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# “We do not care” - exploring community residents' cultural identity with the ecomuseum in the case of the Soga community

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***Abstract:*** *Located in a rural village in the Liuzhi Special Zone in Guizhou of Chian, where the local Longhorn Miao people lived, the Soga ecomuseum also serves as a repository of culture and heritage, and aims to introduce residents and visitors to the unique historical and cultural landscape. However, despite its objectives, there seems to be a disconnect between the ecomuseum's initiatives and the engagement of local villagers. This study investigates the reasons for this indifference, focusing on issues of cultural identity and recognition. Through fieldwork and interviews, it explores the villagers' perspectives on the ecomuseum, revealing a complex interplay of economic, social and cultural factors that contribute to their lack of active participation. The findings highlight the need for more inclusive practices that could bridge the gap between the goals of the ecomuseum and the needs of the local community, and suggest that conflict arises not only from a lack of awareness, but also from deeper concerns about identity and belonging.*

***Keywords:*** *Ecomuseum; community; cultural identity; heritage; ethnic minority; cultural empowerment; economic sustainability*

## 1. Introduction

Ecomuseums have emerged as innovative models of cultural preservation and community development, emphasizing participatory approaches to heritage management and the integration of local communities into the process of curation and storytelling[31]. Unlike traditional museums, which often centralize authority and display static collections, ecomuseums aim to foster a dynamic relationship between cultural heritage, local identity, and sustainable development[47]. However, the success of this model relies heavily on the active involvement of local communities[43], whose engagement and recognition are critical to its objectives. When such participation is absent or minimal, the very principles of the ecomuseum concept are challenged.

The Soga Ecomuseum, situated in the rural village of the Liuzhi Special Zone in Guizhou, China, serves as a repository of the cultural heritage of the Longhorn Miao people, an ethnic minority known for their distinctive customs, clothing, and rituals[61]. This ecomuseum was established with the dual purpose of preserving the unique historical and cultural landscape of the Longhorn Miao and introducing it to a broader audience, including residents and tourists[34]. Nevertheless, despite its ambitious goals, the Soga Ecomuseum has struggled to gain meaningful engagement from the local community it represents. The villagers’ apparent indifference to the ecomuseum raises important questions about the interplay between cultural identity, recognition, and participation in heritage initiatives.

This study seeks to investigate the reasons behind this indifference by examining the sociocultural and economic dynamics within the Soga Ecomuseum community. Drawing on field research conducted through interviews and observations, the research highlights the complex relationships between the ecomuseum’s institutional goals and the villagers’ lived realities. Preliminary findings suggest that the lack of engagement is not merely a result of limited awareness but stems from deeper issues of identity, belonging, and the perceived relevance of the ecomuseum to everyday life. By analyzing these processes, this study aims to increase understanding of the challenges ecomuseums face in achieving community integration and emphasizes the value of inclusive practices that honor and represent local populations' priorities, providing valuable insights into how cultural institutions could better align their objectives with the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve.

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## 2. Research methods

This research employs a combination of literature analysis and field research to investigate the dynamics of community attitudes toward the Soga Ecomuseum. During the initial phase, a theoretical framework was established through a comprehensive review of existing literature on ecomuseums, cultural identity, and community engagement. The theoretical insights from this review informed the research questions and methodology.

Field research was conducted in the Soga Ecomuseum community, chosen for its relevance in exemplifying challenges and contradictions in ecomuseum practices. The research focused on exploring why local residents exhibit a lack of interest or engagement with the ecomuseum. This fieldwork employed a qualitative case study approach, as such approaches are well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena in their natural contexts.

In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method. Participants included local villagers, community leaders, and ecomuseum stakeholders. The interview questions were designed to elicit perspectives on cultural identity, perceptions of the ecomuseum, and its role within the community. The selection of participants followed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that diverse viewpoints were represented. In addition, participant observation was integrated into the data collection process to capture non-verbal cues and community dynamics.

The Soga Ecomuseum community was selected due to its dual significance as a cultural heritage site and a tool for local development. Unlike traditional museums, ecomuseums emphasize participatory curation and the preservation of living heritage, making them uniquely positioned to foster cultural and social connections. However, as revealed in the research findings, this participatory approach may not always resonate with local populations. By situating the field research within this context, the study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on the role of ecomuseums in community development and cultural sustainability.

## 3. Theories and principles of ecomuseum

### *3.1 The conception of ecomuseum*

Over time, several scholarly works have developed and consolidated the idea of the ecomuseum in an attempt to define its main characteristics[6]. This evolving definition highlights its focus on integrating cultural, social, and environmental dimensions, emphasizing active community involvement in heritage preservation and sustainable development. Therefore, "Ecomuseum" can be seen as a new type of museum that takes a specific community and landscape as an organic whole, while carrying out comprehensive and dynamic protection and development of the cultural heritage of the community, as well as the related ecological environment and social environment. Ecomuseum also known as "Museums without walls", "Living museums" or “Community museums”[59].

The core principles and practices of classical museology were challenged and drastically altered by the new museology; the emphasis shifted from objects to society and from buildings to places[12]. With a renewed emphasis on museums' capacity to help society, modern museology has emerged as a key paradigm for museums throughout the globe[30].

