

BASKETRY AND FESTIVAL AMONG THE DONG (KAM) PEOPLE*

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ABSTRACT

While fundamental to the practical concerns of everyday life, bamboo baskets also play important roles within festivals staged by the Dong (Kam) people of South-

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west China. Drawing upon fieldwork in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and in adjacent Liping County, Guizhou Province, this article will evoke and contextualize some of the ways that bamboo baskets are bought and sold, used and put on display within festivals held in this mountainous corner of China and the Southeast Asian Massif.

KEYWORDS: celebrations • basket making • ethnic festivals • intangible cultural heritage • parade costumes

INTRODUCTION

A Xinhua news agency report for March 11, 2016, shows a group of Dong (Kam) men and women performing a circle dance. The dancers are gathered in a plaza or square in the township of Meilin, in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, in China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. While scattered spectators look on from the outer edge of the plaza, three concentric rings of men and women in Dong dress hold hands and dance. At the center of the plaza is a circular, raised platform towards which the dancers face. At the center of all of these circles is a tree neatly trimmed as a tidy sphere of foliage. Two dignitaries – a man and a woman – stand on each side of a rectangular table on which bowls – which appear to hold offerings – are placed. Before that table, on a lower table, appears to be a large black pig ready to be butchered. A small staircase breaks the circle of the platform at the right, to the front of the tables and the pig. Perhaps singing or coordinating all of this activity, a woman with a megaphone stands near the pig at the top of the small staircase. At the outside of this raised platform is one final circle, a circle of circles within circles. Forty or more round, flat basketry trays of bamboo are lined up, side by side, all the way around the circumference of the raised platform from one side of the staircase to the other. One cannot make out in the photograph available online exactly what the baskets hold, but many of them appear to have red ribbons or wrappers in them and, in context, food or other offerings seem the most likely contents. While not a unique event – festivals including ritual elements, special clothing, and circle dances are widespread among the minority nationalities of Southwest China – the scene captured from above by the Xinhua photographer, Huang Xiaobang, is clearly a moment in which something special is going on (Huang 2016: 9).¹

Scholarship by folklorists and ethnologists on the topic of festival repeatedly stresses the ways in which festival intensifies everyday life. This has many dimensions: less, and then more, food and drink, better, newer clothes, more dancing, more games, more socializing, more ritualizing, more courting, less sleep, more formality and more informality too. The catalogue of techniques used repeatedly to make festival, and associated ritual, vivid and meaningful is deep (Stoeltje 1992). Display and performance are prominent among these tools. Across the rural uplands of Southwest China, one can see baskets at work, in a variety of contexts, every day (Jackson and Zhang 2019). But if one wanted a more condensed picture of the social lives of bamboo baskets, the region's festivals provide a particularly rich vantage point. When the Dong and their neighbors come together densely, to share experiences intensely, they bring their baskets with them. If they do come empty handed, they are likely to take home new baskets when the festivities subside.



Photo 1. Festival scene at Meilin township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

This study is derived from a larger research project on basketry in Southwest China that we and our collaborators have been involved in since 2013 (Kay 2022; Zhang et al. 2022; Wuerxiya et al. 2022).² Our treatment of basketry use in festival can be situated within a broader consideration of baskets-in-use among the Dong people and in Southwest China more generally. In turn, discussion of basketry uses fits within the larger chain of human action that moves from gathering bamboo as a key raw material through manufacture, then circulation through both gift and sale, and then on to various forms of use and display. Use and display is, then, followed by disposal and decay. The sequential lives of things has been a useful framework for folkloristic studies of material culture, as exemplified, for instance, in the work of folklorists Pravina Shukla (2008) and Henry Glassie (1999).³ This heuristic guides our studies of basketry in the Chinese section of the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud et al. 2016). This essay on one folkloristically neglected, and perhaps taken for granted, aspect of basketry use is an excerpt from broader research and writing that is still ongoing.

Before introducing basketry and the Dong people, we situate our work within the region that is our focus. Framed initially by anthropologist Jean Michaud, the Southeast Asian Massif is a cultural and geographic construct that brings together into a common frame of reference those societies residing in the upland portions of mainland Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Southwest China (Michaud 2010; Michaud et al. 2016). As an emplaced schema for research, the Southeast Asian Massif helps us appreciate the connectivity that upland peoples share as well as the common environmental and social dynamics that they have long had to face. Among these common social and historical dynamics are often vexed relations with lowland states. This last theme connects the

human geographic concept of the Southeast Asian Massif to the interpretative concept of Zomia, as developed in the work of Willem van Schendel (2002) and James C. Scott (2009; 2016). For more on these frameworks, we direct you to the burgeoning scholarship that exists for both with the warning that Zomia is contentious.⁴ For one reason why you should want to know more about this region, we redirect your attention to the tragic news steadily coming in from places like Manipur in Northeast India and the upland regions of Myanmar/Burma (Travelli and Raj 2023; Wee 2023). Bracketing out the current violence happening in parts of this region for a moment, know that bamboo baskets of the general sort that you will see in our photos are widely found throughout this larger region (Zhang et al. 2022). In tandem with our comparative studies of basketry in the Southwest China sector of the larger Southeast Asian Massif, our collaborator Jon Kay is well-along in a study of basketry among Chin residents of Central Indiana, in the United States. The basket makers with whom he works there are migrants escaping violence and persecution in Chin State, Myanmar/Burma (Kay and Jackson 2024a; 2024b). When they hold festivals in their new home of Indiana they too, like the Dong people to whom we now return, put their basketry on display as heritage objects.

