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# **Recovering tradition in Globalising Rural China: Handicraft Birdcages in Da'ou village**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores how an historic artistic practice – the hand crafting of bamboo birdcages – has been revitalised in one Chinese village to provide social and economic stability and resilience in a time of an extensive rural restructuring. In so doing, it considers the role that arts and crafts can play as endogenous resources that may be mobilised as responses to globalising tendencies, and how the recovery of such traditions is negotiated across a terrain of new technology, mobilities and consumption practices. In Da'ou village in Shandong Province, the historic craft of birdcage making has been revitalised with demand from urban consumers who attach cultural value to the artefacts. The revitalisation of birdcage-making has brought prosperity to the village and has enabled it to avoid issues of depopulation and hollowing-out found elsewhere in the Chinese countryside; yet it has also involved a negotiation of tradition and opportunity – for instance, e-commerce, with potential to open new, international markets, and tourism - with these innovations commonly driven by women and younger residents of the village, thus recasting social relations. The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 with respondents including local leaders, craftspeople, suppliers, and sellers. By looking at prosperous Da'ou village, this paper reveals an atypical rural context where forms of niche innovations are driven by traditional artistic expertise on bamboo handicraft. Yet, it discloses the contestation of such spaces and how indirect forms of globalisation are creating new development trajectories combining traditional handicraft with technology.

## **Introduction**

The revitalisation of traditional craft production has become an increasingly commonplace feature of neo-endogenous rural development in many parts of the world, representing the commodification and repurposing of historically functional artefacts and the skills and knowledge involved in their manufacture to connect rural communities to new niche markets. In Europe, and other parts of the global north, the proliferation of artisan craft workshops and businesses is a notable dimension of the expanding rural creative economy, sometimes tapping into embedded local traditions of specialist craft production, but in many cases involving the

hybridisation of products, styles and techniques and the production of generic ‘rustic’ artefacts including jewellery and pottery. Such crafts may be sold in domestic and export markets, but also, critically, act as an attraction to bring tourists into rural communities (Fox Miller 2017; Mayes 2010; Mitchell and Shannon 2018). In parts of the global south, however, the emphasis has been more on redirecting traditional rural craft production towards export markets, often organised at a more collective, communal level, with whole villages becoming sites for the manufacture of specific craft products for export (Aguayo 2008; Gough and Rigg 2012; Rogerson 1986).

In both contexts, rural craft production is arguably differentiated from other forms of niche innovation within rural economies by a number of distinctive attributes. Firstly, artisan craft production emphasises individual skill, knowledge and imagination and hence reflects what may be regarded as distinctively *rural* forms of creativity. Whilst cities are identified as sites of creativity because of the opportunities they provide for intellectual exchange and the rapid diffusion of new ideas (Bathelt et al 2004; Florida 2005; Knudsen et al 2012), the countryside has conventionally been associated with more individual expressions of creativity, by artists, writers and craftworkers (Mahon et al 2018; Williams 1958). Thus, even as certain villages have developed clusters of craftworkers in the same specialist craft, actual production has tended to be organised through small independent workshops. Secondly, artisan craft production relies on encoded and tacit knowledge and skills that are embodied in the figure of the craftworker, and which are passed on in the individualised relationship between the craftworker and the apprentice. Although some enterprises have sought to commodify this knowledge, for example by running courses in traditional craft techniques, other communities and individual craftworkers have closely protected their specialist knowledge.

Thirdly, craft production is a physical, performed act, that requires the craftworker’s body to work and move in particular ways and demands precision in the senses of touch, sight and hearing. Handicrafts are valorised because they are manufactured *by hand*, by individual craftworkers, not on an industrial assembly line. These expectations structure the conditions of production, spatially and technologically, and restrict the scale of production. Fourthly, craft products may also attract additional value through geographical provenance. This is not necessarily based on the environmental context or material resource of a locality, but rather on its reputation, which in turn is founded on the knowledge and skill of its craftworkers. As such, certain craft products may become tied to certain places of production. Finally, artisan craft products are further valorised as expressions of authenticity – both directly, as authentic hand-crafted artefacts, and indirectly, as symbols of a perceived *authentic* rural, regional or national, way of life that is unsullied by industrialisation and cultural homogenisation.

These attributes shape not only the production process, but also the social relations and spatial formations that support the manufacturing activity and connect craft production with the wider community. Furthermore, they position artisanal craft production at a temporal and scalar interface. Temporally, artisan crafts draw on heritage and tradition, whilst also being mobilised as part of strategies for future economic development. Similarly, in terms of scale, artisan crafts are commonly embedded in a particular place whilst also being sold into national and international markets. Accordingly, artisan craft production can provide a lens through which

to examine how rural communities respond to modernisation and globalisation (see also Gough and Rigg 2012).

In this paper, we examine such dynamics through an empirical case study of artisanal birdcage production in Da'ou village in Shandong province, China. The historic craft of making bamboo birdcages, for which Da'ou village has a centuries-old reputation, has been revitalised in recent years by renewed demand from the growing urban middle class in China. The industry is still organised around individual craftworkers in small workshops, and is founded on local traditional knowledge that has been handed down across generations, yet it is also being reshaped by new translocal interventions such as e-commerce and tourism. As Da'ou village adapts to these challenges and opportunities, the changes are felt not only in terms of economic activity and labour, but also in the demographic profile of the community and in gender relations.