Different from traditional museums, the ecomuseum, as a carrier, not only has the function of paying attention to and protecting collections of objects and materials as a traditional museum, but also has the function of protecting the locality, authenticity, and integrity of national culture and heritage. Hugo De Varine[59], one of the proposers of the concept, summarized a formula to distinguish traditional museums from ecomuseums:

Museums = Building + Collection + Public + Experts

Ecomuseums=Territory + Heritage + Population + Memory

After that, The Norwegian ecomuseumist Gjestrum made a further distinction between the traditional - ecomuseum[26]:

Ecomuseum ———— Traditional Museum

Heritage ——— Collection

Community ————— Architecture

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Residents ———— Audience

Cultural memory ———— Scientific knowledge

Public knowledge ———— Scientific research

Regarding the functionality of an ecomuseum, Georges-Henri Rivière[15] defined it as “the preservation, cultivation, and display of natural and cultural heritage.” France's "Ecomuseum Charter" defines it as "the study, preservation, display and utilization of natural and cultural heritage". According to Marc Maure, the ecomuseum is a "mirror", a tool to enhance self-awareness; a "window", a channel for local residents to communicate with the external environment; and a "showcase", providing a platform for the development of tourism-related activities.

From above, the potential of ecomuseums to display the changing nature of human existence by including intangible elements, such historical recollections, makes them special[28]. The prefix “eco” of the “ecomuseum” is not the concept of ecology or economics that we usually think of. It is essentially human or social ecology: community and Society, and indeed humanity, is a central part of its existence, activities and processes[24]. From the perspective of France, where the ecomuseum originated, Nelson Graburn put forward the viewpoint in his discussion of the Anji Ecomuseum that Anji’s approach is closer to the French approach, which values two types of “live” namely “livelihood” (economy) and “ecology” (natural and human environment).

Experiences in other countries show that the ecomuseums have a constantly changing life with different priority issues at different stages in the development of the museum[26]. In other words, the ecological museum is advancing with the times and adapting to local conditions.

### *3.2 The development of ecomuseum*

#### *3.2.1 Ecomuseum in the world*

In the 1960s and 1970s, after the industrial society experienced the glory of the era of industrial civilization, its negative impact on social thought, cultural heritage, ecological environment and natural resources became increasingly apparent, and a sense of crisis and anxiety emerged in society. Meanwhile, professionals argued that museums may serve as democratic and educational hubs for their local communities, separating themselves from the confines of a homogeneous consumer society[6]. Students gradually formed a trend of reflection and criticism that spread to all walks of life. The concept of “ecomuseums” was duly born in France. It can be said that they emerged from the process of postmodernism and reflection on the social function of “traditional” museums[10].

The concept of "ecomuseum" was first proposed by Hugues de Varine and George Henri Rivière in France during the 9th Congress of the International Council of Museums in 1971. In Europe, the practice of ecomuseums was initially centered in countries such as France and Italy, for example, the Musée des Alpes in France and the Tuscany Regional Museum Complex in Italy. These museums, with their 'open space' format and emphasis on the role of the local community, have achieved significant results in promoting local development and preserving traditional culture[10]. After 1980, ecomuseums were accepted by more regions in the world and developed rapidly and became popular. As of the 1990s, the number of ecomuseums worldwide reached more than 300, and they differed in specific forms and management models. From the end of the 20th century, the ecomuseum concept spread to Asia, Africa and Latin America, becoming a new direction in global heritage conservation[9].

#### *3.2.2 Ecomuseum in China*

According to Su Donghai, dubbed "the father of ecomuseums in China," the ecomuseum concept was first brought to China in 1986, and as of right now, there are at least three generations of ecomuseums [38]. Since the 1990s, China has embraced it for the protection of some ethnic communities to resolve the contradiction between poverty and historical conservation[64].

After more than 30 years of exploration, our country has now built more than 50 ecomuseums in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities and developed eastern regions, reaching the fourth generation. In 1997, the Chinese government cooperated with the Norwegian government to establish an ecomuseum in Guizhou. More than 2 years later, a total of 4 ecomuseums, represented by the Soga Ecomuseum and the Huaxi Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum, were built. They are regarded as the first ecomuseums in China. In the first generation, they started the experiment of China’s ecomuseum. The first-generation ecomuseum was founded in compliance with the ecomuseum's concept of holistic, dynamic, and local protection of cultural heritage. However, the villagers did not "become the owners" and were instead taken over by

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government agencies as "cultural agents" in the early stages of construction. Second-generation ecomuseums such as the Aolunsumu Mongolian Ecomuseum in Inner Mongolia have strengthened communication and multi-party cooperation between community residents, scholars and the government, guided villagers' local management with scientific research strength, and at the same time strengthened the cultural display function of the community. Ten "ethnic-village-type" ecomuseums were built throughout the region, and then the ecomuseums gradually expanded to Yunnan, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and other places. The third-generation ecomuseum, such as the Bulang Ethnic Museum in Xiding, Yunnan, puts management rights in the hands of villagers and realizes the concept of villagers' autonomy. Its positioning is of reference significance - establishing the grand goal of "ecological county" and determining the location of "beautiful county". Achieve coordinated development of urban and rural areas in the construction of rural areas. The fourth generation of ecomuseums, such as the Zhejiang Anji ecomuseum, has shown multi-dimensional development, ranging from rural to urban, and from the west to the east (Table 1).

