World Heritage as discourse: knowledge, discipline and dissonance in Fujian Tulou sites

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World Heritage as discourse: knowledge, discipline and dissonance in Fujian Tulou sites

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The study examines the official discourse of World Heritage Fujian Tulou in China, and compares it with the authorised heritage discourse defined by Smith. I find that although, textually, the former is antithetical to the latter by emphasising the harmony between human habitat and nature, in practice it is as hegemonic as the Western authorised heritage discourse. The Chinese harmony discourse tends to provide a single narrative for the site’s value and privileges expert knowledge over local voices, while it empowers government by ignoring local residents’ capability within heritage conservation. Moreover, the harmony discourse frames, articulates and constitutes non-heritage practices such as public health and moral norms, to legitimise the governmental power. As a result, the harmony discourse, supposedly aiming at maintaining a harmonious society, has created profound dissonance among the inhabitants.

**Keywords:** World Heritage; Fujian Tulou; discourse; discipline; dissonance

Fujian Tulou embody the harmonious and sustainable coexistence of human habitat and nature – UNESCO (2008)

Without the World Heritage title, our life would be much better’ – A Tianluokeng resident

**Introduction**

On 7 July 2008, China’s Fujian Tulou (earthen buildings) were added to the World Heritage List by UNESCO. According to UNESCO’s official description, which derives from the Chinese authored nomination documents (2008), the Fujian Tulou are, ‘in terms of their harmonious relationship with their environment, an outstanding example of human settlement’. Reading the text, one may imagine a beautiful picture of landscape with intriguing earthen buildings and inhabitants living happily in association with their heritage. However, consideration of another event provides a very different picture. On 9 August 2008, a month after the designation, residents of a Tulou village, Tianluokeng, protested at a sightseeing platform. One villager shouted to government officials, ‘Increase the share of ticket revenue! Otherwise, we

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will burn down the platform!’ Another elder added, ‘Solve our problem, or I’ll burn down my Tulou house!’ (Chen 2009, 58).

This study aims to understand this compelling paradox: proposed theoretically as being a model community in harmony, why and how is this site of Fujian Tulou site so full of disharmony? Where does the rage of the local people come from? Is it simply because of monetary issues or has it been associated with other contexts? Finally, does it relate to the rhetorical emphasis on the notion of ‘harmony’ itself?

This paper argues that the discourse about the ‘harmonious relationship between humans and nature’, which I call the harmony discourse, is similar to Smith’s notion of ‘authorised heritage discourse’. It offers a singular value justification for Fujian Tulou and its community, forcefully imposes and manages this value on the local community’s daily life, and frames, articulates and constitutes social norms and disciplines. In theory, the discourse seems to incorporate the local community into heritage processes, whereas in practice it is imposed in a hegemonic manner. Moreover, to maintain a ‘harmonious relationship’ means that local residents have been forced to give up a number of economic activities and social habits, which results in a sense of deprivation and alienation. In response, the local community has organised protests, interpreted the site’s value in a distinctive way and re-defined the nomination process within the context of their own memories of events.

The paper will elaborate and compare the differences between the Western authorised heritage discourse, the discourse about harmony and the local discourse. It also considers the social and political contexts of the discourses.

**Authorised heritage discourse**

This study is theoretically and analytically framed with the concept of ‘authorised heritage discourse’. Smith develops this term to describe a discourse ‘that works to naturalise a range of assumptions about the nature and meaning of heritage’ (2006, 4). The authorised heritage discourse has its historical origin in elitist Western aesthetic philosophy that emphasises the supposedly innate values of historical materials created in the past. Thus, it focuses on the materiality of heritage, and it defines and values heritage primarily for its static representation of aesthetics and monumentality. In addition, the discourse maintains that current generations are responsible for the protection of heritage for future generations (Smith 2006, 29).