In particular, our study has sought to explore questions including: How have broader economic trends in China and globally impacted on birdcage production in Da'ou village? To what extent is birdcage craft production in Da'ou village tied to embedded local tangible and intangible resources, including traditional knowledge? Have new technologies been incorporated into the birdcage craft industry, and if so, what impacts have these had? How has the spatial organisation of birdcage manufacture and sales, both within the village and externally, changed in response to social, economic and technological influence? Have changes in the structure and organisation of birdcage-making affected social relations in Da'ou village? By addressing these questions, the paper contributes empirically to the still limited literature on handicrafts and rural communities, and informs conceptual understanding of rural community change under globalisation, particularly within the context of state-mediated globalisation, as in China.

### **Crisis, Modernisation, Globalisation and Rural Communities**

The decline and subsequent revival of rural craft production since the mid twentieth century is closely entwined with dynamics of modernisation and globalisation, as well as with counter-movements against these dynamics. The disappearance of traditional craft making from rural communities of the global north, documented by European and North American rural sociologists, reflected social and economic modernisation and globalisation: with small-scale craft production supplanted by Fordist mass production, increasingly within global production networks; and rural residents opting to buy cheaper, mass-produced and aesthetically 'modern' consumer products over locally-crafted artefacts (Luckman 2015; Williams 1958). Similarly, the later industrialisation of artisan craft production in the global south has been promoted by state-sponsored modernisation programmes and reinforced by the dissemination of western consumer culture, with the attendant incorporation of rural economies into global economic networks (Eyferth 2003; Gough and Rigg 2012).

The suppression of rural crafts has never been complete, however, and as Fox Miller (2017) notes, successive waves of craft revival since the industrial revolution have drawn on anti-modernist and anti-globalist sentiments, some of which have found distinctively rural spaces

of expression. The centrality of craft to the counter-movement of the 1960s and 1970s a “a politicized way to live against the dominant current of capitalist culture, and to reconnect with the value of human labour” (Fox Miller 2017: 2), for instance, was especially emphasised in the movement of individuals ‘back-to-the-land’ on rural smallholdings, where craft-making was adopted both as a practical measure and as an expression of identity (Fisher 1997).

More substantially, Fox Miller (2017) identifies a further craft revival originating in the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s, and the rise of more fragmented consumer cultures, which “allowed room for small-scale production based on craft labor to occupy a position in the competitive landscape of advanced economies” (p. 2). In this post-Fordist landscape, craft products are valued for their ‘authenticity’, which may be appreciated either in relation to the skilled and individual non-mechanical process of manufacture, or through their signification of a more ‘authentic’ culture unsullied by globalised culture. As such, Fox Miller (2017) observes, craft products can appeal both to progressive sensibilities around quality, ethical consumption and local production, and to conservative impulses for “a nostalgic valorization of historic practices of making” (p. 3; see also Krugh 2004; Luckman 2015; Williams 2011).

The reactions against globalisation and modernisation intrinsic to these sentiments may be articulated in urban as well as rural settings, but they resonate strongly with popular (if misconstrued) associations of the countryside with tradition and local distinctiveness (Prince 2017a). As such, rural provenance can further enhance the perceived authenticity and exchange value of a handcrafted artefact. The craft revival can therefore be positioned as part of the wider commodification of the countryside (Cloke 1993; Woods 2011), that has in turn become a core tenet of neo-endogenous rural development policies in Europe and elsewhere (Van der Ploeg et al 2000). The development of craft production has hence been promoted as part of strategies to foster ‘creative industries’ in rural localities, with initiatives such as craft centres, craft fairs and marketing campaigns to tourists (Bell and Jayne, 2010; Haven-Tang and Sedgley 2014; Lysgard 2016; Prince 2017a, 2017b). Yet the large majority of businesses in rural craft sectors are sole-traders or small enterprises, and whilst there is an agglomeration tendency for craft businesses to cluster together in certain towns and villages, the overall contribution of craft production to local economies and employment in the rural global north remains proportionately small.

By contrast, there is a greater persistence in Africa, Asia and Latin America of villages where craft production is the dominant economic activity, often specialised around a particular material or artefact. As in the global north, rural craft production in the global south has come under pressure from modernisation and globalisation, notably the industrialisation of production to increase supply to domestic and export markets, and the spread of ‘modern’ western consumer culture (Karolia and Sardival 2014). However, some communities have successfully evaded this trajectory and protected traditional crafts by tapping into niche market demands for authentic ‘indigenous’ or ‘ethnic’ craft artefacts, both in domestic cities and internationally (Jain 2017; Nettleton 2010).

Rural craft producers in parts of the global south have therefore arguably benefitted from the anti-modernist search for authenticity, but their ability to do so has been facilitated by the globalisation of transport and communications infrastructure, migration and global media.

Indeed, Aguayo (2008) discusses the case of the rural Otavalo district in Ecuador, as an example of a 'global village' that is engaging with globalisation on its own terms through the export of traditional Andean woven handicrafts. As Aguayo describes, the revival of traditional indigenous weaving in Otavalo was prompted by opportunities from tourism, but expanded globally through a diasporic networks of migrants from the area, who broker deals and sell the handicrafts through street markets in European and North American cities.