*Table 1 Development history of ecological museums in China*

| period | Year | Ecomuseums | Region | characteristics of phases |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Introduction phase | 1986-1998 | Suoga Eco-Museum | Guizhou | Preliminary |
| Multifunctional development phase | 1998-2004 | Zhenshan Buyi Ecomuseum | Guizhou | To realize the overall protection function of ecological heritage |
| | | Longli Han Ecomuseum | | |
| | | Tang'an Dong Ecomuseum | | |
| | | Aolunsumu Ecomuseum | Inner Mongolia | |
| Multi-area development Phase | 2000-2005 | Kuyao Ecomuseum | Guangxi | Scholars' research and villagers' independent management interaction, with the museum to maintain the museum |
| | | Dong Minority Ecomuseum | | |
| | | Zhuang Minority Ecomuseum | | |
| | | Bulang Minority Ecomuseum | Yunnan | |
| diversify development phase | 2006- | National cultural and ecological villages, historic districts, ancient cities, etc | China | From the countryside to the city, the forms are diversified |

### *3.3 The earliest ecomuseum in China: the construction and current situation of the Soga Longhorn Miao ecomuseum*

#### *3.3.1 Soga community, residents, and ethnic culture*

The villages studied in this paper are pronounced "Suojia" in Mandarin Chinese, but "Soga" in local dialect. In order to respect the local language, this article chooses to use "Soga".

Soga, situated in the Liuzhi District of Guizhou Province, is characterized by distinctive karst geomorphological features. The longhorn Miao community residing in this region has developed a cultural framework with pronounced regional characteristics, deeply intertwined with their production practices and daily lives. This cultural form exhibits a close symbiotic relationship with the human environment and natural resources, fostering integration and dynamic interactions. Consequently, the longhorn Miao culture in Soga has evolved into a vibrant and unique cultural phenomenon[67].

#### *3.3.2 Milestones of development*

In the 1980s, after four years of visits, John Aage Gjestrum found Gaoxing Village, Soga Township, Liupanshui City, Guizhou, and chose Asia's first ecomuseum destination. At a cultural planning committee meeting organized in Guizhou province in 1986, a proposal was made for China's first ecomuseum to be created in Soga[53].

From 1980s to 1991, the evaluation of Soga is divided into three stages[26]. Evaluation of the first stage shows that the quality of life is one of the important issues facing Soga in establishing the ecological museum. The Second stage figured out that there is a line between minority heritage, arts and crafts. There for tourism exerts a strong pressure on people. Through the first and second stages of evaluation, it came out that there is a need to help improve the local quality of life, but mainly by improving to the infrastructure of the community related to the social conditions. With the efforts of scholars and local governments, the third phase of the evaluation focused on establishing ecological museums in other villages in Guizhou, drawing on Soga's experience.

Since Gjestrum's death in 2001, Dag Myklebust has taken over the position of scientific advisor to

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the Guizhou Ecological Museum, becoming the Norwegian who has visited Soga the most[23]. Dag Myklebust has more views on the protection of cultural heritage and community participation in Chinese ecomuseums represented by Soga, and has certain differences from Gjestrum's philosophy in practice. What can be seen from the construction problems of Soga ecomuseum is that Gjestrum believes that the data information center should be a cultural landscape away from people's social living space, while Myklebust believes that the data information center is the activity center and spiritual home of villagers, and therefore should enter the life of villagers.

The museological part of the seminar in Norway was organized by Mr. Gjestrum, while the young participants from the villages made a deep impression. The outcome of this was The "Liuzhi Principles" (Table 2) after the town where Soga located in[8]. From 2005, Soga is still committed to The "Liuzhi Principle" of Chinese-Norwegian collaboration, which is regarded as a pivotal document in helping to shape ecomuseum practice in China.

*Table 2 The Liuzhi Principle*

| |
|---|
| (1) Villagers are the masters of their culture and have the right to identify and interpret their culture. |
| (2) The meaning and value of culture must be connected to people and should be strengthened. |
| (3) The core of an ecomuseum is public participation and must be managed in a democratic manner. |
| (4) When there is a conflict between tourism and conservation, conservation takes precedence and cultural relics should not be sold, but encourage the use of traditional crafts to make souvenirs for sale. |
| (5) Avoid short-term economic behavior that damages long-term interests. |
| (6) Protect cultural heritage as a whole, of which traditional technology and material cultural materials are the core. |
| (7) Audiences are obliged to abide by certain rules with respect Code of conduct. |
| (8) Promote community economic development and improve residents' lives. |

## 4. Barriers to engagement: factors behind apathy and potential challenges

### *4.1 The weakening of cultural identity: Insufficient depth of participation*

The concept of ecomuseum theory underscores the pivotal role of communities in the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage, positioning them as active agents rather than passive participants[6]. However, the practical implementation of ecomuseum projects, particularly in contexts like China, reveals a significant gap between theoretical ideals and operational realities. In practice, most Chinese ecomuseums, including Soga, adopt a top-down approach led by government, influenced by the country's distinct social systems, cultural landscapes, and governance models[65]. This governance structure often relegates local communities to a secondary role, where their involvement is limited to passive participation rather than genuine co-ownership.

In the management practices of many ecomuseums in China, decision-making power is often concentrated in the hands of government authorities, external experts, or cultural institutions, leaving local communities marginalized[56]. In professor Li's review[29] of community engagement in the administration and conservation procedures of 36 World Heritage Sites in China, concluded that cultural heritage management in the nation is largely government-led, with limited community involvement. This "top-down" approach is believed to weaken community members' sense of belonging and cultural identity concerning heritage sites. Grcheva and Vehbi[16] further highlight that traditional forms of public participation are often limited to superficial involvement, with community input playing an insignificant role in final decision-making. Such practices can alienate local communities from heritage management processes, exacerbating their detachment from cultural heritage.