The authorised heritage discourse does not simply generate a language and set of concepts about heritage, but has been practised socially. This understanding derives from a theoretical and methodological framework drawn from Critical Discourse Analysis, which draws a sharp distinction from the Foucauldian concept of discourse. While the latter mostly revolves around the idea of discourse, the former moves ‘beyond paraphrasing the content of text and speech towards understanding what it is “that it is doing” in operation’ (Waterton, Smith, and Campbell 2006, 342). Using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis, Smith (2006) has observed that there is a hegemonic process whereby the authorised heritage discourse is disseminated and put into place in international conservation practices. Being institutionalised in global cultural activities, primarily through UNESCO and relevant advisory bodies such as ICOMOS and ICCROM, it has been elevated from a particular set of Western elite cultural values to universally standardised conservation principles. It has created a set of documents, principles and consensuses, such as the Venice Charter and World Heritage Convention, which are used to assimilate and
Consequently, heritage conservation is entangled with the knowledge/power nexus. As Foucault (1991) argues, knowledge is a technique of power. By manipulating particular forms of knowledge, authorities are able to claim legitimacy for their rule. Foucault’s thesis on knowledge/power is evident in heritage conservation (Smith 2004). With the knowledge of heritage defined by the authorised heritage discourse, technical experts and governmental agencies are empowered to assert their superiority in identifying and defining innate values of heritage. In addition, the knowledge/power nexus is strongly associated with governmentality. The concept, introduced by Foucault (1991), reveals the way in which governments produce organised practices through which subjects are governed. The messages produced and conveyed by authorities help them govern and manage the social behaviours of the public. In The Birth of the Museum, Bennett (1995) reveals that in the nineteenth century, modern museums in Western countries were managed and used by their governments and bureaucracies to define the relation between cultural activities and civilising values, in order to regulate the social behaviours and moral discipline of an emerging middle-class population. Consistent with Bennett’s thesis, the authorised heritage discourse creates a range of rules and principles for cultural activities, and claims that only a small group of experts are intellectually able to define and diffuse these rules and principles.

Managing heritage in such a hegemonic way, in addition, represents the affinity between heritage and nationalism. By creating a singular narrative of heritage, senses of belonging and attachment to nation are provided and authorised (Smith 2006). Moreover, heritage-based nationalism has gained global momentum. While it emerged from and is still prevalent in the West, it has remarkably been spread in Asian countries (Daly and Winter 2011).

Because of the singular narrative, the authorised heritage discourse often generates struggles. Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) observe that lack of agreement and consistency as to the meaning of heritage is intrinsic to the very nature of heritage, which leads to inevitable conflicts. While some are included in and benefit from the appreciation of cultural objects, others are excluded from and deprived by this process. However, the excluded and deprived populations do not remain silent. The knowledge and practices excluded by the authorised framework have survived and contest the authorised discourse (Robertson 2012). Also, practices aimed at correcting the authorised heritage discourse have been well developed at the international level. Non-Western experiences, Indigenous groups and local communities have increasingly been characterised as integral to heritage interpretation, conservation and management. A remarkable example is the Kyoto Vision announced at the 40th anniversary of the World Heritage Convention in 2012, which explicitly stressed the crucial role of community. It strongly advocates that:

Only through strengthened relationships between people and heritage, based on respect for cultural and biological diversity as a whole, integrating both tangible and intangible aspects and geared toward sustainable development, will the ‘future we want’ become attainable. (UNESCO 2012)

Ostensibly, the authorised heritage discourse has been gradually undermined by the increase in emphasis on cultural diversity and the inclusion of community groups.
and, Indigenous people in the management process. However, although this people-oriented principle seems more humanistic and less hegemonic, we need to examine the actual practices of the principle of heritage management, and the extent to which the communities affected are integrated into the heritage process. In this sense, Fujian Tulou provides a useful example, as its discourse of harmony appears to be in sharp contrast to the authorised heritage discourse by prioritising community over materials.

Methods

The analytical tool of this study is Critical Discourse Analysis. As mentioned above, the understanding and elaboration of discourse involves not only the text but also the practices based on it. Critical Discourse Analysis provides an approach for exploring the dialectic linkage between texts and practices (Fairclough 1995). To analyse a discourse, one must explore how it is communicated and operationalised in social processes. For heritage studies, a particular discourse is unfolded both in its language (understanding of the heritage) and practice (conservation, identification and management of the heritage). As Waterton, Smith, and Campbell (2006, 342) maintain:

It provides a method that allows the analyst to perform an interlocutory role in the dialogues between texts and social interactions in its oscillations between the close and detailed inspection of texts and an engagement with broader social issues.

