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Narrating Heritage’s Living Stories:  
A Comparative Study of China’s Suojia Ecomuseum and Australia’s Melbourne Living Museum of the West

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Abstract

The Ecomusée, as emerged in France in the 1970s, is a form of open-air museum that aims to maintain collections in their original environments with local communities serving as curators and managing their own heritage. This approach and philosophy implies and is dependent upon democratic principles in the conservation and interpretation processes. Since the 1990s, China has adopted the ecomusée concept for the conservation of selected ethnic villages to relieve tensions between poverty and heritage conservation. However, does this concept really work in China? To answer this question, the Suojia Ecomuseum, the first such initiative - has been selected as a case study and assessed using the mixed methodologies of on-site observation, documentation and semi-structured interviews. This process has identified several issues and problems associated with this ecomuseum. It demonstrates that Suojia Ecomuseum has not achieved international benchmarks, neither philosophical nor practical expectations have been met. This conclusion challenges the internationally acknowledged notion that all ecomuseums develop and are operated using a bottom-up approach, that they were all community-based and democratic. These discrepancies lead to other questions about the differences between ecomuseums in China and elsewhere. In order to map and compare the differences between ecomuseums in China and in Western democracies, a detailed survey was undertaken using Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West, Australia. Applying the same methodologies as in China, a comparable examination was undertaken as to its background, objectives, management structures, programs and activities, and project outcomes as well as problems. The differences between Suojia Ecomuseum and Melbourne’s Living Museum are then explained and shown. They demonstrate quite diverse organisations with different objectives and management structures relating to different cultural and natural resources. However, the
The unexpected finding was that the futures of both ecomuseums relied on the financial support and passion of younger generations and hence were vulnerable.

The ecomuseum concept
In general, the ecomuseum – as a new museology - is a tangible kind of open-air/outdoor museum that keeps buildings and people on their original site. Its theoretical and practical origins were first articulated in France through Georges-Henri Rivière¹ and Hugues de Varine.² The concept was coined by them in 1971, during a dinner with the French Ministry of Environment. Their intention was to link heritage protection with the environment.³

In 1986, Gjestrum demonstrated that the prefix ‘eco’ essentially meant human ecology—a place of man and society in communities within an ecological framework. Gjestrum believed that it should embrace the social, cultural and natural environments shared by a given community.⁴ In 1992, he published a graphic representation that ecomuseum territory = sites + heritage + memory + population + elders.

In terms of the common characteristics, Heron suggested three principal features of ecomuseums as being a strong sense of local pride in traditions, customs, and vernacular architecture, a link with local economic regeneration, and local attempt to save threatened culture.⁵ Boylan emphasised the importance of community involvement.⁶ Joubert has subsequently summarised four principles of the French ecomusée as - the territory, its heritage, the population and education.⁷ Davis has argued that the ecomuseum should work as a tool to enhance local perceptions of local cultural landscape by linking heritage elements to contemporary life and values, and for the long-term rebuilding, maintainance, restoration and conservation of landscapes.⁸ Per explained that the difference between open-air museums and ecomuseums was that the former tended to be just collections and relocations of buildings whilst the latter kept collections and people in the original environment.⁹

In recent decades, the ecomuseum concept has been universally acknowledged as a new paradigm for the holistic interpretation of cultural heritage, in which communities conserve, interpret, and manage their heritage consistent with sustainable development objectives.¹⁰ Evolving from Europe, the ecomuseum has developed in
several English-speaking countries (such as Australia) as well as in China. These ecomuseums are managed according to various backgrounds, policies and heritage contents. This paper examines two ecomuseums—one from China and one from Australia, to demonstrate differences in their management and conceptual expression.

**Developing research methodologies**

In the last fifteen years, Chinese ecomuseums have experienced significant development and there are now fifteen. However, each of these is a unique case and has raised different problems. The lack of local participation and over-developed tourism, have resulted in controversy about their degree of success as ecomuseums.\(^\text{11}\) There is now a necessity to examine how ecomuseums in China are managed and to challenge the original Western concept that all ecomuseums evolve from the bottom-up and are democratic and community-based. In this paper, the Liuzhi Suojia Ecomuseum for the Miao Ethnic Minority, Guizhou (梭戛苗族生态博物馆, thereafter the Suojia Ecomuseum) was selected for detailed investigation and then compared with an Australian ecomuseum equivalent: Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West.