Within this framework, local governments assume a decisive leadership role, while external professionals dominate the design and planning processes[28]. As a result, community engagement becomes guided and superficial, rather than deeply integrative or transformative. External forces with substantial resources have entered the Soga community using a top-down approach, implementing plans based on their own frameworks and directives. Meanwhile, the Longhorn Miao, the rightful custodians of the community, are relegated to passive roles, being instructed on what actions to take. Within this context, the Longhorn Miao have gradually become alienated, exhibiting apathy toward issues concerning national cultural heritage and community development, instead prioritizing their own economic interests[67]. This dynamic weakens cultural identification among community members, as they are not sufficiently empowered to take ownership of their heritage. Instead of being "hosts" who actively shape and interpret their cultural narratives, community members are positioned as "participants" whose

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voices are often overshadowed by external decision-makers.

The author visited Soga and engaged with the director of the ecomuseum's information center, uncovering several challenges faced by the institution. These include frequent staff turnover, inadequate operational funding, and the difficulty of aligning the museum's developmental objectives with the economic needs of the local community. Over time, these issues have led to the ecomuseum's gradual detachment from the lives of local residents. Notably, the Longhorn Miao community in Soga appears to have largely forgotten the ecomuseum's presence. Many community members perceive the information center building as the entirety of the museum, rather than recognizing its broader purpose. This boundary indicates that the ecomuseum has failed to integrate meaningfully into the community and exists instead as an isolated entity, disconnected from the lives and cultural identity of the local villagers. The lack of deep participation by villagers in the ecomuseum process results in weakened cultural identity. When villagers do not feel a sense of ownership over their cultural heritage, they are less likely to develop a strong identification with the cultural content displayed in the ecomuseum. Instead, they may view the ecomuseum as an external entity that has little to do with their daily lives and cultural practices.

Soga continues to adhere to The Liuzhi Principle, which states that "Villagers are the masters of their culture and have the authority to identify and interpret their "culture." This shows that villagers are the interpreters of culture and have the right to explain culture. At the same time, the participation of the villagers' community is necessary. Therefore, the lack of deep community involvement undermines the core objectives of ecomuseum theory. Without meaningful engagement, the cultural content presented in ecomuseums risks becoming detached from the lived experiences and values of the local population. Research has shown that such detachment diminishes the effectiveness of cultural heritage initiatives in fostering long-term sustainability and resilience[48]. Residents are the masters of their own culture, while governments and experts are only temporary agents of local culture. Only when the residents change from the nominal master to the actual master, can the value of the ecological museum be truly realized and the ecological museum be truly consolidated[53]. Avoid further weakening and damage to the cultural heritage itself.

### *4.2 The Loss of Cultural Autonomy and Interpretive Authority: Perceived Deprivation and Inequality in Cultural Rights*

During one of the seminars held in Soga, a session was arranged for a representative of the local villagers to deliver a speech. However, instead of a "Tribal Elder (An older and respected person in the village who is responsible for giving advice or resolving disputes.)" or "Tribal Chief (In old times, a village chief or leader had higher authority and leadership.)" as might have been expected, a young girl took the platform. Her speech was read from a prepared script, written in polished Mandarin and filled with technical jargon, suggesting extensive pre-editing. Local officials justified this choice by citing a language barrier, explaining that many local adults primarily speak dialects that are difficult for outsiders to comprehend. When questioned about the absence of an interpreter, one official responded, "Even if he speaks in a way we can understand, do you think he would dare to stand on this stage? A man who has never left the stockade and cannot read would hardly have the courage to speak here, in front of so many foreign guests and leaders."[12]

In this context, the act of speaking has become a form of performance on the "stage," rather than a genuine expression of the local culture. The voices of the villagers have neither been truly heard nor valued. This external "packaging" undermines the villagers' authority over their own culture, transferring cultural discourse power to external authorities and reinforcing the dependency of local cultural expression on official language. The choice of language and modes of expression is a critical aspect of cultural autonomy. Language is not just a tool for communication but also a vital aspect of cultural power and personal identity[39]. As the interpreters of culture shift from villagers to officials or external institutions, the villagers become "represented" rather than representing themselves, thereby relegating them to the margins of cultural discourse. Minority cultures are not only simplified into symbolic systems that are comprehensible and acceptable to outsiders but are also forced to conform to the frameworks of dominant languages and value systems. This phenomenon exacerbates the villagers' passive position in terms of cultural rights, highlighting the lack of cultural equality and resulting in a deep sense of deprivation.

Cultural hybridity is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures. In fact, hybridity can create a crisis for the authority of cultural narratives[5]. Minority cultures are constructed as the "other" within external discourses, a process that compels their cultural symbols to align with dominant languages and value systems. This passive position effectively "others" the villagers, who, despite being

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the original custodians of their culture, must have it translated, simplified, and interpreted through external perspectives. Consequently, their culture no longer fully belongs to them but is instead "represented" within the discourse of official or external institutions. This loss of subjectivity leaves minority villagers with a profound sense of cultural disempowerment.

### *4.3 The conflict of living standards and practical needs*

#### *4.3.1 Prioritization of Daily Life*

Awareness of the protection and inheritance of national culture, as well as self-esteem and pride in national culture, are closely related to the villagers' standard of living: 'impoverished individuals may lack the means to effectively engage and may be compelled to adhere to existing livelihood strategies'. Economic demands often take precedence over cultural initiatives, as residents seek immediate financial benefits to sustain their livelihoods. The socio-economic transformation triggered by widespread labor migration has reshaped traditional wealth hierarchies, with younger, outwardly mobile generations taking over wealth creation from older residents[13]. Those left behind—mainly the elderly and children—turn to cultural performances and the sale of heritage artifacts as alternative income sources. This shift highlights how traditional culture, once a practical aspect of rural life, becomes a commodified resource disconnected from its original functions[14].