Next, we situate our paper in more local geographical and cultural context. The people known to outsiders as the Dong, and to themselves as Kam, reside primarily in a contiguous territory in Guizhou and Hunan provinces and the adjacent Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in Southwest China.⁵ They are “the northeastern most Tai-speaking highland minority group, located in China” with a population of just under three million as of 2010 (Michaud et al. 2016: 129). The Dong reside in upland locations within the Southeast Asian Massif where they practice irrigated rice cultivation and are, in numerous but not all locales, being pulled into commercial heritage-tourism activities (Photo 1). The Dong are one of the 56 nationalities, or ethnic groups, recognized officially by the People’s Republic of China. On the basis of dialect and other cultural features, the Dong can be characterized as having two logical, geographically manifest, sub-groupings – northern and southern (Geary et al. 2003).

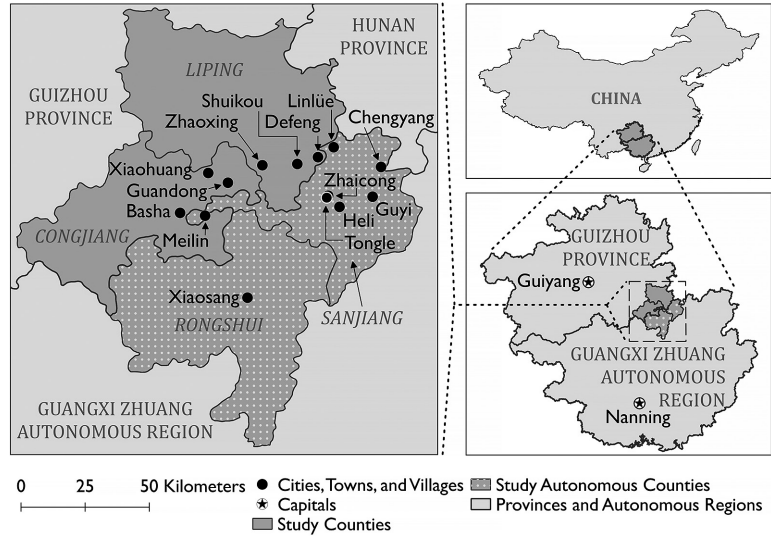


Figure 1. Study locations in the southern Dong Settlement Area. Map by Tanager Mapping.

Our experiences among the Dong are limited to southern Dong communities. We and our research collaborators have made very brief visits to Dong villages in Congjiang County, Guizhou and we have more substantive experience in Liping County, Guizhou and Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi. Our experiences in this region derive from our participation in a series of collaborative projects undertaken by a team of museum-based folklorists from the United States and China that were pursued under the auspices of the China Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society (Jackson 2023). Jackson has made four visits to the Dong – in 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2019. Because of her fulltime work for the Anthropological Museum of Guangxi (a.k.a. Guangxi Museum of Nationalities) between 2015 and 2018 Zhang has visited Dong communities on additional occasions. The location of the communities most relevant to this paper and to the research from which it comes are mapped in Figure 1.



Photo 2. Selling billhook baskets at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

The specific case that we offer here is based on Zhang's participation in fieldwork that Jackson was not a part of. With colleagues from the Anthropological Museum of Guangxi, she visited Meilin township on March 21, 2015, the second day of the second lunar month (Photo 2). There she witnessed the Tai Gaunren parade and the larger Grand Song festival of which it is a part.⁶ This festival or set of linked festivals included activities that were relatively more and relatively less oriented towards outsiders. As is the category of insider, the category of outsider is also heterogeneous. For instance, Dong singing groups from other towns and villages in the region are quite different from various kinds of non-Dong tourist, just as these are different from scholarly observers from local or regional institutions. In this context, a festival might be relatively more oriented



Photo 3. Awaiting the parade at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

towards outsiders or relatively more oriented towards local people. In parallel, and related, festivals may be organized in relatively more top-down or bottom-up (grassroots) ways. These distinctions sometimes relate to whether a festival has a long history or is a new creation. Also related is the relative mix of commercial versus non-commercial activities taking place. In these terms, the festival examined here was relatively oriented towards local people and other Dong participants, but non-Dong were included. It was relatively non-commercial and was related to older forms of festival practice. We are not yet sufficiently knowledgeable to comment on the matter of its organization, but it seemed much more organic relative to newly created heritage festivals that we have attended in the region.