Similar examples from elsewhere in Africa, Asia and Latin America are documented in the literature (e.g. Forstner 2013; Pudianti et al 2016; Rakotoarisoa et al 2016), with communities functioning as nodes in a transnational market for 'ethnic' art, crafts and fashions, whilst "maintaining and re-creating a supposed 'traditional identity' strongly linked to local places" (Aguayo 2008: 546). Yet, even as traditional local identity is foregrounded, the localities concerned are transformed by the connection into global networks and the reorganisation of production systems, including changes in social structures, with for instance the valorisation of craft production in many cases associated with shifting gender relations and the empowerment of women (Forstner 2013; Sugathan et al 2016; Weir 2008).

Moreover, the transformative impact on rural communities is spatial as well as social, as demonstrated by Gough and Rigg (2012) in studies of several craft-producing villages in Thailand and Vietnam. As they note,

Although handicraft production in northern Thailand and Vietnam may retain an image of being part of a traditional sector build around local, inherited skills and knowledge, local histories and local raw materials, in reality the industries considered here have metamorphised in such a way that their spatial engagements are networked and increasingly dispersed. This not only applies to the markets supplied, which have been stretched into the wider national and international arenas, but also to the functioning of the industry from design to inputs and labour. (Gough and Rigg (2012) p 183)

Accordingly, the craft-production system in the cases studied by Gough and Rigg has in effect become disembedded from the village, either as a territorial unit or as a community of social relations, with social, economic and cultural implications. However, the exceptionalism of the craft sector is its inability to completely detach from place, needing to evoke an essence of locality in order to maintain market prices in line with the pretence that handicraft products are "imbued with local skills and values and made from local materials, which marks them out as different, converting cultural authenticity into commercial value" (Gough and Rigg 2012: 184).

Comparison of the literature on rural crafts in the global north and the global south provides perspectives from two contrasting positions in the power-geometries of globalisation. In this paper, we seek engage a third perspective by applying insights from this literature to analysis of empirical evidence from China. The trajectory of rural craft production in China has resonances with that in Latin America and other parts of Asia, but is shaped by the particular political-economic context of China and especially state management of the economy. Based on a study of artisan paper-making in Sichuan province, Eyferth (2003, 2009) has argued that rural China experienced deindustrialisation in the early years of the Communist regime, as traditional rural craft industries were dismantled, restructured and marginalised, under the pretext of modernisation. Economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping from 1978 enabled a revival

of rural craft industries, and the introduction of the ‘One Town, One Product’ policy in 1989 further encouraged the specialisation of localities around traditional craft industries (Pan 2012), whilst urbanisation and the growth of the Chinese middle class created a market demand for commodified rural art and handicrafts with cultural capital (Guo 2012; Liang 2004; Zacharias and Lei 2016). Yet, Eyferth (2009) also suggests that the continuing regulation of the household as a unit of production has inhibited the development of craft industries such as Sichuan paper making; whilst other observers have identified challenges with production capacity, limited markets, low skills, restricted innovation and creativity, and the elderly profile of craftworkers and difficulties in training new craftworkers in an environment of rural depopulation (Feng and Yao 2014; Gao et al 2017; Wang, 2016). The Chinese government has responded to challenges such as these with programmes to support rural handicrafts, including establishing ‘heritage clusters’ that reinforce the association of craft and place (Xu 2015). At the same time, online platforms such as AliBaba have enabled some regional craft cultures to develop export markets (see for example, Liu 2010), but uptake remains uneven and opportunities continue to be moderated by state mediation of globalisation processes in rural China. It is in this context that we encounter Da’ou village.

## **Methods and Case Study**

This paper draws on intensive fieldwork undertaken in Da’ou village over four days in October 2016. Da’ou village (*Da’ougezhuangcun*, 大欧戈庄村) is located in Qijizhen township in the Jimo city region, north of Qingdao in Shandong province on the east coast of China. Its registered population includes 1500 residents in 460 households. The surrounding region is a fertile agricultural district, with wheat, corn and vegetables grown in fields around the village. Under Chinese law, each registered resident has a land-holding, but many rent out the land to farmers from Da’ou village or neighbouring villages, with the majority of the village workforce employed in birdcage making and associated activities. There is also a small footwear factory, a museum and a village government office, as well as two general stores and a post office in the village.

The research team consisted of two European and two Chinese researchers, with all interviews involving at least one European and one Chinese researcher working together. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese or the local dialect by a Chinese researcher, following an interview schedule jointly composed by the full research team. Summary translations of the interview responses were periodically made for the European researchers during the interview, allowing for supplementary questions to be posed. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the interviewee and professionally transcribed in Chinese and translated into English.

The fieldwork was organised with the assistance of the local government and party committee, who also arranged the first couple of interviews, but did not play an active part in the selection or conduct of further interviews. The local government also provided a car and driver to transport the research team between the village and their hotel, but the driver did not accompany the time to interviews within the village. One of the first interviewees, a prominent craftworker in the village, subsequently acted as a facilitator for the research team, liaising with

the Chinese researchers to find interviewees and making introductions. All requests for interviews were accepted. In total, 11 interviews were conducted with 19 people, including nine birdcage makers and family members, five government officials, two employees at the municipal e-commerce centre, and three other residents of the village (Table 1). All interviews were conducted in Da'ou village, mostly in homes or workshops, except for one interview at an e-commerce centre in the chief town of the municipality.