For example, in Longga Village, heritage commodification manifests in interactions with tourists. During a field visit, a young girl dressed in traditional Miao attire persistently offered to pose for photos in exchange for payment. This informal practice, culminating in a complete cultural experience involving traditional clothing and hairstyling, underscored how families adapt to financial pressures by monetizing cultural practices. Such commodification reflects a pragmatic response to economic needs rather than an active engagement with the ecomuseum as a cultural institution. While commodifying heritage offers financial opportunities and sustains cultural practices in a modern context[3], it risks distorting cultural authenticity and marginalizing local communities, particularly when benefits are unevenly distributed or externally controlled[62]. In Soga, the ecomuseum, particularly its Information Center, is often perceived as a tourist-centric "gimmick" rather than a meaningful community resource, illustrating how practical demands can overshadow cultural initiatives.

This dynamic aligns with modernization theories, which posit that traditional customs may hinder economic growth[41]. However, localized modernization, as suggested by Sahlins[42], holds potential for integrating traditional practices into contemporary contexts without losing cultural essence. In practice, however, the Soga ecomuseum struggles to reconcile these competing demands, highlighting the tension between the villagers' immediate economic needs and broader goals of cultural preservation.

#### *4.3.2 The deviation of economic interests*

Villagers often expect ecological museums to bring substantial economic improvements to their communities. Therefore, people with different benefit situations have different attitudes[13]. However, when the benefits are limited or distributed unevenly, such projects are frequently regarded as "ineffective." The "center-periphery structure" is widely observed in socio-economic and cultural conservation projects, characterized by disparities in benefits between central and peripheral areas. For instance, central regions often attract more resources and wield greater influence due to geographic advantages and resource concentration, while peripheral regions remain constrained by limited resources and poor accessibility[2]. This pattern is similarly evident in the planning and implementation of ecological museums, where central areas typically benefit more, leaving peripheral areas with minimal gains.

Taking Soga as an example, surveys indicate that Gaoxing Village, designated as a key protected area within the ecological museum (Figure 1), has become the primary site for project implementation and tourist activities due to its geographical advantages[34]. In contrast, Anzhu Village, constrained by its remote location and poor transportation infrastructure, has struggled to attract visitors and has thus failed to derive significant benefits from the project. Some residents of Anzhu Village are unaware that their settlement falls within the ecological museum's boundaries, while those who are aware express skepticism about the project due to the lack of direct economic benefits[27].

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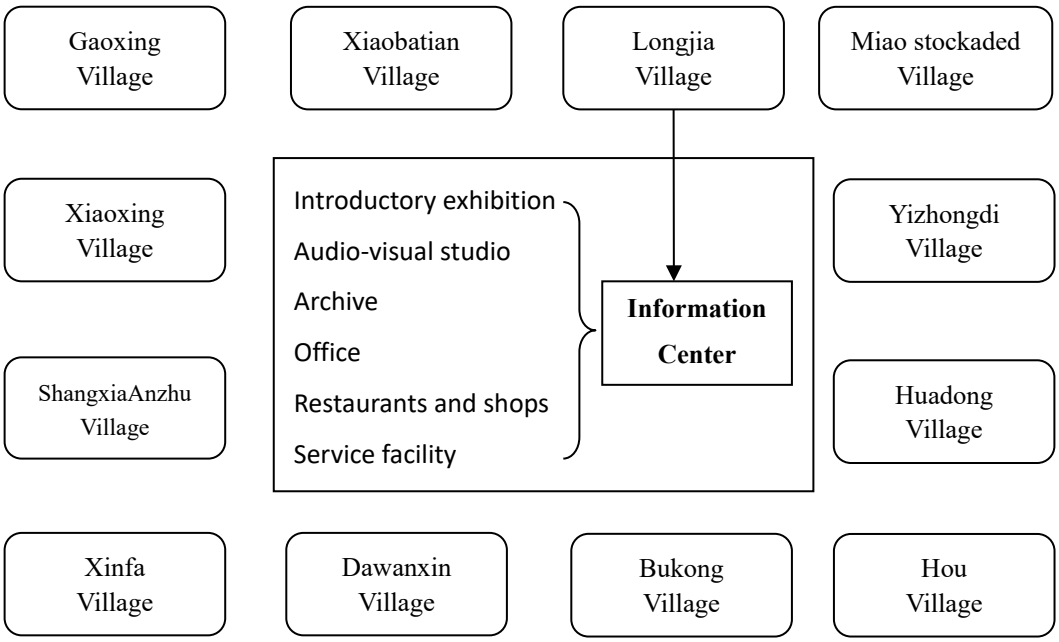


*Figure 1 The basic structure of the Soga Miao ecomuseum in Qingmiao's Stockaded Villages*

The economic marginalization of certain groups within Soga highlights how policy-driven economic shifts contribute to villagers' perceived indifference toward the ecomuseum, which ostensibly centers on their cultural heritage. Since 2002, four years after the establishment of the Soga Ecomuseum, government-supported initiatives led to the construction of two new residential zones, New Stockaded Village Number One and New Stockaded Village Number Two, in Gaoxing Village[23]. These modernized settlements aimed to improve living conditions for the local community. However, the outcomes of these relocations reveal mixed reactions and a broader economic disparity, further complicating the relationship between the villagers and the ecomuseum. For those who had not yet received policy support for relocation, opinions were polarized. Some criticized the ecomuseum as lacking tangible benefits, perceiving it as detached from their economic realities. Others, however, remained content in their ancestral homes, valuing the cultural and emotional connections over modern conveniences. Conversely, among those who had relocated, satisfaction levels also varied. While some expressed appreciation for improved housing and infrastructure, others lamented the loss of traditional lifestyles and community structures that defined their sense of identity.