Like the other Dong communities visited in the course of our research, Meilin is a southern Dong community located very physically close to the Dong communities of Congjiang County, Guizhou, where we, and many of our collaborators, first encountered Dong people and lifeways.⁷ While our paper centers on Dong baskets and Dong festival, you will soon see how

it is essential for us to note that this area is also home to Miao settlements, including the nearby community of Basha, a village that we and our colleagues visited in Congjiang in 2014, and Fulu Miao Ethnic Township, home to a significant Miao population.⁸

Throughout the region, minority nationalities communities have developed performance forms specifically for tourist audiences, but it is also the case that longstanding festivals and cultural performance events have absorbed tourist participants without losing their primary focus on local and regional interests and insider participation. The Grand Song festival in Meilin is an instance of this later type (Photos 3–4). Within a larger event that includes children’s games, festival meals, elaborate dress, singing competitions, *lusheng* (a regional type of bamboo mouth organ) musical performance, dancing events, and the commemorative use of timber rafts as a nod to older logging practices, the Tai Guanren parade stands out for the way that it foregrounds basketry as a sign of continuity in Dong and regional cultural life. In the next section of this paper, we will explore this particularly interesting aspect of the festival parade fourth in a brief four-part treatment of basketry within the festival as a whole.



Photo 4. Scene from the 2014 Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

PRACTICAL AND EXPRESSIVE USES OF BASKETS: FOUR EXAMPLES

As folklorists have long appreciated, festivals bring people together – often densely – and in doing so, they can provide special heightened opportunities for the buying and selling of various goods, including handcrafted ones (Stoeltje 1992: 266–267). As we observed among the Dong during the Bull Festival in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township in 2016 and at the Rao San Ling Festival among the Bai in Qingdong village near Dali in 2019 and 2023, basket shoppers can often find unri-



Photo 5. Buying billhook baskets at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

valled selection and good prices during such festivals and makers have a special chance to cut out middlemen and sell a small batch of baskets of their own making directly to customers who are in a festive and buying mood (Jackson 2022a). As in these other festivals, such sales took place during the 2015 Grand Song Festival in Meilin. Photo 5 shows local women purchasing billhook carrying baskets on the edge of the festival activity. (Such baskets on offer appeared earlier in Photo 2.) Baskets are part of festival commerce across rural Southwest China. Buying and selling during festival markets is thus then our first context.



Photo 6. During a Dong Grand Song Festival in Congjiang County, Guizhou, China, a billhook is used to give a haircut. The man pictured giving the haircut wears a billhook basket. In China, certain festivals are an auspicious time to get a haircut. Photograph by Visual China Group, November 28, 2015. Getty Images 499101254.

Second, baskets are made to accomplish the practical functions for which they are initially created and circulated on festival occasions. The billhook carrying baskets on offer at the festival in 2015 will be used as a sheath by Dong farmers. (For a Dong example of this type, see also Photo 6 where such a basket is being used similarly in a festival context.) A basketry scoop can be used on a festival morning to make oil tea in a way that is not functionally different from the making of oil tea on a non-festival morning, yet the context can be different, and the emotional associations can be different, perhaps stronger, in a household that is eagerly anticipating special events and a special time outside of daily routine.

The type of lidded rice basket that is the pride of Defeng village and the livelihood of our consultant Shi Jinke, and his relatives there, appeared during the celebratory

meals staged in Meilin in 2015, as shown in Photo 7 (Zhang 2022; Zhang and Jackson 2024). Glutinous rice, in a local variety named after them as a people, is what is being served here in the basket. Such rice, offered on such auspicious occasions, is the high purpose for which such baskets are made, even if they can find their way to other uses in and beyond the lands of the Dong people. Once a staple Dong food before being progressively displaced by “regular” “Han” rice, such “Kam rice” is of extraordinary importance among the Dong (Ou 2007: 51, 59, 87–91; Wang et al. 2018). We have seen it carefully stored and displayed in every Dong household that we visited and, while eaten less frequently today than a century ago, it is only rivaled by sour pickled fish and pork as a key sign of Dong culture.⁹ With sour food, hot pepper, and rice wine, it is one of the “four pillars of Kam [Dong] cuisine” (Geary et al. 2003: 125–126). As elsewhere in the world, ancestral foods of special importance often become festival foods, just as ancestral dress forms often become celebratory festival clothes (Jackson 2010; 2013). Dong people may not eat their glutinous rice everyday any longer, but it takes on special significance as a celebratory and heritage food, one essential to festival occasions. In this mode, baskets do their regular work in a special, heightened context.

If we think for a moment more about this second festival instance, represented by the meal being enjoyed by the festival participants in Photo 7, we can recognize that it would certainly be possible to serve now-special glutinous (sticky) Dong rice in a plastic or metal container. Those who have worked hard to prepare and serve this meal clearly have access to such containers. They made a choice to present an important ancestral food in an important ancestral container during an important event. That they did so points to a third kind of festival use observable during the Grand Song Festival in Meilin.

Photo 8 pictures a group of women in elaborate Dong dress, which includes carefully embroidered shoes, socks, leggings with leg bands, embroidered jackets, dickets, and sashes, with hair ornaments and necklaces fashioned of shiny silver metals. Their jackets are indigo dyed using a special technique that adds a reddish hue to the underlying blue. The fabric has also been processed with egg wash or gelatine and hammered to give it the shiny quality that is so valued by Dong and Miao in this region (Geary et al. 2003: 133). They are each wearing clothes that represent the apex of Dong dress and adornment appropriate for women of their age (Hertz 2024). Each of the women also holds a round basketry tray of a type that over time comes to be very familiar to any observant visitor to rural Southwest China (Photo 9). Inside that tray, each woman



Photo 7. Enjoying festival foods at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.