Using Critical Discourse Analysis, I will identify and explicate three interlocking aspects of the discourse of Fujian Tulou:

1. Text: official value description of Fujian Tulou; and how this value justification relates to the Chinese context and distinguishes it from the Western-centric discourse.
2. Dissemination of the text: with what strategies do authorities diffuse and implement the text of heritage values into the local community? In this section, another Tulou building, Shengwu Lou, which is not on the World Heritage list, will be introduced for comparison, specifically to assess how the harmony discourse explains its exclusion.
3. Response: how do local communities respond to the harmony discourse?

Three major sources of data are used. First, the text of the discourse is primarily taken from UNESCO’s official justification of the site, which itself is based on the Chinese nomination documents, and the file for Fujian Tulou’s World Heritage nomination, both of which are available in English. Second, official documents in Chinese, including announcements, regulations, news reports, papers and speeches, reflect how government bodies and experts understand and use the harmony discourse of Fujian Tulou. Third, ethnographic work and structured interviews helped me to observe and explore how officials and local inhabitants understand and respond to the harmony discourse, and how the lives of local residents have been influenced by it. To be specific, my fieldwork was conducted over two spells of 30 days each in autumn 2010 and autumn 2011. I was located primarily in Tianluokeng. Because it is 10 km from Shengwu Lou, I travelled back and forth during my stay. I chose the two sites because they had comparable associations with the World Heritage designation: while Tianluokeng’s Tulou cluster is among the designated...
properties, Shengwu Lou is not designated. Six officials and thirty-three local residents were interviewed from Tianluokeng and Shengwu Lou. Among the officials, two were from the state level, two were from the provincial level, one was from Tianluokeng and one was from Shengwu Lou. Fourteen local interviewees were from the community of Shengwu Lou and the other nineteen interviewees were from Tianluokeng.

Heritage discourse in Fujian Tulou: a discourse of harmony

The harmony discourse

Fujian Tulou buildings, literally ‘earthen buildings’, are a type of vernacular residential building in southeast China constructed with rammed earth and wooden frameworks. According to UNESCO’s official description (2008), Fujian Tulou buildings are ‘exceptional examples of a building tradition and function exemplifying a particular type of communal living and defensive organisation, and, in terms of their harmonious relationship with their environment, an outstanding example of human settlement’. In this understanding, it is the human dimension — communal living, defensive organisation and human settlement — that constitutes Fujian Tulou’s outstanding value. The buildings themselves are not valuable without the intangible humanistic associations. The idea of ‘harmony’ used here was imported directly from the Chinese nomination documents.

In addition, throughout the file prepared for the nomination of Fujian Tulou as a World Heritage site, edited by Chinese authorities, harmony between nature and human life is a central concept. For example, the file characterises the Tulou to ‘stand for the harmonious co-existence between man [sic] and nature, maintaining the traditional building style, particular village pattern, household compact communities and local folk-customs’ (SACH 2008, 279–280). In this text, harmony not only exists abstractly in the relationship between communal living and the environment, but is also a representation of the dynamic and interactive relation between physical structures and social and cultural elements.

The word ‘harmony’ not only points to the relationship between human society and nature, but also entails the coherent social fabric within society. The nomination file states that ‘the architectural form and internal layout of Tulou well embodies the ethical concepts of Confucianism, such as reverence for ancestors, [and] staying in harmony with other family members’ (SACH 2008, 83). Because of this embodiment of harmonious human relationships, Fujian Tulou is regarded by the government as a symbol of the construction of a ‘harmonious society’. The Chinese government’s official website, quoting an expert’s statement, describes Fujian Tulou as ‘most useful for the constitution of harmonious society’ (Wu and Meng 2008). Therefore, the official discourse of Fujian Tulou can be called ‘the harmony discourse’.

The harmony discourse vs. the authorised heritage discourse

Compared to the authorised heritage discourse, the harmony discourse has certain specific Chinese characteristics, which is a manifestation of Asian traditions in heritage conservation. As Byrne (2008, 2011) observes, in China in particular and in Asia in general, attitudes and values dynamically sustained by culture play a more important role in heritage conservation than material forms of the heritage site. Local
people ‘have been acting as conservationists since long before the conservation concept appeared in the West’ (Byrne 2011, 8). Similar to Byrne’s observation, the emphasis on local community and living tradition in the value justification of Tulou provided by the Chinese Government establishes a clear distinction from the Western-centric authorised heritage discourse. The harmony discourse of Fujian Tulou is non-Western, or more specifically, Asian derived. According to this discourse, it is the people, as well as their values, settlements, living traditions and customs, lifestyle and other factors that enable a heritage site to be identified as culturally significant for protection.