Compared to China, Australia has a mature system of heritage conservation as demonstrated by its acknowledgement of the *Burra Charter* and development of National and State Heritage Councils. This is the main reason why Australia was selected by the author for this comparative study.\(^\text{12}\) Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West is the only formal ecomuseum in Australia, and was chosen as case study. According to Davis, this lone example in Australia is due to the lack of understandings about the ecomuseum concept within this country.\(^\text{13}\)

This research will describe the characteristics of the two case studies, including their backgrounds, objectives, management structures, programs and activities, project outcomes and problems. Three methods were used – documentation review, on-site observation and semi-structured interviews with the senior management and local residents. With regard to interview questions, five major topics were determined in advance and for each topic there were several subordinate questions. These questions worked as a thread to guide the sequence of the other questions, and allowed the emergence of more questions, according to observations of the interviewees’ responses.
The Suojia Ecomuseum

The Background

The Suojia Ecomuseum was the first ecomuseum not only in China but also in Asia, and was opened to assist the Miao ethnic minority in 1997. This community resides in twelve villages in Suojia Town, Liuzhi District, Guizhou Province, and is located in a remote area of Guizhou having little communication with the Province’s urban areas. The Miao possess an ancient and distinctive culture in terms of their language, houses, weaving skills, unique music, marriage systems, sacrifice ceremony and dance traditions. They are well-known for the long oxen horns worn by the women at festivals, weddings and other special occasions, and their elaborate hair-pieces made of wool (Figure 1). However, up until the 1990s, these twelve villages had been isolated from mainstream Chinese culture for over 200 years. This isolation guaranteed the authenticity and the integrity of their regional cultural heritage but also resulted in poverty. The communities lacked amenities like running water and electricity. How to provide these people with access to a less poverty-stricken life, without harming their culture, was a challenge for both the Central and provincial governments of China in the 1980s.

Also around the 1980s, Chinese museology was developing under the international influence of new museology. The promoter of the Chinese museological revolution, Donghai Su, introduced the concept of ecomuseum to China in 1986. Su was the consultant for cultural relic conservation in Guizhou Province, and advocated the ecomuseum idea in a governmental report -The ‘Seventh Five (year)’ Planning of Museum Development in Guizhou.17

Figure 1. Young girl in Suojia wearing traditional costume and hairstyle
At the annual meeting of the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) in 1994, Su entertained extensive discussions with the two museological ‘giants’ – the Norwegians Andre Desvalles and John Gjestrum. In 1995, after discussions with Laishun An — a specialist from the Chinese Society of Museums, Su formally presented to the Provincial Government of Guizhou a plan for co-operation with the Norwegian government to establish an ecomuseum.18

This proposal was adopted by the Guizhou provincial government and, as a result, the Chinese and Norwegian Governments signed a Sino-Norwegian cultural co-operation agreement for the project the same year.19 With academic and financial sponsorship from Norway, the first ecomuseum was opened in 1998 in Suojia Town, Liuzhi District, Guizhou Province; geographically covering twelve villages (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Map of the Suojia Ecomuseum (Adapted from Documentation Centre of Suojia Ecomuseum with copyright permission)](image)

The Objectives
At its outset, this ecomuseum proposal addressed three themes for the twelve Miao villages—heritage, economy and education. While major aim of this Ecomuseum was to open up these areas for poverty alleviation,20 a second aim sought to enhance local awareness of the value of their heritage. In 1998, Norwegian museologists were very excited to witness the rural culture when they visited Longga village, however, the villagers did not know which part of their property was a ‘treasure’.21 When the Norwegian museologists told the local people that their old loom was a ‘treasure’, the local people laughed and could not believe that their old artifact was so valuable.22 Attempting to address these differing perceptions, Suojia Ecomuseum seeks to serve
as an ideal educational tool to raise local people’s consciousness and confidence, and their pride in protecting their culture, in order to enhance their abilities to respect, utilise and develop their cultural and natural heritage. To conclude, there are three objectives of the Suojia ecomuseum:

