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Reconstructing Authority, Reconfiguring Culture: Post-Disaster Governance and the Politics of Cultural Visibility in Wengding Wa Village

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Abstract. This study examines post-disaster reconstruction in Wenging Wa Village, focusing on how the 2021 fire reshaped governance and cultural life in Wengding Wa Village. Using qualitative fieldwork and unscripted interviews, the research conceptualizes reconstruction as a turning point in political authority and cultural visibility of this village. It exhibits that the rebuilding not only centralized decision-making but also rendered village elections more and more procedural, while subsequent tourism corporatization changed the ritual practice into a dual-track system of staged performance and private authenticity. Although governance became more bureaucratic and commercially managed, villagers continued to exercise negotiated agency by separating staged performances from private rituals, maintaining traditional practices within household spaces, and selectively adapting cultural expressions to changing tourism demands.The study demonstrates how disaster recovery can function as a mechanism of authority reconfiguration and cultural restructuring in ethnic minority communities, revealing the complex negotiations between institutional control and local cultural continuity.

Keywords: Post-disaster reconstruction, Governance restructuring, Corporatized tourism governance, Cultural visibility, Dual-track cultural system

1. Introduction

Wengding Wa Village, located in Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County, Lincang City, Yunnan Province, is widely regarded as one of the best-preserved traditional Wa settlements in China and is often described as "the last primitive tribe" in the country. Situated in the mountainous borderlands of southwestern China, Wengding occupies a position that is both geographically peripheral and symbolically central in the representation of Wa ethnic heritage. The name "Wengding," meaning "clouds and mists" in the Wa language, reflects not only its physical landscape but also its long-standing association with cultural authenticity. The village once preserved a distinctive spatial and ritual structure. Its "chicken coop" layout, together with sacred spaces such as the village gate, central stone, wooden drum house, and totemic pillars, formed the core of Wa cosmology, ritual hierarchy, and community governance [1]. The stilted wooden houses, built mainly from timber and earth, were not merely dwellings but material embodiments of social organization and customary

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authority. Over the past decade, however, Wengding was increasingly incorporated into state-led ethnic tourism development. Cultural preservation became intertwined with commercial display, and ritual practices were gradually mediated through performance schedules and visitor-oriented staging. On February 14, 2021, a fire reportedly caused by accidental ignition destroyed nearly the entire traditional settlement. The disaster marked a critical turning point.

This paper conceptualizes the post-fire reconstruction as a process of political reconstruction and governance restructuring, defined here as the reorganization of authority, decision-making power, and institutional control following crisis intervention. It also examines the emergence of corporatized cultural governance, through which cultural practices become administratively managed and selectively made visible.

2. Literature review

2.1. Political reconstruction and governance restructuring

Scholarly research on rural China has examined the institutional reconstruction of village governance and the evolving relationship between local leadership and higher-level administrative departments. Studies on village elections exhibit that although electoral institutions formally remain in place after the embedded governance, their practical significance or value may shift when they become integrated within broader governance coordination systems. Elections continue as part of the political procedure, but decision-making authority will depend more on administrative policy departments, changing legitimacy from substantive participation to performance-based evaluation.

Studies on governance modernization further emphasize the recalibration between centralized coordination and local discretion. Strengthened institutional supervision may enhance policy coherence and accountability across administrative levels, yet it can also redefine the scope of village-level autonomy [2]. Rather than functioning as fully independent administrator, village leaders increasingly operate as a small portion of the governance networks.

Tourism governance research has explored how commercial development reshapes the structure of rural management. Under the tremendous transformation, "place" becomes a contested field shaped by economic planning and cultural attachment [3]. Authority over land use, labor allocation, and cultural representation may gradually extend beyond local leadership to include institutional actors. While tourism studies highlight the political economy of development, they often treat tourism corporatization as analytically distinct from prior phases of institutional restructuring [3, 4].

Existing research has addressed weakened village elections, stronger government control, and the growing role of tourism companies in rural areas, but usually in isolation. Resettlement after disasters is often seen as an emergency government response. Changes in rural governance are discussed as part of state control. Tourism development is explained through market reforms. What remains underexplained is how these processes are interconnected.