However, the harmony discourse of Fujian Tulou is also to some extent similar to the authorised heritage discourse. First, it is still a singular narrative claim on the value of heritage, instead of opening up room for multiple narratives. The designation is still a top-down imposition with a universal framework. Second, it is embedded in a grand nation-building narrative. Constructing a ‘harmonious society’ is an official line of propaganda initiated in 2004 by Hu Jintao, China’s President between 2003 and 2012. The initiative of the ‘harmonious society’ marked Hu’s acquisition of political power, and is remembered as a significant legacy of his term in office. Situated in this context, a heritage site claiming to represent ‘harmony’ inevitably entails a great deal of political implications.

The preceding comparison between the harmony discourse and the authorised heritage discourse is based on textual materials. However, the actual practices of the harmony discourse in conservation and management need to be explored, which will be the task of the next section. As we will see, the harmony discourse, identical to the authorised heritage discourse, is a hegemonic one that is forcefully imposed by authorities. As a result, the harmonious human factors, which are supposedly integral to the heritage site, have ultimately been removed from it.

Discourse imposition and moral regulation

Once heritage knowledge is created by elites, the access to the knowledge is controlled by them (Lowenthal 1998, 90). This knowledge, as a result, provides epistemological frameworks to sanction and disseminate the authorised meanings of heritage sites to locals (Smith 2006, 51). In Fujian Tulou, by articulating heritage values through the expert discourse about harmony, the authorities first constrain what forms of life can be considered heritage, and second associate the discourse with non-heritage social acts.

Imposition of the harmony discourse

According to the harmony discourse, the main principle for Tulou’s conservation is to maintain the ‘harmony’ between the site’s physical environment and human activities. China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage requires that ‘historic sites under protection at all levels should maintain the initial residential nature as much as possible’ (SACH 2008, 291). A series of regulations has been promulgated to restrict local residents’ heritage-related activities. There are strict rules for Tulou owners, including their responsibility for the protection and maintenance of the buildings. For instance, it is forbidden to make adjustments to the structure of Tulou (SACH 2008, 291), and ‘Raising of domestic fowls is forbidden inside Tulou, as is the act of dumping wastewater and trash inside Tulou’ (SACH 2008, 116). Further,
‘Construction of new buildings, cutting into the mountains, quarry works, deforestation and pasturing in the protection scope’ are prohibited (SACH 2008, 75).

To some extent, these regulations are reasonable. What makes them hegemonic, however, is the procedure through which they are developed and implemented. The authorities control the power of making and defining the principles for locals, whereas the locals are only ‘educated’ and ‘encouraged’ to live in such manner (SACH 2009[2007], 622). The authorities’ attitudes characterise the locals as ignorant about their heritage’s aesthetic values. Although it was the residents’ architectural and communal practices that contributed to Tulou’s ‘outstanding universal value’, they have become the immediate target group of the harmony discourse. As an official document claims:

Every year, around the ‘Cultural Heritage Day’ in June, government servants are sent to towns and villages where Tulou are located to promote the idea of protecting Fujian Tulou … The idea that it is every citizen’s obligation to protect cultural heritage has become popular. (SACH 2008, 124)

This statement about behavioural norms reflects the Foucauldian concept of governmentality. Local people in towns and villages are governed through the idea of heritage conservation, which is ‘promoted’ by the government servants as an expert knowledge. However, as my interviews reveal, before the World Heritage nomination, Tianluokeng villagers voluntarily carried out renovations and maintenance of the buildings. Since the buildings were officially designated as being historically and culturally significant, the act of maintenance has been defined as a type of ‘obligation’ for the inhabitants. Once it becomes an ‘obligation’, the ‘conduct of conduct’ has been framed with a set of normative regulations (Foucault 1991). Moreover, the local inhabitants, with the routinised mode of conduct articulated by the authorities, are characterised as ‘citizens’, a term that makes them closely involved in the nation-building process.