Photo 8. Displaying valuable cloth at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

carries a folded length of the same highly valued cloth that their jackets are made of. The women are staged and ready for a festival parade episode that we do not yet understand, not having studied it in detail with local tradition bearers. But here we can still observe a key point. These women – in accord with longstanding Dong values – are literally wearing and carrying wealth. Their silver is beautiful, and it has a special place in Dong culture for that reason and also because it is a tangible expression of family and personal wealth, even if such items of adornment are not always made out of actual silver. Silver customarily figured prominently in the dowry/gift exchange accompanying marriage (Geary et al. 2003: 134–136, 144–145; Ou 2007: 112–113; for Miao silver see Li 2021). The cloth that they wear and that they hold in their baskets is the product of extraordinary amounts of skilled female labor. Worth stating in its own terms, we mention this here because if they and their families wanted the cloth to be carried and displayed in metal basins, plastic bowls, or even porcelain trays, they could afford to do so. The traditional fabric is

being displayed here in the most culturally conservative and culturally appropriate way available. In the terms we are using here, the baskets – like the cloth they hold – are a sign of Dong ancestral culture. Among the Dong, as among the Hakka people that Zhang knows best and the Yuchi people with whom Jackson has longest collaborated, festival performances provide powerful, reflexive opportunities to highlight key aspects of ancestral culture, renewing its place within both historical consciousness and contemporary life. An even more pronounced version of this process can be seen in our fourth example from Meilin, the Tai Gauren parade that pictured in Photos 10–14.

Festivals among the southern Dong are extensive and elaborate. They could clearly reward a lifetime of attention, but a quick glimpse of the Tai Gauren parade will have to suffice here. As pictured in Photo 10, central to the parade is the display of a young man dressed and presented to the eager audience as the “King of the Miao”. As befits a king, he is carried by his entourage on a sedan chair made of bamboo poles. The canopy is decorated with paired, mythically important, water buffalo horns that are iconic elements in Miao houses within the region and it is decorated in a house-like way with auspicious couplets, one of which, in a nod to both national policy priorities and to any Miao observers, emphasizes ethnic unity.¹⁰ Like his bearers, he wears clothing that is intended to evoke Miao men of old. He carries a long-stemmed pipe and, despite



Photo 9. Round basketry trays in a type common across Southwest China being sold at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

his youth and the festive atmosphere, he is working to convey the confident dignity of his persona. In other images from the festival, he can be seen with a female counterpart, a young woman wearing an iconic Miao (rather than Dong) silver headdress and similarly displayed in royal fashion upon a comparable sedan chair (Photo 11, also Duxingxia 2015). We do not understand the details that fully explain the presence of Miao royalty of old in the Dong Tai Gauren parade, but the name itself refers to carrying a husband or officer (or governor in some journalistic accounts), a reference that relates to the use of the sedan chairs for what



Photo 10. Parading with the “Miao King” at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.



Photo 11. Parading with the “Miao Queen” at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.

seems to be a royal couple. When Zhang asked a local participant about all of this, she was told that the performance recalls how the Miao King helped the Dong people in history and it is how they show, and recall, their respect to the King. Surely much more could be said, but for our purposes, that starter-answer can suffice. The performance brings the past expressively to life in the present. But where are the baskets?¹¹

The Miao king and queen are displayed to their fans in a parade but they and their court are not the only performers. Also present, and playing, it seems, a more clowning part, are a group of Dong men whose role seems to be to use an exaggerated style to evoke the most iconic aspects of ancestral lifeways. Some carry giant wooden versions of the everyday billhooks central to work life in the region. Some lead a fake ox or water buffalo, with a harrow, through the streets. For our purposes, as shown in Photos 12–14, many of these performers adorn themselves – again in exaggerated fashion – in the kinds of work basket that are central to our research and museum collecting activities. They do not just wear

billhook baskets on the backs of their waists, as Dong farmers do every day. They have fish traps, poultry baskets, and other work baskets tied to their bodies. They wear their clothing in a style that seems designed to evoke the hard labor of common people in the past and there is no mistaking the centrality of baskets in this representation of working people’s lives. We know that there is more to the story than this just as a museum visitor who sees an unusually shaped basket in a gallery display will know that such a basket exists without knowing how it is used or made. However, one aspect of both festival and museum display is that they extract a key part of a more complex phenomenon, highlighting that part iconically as a selection-based representation of the broader whole. Watching the dignified Miao King and the clowning, basket-covered men who preceded him in the parade, Zhang was like younger Dong audience members in not knowing what it is all about but also in being given the clear impression that baskets have something important to say about the story.

Photo 15. Basket sales during the Dong Bull Festival in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson,



Photo 12. Parading with baskets at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.



Photo 13. Parading with baskets and nets at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.



Photo 14. Parading with a “water buffalo” or “ox” and harrow at the Grand Song Festival in Meilin, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, March 21, 2015.



Photo 15. Basket sales during the Dong Bull Festival in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, May 12, 2015.