This divergence in perspectives demonstrates how policies designed to modernize living conditions inadvertently shifted economic priorities. The focus on physical infrastructure often overshadowed the cultural and participatory aspects that are central to the ecomuseum model[10]. Furthermore, such developments created a rift between those who benefited from the projects and those who felt excluded, deepening economic inequalities within the community. This sense of exclusion likely exacerbated perceptions that the ecomuseum was ineffective in addressing the villagers' immediate needs or enhancing their quality of life. In the broader context of ecomuseums, scholars have noted that the success of such initiatives hinges on aligning cultural preservation efforts with the economic aspirations of the local community[50][19]. When economic benefits are unevenly distributed, as seen in Soga, the ecomuseum risks being perceived as a superficial or external imposition rather than a meaningful institution. This underscores the critical need to integrate local voices and equitable economic planning into cultural heritage projects, ensuring that their benefits resonate with all community members.

### *4.4 Questioning the Appeal of the Project*

For the residents of Soga, the Information Center is often perceived as the entirety of the ecomuseum. The exhibits it houses are limited in scope and closely intertwined with their everyday lives. As a result, the ecomuseum's function as a "display case"[7] merely showcases the villagers' own lifestyles and culture, requiring no additional attention from them. This perspective was repeatedly affirmed during the author's two visits to Soga. In 2021, an elderly resident, Mr. Zhang, who accompanied the author to the Information Center, remarked, "There's nothing much to see; just these exhibits." Similarly, a local driver,

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who had never visited the center, preferred engaging in conversations with villagers, stating, “It’s all the same.” By 2024, government official Mr. Meng conveyed to the author, “The ecomuseum is the entire Soga Village; there’s not much to see. The curator can guide you through the Information Center.”

The author observed a notable indifference among younger residents, many of whom had increasingly left the area in search of better opportunities. In contrast, elderly villagers displayed higher levels of engagement with the ecomuseum, viewing it as a platform for performances or providing cultural experiences to visitors in exchange for economic benefits. Interviews revealed two critical insights:

1) Elderly villagers value their cultural heritage not only for its intrinsic uniqueness but also for its ability to generate economic opportunities.

2) While they hope to preserve and pass down their traditional culture, they remain indifferent to the abstract concept of the “ecomuseum.”

This divergence between the community’s appreciation for its culture and its indifference to the ecomuseum underscores broader challenges in heritage management. Heritage is a dynamic and living process, not merely a static display[46]. When cultural projects like ecomuseums fail to align with community priorities, such as economic sustainability and youth engagement, they risk becoming irrelevant[49]. The Soga case highlights the need to reimagine heritage initiatives as participatory and economically integrated endeavors rather than solely preservationist ones.

## 5. Towards a Practical Framework for Improvement: A Way Forward

As mentioned above, there are two crucial elements to consider when developing a practical strategy to address the constraints and challenges that the Soga Ecomuseum is now experiencing: the restoration of cultural subjectivity and the transformation of villagers’ roles; the blending of economic values with the cultural identity of the villagers. To develop a workable framework that is more suitable for Soga, further empirical study encompassing a greater variety of pertinent theoretical viewpoints is required.

In addition to assessing local history and offering conservation strategies, ecomuseums also aim to influence community members' and local stakeholders' behavior and awareness[31]. However, after the establishment of the ecomuseum, its culture is protected on the surface, but it can also be regarded as another form of exploitation. The culture has been exposed and displayed, but the connotation of the culture, its own creativity and vitality are withering away. Conservation for conservation's sake is practically unheard of these days, and it nearly always has an economic rationale, as Timothy and Nyaupane[56] note. In this regard, the Soga ecomuseum has an advantage. Liu, a staff member at the Information Center, mentioned, “The current provision of funds to keep the Soga ecomuseum running basically relies on the government's downward allocation.” When the author asked why there is little development of government-led large-scale tourism or handicrafts here for more economic benefits, he gave an explanation, “The original purpose of the establishment is ‘protection’ - to protect this Hmong ethnic group.” Soga's Ecomuseum's original goal was to preserve the cultural and natural heritage of the indigenous people.

However, it is also debatable that when it presents these to the world as an educational tool or a performance object, as a human resource to enable the development of the local economy, it may also be an act of exploitation. At the same time, because people have realized that culture is a resource that may boost the economy, cultural legacy simultaneously turns into a human resource for economic growth[13]. It is therefore worth considering whether the current approach to ecomuseum management at Soga is the most appropriate one, and whether there are new ideas that could lead to a more sustainable development.

### *5.1 Theoretical foundation*

#### *5.1.1 New museology/Sociomuseology*

As the connection between culture and development and the importance of communities in preserving cultural assets have an influence on ecomuseum management, these concerns are gaining more attention[36]. Therefore, in order to give marginalized community groups a voice and advance the idea of "shared power" in interpretation and decision-making, efforts must be made to turn community members from passive research subjects into active players[44][35][50].

In the discourses of the New Museology, a movement that came to define worldwide museological research and professional practice over the latter decades of the twentieth century, public engagement in

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museum programs was envisioned as a key democratizing strategy[43]. At the same time, rather than being confined to an elite domain, the new museology focuses on its ability to provide necessary support to society. The evolution of museums from private venues for a select few to accessible resources for every individual, as well as the shift in their operations from depending exclusively on tangible proof to embracing a variety of social expressions[57].