- Conserving cultural heritage;
- Bringing the isolated minority communities access to modern ways of life;
- Keeping local villagers’ sense of identity.\(^{23}\)

To achieve these objectives, a guiding principle was issued during a workshop in Norway for ethnic minority peoples to be given some preliminary understanding of ecomuseums.\(^{24}\) Called the *Liuzhi Principle*, it demonstrates a sympathetic manner with respect to local people, their customs and beliefs\(^{25}\) and it remains the core ideology for the co-operation between Norway and China. The *Principle* illustrates the relationship between economic activities and heritage preservation - the latter should always be given priority. Since then, the *Liuzhi Principle* has been recognised as a ‘compulsory’ guideline for Chinese ecomuseums.\(^{26}\) However, this guideline has been proved to be too idealistic for the Suojia Ecomuseum, as revealed by the discussions below.

*Management Structure*

The advisory committee for the establishment of Suojia Ecomuseum comprises John Gjestrum, Chaoxiang Hu\(^{27}\) representing local government, Laishun An as project coordinator and Donghai Su as committee president.\(^{28}\)

The initial step of ecomuseum establishment was a long-term and significant effort to make villagers understand and accept the ecomuseum idea, and then be willing to participate in the establishment process for the ecomuseum. This step included the construction of a road to offer a convenient traffic conduit for villagers, the provision of infrastructure such as tap water, electricity and the renovation of old houses. These efforts made villagers see the benefits of an ecomuseum and they finally accepted the idea and helped with the establishment of an ecomuseum. They contributed to the documentation of their culture by taking photos and making video recordings, etc. Su stated that ‘the value of the ecomuseum gradually became clear as villagers’ ownership of their culture became a reality’.\(^{29}\) However, according to the author’s field research, during the thirteen years since, there are still many problems related to local involvement and ownership.
The Suojia Ecomuseum is managed separately from the villages themselves. The museum deals with cultural tasks, whilst the village administration does not interfere at all and always respects the ecomuseum management decision. Six staff work for the ecomuseum—two curators, three staff and one volunteer. All the full-time staff are from local governmental agencies, and the two curators possess cultural affairs backgrounds. This management structure deviates from the original (Western) ecomuseum idea of local people managing their own sites.

Su believes that the first stage of ecomuseum localisation is cultural consignment. This step allows government officials and advisors to be the agents of the ecomuseum establishment because they are the only persons who know what an ecomuseum is, whilst the locals have no awareness of the significance of their culture. By this reckoning, ecomuseum establishment is not feasible without the initial coordination of government and advisors. Su also believes that until the villagers understand the concept of ecomuseums and the significance of their culture, indeed only when they become the real ‘owners’ of their culture, can an ecomuseum be firmly sustained. For Su, the process from cultural consignment to cultural autonomy has to be part of the normal process of ecomuseum establishment and sustainability.

Activities and Programs
A Documentation Centre was constructed in Longga Village comprising an exhibition hall, a library, a staff office, a dining room, an accommodation building and a reception hall. This centre was co-designed and co-built by an architect and the local people to help ensure that its architectural style was compatible with the surrounding landscape and the vernacular architecture (Figure 3).
As mentioned earlier, in order to gain local people’s acceptance of the ecomuseum ideas, the first step was to bring material benefits. Considerable changes have unfolded for the Miao people since, especially in Longga. An elementary school was built, medical facilities were established, and a cluster of forty new houses was constructed for hitherto extremely poor villagers (Figure 4). These activities received positive appraisal from local people.\textsuperscript{34}

Meanwhile, a workshop entitled ‘The Memory of Miao’ was held during the early years of this ecomuseum, in both Liuzhi District and Norway, thereby providing an opportunity for Suojia Miao people to communicate with Norwegian and Chinese
museologists. The purpose of these workshops was to encapsulate the significance of local culture and to establish common understandings about the concept of an ecomuseum. This was the time when the Liuzhi Principle was born. Besides improvement of living conditions and raising of consciousness of their cultural value, tourism has also been facilitated. Local performances, such as singing and dancing are frequently scheduled for visitors. For example, grand dancing parties are held every year from January 4th to 14th in the Lunar Calendar. Further, local people are willing to provide walking-guide services to tourists and to interpret the culture to them. These tourism-related activities made more Miao culture accessible to the outside world, and also gave villagers opportunities to involve themselves in ecomuseum activities and to obtain additional income.