This study focuses on Wengding Wa Village, exhibiting how these changes unfolded sequentially. After the fire, villagers were forced to relocate and had disagreements over compensation. The results were largely decided by high-level of political framework. Decision-making power gradually moved upward to township authorities. Later, tourism companies began controlling performance schedules, wage distribution, and even the boundaries of rituals. Traditional leaders were not completely removed, but their power was reduced to mainly symbolic or ritual roles, while real administrative and economic decisions were made by others. By interpreting reconstruction as a moment of governance change rather than just rebuilding, this study connects disaster recovery, stronger state control, and company management into one process.

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2.2. Cultural transformation and the production of dual-track systems

Cultural transformation in tourism contexts has been widely examined through the lens of authenticity and commodification. MacCannell's theory of staged authenticity conceptualizes tourism as a system in which "back regions" are reorganized for the tourist gaze, blurring distinctions between authentic and performed culture [5]. Subsequent scholarship on commodification argues that cultural forms are reshaped through various aspects of forces, including economic, political, and representational [4]. Culture under tourism is not merely sold as a new kind of commodities but reorganized within broader governance and development logic.

Research on heritage institutionalization further demonstrates how local identity becomes subject to regulatory frameworks. Evans shows that institutionalization may "manage" and sanitize expressions of ethnic identity in ways that align with official development agendas [6]. Cultural practices are thus reframed as manageable, displayable, and often depoliticized representations. Another strand of scholarship highlights everyday mediation on cultural transformation, showing that local residents negotiate, reinterpret, and adapt to tourism structures and management [3]. Cultural change therefore emerges through long-term management and adaptation.

Although studies have discussed tourism and cultural commercialization, most focus on how tourists see local culture or on large-scale economic changes. Few examine how companies managing tourism directly control what parts of culture can be shown and what parts must stay hidden. In many tourism debates, people ask whether performances are "real" or "staged." However, this surface comparison does not consider an essential point. Tourism companies create specific rules, such as fixed performance times, standard scripts, language requirements, and payment systems, that shape how culture is presented. Because of the existence of these rules, culture becomes divided into two parts: what is shown to tourists and what is kept private and substantive.

In Wengding, this situation is very obvious. Public performances are shortened, sped up, or changed to meet tourists' expectations. Some rituals are only shown symbolically to visitors, while the real rituals are still practiced at home. Companies also decide when rituals can happen, what performers should wear, what language they should use, and which parts should not be shown.

This study argues that tourism management does not simply turn culture into a product. Instead, it creates a "dual-track" system: one public version for display and one private version for community life. This research shows how rules and management reshape what authenticity means inside the community. By looking at the two different perspectives, this study connects disaster recovery, stronger state control, and company management into one process.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative case study approach to research governance restructuring and cultural transformation in Wengding Wa Village following the 2021 fire. The village is a critical site of institutional reorganization, where post-disaster reconstruction provided an opportunity to observe how political authority, economic management, and cultural practice were reconfigured within a bounded rural community.

3.1. Fieldwork and participants

This fieldwork was conducted in Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, and Wengding is serving as the primary research site. The whole study is based on in-depth, unscripted interviews and field observation.

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Interview participants were primarily elderly and middle-aged villagers who had long-term ties to their old settlement. Some people stay in Cangyuan throughout the year, while others periodically leave their hometown to work in other places. Through the interview, interviewees also shared some information about their children and grandchildren. The information from these young Wa people provides indirect intergenerational perspectives on cultural continuity. Nearly all participants had personally experienced both the fire and the subsequent reconstruction process, making their narratives truly based on lived institutional transformation rather than distant observation.

3.2. Interview process and document reading

Rather than relying on strictly structured questionnaires, interviews in the study were largely conversational and unscripted. Conversations often began with everyday topics, including household routines, farming, performance schedules and family stories, before gradually extending to issues of post-disaster reconstruction. With various perspectives of information during the interview, useful information for the post-disaster reconstruction study was found. This flexible approach allowed participants to frame their experiences in their own terms and revealed how governance restructuring was embedded in daily life. Also, more importantly, this approach does not require interviewees to have high academic ability or understanding of post-disaster reconstruction, culture and politics.