A shift from traditional museums to development guided by a new museology is necessary. Not surprisingly, as previously stated, Soga villagers lack a sense of belonging to the function of the ecomuseum, and the discourse of major decisions is centralized in the hands of the government, experts - a privileged few from the outside. The value of social museology is found in its capacity to offer specific conceptual guidelines for museum operations, which in turn encourages methodological changes[30]. New museology places participation at the centre, asserting that communities should play an active role in cultural narratives, both as content producers and decision makers. While the rejection of a single authority is inappropriate in the Chinese context, it is helpful to emphasise cultural democracy through participation, and to make museums a collaborative field of diverse perspectives. This concept provides theoretical support for the Soga Ecomuseum, which can enhance the depth and breadth of community participation by increasing residents' cultural identity and sense of responsibility through co-construction mechanisms.

#### *5.1.2 Empowerment and co-governance*

What is most beneficial for empower co-governance, as well as share governance, is decentralization and multi-stakeholder participation[53]. Deliberative engagement is a strategy that emphasizes actively involving individuals in decision-making processes that impact their lives and the environment in the early phases of empowered shared governance[42]. This strategy seeks to encourage involvement and investigates how consultation may support responsible innovation. To maximize the decision-making process, it offers a forum for exchanging ideas, experiences, and information by promoting the community to participate in candid and organized conversations. Promoting productive communication amongst many stakeholders, which enables the integration of diverse viewpoints and the voicing of multiple voices, is at the core of consultative participation[17]. A sense of ownership and responsibility is also fostered by including the community in policymakers' actions. Additionally, by allowing citizens to identify issues and provide solutions, more innovative and locally focused ways may be produced. This kind of cooperation may enhance the standard of decision-making and help create communities that are more resilient and sustainable[39].

From the standpoint of power-sharing, collaborative governance is a desirable strategy as it necessitates effective accountability and shared responsibility and is predicated on the sharing and distribution of governance resources. Achieving effective governance, horizontal relationships between partners, goal-setting that is mutually agreed upon and cooperatively determined, and relational and political responsibility are its main goals[4]. The signing of a social service contract between a government agency and a non-profit organization is an example of the use of collaborative governance. The involvement of these organizations in governance issues has become more common in China as a result of this approach[18]. Although there are fewer non-governmental organizations active in the conservation of cultural heritage in China[21], and Chinese NGOs are viewed as partners of the government in enhancing social governance rather than as a way to advance political democracy[67]. But by encouraging candid and cooperative communication between business owners, local government representatives, and residents[45], a first step can already be taken. Strategies have been developed to move the ecomuseum out of the awkward position of ‘not being cared for by the subjects - i.e. the villagers’ - while at the same time promoting economic growth, addressing the high relevance of the living standard, and strengthening the local social fabric of Soga.

However, there are also challenges to the implementation of empowered co-management, firstly, the need to overcome the disconnections in the traditional model, and secondly, the need to motivate and mobilize stakeholders at different scales. Finally, there are the multiple levels of coordination and resource mobilization between different actors[24].

In summary, the successful implementation of empowerment co-governance and share governance relies heavily on sound decentralization and active multi-stakeholder participation. By encouraging communities to share knowledge and experience, consultative participation not only optimizes the decision-making process but also lays the foundation for responsible innovation. At the same time, empowered collaborative governance improves the quality of decision-making and the sustainability of the community by promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility on the part of citizens, which opens up the possibility of developing localized and innovative solutions. In addition, collaborative governance

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provides a structural framework for achieving good governance through resource sharing, accountability and a horizontal model of co-operation, especially in contexts such as China, where it has already facilitated collaboration between NGOs and the government and community to a certain extent. However, this process is not without its challenges, and therefore, in Soga, the realization of empowered shared governance requires a first step towards a locally adapted combination of consultative participation, strategic planning and collaborative governance models in order to gradually move towards the goal of more inclusive and sustainable governance.

### *5.2 Case Study - Ak-Chin Him-Dak Ecomuseum*

Community involvement initiatives driven by similar principles are essential to advancing local social education and sustainable community development in the field of ecomuseum practice worldwide[30]. Consider Arizona's Ak-Chin Him-Dak Ecomuseum, which is the country's only legally recognized ecomuseum[11]. Like the Soga community, Ak-Chin has a limited relationship with the tourism industry and ensures social development and cultural revitalization in accordance with the special requirements of indigenous tribes. Here, the ecomuseum is built and managed with the participation of community members in mind, the community has cultural autonomy, and the residents have the right and sense of self-determination. Most of the museum staff are members of the Ak-Chin tribe, who are not only responsible for the day-to-day operation of the museum, but also actively participate in the cultural and educational activities of the community, taking control of their own cultural resources. In addition, the museum enhances the connection and sense of belonging among community members by organizing various community celebrations, such as Him-Dak celebrations and Aboriginal Recognition Day celebrations. It is important to note that the AK-Chin ecomuseum is more than just a place for displaying artefacts; it also carries the burden of promoting the social and cultural development of the community. The museum helps young people understand and learn about their history and culture by providing education and training programmes. The museum is also actively involved in the community's health and nutrition programmes, such as diabetes awareness seminars and conferences, all of which contribute to the overall well-being of community members. On the economic front, although tourism is not the primary goal of the AK-Chin ecomuseum, the museum's operations do bring some economic benefits to the community. However, these gains are not the primary goal pursued by the museum, but rather serve as added value to cultural preservation and community development efforts. While agriculture and gaming are the mainstays of the AK-Chin tribe's economy, the museum focuses more on long-term cultural and social development. This economically and culturally balanced model allows the museum to be a stable driver of long-term development while respecting the core needs and cultural autonomy of the community.