Last but not the least, the core program of the Suojia Ecomuseum is the ‘Memory Project’ - the recording and archiving of the tangible and the interpretation of the intangible culture of the twelve villages, including their costumes, dance, music, artifacts, stories and buildings. This Project helps to build a database for the past and the present of the Miao, and provides data for future research. According to interviews with the deputy curator, the Memory Project has been regarded as a key and compulsory mission of all Chinese ecomuseums.

The Outcome
After the ecomuseum was initiated, dramatic changes took place in Longga village: 1) living styles changed because of the availability of electricity, roads, piped water and access to the outside world; 2) traditional agricultural production was replaced by mechanical modes; 3) there were more exhibitions of cultural relics and more performances for visitors; 4) depopulation happened particularly as a result of outward migration by younger generations who chose to work in cities. Fang believes the ecomuseum itself brings changes to the villages. Meanwhile, she stated that these changes were caused by the experts and government who exposed the villagers to the process of modernisation and mass tourism, and this process would result in villagers’ alienation from their old traditions to modernised life.

Fang’s perspective is a criticism of Chinese ecomuseums. Others take a more neutral perspective towards this change. Interviews with other ecomuseum activists revealed that they believed that ecomuseum itself did not bring any changes to these villages, but worked as the catalyst to accelerate these changes. In other words, even without ecomuseums, such changes would have happened sooner or later—the
ecomuseum simply hastened the process. Suojia Ecomuseum’s curator explained that this unique role of the Chinese ecomuseum in fact corresponded to the need to alleviate the poverty of ethnic minority villages. He believed that in Ethnic Minority Villages, cultural resources were the only resources that can be utilised to promote economy, and in return, only when the economy develops can they achieve a more effective conservation of culture.

In a nutshell, the Suojia Ecomuseum has worked as a catalyst enabling the development of Miao villages, and also has accelerated material changes.

Part of the living culture has passed to the next generation whilst some aspects have been archived and converted into documents and videos, all of which is somehow far removed from the Liuzhi Principle which advocated placing heritage conservation above economic development. This situation indicates that the original ecomuseum idea was perhaps too idealistic or advanced for Chinese conditions. However, all these changes gained positive comments from local people, at least two thirds of interviewees being satisfied with the current situation. They largely agreed that Suojia Ecomuseum improved their educational levels, provided job opportunities and raised their consciousness and willingness to cherish and protect their culture. Meanwhile, because of the establishment of the ecomuseum, some valuable cultural objects were kept and some valuable cultural traditions were passed from generation to generation. More effort is needed to raise villagers’ consciousness of the significance of their culture, but this can only occur when their poverty is alleviated.

The Problems
As discussed above, the Suojia Ecomuseum has brought seemingly significant benefits to local communities and does somehow meet the ecomuseum criterion with regard to local involvement. Nevertheless, there are five significant problems:

1) The spatial territory of the ecomuseum is unclear to local villagers. Interviews revealed that the villagers external to Longga Village did not regard their villages as part of it. This is probably because, apart from Longga Village, there have been few changes in the other eleven villages.

2) Although ecomuseums in China have operated for several years, local people are still living in a poor conditions and don’t gain much benefit from them. Apart from financial support from government, the main avenue through which local people can
improve their living conditions is tourism. However, as observed by the author, several companies take tourists to the villages to see local performances and the scenery, but each time the local dancers receive little payment for their performances. It is unclear how the financial benefits from cultural tourism were distributed within the communities.

3) Local participation is minimal whilst local villagers do not really have any power in relevant decision-making processes. First of all, none of the six ecomuseum staff are Miao. Local people demonstrated that they were encouraged to participate in ecomuseum activities, but all ecomuseum programs are organised by local and provincial authorities. This should not be surprising because all such work is under the direct control of government and scientific advisors, and villagers are forced to accept it. There are two main reasons for this special structure. On the one hand, it has much to do with the ‘top-down’ nature of Chinese politics and governmental structures. On the other hand, due to local villagers’ low educational levels, impoverished living conditions and inadequate understanding about how to communicate the value of their culture, they do not have enough capacity to organise the cultural activities themselves. As Davis explained, in China, ecomuseums are not possible without external financial and expert help, whether this means Chinese and/or Western assistance.