As Da'ou village is fairly compact in area, the research team were able to walk around the whole village, taking notes and photographs that provided supplementary data. Further information was collected from visits to the village museum, the municipal e-commerce centre, and to the Jimo Ancient City tourism site, where one of the Da'ou village craftworkers has opened a shop; as well as from informal conversation with officials from the local government and other local residents over meals. Additional contextual information on rural crafts and birdcage culture in China was later collected from English and Chinese-language online sources.

Interviewee No	Position/Occupation	Gender	Age
1	Land Resources Bureau Director	Male	
2	Land Resources Bureau employee	Male	
3	Governor of the Jimo City Land Resources Bureau	Male	
4	Village Party Secretary	Male	
5	Township Director	Male	
6	Birdcage maker	Male	44
7	Birdcage maker	Male	60s
8	E-commerce trader & wife of birdcage maker	Female	48
9	Birdcage maker	Male	
10	Birdcage maker	Male	48
11	Wife of birdcage maker	Female	40s
12	Wholesaler	Female	50
13	E-commerce Centre Manager	Male	
14	E-commerce Centre employee	Female	
15	Bamboo supplier	Female	
16	Birdcage maker	Male	36
17	Birdcage maker	Male	48
18	Wife of birdcage maker	Female	40s
19	Footwear factory manager	Male	37

Table 1: Details of interviewees

### Chinese Bird Culture and the Da'ou village Birdcage Tradition

Bird culture in China has a long history, with birds revered by the Chinese population for the spiritual and symbolic meanings attached to them in Chinese religion and mythology. The keeping of birds as pets was popularised in the Song Dynasty (CE 960-1279), especially in the imperial court and among aristocratic families. Da'ou village was founded during the early Ming Dynasty (CE 1368-1644) and established the practice of birdcage making around a century after its foundation, introduced by craftworkers who had visited birdcage-making



communities in Yunnan province, in southern China. The adoption of birdcage-making in Da'ou village established a source of bamboo birdcages in northern China, closer to the imperial capital at Beijing, and the fashion for Da'ou birdcages peaked during the Qing Dynasty (CE 1644-1911), and especially the reign of Emperor Qianlong (CE 1711-1799), when they were favoured as a status symbol by members of the Manchu elite (Interviewee 5; Wang and Wang 2009).

By the twentieth century, over 400 households in Da'ou village were engaged in producing birdcages (Interviewees 1 and 5). However, in common with other traditional craft industries (Eyferth 2003), the birdcage industry in Da'ou village was extensively curtailed and restructured following the declaration of the People's Republic in 1949. Individual craft workshops were reorganised into a village cooperative, with centralised management of production and a monopoly arrangement that saw all products sold to the Qingdao Department Store. Production was shifted from decadent birdcages to more utilitarian items such as clothes pegs, coat hangers, clothes stands and badminton racquets, until competition from cheaper mass-produced plastic versions of these goods undermined the market in the 1980s. At the same time, the collectivisation of agriculture demanded the participation of all village residents in farming in a struggle to maintain food supplies. Through the combination of these factors, commercial birdcage production ceased in Da'ou village for over twenty years, but the skill was not lost, as one birdcage maker recalled: "the birdcage craftsmanship was not lost and forgotten; even after so many years, the villagers could still pick it up" (Interviewee 6).

Economic reforms after 1978 provided the opportunity for the birdcage industry to be revived. The new household responsibility system allowed craftworkers to set up their own workshops again, and the dismantling of the village cooperative and the monopoly of the Qingdao Department Store permitted them to sell directly to customers in markets in Qingdao: "you could work on your own and the talented people could market their products outside; they didn't have to sell to the department store" (Interviewee 9 – birdcage maker). In particular, craftworkers established contacts with traders or agents (generally referred to by villagers as 'middlemen'), who bought birdcages from Da'ou village to sell in Beijing and other cities of northern China.

Through these connections, Da'ou village has profited from a renaissance of bird culture in China and a growing demand for birdcages from urban residents. As Yang (2015) notes, the growth in demand reflects several concurrent trends, including the increased disposable income, leisure time and pursuit of cultural capital of the expanding urban middle class, and the popularity of bird keeping as a hobby among the substantial retired population but also a growing fashion for keeping birds by young people, and the reduction in prices of birdcages making them affordable to a wider section of the population. Despite some competition from plastic and metal birdcages, Da'ou village craftworkers produced around 500,000 birdcages per year (Xi and Wang 2015) and have secured an estimated 70-80 per cent of the market for birdcages in northern China, including cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Wuhan. Birdcage sales bring around 30 million RMB (3.75 million Euro) in revenue to Da'ou village each year, with 75 per cent of households in Da'ou village engaged in making birdcages, and a further 15 per cent in supporting activities (Interviewee 6).

## Local Embeddedness and the Transmission of Knowledge

The dominance of Da'ou village in the northern China birdcage market reflects the value placed on the geographical provenance of the handicrafts, yet the association of birdcage making with Da'ou village is not based on the exploitation of a rare local resource for raw materials. The *moso* bamboo used to make the birdcages is not grown locally, but is transported from the southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Anhui. Rather, the pre-eminence of Da'ou village birdcages has been maintained through the inter-generational transmission of the intangible, tacit knowledge of birdcage crafting.