In the beginning of the field research, some villagers expressed concern that the research team might be affiliated with government authorities conducting inspections or evaluations. As a result, early responses tended to remain procedural and restrained without making the interviewee too nervous. Later, through repeated visits, informal exchanges, and continued presence in the village, the trust gradually increased among interviewees and me. Therefore, participants offered more substantive reflections on compensation disputes, decision-making processes, performance regulation, and the distinction between staged and private ritual practice.

3.3. Ethical considerations

All participants were informed of the research purpose. To protect anonymity, personal identifiers are removed and interview excerpts are cited only by role and timestamp. Given the sensitivity surrounding governance and reconstruction issues, care has been taken to represent participants' perspectives accurately without attributing evaluative claims beyond what interviewees articulated.

4. Results

4.1. Structural level: reconfiguration of power and institutions

4.1.1. Government intervention and community passive acceptance

During the interview, it is found that in fact, some respondents hold a passive attitude towards restoration. The reasons for this include various factors such as politics and economy. After the fire destroyed the entire village, the government shouldered all the responsibility for reconstruction. Banda Houses were rebuilt on their original sites, and additional standardized residential concrete buildings were constructed near the original site, resembling China's broader urbanization model. In policy terms, this could be interpreted as a form of developmental compensation, including spatial restoration, infrastructural upgrading, and financial stabilization. Villagers' narratives, being used to the original living habits of their ancestors, suggest that material rebuilding was not necessarily

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equal to participatory governance. Reconstruction was considered as a rapid and decisive process but without any negotiation.

The new-village chief articulated this constrained agency directly. His phrases reveal a procedural rather than deliberative process. Even the mention of elections appears symbolic rather than substantively participatory, indicating that elections were largely symbolic, with limited impact on actual decision-making.

"Doesn't the government do any compensation as well? … We had to listen to the government. We were the last ones to move in." (08:34-08:40)

"We didn't want to move. We were the holdouts, but the government wouldn't

compensate us, so we had no choice but to listen to them. We were evicted and there was nothing we could do." (08:40-08:47)

"The election was supposed to be an election, but in reality, the outcome was already decided." (25:40-26:05)

Mr. Ma from the old village reinforced this perception of passive acceptation. These statements frame relocation as a tremendous economic loss and political vulnerability rather than collective recovery. The reference to shifting leadership further reflects uncertainty and instability in governance expectations.

"We are stubborn people. The government doesn't consider the losses from our relocation." (00:39-01:23)

"If the government really compensates, we lost over one million yuan. How can just twenty or twenty thousand yuan solve the problem?" (35:07-35:44)

From a broader perspective, this exhibits that efficiency and rapid recovery are prioritized over procedural inclusion. Reconstruction becomes a state project of order-restoration, but not necessarily a social space for adequate negotiation. As a result, material stability is achieved, yet political subjectivity of the minority people remains constrained.

4.1.2. The marginalization of the traditional authority system

During the interview, it is noticed that there exists the reluctance of many elderly people towards reconstruction. To outsiders, this reconstruction may seem like merely a renovation of a house, but to them, it is a farewell to the old times. Spending a large amount of money on the reconstruction of the village has enabled the government and companies to have better intervention and jurisdiction over this area. The restructuring of governance altered the symbolic hierarchy of authority within the village, making the orthodox gradually be further from the right center. Traditional figures such as ritual leaders were not eliminated, but their spheres of influence became increasingly restricted. What once functioned as comprehensive social authority was gradually confined to ritual symbolism.

The new-village chief reflected on this narrowing of power:

"The chief is now solely responsible for temple sacrifices. Everything else is under the jurisdiction of the government. I used to be the headman, but now the company has the final say." (25:40-26:11)

This statement suggests a segmentation of authority: ritual remains internal, and governance becomes external.

Also, the new-village chief explained the overlapping authority structure, stating the fact of this new system after the disaster:

"The chief and the village head are not the same. The chief is in charge of the Wa's religious ceremonies, while the village head is appointed by the government.