4) There is little continuing maintenance of village landscapes. For example, when Suojia Ecomuseum was established, ten wooden houses were consolidated (Figure 5). However, no maintenance has been undertaken since and the exteriors are now in a very poor condition.

![Figure 5. The change of exteriors of the 1,000 year-old house (Left: 2005; Right: 2010)](image)
5) Lastly, there is inadequate funding. Suojia Ecomuseum’s curator stated that after the Norway-China co-operation agreement expired around 2005, the Ecomuseum had difficulty raising sufficient funds. This financial problem is directly linked to the issues mentioned previously. Moreover, neither does local government pay sufficient attention to organising ecomuseum programs.

The key question which remains - does local government really understand or sincerely appreciate the value of cultural heritage for ethnic minorities - is unanswered.

Melbourne’s Living Museum of the West
As initially planned, the same methods of documentation, observation and semi-structured interview were used during two visits to the Living Museum. The findings are described as below.

The Background
This museum area is located along the Maribyrnong River valley and encompasses nine industrial suburbs in the western region of Melbourne with a population of about 450,000 and a territory of 1,950 hectares (see Figure 6). Before 1835, this land was occupied by two Aboriginal tribes: the Bunurong and the Woiworung (sometimes referred to as Wurundjeri within the Kulin nation).

<Figure 6> The map of Melbourne’s West Region
Since 1835, the population of the region has become one of the most diverse communities in Australia; primarily working-class, it includes some 36% born overseas, including from Vietnam and Latin America. Over the years, these people developed the first industries of Melbourne, including farming (dairying, orchards, haymaking, vineyards), fibre and fabric (woollen mills, textile industries), meat and by-products (slaughtering, boiling down and tallow, soap and candles, meat preserves, skins and hides, explosives, chemicals, fertiliser, glue), and quarry and stone (quarryman, stonemason, crushed stone).

In the 1910s, the major industry in the region was pipe making. Expansion of Melbourne's sewage and drainage systems in the early 20th century depended heavily on pipes. In the late 1970s, the major industries were shutting down, leaving thousands of unemployed. There was an urgent need to do something to save this area. Joan Kirner – a local Member of Parliament -- convened a meeting which brought together local people, state government representatives and others interested in history and museums. As recalled by Peter Haffenden who has been the Living Museum curator for 25 years, this ecomuseum was established with the financial support of government, advice from academics and the requests of local people who wanted a museum.

In June 1984, drawing from an idea from academics, the passion of local people and funding from the Commonwealth Government and Commonwealth Employment Program, the Living Museum came into being.

The Objectives
As indicated on their official website, this project seeks to express this disadvantaged region, which is geographically flat and rocky and one of the most heavily industrialised of all the regions of Melbourne. Although it did not adopt 'ecomuseum' as the project name, it has been claimed as the first ecomuseum in Australia. This Living Museum sets ambitious objectives:

To establish a permanent ecomuseum within the context of Melbourne’s Western Region;
To develop a greater understanding of the history and culture of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and the environment of Melbourne’s Western Region;
To record and present the history of working people in Melbourne’s Western Region, up to the present day;
To involve the people of the region in the collection, research and presentation of this history;
To use a wide range of presentation methods, including exhibitions, video, publications, theater, public events and other participatory activities;
To be a multi-cultural museum;
To create a mobile museum service for Melbourne’s Western Region;
To relate the historic sites and structures of the region to the story of the people of the region;
To develop a Heritage Resources Centre of the region;
To undertake linking and bridging activates with other groups, projects and institutions in the Western Region;
To act as a catalyst for the development of ecomuseum activity in Australia;
To develop and promote community museum activity which is interactive and innovative;
To develop the techniques of presenting exhibitions and related activities as effective communication devices;
To undertake pilot projects in a number of areas within the ecomuseum’s context on an experimental basis. 

