for Nationally Recognised Historical Towns in She County’, ‘Urban Planning of She County’, and ‘Detailed Plan for the Historical Zone of Ancient Huizhou Court in She County’. In addition to these recently devised plans, the internal power structure within the state apparatus underwent a transformation, leading to the establishment of specialized units dedicated to cultural heritage. These units were staffed by individuals possessing both expertise and authority. Furthermore, the report delineated a hierarchical power framework, positioning the Bureau of Culture as the overarching authority in comparison to other entities involved in the realm of built environments.

5 Village-level dynamics: engaging local heritage through private enterprise and villager initiative

5.1 The tourism company’s involvement

A significant contributor to Yi County’s nomination process was a private enterprise specialising in cultural asset development, headquartered in Beijing. The initial engagement between the Beijing Zhongkun Investment Group Co., Ltd. and the Yi County government occurred during the ‘Tourism and Trade Development Fair of Anhui Province’ in 1997 (Zou 2005). This encounter led to the formation of a new enterprise named ‘Huangshan Jing-Yi Tourism Development Corporation’, signifying a collaboration that spanned different scales—‘Jing’ representing the national capital Beijing and ‘Yi’ representing Yi county.

The newly established Jing-Yi enterprise was tasked with executing a contract negotiated between the Yi County government and the Zhongkun Group. This contract involved leasing the tourism development rights for three villages within Yi’s jurisdiction. Consequently, the responsibilities for tourism development and management in Hongcun, Nanping, and Guanlu villages were transferred from the Yi County Tourism Administration to Jing-Yi for a period of 30 years (Interview with the head of public relations at Hongcun, 06/21/2013). Under this arrangement, Jing-Yi was granted a range of discretionary powers, including the formulation of renovation plans, construction activities in communal areas, and the delineation and management of tourism zones. Notably, this contract was signed during the preparation phase for the heritage nomination. Huang Nubo, CEO of

Zhongkun, participated in heritage inspection tours in 1996, coinciding with Yi County hosting the national Historical Cities and Towns conference.

Moreover, the financial support provided by Jing-Yi played a pivotal role in formulating and executing the conservation strategy. During our field research, a government official from Huangshan City disclosed that the reluctance of other counties, districts, and villages to engage in the WHS nomination process stemmed from the anticipated financial burden, which far exceeded the financial capacity of most ordinary villages and counties at that time. To illustrate, the initial cost estimate for Hongcun was approximately 400,000 yuan (Hu 2017). However, the annual budget allocations of the region’s counties could only provide several thousand yuan (approximately US\$12,500). Jing-Yi intervened to bridge this financial gap, investing funds to enlist the services of an architecture professor from Tsinghua University to develop the conservation plan. Significantly, these funds were also utilized to dismantle structures that did not align with the character of the Hui merchant village or to make modern additions that harmonised with the surrounding heritage buildings.

A fundamental requirement for a WHS nomination, as stipulated by UNESCO, is the development and implementation of a well-conceived conservation plan. The former demands expertise possessed by cultural elites, while the latter necessitates substantial financial investment. In this progression, capital transformation took place through diverse stakeholders and various strategies. This process of externalising actions reflects a materiality process (Brenner 2001) wherein entrepreneurial strategies and financial capital traverse multiple scales.

Notably, the cultural capital held by conservation professionals was redirected to specific beneficiaries through the administrative system. The significant disparity between the estimated economic capital required for conservation endeavors and the funds available within official budgets presented a valuable opportunity for private enterprises, particularly those involved in tourism development, to become actively engaged. Jing-Yi, operating as a tourism company, assumed a pivotal role in advocating for the WHS nomination of Hongcun. This was achieved by strategically utilising their financial resources to engage with government officials and heritage experts in the process of heritage making. We assert that such tactics significantly affect the policies and hierarchical dynamics among all the stakeholders involved.

5.2 The local villager

The private company facilitating tourism development has selectively included certain historical houses in the

tourism route while omitting others, thereby contributing to the local heritage-making process. This creation of heritage is predicated upon the company's design of the tourism route, its assessment of what merits recognition as heritage by tourists, and the agreements it has established with the homeowners. Despite the historical significance of their properties, some homeowners have chosen not to engage in the tourism initiatives led by the company. One exemplary of such insurgent action by villagers is an ancestral hall decorated with a variety of plaques, which winning its nickname the "Plaque Museum" (see Fig. 1).