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Although structured as an electoral process, the result tends to be preordained."
(25:25-26:05)

"After the company came in, our performances, wages, and debts were all managed by the company. Things that we used to decide on our own now all need to follow the company's instructions." (38:11-38:28)

"It was originally managed by the government, and then it was contracted out to the company (after the disaster)" (35:25-35:44)

His remarks reveal how ritual authority was formally preserved but substantively limited. The distinction between ritual chief and administrative village head remained symbolically intact, yet decision-making power migrated toward corporate management.

Therefore, this marks a consolidation of community-embedded governance, where government and the company attain more control of the village. The village has already become a managed cultural asset rather than an autonomous social organism. Decision-making shifts upward and outward, while villagers' roles are redefined as performers, employees, and service providers. Authority is no longer derived primarily from lineage, ritual knowledge, or communal consensus, but from contractual arrangements and revenue logic.

4.2. Identification layer: cultural alienation, livelihood crisis, and community response

4.2.1. Cultural authenticity anxiety

In the interviews, almost all the respondents expressed considerable concerns and doubts about the authenticity of the culture. When the village was burned down, the two seemingly incompatible elements of culture and business collided more directly. Under the impact of business, culture has had to make concessions and be reshaped into a new form. Ritual events that once marked seasonal cycles and communal belonging increasingly became staged performances designed for tourist consumption. The shift truly alters how villagers understood authenticity. The change from cultural performance to commercial activities reveals a reorientation of cultural value: what once carried ritual depth must now conform to audience expectations. A performing musician described the transformation of frequency and purpose:

"We used to sing only during festivals. Now we perform three shows a day, earning 60 yuan per day." (33:29-33:55)

"The company sets the performance time and songs. Sometimes they even require singing in Chinese." (34:14-34:36)

"The original songs were slow and deep. Tourists didn't like to listen to them." (46:04-46:26)

"Singing in Chinese changes the meaning, but tourists don't understand the Wa language." (42:20-43:05)

Mr. Ma offered a similar contrast between past and present, showing the tremendous loss of cultural authenticity:

"The Ram Bridge used to be a major event for the entire village, but now it is just a show." (34:40-35:00)

"Before, people danced when they were happy. Now, they follow a schedule." (10:54-11:36)

"The current performances are all fake. They don't care about the real culture." (17:30-17:46)

The new-village chief noted aesthetic standardization:

"The company taught us how to act, how to speak, how to laugh and even what clothes to wear." (12:49-13:26)

The spiritual elder distinguished between staged and authentic ritual:

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"It's actually done at home, but what's shown to the tourists is fake." (03:08-03:22)

"Originally, spiritual healing couldn't be charged for, but the company said they could take a small fee." (03:22-04:00)

Therefore, when ritual becomes performance and culture becomes product, the criteria of value move from communal recognition to market reception. What values as "good" singing or "successful" ritual is no longer determined internally by Wa elders or tradition, but externally by tourist satisfaction and markets. As a result, the cultural meaning of Wa is thus reframed through audience evaluation, generating a subtle but profound transformation in how heritage is defined and validated.

4.2.2. Intergenerational cultural repositioning

After the fire, under the dual influence of commercialization and relocation of residences, the inheritance of Wa culture has also become extremely difficult due to the loss of its original environment and the erosion of business. Younger villagers grew up within an environment already structured by tourism, standardized schooling, and external cultural influence. As a result, cultural transmission no longer followed the same organic pattern as in the pre-fire village. Language, music, and symbolic practices gradually shifted in perceived value. In the interviews, both middle-aged and elderly Wa people have developed a certain sense of crisis about whether their culture can be sustained.

The new-village chief expressed both hope and concern. In his phrases, these remarks reveal anxiety over linguistic continuity. Language here is not simply a communication tool but a marker of belonging. The diminishing use of Wa language during the process of reconstruction, which makes Wa children not only physically be far away from the original site but also from their original culture, signals a subtle detachment from ethnic identity.