Tacit knowledge is implicit, subjective and contextual; it is a form of practical 'know how' embodied in the skills and work practices of individuals and organisations, in this case of craftworkers. In Da'ou village, it has been passed on from generation to generation through 'learning by doing', with children immersed in the family workshop culture, listening, watching and learning from their father and grandfathers how to produce bamboo birdcages. The informal apprenticeship would generally start from around age 10, with young men starting to make bird cages independently in their mid-teens. As one birdcage maker explained, "you cannot learn this skills in a short period of time. It takes time. We have been making this for more than twenty years" (Interviewee 6).

Whilst the family workshop has been the main locus of inter-generational learning, the clustering of birdcage production in Da'ou village has also assisted, reflecting broader observations of the significance of spatial agglomeration and dense networks of interactions for the transmission of tacit knowledge in knowledge-based economies, and especially craft industries (Fox Miller 2017; see also Bathelt et al 2004; Gertler 1995; Storper and Venables 2002). Critically, the spatial agglomeration of birdcage craftworkers in Da'ou village enabled the transmission of the tacit knowledge and skill of birdcage making to be contained within the village and not passed outside, thus maintaining the village's competitive advantage. A strict gendering of the division of labour in birdcage manufacture reinforced this protectionism – the artisanal knowledge was traditionally passed only to young men, with concerns that women could marry outside the village and take the secrets of Da'ou birdcage making with them. Women were generally only permitted to engage in the birdcage making process after marrying a Da'ou craftworker, and then only in supporting roles.

The policing of the transmission of the tacit knowledge of birdcage making has been further assisted by the *hukou* system of household registration in China, which has restricted the ability of craftworkers from elsewhere to move to Da'ou village and enter the birdcage industry whilst at the same time enabling out-migrants from the village to return. In the decade preceding the research, around 30 households had used their family connections with Da'ou village to move from provinces in north eastern China including Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, attracted by the strong economy, quality of life, cultural environment and local social security provision (Interviewee 6). Additionally, young people who moved from Da'ou village for education or work have also started to return, with some becoming birdcage makers, including Interviewee 16, who had returned to Da'ou village and set up as a craftworker at the age of 26, having previously left to work in the petroleum industry in Jimo:

“Well, I decided to come back for keeping the heritage of our village. It is now recognised by more and more people. Both the city and village governments give their support [to birdcage making] and do a good job. And, how could a I get a decent income back then [in the city]?” (Interviewee 16)

In returning to Da’ou village, the craftworker was tapping into the artisanal knowledge and skills that he had been introduced to in his youth, noting that “I listened and watched this [making birdcages] and I was fully immersed in this since a kid” (Interviewee 16). However, although he suggested that several of his contemporaries from Da’ou village “went to university but ended up coming back since their salary is very slim [in the city]” (Interviewee 16), he also estimated that around 70 per cent no longer lived in the village. Indeed, his own wife and children continued to live in Jimo city, 20 kilometres away, such that whilst he felt it necessary to return to Da’ou village to set up a birdcage workshop, he continues to live a life that extends beyond the village.

Thus, whilst the revival of birdcage making has enabled Da’ou village to buck the dominant trend of rural depopulation in China and register a recent increase in population, the mobility of younger generations and the increasingly translocal lifestyles that they follow, may make it increasingly difficult for the artisanal knowledge of birdcage making to be contained within the village and form the basis of its market advantage. As such, Da’ou village craftworkers have also needed to pursue other strategies.

### **Adaptations and Innovations**

History and tradition are essential to the valorisation of the provenance of a Da’ou birdcage, but they are not in themselves sufficient to ensure the sustainability of the industry. Studies of rural craft industries in China have revealed an uneven picture, with pockets of successful revitalisation, such as Da’ou village, contrasted with wider patterns of long-term decline characterised by low earnings, aging craftworkers and problems of business succession (Wang and Zhang 2013). Locally within Qijizhen township, Da’ou village is recognised as an anomaly, with its success not shared by two other traditional handcraft industries – making dustpans (*Boji*) and weighing scales (*Sheng*) in neighbouring villages (Interviewee 5). The vitality of the Da’ou birdcage industry cannot therefore be explained by structural factors, alone, but also is a product of the agency of craftworkers in negotiating innovation and tradition. In this way, the Da’ou birdcage makers may be considered as an example of what Ye and Fu (2015) label popular peasant innovation, embracing the strategies, actions and techniques through which peasants combine their tacit knowledge and practical experience to adapt to social, economic, cultural and environmental change. In the case of Da’ou village, craftworkers have demonstrated popular peasant innovation in adapting the historic practice and traditional knowledge of birdcage making to new market and cultural conditions and new technologies.

Five adaptations in particular have been significant in the negotiation of tradition and modernisation by Da’ou craftworkers. First, they have expanded the variety of birdcages that

they produce to meet the demands of an increasingly nuanced and fragmented market. Fundamentally, Da'ou birdcages are designed for three species of bird – lark, thrush and jade birds – that require different sized cages. Yet, cages are also modified according to differing characters and diurnal habits of birds and the preferences of customers. Traditionally, Da'ou birdcage makers produced around 20 to 30 types of bird cage, but since the revitalisation of the industry in the 1990s, this has increased to more than 60 different types of bird cage. The range of birdcage accessories has also increased significantly, making use of new materials such as red sander in place of traditional bamboo and ox bone, with over 500 different accessories now available.