The owner of the Plaque Museum did not join in the tourism company's plan due to unfavorable clauses proposed in the contract, especially the small share of profit it offered. He was joined by another villager, whose house was not chosen by Jing-Yi. Both families open their houses to tourists with a separate ticket charge of 5 yuan (less than US\$1) per visit.

During our interview, the owner of the Plaque Museum became agitated:

We will lose part of our freedom if we join it. It gives you only a small amount of money, just like a candy wrapper without the real candy. You can only imagine the sweet taste...Tourists are all cheated! They should be able to see more than 100 houses, but now, fewer than five houses are shown; only three of them are privately owned. (Interview with a local senior villager, 06/06/2013)

To attract visitors, he kept his house in good shape, and hired a gateman as well as several other employees to serve the guests. He transformed his house into a hostel where visitors could stay in a historic building. Also, visitors have access to the top of his house, which is the highest point of Hongcun, where the whole

picture of the village unfolds. Similarly, the owner of the Plaque Museum has carefully preserved the house and has transformed it into a Plaque Museum to attract visitors. The museum has a considerable number of plaques hanging on its walls. By creating their own private museums, these two villagers show spontaneous revitalization in an effort to resist the Jing-Yi company-led tourism developments.

With the development of tourism in Hongcun, this villager learned to appreciate the economic value that their historic homes could bring. By actively participating in heritage-making, they transformed their homes into potentially important heritage sites and put them on display. By doing so, their identity shifted from an agriculture-oriented villager to one who operates and redesigns heritage sites. Hence, the concept of heritage is channeled from UNESCO via the government officials and Jing-Yi company to the local villagers, who internalize the importance of heritage and externalise their understanding by redesigning their own house. Here, the notion of scale as supranational, national, and subnational becomes conflated and (re)shaped.

This villager's case offers a tangible depiction of the nuanced dynamics presented in the introduction and theoretical framework. Heritage is showcased not just as an official narrative but as a fluid and contested domain, evident in the owner of the 'Plaque Museum' challenging the conventional 'authorised heritage discourse'. This act pushes beyond the conventional dichotomy of top-down versus bottom-up heritage approaches, highlighting the agency of individuals situated between these poles. At the same time, the villager's decisions reflect the multi-faceted scales, demonstrating how individuals can reshape heritage perceptions by intersecting local experiences with broader national and supranational narratives. Furthermore, while previous section emphasizes the dominant role of heritage professionals, the actions of the villagers underscore the potential for individuals, even those outside expert circles, to harness their social and cultural capital to challenge established narratives and derive economic benefits. The villager's example thus provides a vivid manifestation of the complexities in heritage production and the multifaceted roles played by diverse actors.

6 Discussion and conclusion

Specific instances of heritage are meticulously chosen to symbolise broader categories of historical sites. The concept of representativeness within heritage sites reveals the intricate process of heritage selection, deeply entwined with the ideologies governing the assessment of 'What possesses significance and warrants preservation,



Fig. 1 The Plaque Museum (Source: the author)

and what does not' (Harrison 2010). These ideologies become internalised by individuals and institutions, shaping their approaches to heritage selection. The ideologies guiding heritage formation are multifaceted and exert influence over patterns of thought and behavior (Moore 2008).

The villages in southern Anhui were officially designated as heritage sites by organizations that had embraced UNESCO's guidelines. UNESCO's criteria for heritage selection directly influenced perceptions and practices related to heritage formation across various scales. In this context, the concept of scale is understood in hierarchical and profoundly shapes an actor's interpretation of heritage.

In this scenario, the process of heritage production revolves around the interpretation and execution of strategies aimed at selecting representative heritage sites at multiple stages and scales, spanning from the supranational to the national and subnational levels. UNESCO's criteria for characterizing a heritage site wielded a significant influence over government officials, both at the national and subnational levels, during the nomination of World Heritage Sites (see also Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013). Consequently, it is the supranational scale that delineates and defines what is considered valuable, deserving of safeguarding, and worthy of international recognition. Officials operating at the national and subnational tiers then internalize this supranational perspective, as they designate heritage sites possessing universal value in alignment with UNESCO's prescribed criteria.