The restrictions and official statements show how expert knowledge maintains its power over the local community. It first creates an impression that local people are unable to preserve their own heritage; then it characterises the authorities as the only party able to provide this knowledge for the local community. The idealised ‘harmonious lifestyle’, as a result, is underscored by the state authorities to create a fossilised tradition for the local communities. The residents, under this discursive frame, are forced to perform an ‘authentic’ mode of living, without being heard.

**Heritage conservation and social discipline**

Heritage conservation is also rhetorically characterised as a manifestation of public responsibility and social discipline. According to the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP, ‘Any behaviour that damages and devastates cultural heritage is ignorant and backward, and it must be condemned by future generations and by all mankind’ (2009[1989], 244). In addition, the protection of cultural heritage is associated with development in scientific knowledge and rationality (State Council of PRC 2009[2005], 544).

Heritage practices are further articulated as being interwoven with issues of personal morality and the society’s level of civilisation. Heritage sites’ social value, according to an official publication, lies primarily in their function in ‘constructing
civilised society, [and] promoting the quality of citizens’ (Li 2007, 41). Moreover, in Regulations on the Protection of Hakka Tulou in Yongding County (SACH 2008, 320–322), Fujian Tulou conservation is explicitly articulated to be integral to the construction of a normative system of public hygiene and neighbourhood safety: it states that the residents should ‘foster a good habit of hygiene’ and ‘should abide by social ethics’. Even the requirement to ‘respect the aged and cherish the young’ is mentioned in the regulations. Moral regulations are included to ‘help mediate disputes among the residents, resolve conflicts and bring about a harmonious neighbourhood relationship’ (SACH 2008, 321). At the end of the document, there is a section titled ‘Residents’ Pledges on Civilization’, in which the residents agree to be ‘civilised and polite; to receive guests with warmth and keep good neighbourly relations’, and to ‘pay attention to public hygiene’ (SACH 2008, 321).

By associating heritage conservation with morality and social discipline, the state creates a model of social action. At a broader level, the moral regulation is essential to the state-making process. The modern Chinese state has been shaped by normative agendas with moralist discourses (Thornton 2007). It aims to create a specific moral vocabulary about virtue and deviance in order to construct and maintain social discipline and political order. Measures on public health, for instance, are linked to state-building efforts on the part of the authorities (Riley 1987; Lupton 1995). As the aforementioned regulations and documents reveal, heritage conservation is tightly associated with issues of public health in China, by which the authorities legitimise and consolidate the state-building process.

Along with the state-building process, civic responsibility is underscored in heritage conservation practices, as well exemplified by the slogan, ‘Everybody is responsible for cultural relics protection’ (State Council of PRC 2009[1981], 112). This is the most widely used slogan about cultural conservation in China, and every interviewee was familiar with it. Moreover, the ‘responsibility’ must be disseminated and imposed on the local communities from the top down. For instance, in 2006, the state required local governments to ‘strengthen the senses of mission and responsibility of the people, in order to incorporate the idea of cultural heritage appreciation, caring, protection, conservation and rescue into people’s minds’ (SACH 2009 [2006], 550).

In comparison to the underscored responsibility, however, the local’s basic rights of culture and heritage are somewhat neglected. There are very few mentions of local rights in official documents about Fujian Tulou. The overwhelming emphasis on responsibility reveals that, in spite of the human-centric harmony narrative, the local community has not yet been incorporated into the process of heritage management.

These non-heritage issues – behavioural norms, moral codes, public health and civic responsibility – are associated with the harmony discourse because they are believed to be integral to the constitution of the national initiative of a harmonious society. With this logic, Fujian Tulou’s harmony not only resides in the relation between human and nature, but also entails social and political dimensions. In order to reach this harmony, the locals should conform to the regulations imposed on their life. Although the discourse of harmony implies something different from the authorised heritage discourse advanced in the textual materials, it is still an authorised and hegemonic heritage discourse.²
The harmony discourse of Fujian Tulou is challenged by local people in two primary ways. First, they give different accounts of its inner value and meaning. Second, they complain and organise protests about the implementation of the discourse and the practices it frames. In this section, I will elaborate the alternative accounts and compare them with the harmony discourse. The next section will discuss social dissonances.