COMPARISON

Is Meilin just a basket loving community? Comparative experience and evidence suggest not. Our experience of the Dong Bull Festival held in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township in May 2016 first revealed how dense with baskets a Dong festival could be (Photo 15). While seeking a means by which to use some of the journalistic images found in published reports of the festival in Meilin legally, we consulted the Getty Images database, which makes some photographs from Xinhua and other Chinese publications available for licensing. While we did not find the images that we sought, we did find others related to our topic, a search that can provide a kind of comparative confirmation of our specific observations on the Meilin example.¹²

An English-language search of gettyimages.com on June 25, 2024, provided 26 pages of images for the terms: Dong Miao Festival. The results clearly related to the Dong or the Miao people, although a group of Zhuang festival images were also in the results because the Zhuang festival pictured took place in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, thereby hitting on the terms Miao and Dong. Forty-five images of basket use in festival contexts were recorded in this corpus. We highlight some examples that enrich categories of use noted for Meilin. Aesthetics and tastes vary, but we think that the photographs to be mentioned here are all beautiful and worth the reader's attention. We regret that we cannot afford the expense of publishing them here. For each type of activity, we arrange the data from oldest to newest.

In a festival parade from 2016, a Visual China Group photographer photographed Dong women walking in procession with shoulder poles and mixed basket types. The Getty Images caption for two photographs of this subject indicate that the women are carrying steamed black rice during a Grain Festival in Liping County (April 19, 2016). On this same occasion, a woman in festival dress was pictured carrying and displaying a spindle basket of a type that is iconic of women's textile work.¹³

During a second festival from 2016, the Guizhou Jianhe Yangasha Culture Festival in Jianhe County, Guizhou, a group of Miao men and women were photographed parading by a photographer associated with Visual China Group on October 11. In one of these scenes, Miao men carry shoulder poles from which hang pairs of large baskets holding matching unidentifiable, but colorful, objects. On the same occasion, later in the parade, in a different image, a group of Miao women are seen carrying smaller square baskets with shoulder poles, while a group of men carry poultry and fish from shoulder poles, and a further group of women carry basketry-wrapped bottles typically used for local rice wine (also suspended from shoulder poles). A third image from this parade provides a closer look at one of one of the basket-carrying teams: women with pairs of rectangular baskets with bail handles, here suspended by ropes or cords from their shoulder poles. The contents of the baskets could be multicolored candy, but this is unclear. The type of basket they carry is regularly used as sewing baskets by Miao in Guizhou. Shoulder poles are a key everyday technology used together with baskets in this region and elsewhere in China.¹⁴

In a festival parade taking place somewhere in Liping County, Guizhou, on December 5, 2021, a group of Dong women were photographed by Qiao Qiming of the Visual China Group carrying both matching red umbrellas and shoulder poles holding a pair of tray baskets with items wrapped in red cloth or plastic film.¹⁵

Images from a tourism festival held March 4, 2023 in Jinping County, shows a group of Miao women similarly processing with shoulder poles and baskets. In this case, the baskets are colorful and woven from plastic strap rather than bamboo.¹⁶

In summary, parade display is a key practice in festival in Southwest China as it is in many parts of the world. Parading with baskets is not unique to the festival Zhang observed in Meilin, but it is part of a larger regional cultural performance mode. We note here that parading with baskets of food, especially rice, is also fundamental to wedding rituals and associated gift exchanges between families.

Exciting to see, even in a collection of low-context stock photographs, are scenes from the Miao Sisters Festival taking place in a pond in Taijiang County, Guizhou. In this set of images by Jie Zhao taken May 3, 2015, a large group of Miao men and women are using open-bottomed, open topped, baskets to capture fish. As in other fish catching festival scenes in the Getty Images corpus, it is noteworthy to see participants – women especially – wearing dress-up clothes while wading and actively catching large fish with baskets and their hands. Such baskets are used in this way outside festival contexts also, but with less fanfare and fewer spectators.¹⁷

The same festival event, taking place in a different location – Gedong, Liping County, Guizhou – a year later really captures the central place of baskets, as here the Miao men and woman use basketry nets and wear a kind of basket at their waists into which caught fish are placed. We have documented these basket types with makers among the Dong.¹⁸

A third episode of Miao festival fishing with baskets appears in images from the Visual China Group made August 5, 2022, when a photographer captured such activity in a large river context during the Chixin festival in Shibing County, Guizhou. Here, as in the first example, men and women push large, open-bottomed, open-topped basketry cylinders down into the water to catch large fish.¹⁹

A fourth example of this type are a large group of images from an August 12, 2018 event on a river in Taijiang County, Guizhou. In this Daoyu festival, Miao men and women also use baskets to catch fish and also to splash each other in the river. In this riverine context, the type of baskets used are dedicated fishing baskets in conical shape, a type premised on faster moving water. This is another type of fishing basket that we have documented and collected in the region. Separate from the fishing, these Visual China Group images from this occasion also include images of men acting as ritual officials making food offerings on a table near the river.²⁰

In all of these images, fish are being caught in an everyday way in an extraordinary context. The size of the crowds, the competitive spirit evident, the celebratory expressions on the faces of those catching fish, all reveal that these are special, convivial, meaningful episodes within something bigger than an everyday morning or afternoon of fishing. All of the types of fishing baskets shown in these two series are familiar from our work with basket makers and sellers and some are represented in the collections that we have made, but these contexts of use are not the ones that makers or other consultants offer when we ask: “What is this type of basket used for?”