Second, the craftworkers have also diversified the quality, and hence cost, of the bird cages produced, to reflect demand from a broader range of customers and competition from cheaper imitations. This has been facilitated by the adoption of machines that have accelerated the manufacturing process, enabling a craftworker to produce four or five birdcages per day, which would retail for around 30-50 RMB each (3.75 – 6.25 Euro). By contrast, a full hand-crafted bird cages takes two to three days to complete, and sells at an average price of 500-600 RMB each (62 – 75 Euro) (though the best quality examples can sell for more than 5000 RMB (620 Euro)). Da'ou craftworkers therefore are required to negotiate between maintaining the cultural value of their birdcages with limited high quality, high price examples, and ensuring consistency of income with cheaper, lower-quality examples, reflecting Banks's (2010) observation that increased demand for craft products is leading a reduction of quality, with a decline in 'good' craft jobs and the rise of large numbers of standardised products.

Third, adaptation to the demands of an expanded market have also resulted in changes to the production process, with more specialist contributions from Da'ou craftworkers. Traditionally, an individual craftworker would make an entire birdcage, which they would sell as a finished product. Increasingly, however, traders are requiring semi-finished products, with the Da'ou village craftworkers undertaking the more skilled work of the making the bamboo parts, but with the assembly of the finished product being completed by contractors elsewhere. This arrangement allows for faster and cheaper production.

Fourth, changes in transportation and the supply of raw materials have enabled some characteristics of high quality birdcages to be more widely adopted. Bamboo is now delivered to Da'ou village from the southern provinces of Fujian and Anhui by truck in as little as twenty four hours – compared with several days for bamboo historically transported by handcart – and in larger quantities, with up to 500 or 600 pieces of bamboo delivered in a single truckload (compared with 15-16 pieces by handcart). With a regular, reliable supply of fresher bamboo, craftworkers have been able to stop using marginal elements of the bamboo, such as the skin and pulp, and to more widely introduce techniques that enhance the quality of the bamboo, such as drying and dehydration:

“To make a good birdcage and to dehydrate a bamboo, it takes at least 2-3 months. Then you have to let it dry until it turns yellow. It is a time-consuming process. We dehydrate and let them dry now, now. There were not so many bamboos before and we were short of raw materials. We would start using them as soon as they arrived here.” (Interviewee 6)

Fifth, Da'ou village birdcage makers have also adapted to changing market demands by reorganising themselves. Six cooperatives have been established in the village by groups of craftworkers. Whilst the tradition of the individual craftworker is valued and respected, the cooperatives enable birdcage makers to take on larger orders, which they then divide between themselves, as well as to coordinate marketing and other support activities.

Through these adaptations and innovations, the Da'ou village birdcage makers have negotiated the pull of tradition and the pressure of modernisation to forge a hybrid space where technical innovation is used both to secure a livelihood by producing common birdcages and to create a very high-quality niche product that satisfy the demand of more specific customers. These two, seemingly contradictory modes of production co-exist by necessity, as one birdcage maker explains:

“They feel completely different. For the good one, you have a sense of achievement when you just look at it. You may earn more with machine [for the ordinary ones]. But we can't lose or forget our traditional craftsmanship. You have to make the birdcage purely by hand if the customer requires it.” (Interviewee 6).

The income generated by the larger-scale, part-mechanised production of cheaper birdcages is essential to the prosperity of the village, yet their value and popularity in itself rests of the reputation of Da'ou birdcages as an object of quality and historical resonance, and the capacity of hand crafted bird cages to continue to fetch high prices. Tradition and modernisation are thus intrinsically locked together.

### **New Spatial Connections**

In addition to negotiating new technologies in the production process, Da'ou village birdcage makers have also engaged with new information and communications technologies, including computers, smartphones and the internet. Whereas adaptations in the production process have negotiated the temporal interface between tradition and modernisation, the internet and social media have produced possibilities for new spatial connections across the interface between the local embeddedness of the Da'ou village birdcage culture and globalisation. The spread of computers, smartphones, social media and the internet are arguably some of the most notable expressions of globalisation in rural China, albeit heavily mediated by the Chinese state. With access to international websites, applications and software severely restricted, use has focused on Chinese platforms such as Weibo, WeChat and Taobao, harnessing global technologies to transform internal relations within China (McDonald 2016). In particular, there has been an explosion of e-commerce, using platforms such as Taobao (for domestic sales) and AliBaba (for exports), which has both transformed consumption practices in rural communities and expanded the potential for sales of rural products (Lin et al 2016).

In Da'ou village, Taobao shops have been established by a number of households to sell birdcage products directly to customers, generating 10 million RMB (1.25 million Euro) in e-commerce sales, or around one third of total sales revenue from the village (Interviewee 5). One household interviewed were selling five per cent of their products through Taobao, whilst another had increased their e-commerce sales by 30 per cent in the previous year (Interviewees

10 and 16). Passing the threshold of 10 million RMB in revenue has earned Da'ou village designation as a 'Taobao Village' by the Ali Research Institute, as advertised at the entrance to the village. Additionally, an e-commerce centre for the township was established in 2015 in Qijizhen, operated by a private company on behalf of the township government, with 100 employees handling e-commerce sales and dispatching goods on behalf of local producers, including Da'ou village birdcage makers (Interviewees 13 and 14). A smaller e-commerce centre also opened in Da'ou village itself in 2016, performing a similar function.