"I hope the children remember that they are of the Wa ethnic group." (14:50-15:03)

"The children speak Chinese outside and are not as proficient in the Wa language anymore." (29:00-29:35)

A performing musician described a similar shift in musical preference. His contrast between the Lusheng (a kind of traditional Wa musical instrument) and the guitar reflects more than aesthetic choice. The guitar symbolizes modernity, mobility, and economic potential, while the Lusheng (a kind of traditional Wa musical instrument) becomes associated with limited financial return and rural traditionalism. What emerges is not an explicit rejection of heritage, but a pragmatic recalibration of cultural value under developmental logic by young people.

"My grandson doesn't want to learn the Lusheng (a kind of traditional Wa musical instrument). He wants to learn the guitar." (49:47-50:12)

"Young people think the Lusheng (a kind oftraditional Wa musical instrument) doesn't bring in much money." (54:23-54:48)

Therefore, at the cognitive level of young people, their identity as Wa people may have been downplayed. Younger generations orient themselves toward broader national and global imaginaries, where mobility, education, and economic advancement are prioritized. In this context, traditional culture is not necessarily rejected but selectively integrated. It becomes one identity layer among many, rather than the primary structuring framework of social life.

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4.2.3. Contradictory psychology regarding development

Despite structural change and cultural anxiety, villagers did not frame development in purely negative terms. Rather, their responses were characterized by ambivalence. Tourism brought infrastructure, income, and visibility; at the same time, it altered everyday life and identity boundaries. This duality produced layered emotional responses rather than simple opposition.

The new-village chief articulated this tension clearly. His statements combine pragmatic acceptance with personal sacrifice. The experience of detention underscores that opposition existed, yet the final stance reflects accommodation rather than confrontation.

"Tourism is a good thing, but it can't just rely on performances to survive."

(14:44–14:55)

"I hope to live a better life, but I don't want to lose who I am." (16:17-16:22)

"We were detained for six months because we opposed the relocation." (16:22-16:56)

Aimang's girlfriend expressed similar ambivalence from an economic standpoint:

"Tourism gives us income, but it also ties us down here." (09:42-10:37)

"Sometimes I wonder, if we didn't do tourism, would we be more free?" (02:23-02:56)

Her remarks reveal how tourism simultaneously generates livelihood and restricts mobility. Economic attachment becomes a form of structural anchoring. Mr. Ma conveyed emotional attachment to spatial memory. After the reconstruction, there is no fire pit in their new houses in order to keep away from any fire potential. The absence of the fire pit symbolizes not only architectural difference but also altered communal intimacy. Thus, development is not rejected, but neither is it fully embraced; the eventual result remains negotiated.

"Moving to the new village is good, but I still prefer the old village." (43:06-43:19)

"The new village doesn't have a fire pit." (43:06-43:19)

Therefore, the ambivalence suggests that development operates as both opportunity and constraint. It expands material capacity while narrowing certain forms of autonomy. Rather than framing villagers as either resistant or compliant, their narratives reveal a dynamic balancing act, seeking economic security while attempting to preserve dignity, memory, and identity.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores how the fire and post-disaster reconstruction reshaped governance and cultural life in Wengding Wa Village. Although the government rebuilt the village quickly and improved infrastructure, reconstruction was not only about physical recovery; it can also act as a gateway through which local power structures are reorganized. Decision-making became more centralized, and village elections appeared more procedural than participatory. Later, with the introduction of tourism companies, cultural performances, wages, schedules, and even ritual boundaries were increasingly managed through corporate systems. However, villagers were not simply passive. Many elders and performers quietly protected traditional knowledge by separating staged performances from real rituals practiced at home. This shows that cultural continuity can survive even under strong political and economic pressure. Wengding's case shows that post-disaster reconstruction can become a turning point in governance and cultural meaning. Future research could further explore whether more participatory reconstruction models might better balance economic development with cultural autonomy.

Limitations also exist. First, the study relies mainly on a limited number of interviews and field observations, so it may not fully represent the views of all villagers, especially younger generations, local officials, and tourism company managers. Second, the paper could engage more deeply with

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existing scholarship on ethnic tourism, post-disaster governance, and Wa ritual life. Future revisions could include these factors to strengthen the argument.

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