Basket sales do not appear in the Getty Images corpus, but there is one image in the collection that speaks to the importance of baskets for festival meals. This is the inadvertent (to our search) Zhuang festival image made by a Visual China Group photographer on July 26, 2018 in Congjiang County (and thus near to Meilin and the other

Dong communities where we have studied). In this scene, a festival meal or a meal-as-offering is arrayed neatly on serving plates and bowls, with accompanying wine cups, in a rectangular array on a stone walkway. A man squats in front of the food and drink holding sticks of incense towards them. To his right, immediately adjacent to the bowls and cups and festival foods are an array of square lidded baskets with handles of a type that can be used to protect and transport foods on such occasions. This scene is a moment from a larger Zhuang 'diving' festival and other images from this occasion show celebrants diving joyfully off a diving board into a river.²¹

Before concluding this comparative treatment of the Getty Images corpus, we can note that a second instance of the Tai Gaunren itself appears therein. This performance happened a little less than a year after Zhang's visit to Meilin in a Liping County Dong village. The Getty caption does not name the village photographed, but notes that the festival takes place in the "neighbouring villages of TangAn, Jitang, Congjiang, and Zhaoxing" (Visual China Group 2016g). Baskets can be seen in two parade images that share much with the parade in Meilin. The main visible difference between the two parades is that the instead of parading a Miao king and queen, the Liping County celebrants parade through the town or village with beautifully and richly-dressed children, both boys and girls.²²

What to make of this 40-image tour of the lands surrounding our focal point of Meilin and its festival? Surveying decontextualized, lightly contextualized, or miscontextualized images is no substitute for extended participant-observation fieldwork, but in the present era, such work is not always possible. Survey fieldwork of the sort that we have undertaken though has been prepared us to recognize patterns and processes in a body of images such as those made available for licensing by Getty Images and the photographers and news services with which they work. We are better for having seen and pondered these images. They tell us that the ways that the people of Meilin and its hinterland use their everyday baskets in festival contexts make sense within a larger regional cultural and social context and that these uses would be perfectly logical to their Dong, Miao, and Zhuang neighbors today. Such neighbors would accuse us of perhaps belaboring the obvious, but what is obvious on the main path through a Dong village today is not so obvious in a museum storeroom in Oxford or Philadelphia and it perhaps might not be obvious to a Dong or Miao or Zhuang person in some distant future. Just as baskets today, and in the knowable past, were essential tools for ritual in Southwest China and essential tools for the practicalities of everyday life in this region, baskets today, and in the same knowable past, are also multifaceted technologies that make festivals what they are as both convivial human encounters and as expressions of culture, social relations, and heritage (for ritual, see Mueggler 2001; for everyday use, see Zhang et al. 2022).²³

CONCLUSION

Within a festival, baskets can remain tools for serving glutenous rice to family or guests, for carrying cups and dishes back and forth, for preparing for a celebration or for cleaning up after one. As in Meilin, baskets can also support performers when they step in front of a festival audience and assume responsibility for enacting a cultural perfor-

mance (Bauman 2012: 99). As there, they can be the most culturally appropriate way of showcasing carefully woven and culturally important cloth, but they can also go further and serve as overt signs of culture and cultural history themselves. Through the agency of those who own and use them and while remaining vital things in the lived present with a complex materiality of their own, baskets call into memory both antiquity and cultural particularity. They fit within a larger historical consciousness and represent a particularly salient expression of continuity. The Dong, Miao, Yao, Buyi, Zhuang, and Bai of today are preceded by generations and generations of ancestors who did not have televisions, mobile phones, or motor bikes. But those ancestors definitely had baskets. Over generations they refined the forms and uses associated with those baskets and that knowledge lives and is activated among their descendants today. Like rituals, festivals are important moments in the life of a community. Festivals are participatory cultural performance events in which a people put themselves on display to themselves and also, in many settings, to human and sometimes other-than-human others (Singer 1972; Stoeltje and Bauman 1989). In doing so, they often single out those things that are most important about their lives and their identities. It is not surprising then that baskets would have a role to play on such occasions among the Dong and their neighbors.

NOTES

1 We are not able to reproduce the image just discussed in this paper, but a preservation copy of the webpage on which it appears is available in the Internet Archive (see Huang 2016: 9). The photographer, Huang Xiaobang attended the festival one year after Zhang attended (see below), providing a second glimpse of the event that centers our discussion here.

2 In response to reviewer interest in our methodological approach in this and related studies, we observe that we have not been able to pursue long-term, participatory fieldwork in Southwest China. As discussed in Jackson 2023 and other works, our studies have grown out of shorter-term survey work undertaken in a range of locales across the region. In most instances, that work has been done as part of multilingual, binational, multiethnic research teams comprised of staff from a range of US and Chinese universities and museums. Key partners have been local scholars and tradition bearers in particular locales. We are cognizant of the limitations of such survey work but have done our best to cultivate the benefits of this approach (such as fostering a broader regional perspective) while controlling for the inherent limitations of this strategy. We work in an era in which, around the world, many scholars are seeking to pursue meaningful ethnographic research without the liberty or resources to pursue it comprehensively or with full freedom of inquiry. The specific methods that we draw upon most directly include group interviews with basket makers, sellers, and users. We also pursue photographic documentation of baskets and their production, circulation, and use as well as observational engagements within festivals and other relevant public events. Our work on basketry is part of a larger inquiry into textile arts and heritage policy impacts in the region (Jackson 2023).