To conclude, there are three main missions of this museum—involving local communities in the recording, preserving, and interpreting the richness and depth of the region’s social industrial and environmental history, as well as people’s lives; providing a platform for this multi-cultural population to unite; and, offering services to this population. In addition, Haffenden expected this Museum to influence, and not just record, culture - something which would be achieved through education allowing people to participate and appreciate their culture.

Management Structure
The original funding from the Commonwealth Government was only for one year and involved the establishment of a steering committee of twenty-two people. These were all unemployed, or representatives of different ethnic and working backgrounds. Five of the committee members had some research background. Parks Victoria, a statutory authority committed to delivering works on the ground
across Victoria’s park network to protect and enhance park values,\textsuperscript{49} leased Pipemakers Park for the committee to build the Visitor Centre as a project venue.

At the end of the ‘experimental year’, government funding ceased and the Museum successfully achieved private sponsorship from a Spanish-background philanthropist who was amazed by what the Living Museum was doing. Thereupon six people were selected to serve as the staff of the Living Museum, with one as the Head, one as Project Co-ordinator and four people representing different groups: an Aboriginal advisor, historian, industrial archaeologist, heritage consultant and artist.\textsuperscript{50} In addition, the basic policy and direction of the Museum was guided by a Management Committee drawn largely from the western region. Some of these Committee members were elected as community representatives, some of them were drawn from history and education backgrounds, and some were appointed by local councils. The members were elected every year.

In the following two decades, the Management Committee and the staff together kept the Living Museum operating with sponsorship from the Maribyrnong City Council\textsuperscript{51} and Arts Victoria – a State Government body which advises on, and implements policies making the arts available and accessible to all Victorians, and with supporting and developing Victoria’s artists and creative industries.\textsuperscript{52} Each of the nine incorporated suburbs has their own representatives responsible for communicating with Museum staff and linking local people with the Living Museum. There were annual meetings with Museum staff to address on-ground enquiries and to discuss strategies. They also took researchers to the Visitor Centre to find resources. This management structure kept the Living Museum a community-based organisation.

\textit{Activities and Programs}

The Living Museum Visitor Centre was built in the Pipemakers Park, which was transformed into a park and wetlands from a historic pipe-making industrial site. Eight old buildings (dating from the 1840s to the 1940s) were well kept on this site, including the Chimney, tallow store, the main meeting building, etc. These buildings were restored with the co-operation of Living Museum and Parks Victoria.

The first step was building Museum facilities in the park. Apart from the Visitor Centre, there is a history garden called ‘The History of The Land Discovery Trail’. It uses different types of plants, sculptures and ground treatments to represent how this
region has developed from pre-European age until now. It comprises a Wurundjeri Garden, Early Settlers Garden, Colonial Garden, Hume Pipe-workers Garden, and an Industrial Archaeology Garden. There is also an interesting flower rack made from pipes to symbolise Greek pipe-workers (Figure 7).

The pipe-making factory remains are located behind Living Museum Visitor Centre and include an enclosure of shafts, machines and house remains (Figure 8). Along the park trails, there are shelters constructed by local women as a memorial of their farming activities. This shelter is now used extensively as a place for family reunions.

In addition to the physical design of the park, the Museum has launched several projects focusing on three themes—people, environmental history and industry. These programs cover a large range of subjects: the role of women in the region; built heritage; the Aboriginal heritage; and the natural environment. Some of them are initiated by Museum staff, whilst others result from community enquiries. Further, the Living Museum provides talks, tours, seminars, festival celebrations and a consultancy service. It also co-operates with tertiary and secondary institutions to organise educational programs; for instance, the Annual Report of 1999 was written by local college students.

![Figure 7](image1.png)  
**Figure 7.** The flower rack made of pipes to symbolise Greek pipe-makers.

![Figure 8](image2.png)  
**Figure 8.** The remains of pipe-making factories, enclosed by steel fencing.

The Museum also constructed a resource centre for the western regions of Melbourne, including storing recordings of oral history, photos, maps and a variety of publications. Local communities co-operated with Museum staff in documenting,
preserving, recording and interpreting the richness and depth of the region’s social industrial and environmental history.\textsuperscript{53}

It also needs to be mentioned that there is no physical collection in the Museum in the traditional sense. As Haffenden explained, the Living Museum is about observing things and making a record, not collecting things—if people bring photos to the Visitor Centre, they make a copy but do not keep the original photos.\textsuperscript{54} The reason is to keep a record of as many of the resources as possible to enable the development of other programs. Therefore, rather than a collection of artifacts, objects and information, this Centre has become a platform for research, education, communication, community liaison and preservation of ideas.