The main objective of the e-commerce centre, however, is to develop ten exemplary e-commerce villages or cooperatives and the centre runs e-commerce training courses for local residents, covering aspects including opening an online store, website design, advertising, photographing products, and managing logistics. As such, the emphasis is on encouraging household Taobao stores. Thus, as in Lin et al's (2016) case study in Guangdong province, the adoption of e-commerce in Da'ou village has reinforced the household as an economic unit, but with an altered division of labour. E-commerce activities in the village are predominantly managed by women, who were traditionally marginalised in the birdcage production process, with younger women in particular using computing and business skills acquired in education or employment outside the village (for example, Interviewees 8, 10 and 16). The development of e-commerce in this way has accordingly had both financial and social impacts, generating new income sources, enhancing the position of women, and potentially creating new employment opportunities for young women in the village. It has also changed the dynamics of household relations, giving women a stronger role in business decision-making, which has not been without tensions. Although most interviewees spoke enthusiastically about the potential of e-commerce, some older male craftworkers were more sceptical, or expressed concerns about the consequences for their way of working – with more smaller, customised orders – as well as about the impact on the businesses of the traders through whom they conventionally sold their birdcages, and with whom they had developed friendships.

The adoption of e-commerce has not only permitted Da'ou craft households to sell directly to customers, but has also increased the geographical scope of their sales beyond the northern cities in which the traders conventionally operated. In addition to Taobao shops based in Da'ou village being able to sell anywhere in China, Da'ou birdcages are also offered on Taobao by online retailers based in 12 Chinese provinces, including southern provinces such as Guangdong and Sichuan, which had not traditionally been significant markets. However, the potential for e-commerce to extend to international sales has not been substantially realised. Local government officials, craftworkers and e-commerce traders all expressed aspirations for exports, and one household we visited had a large map of the world pinned above the computer they used for e-commerce, but many described the difficulties encountered. In part these reflect the cultural specificity of the Chinese birdcage culture, with the few examples of international sales tending to be to Chinese emigrants; but they also indicated skills and confidence limitations, including an absence of English language competence and challenges of dealing with bureaucracy for export permits:

“Without the talent in computer, English or any other foreign language, we can't understand this area. The middleman has such talents and they are experienced in this. With such talents the market will expand” (Interviewee 7)

A similar paradox relates to the promotion of tourism in Da'ou village, which has also been actively encouraged by the local government and welcomed by craftworkers and village residents, and which utilises new media and communications opportunities. A new museum of birdcage-making has been opened in Da'ou village and historical information boards and other tourist-friendly signage and street furniture erected as part of plans to enhance the village appearance for tourism (Jimo Government, 2016). The village has featured in a Chinese travel magazine and a television programme and designated as a 'Rural Memory Village', whilst the Da'ou birdcage craft was certified as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Shandong Province in 2006, all increasing the profile of the village and encouraging tourism. Moreover, a showcase shop for Da'ou birdcages was opened in 2016 in the nearby Jimo Ancient City tourist district, a major new development of shops, restaurants and tourist attractions. There are hopes that such initiatives might attract international tourists, especially with plans for a new Qingdao International Airport to be built near the village, but so far almost all tourist visitors have been from within China, with language and accessibility remaining obstacles.

The engagement of Da'ou villagers with new technologies and opportunities created by globalisation, along with the adaptability of craftworkers to shifting market environments, demonstrate the agency of rural inhabitants as "dynamic actors" and "the real promoters of institutional transformation in the special institutional context of rural China" (Ye and Fu 2015: 97). However, they also reflect the limitations of local agency, and particularly the ways in which interactions with global networks outside China are mediated by the same 'special institutional context' of China.

### **Village Transformations**

Notwithstanding the limits to local agency noted in the previous section, the social and economic impact of the revitalisation of birdcage-making in Da'ou village has been significant. The annual value of birdcage production in Da'ou village is around 30 million RMB (3.75 million Euro), providing a substantial income to the village in the context of rural China. One craftworker reported an annual household income of between 80,000 and 100,000 RMB (10,000 to 12,000 Euro) which was considerable higher than an average household income of 31,545 RMB (4,000 Euro) for urban households and 12,848 RMB (1,600 Euro) for rural households in Shandong province for the same year 2015 (Shandong Bureau of Statistics, 2017a and 2017b). Residents have invested this relative wealth in household improvements, including new furniture and appliances, refurbishing or extending houses, or building new houses. Property values have consequently inflated, with a four-bedroom house in Da'ou village valued at 140,000 – 150,000 RMB (18,000 – 19,000 Euro) compared with 40,000 – 50,000 RMB (5,000 – 6,250 Euro) in a neighbouring village. Villagers have also made financial investments, particularly in insurance companies.

Increased revenue to the local government has been channelled into improvements to the landscape and public infrastructure of the community. Roads have been paved, attractive street furniture installed, and a former rubbish dump in the centre of the village converted into a lake. Housing for elderly residents has been refurbished and modernised, and there are plans to replace some of the older housing in the village with modern, western-style villas.