3 An engaged peer-reviewer urged us to make the theoretical context for our primarily empirical and interpretative paper more explicit. We offer the following for those wishing to know more about our orientation and where the research of which this paper is a part might lead. While we are theoretical pluralists with concerns that range from the interaction order (Goffman 1983; Noyes 2011) to the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein 2004; Jackson 2022b), much of our basic research is pursued in rural settings among social groups with identities, cultural practices, and social arrangements that set them outside national mainstreams (Jackson 2003; 2013b; Zhang

2024). While we adopt ethnohistorical methods, our most basic approaches are ethnographic and ethnological. Our ethnography is generally inductive and our ethnology involves controlled comparison within coherent cultural areas and empirically observable social networks (Eggan 1954; Fischer 1968; Jackson 2013a). In general, we draw most heavily on performance-oriented and communications-centered perspectives developed within North American folklore studies through theoretical exchange with North American linguistic anthropology and interactional approaches in sociology (Bauman 2012 and work cited therein). While here we cite the work of Glassie and Shukla as specifically orienting our studies of basketry in China, we are engaged with not only the main lines of folkloristic work on material culture (Glassie 1999; Löfgren 2012; Saint George 2018) but with material culture studies work published in English-language social and cultural anthropology (Tilley et al. 2006; Hicks and Beaudry 2018), including related approaches concerned with the “social life of things” (Appadurai 1988). Zhang was trained in both the Chinese ‘tradition’ of folklore studies (An and Yang 2015; Zhang and You 2019) and the Americanist ‘tradition’ in which Jackson was also trained (Boas 1974; Darnell 2001).

Where might our work lead, theoretically? We touch on its relationship to theoretical debates about the region in which we work in Endnote 4. Beyond this context, we can cite one example of interest to us. Our empirical work may become robust enough to contribute to theoretical discussions of “porous social orders” (Gershon 2019). To picture this, consider the different kinds of individuals and groups that come together in interaction in a Dong festival, whether that festival is Dong-facing or outsider/tourist-facing. How does material culture help make social orders porous on the one hand and how does it help groups form and cohere? What do baskets do across the multiple social orders that residents of, and visitors to, Southwest China or the Southeast Asian Massif, live in and between. This is just an example to illustrate our concern for building our descriptive and interpretative work towards more general concept work (Jackson forthcoming) if not grand theory. We could identify other examples, but our work is also by design descriptive and cultural historical in nature. We are describing social worlds undergoing change and hold that such work is an end in itself.

In addition to general theory and material culture theory, this reviewer also sought information on our engagements with theory relative to festival studies. Our approach to festival is, like our general orientation and our approach to material culture studies specifically, performance- or communications-oriented (Singer 1972; Noyes 2003; Bauman 2012). To the extent that we are working here towards general contributions to festival studies, it is towards keeping material culture studies and festival studies in a shared theoretical frame and to continue work connecting both of these domains to critical heritage studies.

4 A thoughtful peer-reviewer urged us to do more than flag Zomia as a controversial interpretive framework and to provide more detail on it. This range of issues and the associated literature is now vast and we will attempt to stay close to the basics in the interest of brevity. One set of debates concern how to geographically bound, anthropologically characterize, and historically contextualize the upland region or regions of concern, whether called Zomia (van Schendel 2002; Scott 2009; 2016; Michaud 2018b), the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud et al. 2016), the “Dong World” (Anderson and Whitmore 2017), Highland Asia (Wouters and Heneise 2022), the Trans-Himalayan Borderlands (Smyer Yü and Michaud 2017) or by some other nomenclature. These debates are of a typical, scholarly sort and we have benefitted from them. Beyond geographic and other questions of inclusion and exclusion from the framework, there are various interpretive debates. One concerns relative acceptance or rejection of the proposition, central to Scott’s arguments, that the habitation of Zomia involved, until relatively recently, flight to the uplands by those seeking to evade encompassment by lowland states. There are many contributors to such debates, but we see Michaud (2010; 2018b; Michaud et al. 2016) as the primary chronicler of them, and his writings provide what we judge to be a fair-to-all point of entry. One sort of critique of this type suggests that Scott’s interpretive arguments about Zomia, particularly those

related to flight from the state, cover over the remarkable cultural diversity found in this broad region (Jonsson 2014; Michaud 2018a). Related to this is concern over how Scott's arguments treat strongly felt social identities as social constructions, how Scott's account passes over the presence of strong social hierarchies among some upland peoples, and how the case made in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Scott 2009) relates to questions of literacy (Mai Na M. Lee in Hammond 2011; Michaud 2017), interethnic trade relations (Giersch 2010) or other matters. Beyond Michaud's summaries and reflections, a simple introduction to the debates at a key early stage is available in a long journalistic account aimed at scholars provided by Ruth Hammond (2011). Distinct in kind from such scholarly debates among writers publishing in English from outside the region, there is a different variety of – more hidden – controversy for some of those working in their own national languages and national scholarly contexts. For them, there can be official disapproval of the Zomia interpretation and restrictions on engaging with it in their own scholarship. The wider set of criticisms on Scott's model of Zomia can also be entangled with authorized national discourses and policies.