The harmony discourse of Fujian Tulou serves, among other things, to provide an explanation for the selection of the 46 nominated Tulou buildings from among a total of more than 3000. The notion of nature–human harmony is used as an essential concept to underpin the selection. This can be demonstrated by way of the example of two sites, Tianluokeng Tulou Cluster in Nanjing County and Shengwu Lou in Pinghe County, 10 km away from Tianluokeng. Whereas Tianluokeng is a World Heritage site, Shengwu Lou was excluded from the nomination process.

During my visits, Shengwu Lou had only two households and ten residents left, with most of its rooms being vacant. Most inhabitants had moved to cities for economic reasons. What was left, however, was an aesthetically compelling building. Judging Shengwu Lou on the basis of its aesthetic merits, its material elements represent unique inner values. It is exceptional because its interior decoration contains more than 600 pieces of carved wood elements with unique designs. It is described as ‘the most exquisite Tulou for its decorative arts’ by Chinese Tulou scholar Huang Hanmin (Global Heritage Fund 2009). Moreover, public appreciation of Shengwu Lou was originally equivalent to, or even higher than, that of Tianluokeng. In 2001, Fujian Daily reported that a number of Fujian Tulou buildings were designated as State Priority Protected Sites. In this paper, Shengwu Lou received more attention and it was valued as being aesthetically more significant than Tianluokeng (Lin 2001) (Figure 1).

Shengwu Lou was, however, excluded from World Heritage nomination because, according to the authorities, it does not fit the ‘harmony’ discourse. Only two households living at the site is seen by the harmony discourse as the lack of human factors, which prevented the site from being recognised as a harmonious site. The expert knowledge sees Shengwu Lou’s lack of human activity as the main reason for its exclusion from the World Heritage nomination. According to a provincial expert during interview, lack of human activity reflects the absence of nature–human harmony. He suggested that despite the aesthetically pleasing interior decoration, Shengwu Lou is not culturally qualified for World Heritage because it does not meet the UNESCO justification that underscores harmony between nature and human activities. In comparison, he suggests that Tianluokeng, which has 111 households and 464 people living in the nominated properties has human activities that are considered to contribute to the idea of harmony.

However, as interviews with locals reveal, local accounts of the World Heritage nomination differ from the official discourse. Harmony is not a key consideration in these accounts. Many locals account for the nomination decision as a result of bureaucratic process. Residents in Shengwu Lou and its neighbourhood believe that Shengwu Lou should have been included in the nomination. As a senior citizen states, ‘Shengwu Lou is one of the most valuable Tulou properties in China because of its excellently preserved earthen structure and wooden frame’. Most of the locals do not mention the term ‘harmony’ in their personal accounts. They insist that
Fujian Tulou’s nomination was overly bureaucratically managed, and decided solely by a small number of county officials based on their personal understanding (often misunderstanding) of World Heritage. As some recall, during the first wave of nomination, the decision was not about which Tulou buildings should be selected, but about which counties would participate. Pinghe County, where Shengwu Lou was located, was originally considered as a candidate. However, having estimated that the basic expenses of the drafting and translation of nomination files might cost RMB500,000 (US$60,000), Pinghe County Government decided it was not worth spending that much on the project and the county eventually withdrew the nomination.

As a resident recalls, while other counties were busy making nomination files, a county official of Pinghe said, ‘Tulou can’t feed you!’ This is a Chinese expression that in English would be equivalent to ‘Tulou can’t make money’. Because of this opinion, a number of Tulou buildings in Pinghe County were replaced with banana or orange trees, which the government thought would ‘feed’ people (Ma 2011).

Some locals agree that the lack of human activity is a reason for Shengwu Lou’s exclusion. However, this account does not involve the term ‘harmony’ but comes rather from a practical perspective. For example, a local inhabitant maintains that lack of human activity entails less maintenance and care for the buildings. He suggests that smoke kills worms and insects that eat the wooden frames of the buildings, and thus the lack of human activities such as making fires for cooking will lead to the deterioration of the wooden structure. In addition, a larger community size means more frequent protective checking and monitoring. In this sense, the exterior appearance and surroundings of Shengwu Lou have suffered from various kinds of damage and pollution.