The transformation of the community has been social as well as physical. As noted in earlier sections, Da'ou village is unusual in rural China in experiencing in-migration and population growth, as former residents and households with historic ties to the community are attracted back. Although most young people still leave the village for higher education and/or work, the vitality of the birdcage craft industry and the related expansion of e-commerce are creating opportunities for young men and women to return and set up businesses or contribute to family businesses. In particular, as previously noted, women have tended to be especially active in developing e-commerce, contributing to a re-casting of gender roles and relationships in the community.

As such, the fusion of the traditional craft of birdcage-making with modern market opportunities has been a catalyst for physical and social transformations that have significantly improved the quality of life for local residents. The dominance of birdcage-making in the economic life of the village means that the benefits have been widely distributed in the community, however economic and social disparities with other villages in the locality have increased, and with increased mobility and economic liberalisation the capacity for village leaders to control the spread of birdcage-making to other sites outside Da'ou village may be tested. Moreover, the reliance of Da'ou village on a single product type – birdcages – introduces its own vulnerabilities, as is an issue for the Chinese 'One Place, One Product' policy more broadly. In the case of Da'ou village, the risks arise not only from the prospect of competition from cheaper mass-manufactured metal or plastic birdcages, but also from changes in market fashion. The demand for Da'ou birdcages rests on cultural cachet of traditional birdcages with (largely urban and middle class) consumers, which is susceptible to change, potentially under the influence of western culture and animal welfare values. The resilience of Da'ou village may therefore depend on continuing innovation and adaptability in which birdcages may be commodified more through tourism than as consumer products.

## **Conclusions**

In many parts of the world, rural handicraft industries have experienced a renaissance as demand for ethnic, traditional and nostalgic rural products has grown with urban consumer enthusiasm for signifiers of 'authentic' rural culture. Whilst this fashion may be considered as a reaction to cultural globalisation and perceived homogenisation, the revival of rural handicrafts is itself facilitated by globalisation processes, including trade liberalisation, the circulation of new technologies – including internet and communications technologies, increased international tourism, the promotion of global consciousness through transnational media, and the intermediary role of transnational migrants. At the same time, the impacts of handicraft revitalisation can be highly localised, and have a substantial transformative effect on social, spatial and economic structures in the localities concerned, as Aguayo (2008) and Gough and Rigg (2012) have documented.

It is also evident that whilst there may be commonalities between rural craft revivals in different parts of the world, there are also significant geographical variations and that the form of handicraft production and its impact on local socio-spatial structures may be shaped by particular political-economic conditions. Thus, whilst in the global north, rural craft-making



may be associated with clusters of entrepreneurial craftworkers, often in popular tourist localities, producing for niche markets; in the global south rural handicraft industries commonly are more routinized, producing *en masse* for export markets and in many cases forming the staple industry for the villages concerned. As Gough and Rigg (2012) also note, there is a need for more empirical research exploring these different geographical contexts of rural handicrafts, and this paper contributes to this endeavour with its empirical study from China.

The recent history of rural handicrafts in China has been highly differentiated, with elements that reflect processes and experiences observed elsewhere both in the global north and in the global south. Certain artefacts, such as Da'ou birdcages, have become sought after for their cultural signification by an urban middle class nostalgic for an idealized rural past and villages such as Da'ou have benefited, in much the same way as the rural handicraft revival in the global north has been substantially driven by urban middle class commodification of the rural idyll. In contrast, other artefacts, such as the dustpans and weighing scales historically produced by neighbouring villages to Da'ou village have not attracted the same cultural capital and have not stimulated economic development in the same way; whilst the craft heritage of communities in some other parts of the country have been directed towards mass production for export markets, including of ersatz western 'rural' craft artefacts, in production models more similar to those observed by Gough and Rigg (2012) in Thailand and Vietnam. Even in places such as Da'ou village, where the driving consumption patterns may reflect western cultural changes, the organisation of actual handicraft production continues to have more in common with craft villages elsewhere in the global south. Yet, at the same time, Da'ou village has been protected by China's distinctive political-economic structure from some of the pressures for spatial and social reterritorialization observed in Thailand and Vietnam, for instance (Gough and Rigg 2012).

As such, the case of Da'ou village may be read not only as an empirical example of the revitalisation of handicraft production in rural China, but also as a study of how a rural community negotiates globalisation and modernisation. Handicraft production provides a particularly interesting insight into these dynamics as it inherently involves an interface of tradition and modernity and of the local and the global. The case of Da'ou village thus reveals the agency of rural craftworkers (following Ye and Fu 2015) in seeking to shape their own futures through the fusion of traditional, locally-embedded craft knowledge with modern technologies and new spatial relations. As bottom-up innovation, this compares with primarily top-down official programmes for rural development in China. However, the agency of the craftworkers continues to be regulated by structural factors, notably the institutional power of the state. The revival of craft-making has on the one hand been facilitated by the state, from national policies such as the introduction of the household responsibility system to local government actions such as investment in e-commerce; yet, at the same time, state regulation continues to limit opportunities in areas such as e-commerce and exports. In this way, globalisation is in the background of change in Da'ou village, not the foreground: it may be glimpsed in the economic boom that underpins urban demand for birdcages, in the spread of new technologies and the adoption of social media and e-commerce, in the promise of tourism and in aspirations to sell abroad; but it has had little direct impact on the economic life of Da'ou

village, with craft revitalisation influenced more by domestic political, economic and cultural drivers within China.

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