For the purposes of our article and those articles co-published with it, what matters is that on a modest scale we are trying to begin the work of addressing some of the matters under debate in an inductive and empirical way through the consideration of material culture in local and regional contexts – particularly basketry and other textile crafts – among the peoples of this region. We are not ready to contribute substantively to the debates over Zomia, but we hope that our descriptive and interpretative work can accumulate and eventually be useful for such purposes.

5 As discussed by Jerold Edmondson and Kenneth Gregerson (2001: 102) there is also a small group of Dong people living in Tuyen Quang Province, Vietnam.

6 The following non-scholarly sources provide additional photographs and observations – journalistic and touristic – of the festival discussed here. Blogger Duxingxia H (2015) was present at the same festival episodes that Zhang observed. He published online many pictures of relevance to the Tai Guanren parade. As indicated in the opening sections of this article, China.org.cn republished a Xinhua photographic essay from 2016 that pictured scenes from the festival at Meilin in that year (Huang 2016). *China Daily* (2014) published an English-language photographic essay picturing the festival in 2014. The 2014 festival was also pictured in an online essay published in the English version of the *People's Daily Online* (2014). Particularly spectacular is a documentary video that is both an advertisement for China Mobile and an intangible cultural heritage-focused documentary of the festival as it took place in 2023. This video, which includes English subtitling was released for consumption outside China via YouTube (China Mobile Guangxi 2023).

Scholarly sources of particular relevance to this case mainly focus on the performance of Dong Big Song (Grand Song) and its festival contexts (see Turner 2010; Ingram 2011; 2020; Ingram and Wu 2017; Yandong Grand Singers 2019; Han 2021; Mu 2021). Core ethnographic sources for the Dong in general include Geary et al. 2003; Ou 2007 and Rautio 2019; 2021; 2022; 2024. The work of Suvi Rautio is particularly important because of its in-depth nature (relative to the survey nature of our own work) and because it reports on approximately the same time period covered by our brief visits among the Dong. Her work is also concerned with issues of heritage policy, including the social impact of state heritage policies.

7 Meilin is the community at the center of linguist Wu Manxing's documentary work on the Kam language. While not an ethnography, significant ethnographic information of relevance to the Dong in Sanjiang County and to Meilin specifically can be found in his monographic grammar of Sanjiang Kam (Wu 2015).

8 In this paper, we follow the common practice in China, and in studies of China, of referring to the Miao (those in China) by the term Miao, rather than by the term Hmong used most widely in the Southeast Asia and in the Hmong diaspora (Schein and Vang 2022: 30–31).

9 This has been reflected in a local idiom *dong bu li suan, dong bu li nuo*, which can be literally translated to “the Dong people cannot do without sour pickled food and glutinous rice”.

10 The horn shape evokes Water Buffalo, which is important in the Miao culture. Water Buffalo is one of the sons of the “Butterfly Mama” in the Miao epic. Water buffalo also plays a significant role in their agricultural activities.

11 Meilin is not the only Dong community in this area to perform the Tai Gaunren parade. A performance in Huanggang Village, Liping County, Guizhou, China held on February 22, 2018 can be seen in a series of photographs by Yang Daifu published online, with English captions, in Xinhuanet.com. We cite a preservation copy via the Internet Archive as Yang 2018. Sharing many similarities, the Huanggang version features children dressed beautifully and paraded in bamboo sedan chairs rather than a Miao king and queen (Yang 2018). Huanggang is about an hour and a half away from Meilin by car (40–70 km depending on the route chosen). As discussed later in this paper, another version of the festival was documented by a journalist for Visual China Group in Congjiang County in 2016. Readers may wish to know that Miao-Dong interethnic relations are not as rosy as the explanation given to Zhang was intended to suggest (for example, Rautio 2024: 40–41).

12 A reviewer sought clarification on our choice of this corpus of images (Getty Images) relative to others. As noted, we turned to Getty Images in the hope of finding the particular image discussed in the opening of this article. Looking through this corpus in search of this particular photograph, we encountered others (discussed here) that addressed the themes of this article and situated it in a comparative regional context. There are archives and other commercial databases to which we could turn for further research, but we took advantage of our incidental investigations of the Getty corpus (which derive from the work of Chinese photojournalists) to test the observations we have based on our work together and Lijun’s visit to Meilin.

13 The three related images in the Getty Images corpus are Visual China Group 2016a–c.

14 The three related images in the Getty Images corpus are Visual China Group 2016i–k).

15 The four related images in the Getty Images corpus are Qiao 2021a–d.

16 The image in the Getty Images corpus is Visual China Group 2023.

17 The three related images in the Getty Images corpus are Jie 2015a–c.

18 The three related images in the Getty Images corpus are Visual China Group 2016d–f.

19 The seven related images in the Getty Images corpus are Visual China Group 2022a–g.

20 The 13 related images in the Getty Images corpus are Visual China Group 2018a–m.

21 The image in the Getty Images corpus is Visual China Group 2018n.

22 The two related images in the Getty Images corpus are Visual China Group 2016g–h.

23 Four of the images discovered in this search are not discussed because they are less germane to our discussion. This search also identified the image published as our Photograph 8.

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