Figure 1. Interior view of Shengwu Lou, in which only a few apartments are still in use.
Local accounts of the reason for Tianluokeng’s designation also differ from those proposed by the harmony discourse. The most dominant explanation is that Tianluokeng’s buildings are more ‘beautiful’ than the excluded ones. As one stated, ‘Tianluokeng is of course much better than Shengwu Lou, because the buildings here are more historic and aesthetically pleasing than Shengwu Lou’. Asked to explain in what way they are more aesthetically pleasing, the respondent answered, ‘Shengwu Lou is just not as beautiful as ours!’ Among the inhabitants, very few mentioned the term ‘harmony’ in their personal accounts (Figure 2).

Table 1 shows a comparison between the harmony and local discourses. In spite of the distinctions, the local inhabitants’ knowledge and voices are largely ignored by the authorised narratives, which merely stress the significance of ‘harmony.’

**Dissonance**

As demonstrated by Di Giovine (2009, 142), once a site is designated as World Heritage, it no longer belongs exclusively to the locals, and the relevance of this is evident in the case of Fujian Tulou. Although the lands on which the Tulou areas are situated are legally owned by the peasant collectives (SACH 2008, 97), since the World Heritage designation the real ownership has become a bone of great contention. This is heavily constitutive of what Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) would term a dissonant heritage, and largely associated with local politics and power relations between the official discourse and the local community.

In Tianluokeng, most residents are now unhappy about heritage management. A villager in Tianluokeng insisted that the buildings, even the ‘inharmonious’ ones, should be their own property:

Figure 2. Tianluokeng Tulou cluster. This view of the five buildings shows how the site could be articulated as an example of architecture-nature harmony.
But the government doesn’t think so. They think it is their property. They say that human lives are an integral part of the heritage. But we are treated just as objects, not as humans. Everyone has forgotten that these are our own properties. The culture and heritage are made by us, not them. Now they sell it to the world. And we have been forgotten.

In 1999, the year when Nanjing County decided to nominate Tianluokeng for World Heritage, the residents’ lives began to change. Their livelihood used to be heavily based on the cultivation of tea, but this is at stake because the formerly used tea processing buildings outside Tulou buildings are seen to be ‘inharmonious’ and have been dismantled. The prohibition on raising domestic fowls further compounds the difficulties. The originally rich fields have been deteriorating. As a result, dissent has become widespread: ‘They [the government] think we are resources’, says a respondent, ‘they just invest money and extract profits from us. But they never care about our lives and feelings!’

Before 2008, the local community would collect 20% of the ticket revenue, which they thought too little. In 2008, believing the buildings to be their own properties, they organised to claim 70% of the ticket revenue from the county’s bureau of tourism (Chen 2009). After their claim was rejected by the government, as the quotes at the beginning of the paper illustrates, some residents (supported by most residents) went to the official entrance of the village and charged tourists an extra amount of money, failing payment of which the tourists were forbidden to enter the village. Soon, 18 villagers were arrested and charged with ‘disrupting social order’. Consequently, most families of the community have turned their backs on visitors. Although the 18 arrested activists were eventually released, deeply anchored tensions remained. As a result, Tianluokeng is now filled with disorganised commercial stands (Figure 3).

‘The key point is not ticket share’, says a villager to me, ‘it’s about life’. Life is strictly regulated with the harmony discourse. For example, a resident and peddler at Tianluokeng complains that he and his family are required to live in their original residence, and his expansion of the house was forcibly dismantled by the government. As the family has now expanded, he is unable to find a place for his children to live.

A ‘positive’ consequence of the hegemonic harmony discourse is that the dissonance serves as social glue for the community. By circulating the information of the campaign, and by recounting the memory of this occasion, the inhabitants in

<table>
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<th>Why is Tianluokeng included?</th>
<th>‘Harmony’ discourse</th>
<th>Local discourse (Shengwu Lou)</th>
<th>(Tianluokeng)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>The traditional layout of the village still keeps a harmonious relationship with the natural environment</td>
<td>Bureaucratic process</td>
<td>Just beautiful</td>
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<td>Human activity is still vital, which keeps the ‘harmony’</td>
<td>More residents means more daily care of the building</td>
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| Why is Shengwu Lou excluded? | Lack of human activity, fails to meet ‘harmony’ | Lack of residents means lack of daily maintenance | Not as beautiful as Tianluokeng |

Table 1. Authorised harmony discourse vs. local discourse.
Tianluokeng have reinforced solidarity within the village. As a villager stated, ‘what they [the government] did just made us stay more tightly together’.