Through these practices, the Ak-Chin ecomuseum not only achieves empowerment and shared governance, but can also provide a model that other similar communities, such as the Soga, can learn from, demonstrating how a resilient and sustainable system of community governance can be built through a multidimensional collaboration of culture, education, health, and economic development.

### *5.3 Soga specific recommendations with possibilities*

#### *5.3.1 Restoring the status of cultural subjects - the changing roles*

Based on the concepts of new museology and Empowerment of shared governance mentioned above, what the Soga community, currently an ecomuseum, could try is to set up a community cultural committee comprising of villagers, local scholars, and government representatives that would be responsible for planning cultural activities and making decisions on cultural preservation.

Early ideas of community participation can be traced back to the social work movement and urban reform period of the early 20th century[1]. Social workers and some social reformers at the time proposed to address many of the problems of urbanization by engaging community residents in governance and decision-making processes, thereby promoting social change and local governance. Whereas the concept of community councils can be traced as far back as the mid-20th century, especially in the context of the rise of new museology[60], the concept of community councils is closely related to the ideas of local autonomy and democratic governance[44]. The United States started to pay attention to a variety of complex models, creating conventional community planning paradigms, community development operations, and complete community action methods[63]. As society advanced, this paradigm gave rise to government-led community action programs and top-down rebuilding methods, which in turn morphed into community-led revitalization projects driven by the grassroots[69]. Since 2021, China has also

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released The 14th Five-Year Plan to provide policy support in this area, articulating a vision for future development[21]. While creative tactics like community building encourage greater social connection and mitigate the shortage of social capital, the participatory empowerment renewal model seeks to strengthen community sovereignty[70].

In terms of the traditional management composition of the Soga ecomuseum, villagers are more suitable to form a community cultural committee. And for the sparsely populated Soga community[61], it is feasible for the committee to choose members with broad representation to form it. Due to the villagers' overall low literacy level[14] and the generally shy character of the Longhorn Miao, an ethnic minority[23], it is difficult to engage in direct policy participation and direct decision-making. However, a small number of intangible culture bearers still reside in Soga. In addition to this, the community system is well defined and well protected, with Tribal Chief (In old times, a village chief or leader had higher authority and leadership), Tribal Elder (An older and respected person in the village who is responsible for giving advice or resolving disputes) and Miao Shamanic Healer (Spiritual leaders responsible for healing, organizing traditional activities and rituals) are still in their respective roles and have the authority to maintain Soga's productive life from within[61]. Therefore, villagers are able to more conveniently and easily choose spokespersons who can represent their wishes and establish community cultural committees to help them communicate their ideas on aspects they are good at, enabling more proactive expression of views and participation in community decision-making. As for the way of participation, the consultation and participation mechanism can be applied to the community cultural committees. Through regular ‘villagers’ council days’, villagers can be directly involved in the operation of the ecomuseum to optimize consensus decision-making.

#### *5.3.2 Combination of cultural identity and economic value*

Since the awareness of the protection and inheritance of national culture is closely related to the living standards of villagers, increasing incomes is one way to reduce poverty and inequality, improve assets and increase productivity[55]. According to Mohammadi et al.[32], the best strategy is to increase the resilience (vulnerability) of the households, so the villagers' cooperatives have the potential to be one of the options for Soga.

Currently, Soga has established a “1+5N” model of villagers' self-governance organization, which optimizes the channels of villagers' participation. This model is embodied in two organizations: one is the Traditional Village Conservation Committee, which is similar to the Community Cultural Committee mentioned above, with the village Party branch as the core and the Traditional Village Conservation Committee under the leadership of the village branch members. The other is the Cooperative Society, which is a collective economic organization initiated by the villagers. The cooperative is an economic organization that has set up the Gaoxing Village Market, and at the same time, it has carried out environmental improvement, and also taken measures such as exchanging reward materials through a points competition, in order to improve the quality of life of the villagers. These are not yet enough, so Soga is investing in a bed and breakfast, a performance hall, an embroidery processing workshop, and a crossbow shooting range in Gaoxing Village[61].Soga, through the cooperative, needs to help develop the village's infrastructure, facilitating farmers' access to the urban market, welfare, health, and tourism facilities, while guaranteeing that the external benefits are well distributed and have a positive impact on other applications of household livelihood assets positively[29]. In conclusion, the establishment of villagers' cooperatives in Soga helps to promote the realization of a shared governance model that facilitates the integration of villagers' cultural identity and economic values.

## 6. Conclusion

The study reveals a complex picture of the relationship between the Soga ecomuseum and the local community. While the ecomuseum seeks to celebrate and preserve local heritage, it faces challenges in engaging the villagers, who often feel disconnected from its initiatives. This disinterest can be attributed to various factors, including economic barriers, a lack of understanding, and concerns about cultural identity. Through fieldwork and interviews, it was found that many villagers do not perceive the ecomuseum as relevant to their daily lives or their sense of belonging. To address these issues, the study suggests the need for more inclusive practices, such as community-driven projects and educational programs that foster a greater sense of ownership among residents. By bridging the gap between the museum’s objectives and the villagers’ lived experiences, it is possible to cultivate a stronger connection between local culture and heritage, ultimately resolving the conflicts that arise from this disconnect. Future efforts should focus on creating meaningful dialogue between the ecomuseum and the community,

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ensuring that cultural preservation efforts are both sustainable and relevant.

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