Chinese government officials embraced this supranational perspective, actively formulating conservation strategies and accentuating the importance of a scientific approach to heritage management. Each scale operates with its own set of priorities: at the national level, the foremost concern is adhering to UNESCO's established standards. However, on a regional level, the focus shifts towards compliance with directives from higher-level government authorities and promoting collaborative efforts. In essence, instead of selecting heritage sites solely based on representativeness, provincial governments opt for sites based on the cooperative disposition of local administrations. Consequently, the essence of heritage can exhibit variations across different scales, and individuals who align themselves with the heritage ideology prevalent at their respective scale are more likely to achieve success.

For the provincial government, the capacity for collaboration, the assimilation of UNESCO's heritage discourses, and the implementation of a scientific approach to heritage management play pivotal roles in the selection of nominees. While UNESCO's heritage narratives

encouraged nations to put forward more vernacular settlements, the practical execution of heritage production served as a mechanism to regulate lower-level governments, thereby reinforcing the hierarchical administrative structure. UNESCO's regulations were embraced as tools to shape the conduct of local government officials. The authoritative influence of UNESCO is harnessed by the state apparatus to extend control over its subordinate entities, with provincial and city levels wielding authority over counties.

This paper analyses the roles played by various sectors in heritage-making via a relational reading of scale. Actors internalised the externality by shifting how they selected and packaged the 'representative' heritage sites, from the supranational level all the way down to the historical villages themselves. However, by following the rules, each actor and organisation's understanding and practice of the heritage changed across scale, which in turn, reshaped the understanding and epistemological approach to scale.

UNESCO's World Heritage listing aims to select representative heritage sites with universal value. In response to the goal of having representative heritage sites, vernacular settlements have become the new focus. Moreover, the quota system by the Cairn Decision limited the number of sites each nation-state could nominate. These rules at the supranational level influence the heritage-making strategy adopted by the Chinese state and then the regional government. By internalizing the supranational heritage habitus, the Chinese state has re-directed its attention to vernacular habitus, such as southern Anhui villages. However, in practice, the selection of southern Anhui villages was adopted as a strategy to balance China's uneven regional development. At the subnational level, the villages in southern Anhui province were selected based on the cooperativeness of their local government, as well as from having a collaborative private enterprise to actively participate and anticipate economic benefits from being listed as a World Heritage Site. Hence, on the surface it may seem that the decision to nominate Hongcun and Xidi was based on their local government's ability to follow UNESCO's rules regarding the scientific conservation plan and management. In reality, actors at various scales interpreted the rule differently as they pursued their own interests.

In this paper, we unpacked the nomination process of the Hui settlement by conceptualizing scale. This paper unpacked the complexity of scale in heritage-making, taking it as socially constructed by remains hierarchical. In unpacking the concept of scale, we described how scale enables and constrains certain ways of thinking and doing. We advocate for a reading of scale that asks questions such as, 'What do people do with scale

categories?’ (Moore 2008, 217). Hence, instead of asking what scale is, we attempt to use a scale to answer questions regarding how things came to be and their scalar effects. In the case of heritage-making, scale not only influences individuals’ and organisations’ heritage-making perceptions and practice, but also is (re)produced by individuals situated in various scale who manipulate their resources in heritage making. Each scale prioritises a different value and strategy.

This paper offers a significant contribution to heritage studies by examining the role of scale in heritage making within the context of southern Anhui historical villages in China (Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013). Through intensive five-month field research and a case study approach focusing on the nomination processes of Xidi and Hongcun, the study reveals how politics and selectivity impact World Heritage Site nominations (Zhang 2017; Wang 2019; Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013), emphasizes the critical role of diverse stakeholders in shaping heritage narratives (Waterton and Smith 2010), and demonstrates how individual efforts interact with and reshape the concept of scale (Wang and Yao 2024; Taylor 2004). By integrating the notion of scale into heritage discussions (Wang 2019), the research challenges the traditional hierarchical understanding of scale (Herod and Wright 2008), highlighting its dynamic reproduction and the interplay between individual agency, resource manipulation, and scalar power (MacKinnon 2011). This approach not only redefines scale as both an epistemological and tangible force (Taylor 2004), but also enriches the discourse on heritage making and its sociopolitical dimensions (Smith 2006), making a substantial contribution to critical heritage studies (Harvey 2015). In addition, our research is resonant with the current debate on the scale in its selective combination of the political economy approach with the post-structural approach, where scale is taken as socially constructed, yet reified (Wang 2019; Winter 2019). The approach allows analyzing cases where structure and agency work dialectically, shaping and (re)shaping perceptions of scale-ness.

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