During my interview, the word most commonly used by the local residents to distinguish between themselves and the government was ‘class’. One respondent told me, ‘We are deprived because we are the lowest class. The government just wants to cater to the upper-class, who have money, power, doing whatever they want’. Issues of class have been analysed in heritage studies and have been shown to be significant in defining conflicts over heritage (e.g. Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Smith, Shackel, and Campbell 2011). Similarly, Fujian Tulou bears witness to how local people use the rhetoric of class deprivation to create self-identity and to articulate social relations. For example, Tulou residents tend to portray anyone who has a close relationship with the government as upper-class. A resident who maintains a close relationship with the government and remains neutral during the conflict is disliked by other residents, who call him a traitor. One villager told me, ‘Don’t interview him, he is part of the government. He belongs to that class’. In addition, some even use class rhetoric to propose the need for a social revolution: ‘The society now is much like that before the Communist Revolution’, one villager put it. ‘We may need a new revolution to overthrow the corrupted government’.

The class-segregation between the locals and the government is also manifested in, and partly derived from, the government’s own discourse. According to an official report, Fujian Tulou’s World Heritage nomination was ‘highly supported and understood by both cadres and local residents’ (Zheng 2008, 69). Another official report reviewed the nomination process, in which, ‘both cadres and ordinary people have one purpose, unified and devoted to winning the success of the nomination’ (Zheng, He, and Chang 2008, 4). By separating cadres from ordinary residents, and
by privileging the former over the latter, the statements implied that authorities and local inhabitants resided in two hierarchical levels of local society. Local residents were described as being merely motivated to ‘fully support and recognise’ the government’s protection projects (SACH 2008, 88).

This is again a manifestation of the hegemonic harmony discourse, which situates authorities as the leaders of heritage nomination and the locals as supporters. While the former are authorised to claim power to manage heritage conservation, identification and nomination issues, the latter are disempowered in this process.

Conclusions

This study reveals a dangerous trend in heritage practices: an attempt to modify/correct the authorised heritage discourse may fail by creating an even more hegemonic discourse. The official discourse of Fujian Tulou – harmony between nature and community, as well as the emphasis on human activity in a material site – is ostensibly different from the Western authorised heritage discourse defined by Smith (2006). However, the harmony discourse about Fujian Tulou resembles the authorised heritage discourse in that it privileges expert knowledge but dismisses local alternatives. This discourse is largely hegemonic and imposed on local inhabitants by the elite group. Local life is ‘forced’ to keep the imagined and idealised ‘harmony’. It is also associated with the state-making process. World Heritage Fujian Tulou is utilised by the Chinese government as a tool to define and regulate social behaviours and moral disciplines.

Hence, we should re-visit the academic reflection on the West’s hegemonic imposition of heritage discourses on non-Western cultures. I agree that the reflection should be carried out by acknowledging the richness and distinctiveness of Asian heritage practices (Byrne 2008, 2011; Daly and Winter 2011). However, scholars need to note that hegemonic inequality does not only arise from relations between the West and non-West. Rather, it has been anchored within non-Western nations. As we see from the Fujian Tulou case, it is the Chinese experts and authorities, not the West, who impose the harmony discourse on the local community. Whereas the text of the harmony discourse is something of a convergence of Asian traditions and UNESCO’s rhetoric of community, the practice of this discourse is exclusively managed by the state authorities. In such a sense, the harmony discourse is the equivalent of, or even more hegemonic than, the Western authorised heritage discourse.

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Notes

1. The value justification of Fujian Tulou, though provided by UNESCO on the World Heritage Centre’s website, is originally developed by China’s State Administration of Cultural Heritage. Therefore, regardless of the publisher, any narrative of Fujian Tulou in this paper is the Chinese understanding of the buildings.
2. Fujian Tulou is not the only Chinese World Heritage Site whose narrative is articulated for national purposes. Since China’s ratification of the World Heritage Convention in 1985, it has actively employed the Convention for its nationalistic ends. A number of scholarly works have demonstrated this, such as Hamlish (2000) on the Forbidden City, and Hevia (2001) on the Mountain resort and its outlying temples in Chengde.

3. All quoted texts were collected from my interviews with officials, professionals and local inhabitants. To keep their personal information confidential, anything that may identify them is concealed in this paper.

4. A datum that can be found in SACH (2008, 52).

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