\textit{The Outcome}

In the first two decades, the Living Museum made great advances in recording, preserving and interpreting history, and linking local communities together. It developed extensive resource material from local oral histories, publications and heritage studies; it established the history of the land and gardens at the site of industrial ruin; it co-operated with Parks Victoria in developing Pipemakers Park and the restoration of historic buildings and structures; it involved the community through interpretive exhibitions and festivals that affirmed the multi-cultural character of Melbourne’s West; and it worked as an influential Museum to raise a common sense of identity for the people in Melbourne’s West.

\textit{The Problems}

As discussed above, the Living Museum has made positive outcomes to the western region of Melbourne. However, this Museum has become much less active since 2010, when Arts Victoria ceased financial support. As explained by Haffenden, this was due to a cultural policy change whereby the focus of Arts Victoria shifted from an emphasis on social history to tourism. At that time, there was only one full-time staff – the new curator and some associates – employed by the Living Museum. All the Committee Members were volunteers. The new curator leased the building of the Pipemakers Park to an art factory with the funding of the Living Museum reliant upon the rental revenue. This change resulted in the Living Museum deviating from its principal purpose which caused considerable angst among the Committee members.\textsuperscript{55} Nevertheless, there has since been no full time staff.
Today the Maribynong City Council provides limited funding for the Living Museum and any other funding is obtained from project-linked grants. The opening hours were also changed to Sundays only with voluntary interpreters taking care of the Visitor Centre. The Living Museum does, however, open for special occasions such as when school children come for educational programs.

Despite the lack of funding for nearly two years, the Museum has continued to operate in a voluntary capacity and has continued to working with existing partnerships and ongoing projects. The major work includes providing a venue for activities such as the Healing Circles for the local Aboriginal Community, the Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley, school groups engaged in environmental studies and cultural heritage themes. Last year, 2011, the Living Museum launched an exhibition with a poster of all the existing animals, to tell the story of the environment. The Committee Members endeavored to get funding from different authorities, such as the National Library and Environmental Protection Authority to run exhibitions.

Haffenden believes that the reality was that few people thought it worthwhile to pay money to appreciate the industrial ruins. From his perspective, the Living Museum is unlikely to maintain volunteer enthusiasm, as they are not paid. It is hard to find any young people who are as passionate as the Committee Members twenty years ago. Business investment is needed to maintain the Living Museum. Great passion is needed, and that is a problem.

**Discussion—a comparison of the two cases**

The above discussion provides a detailed description of how these two ecomuseums are managed according to different backgrounds and circumstances. They both have declared themselves as ‘ecomuseums’ - a community-based approach to conserve and interpret local heritages. However, they present different characteristics as below.

1) The theme of heritage is different. The Suojia Ecomuseum is for a landscape that is still evolving whilst the Living Museum is about interpreting and recording past history. This difference is reinforced in their respective objectives. Suojia Ecomuseum seeks to implement the bilateral objectives of improving people’s living conditions and preserving the heritage while the Living Museum solely focuses upon heritage.
2) The management structures are different. Suojia Ecomuseum has been initiated by government, managed by museum staff and involves local participation; it is a top-down organisation. The management of the Living Museum is more democratic and bottom-up under the guidance of a Management Committee representing different communities. For example, for the Suojia Ecomuseum, the guidelines are made by the Chinese government without consultation with villagers. However, for the Living Museum transparency is compulsory.

3) Collection methods are different. Suojia Ecomuseum has a Documentation Centre with local objects for exhibition whilst the Living Museum does not have conventional collections but stores all resources, and places an effort on organising cultural programs.

4) Strategies towards tourism are different. Tourism development in Suojia is essential as it provides local people with more income and makes the Miao culture accessible. In contrast, the Living Museum perceives that tourism is not a consideration.

5) The ecomuseum’s influences to local people are different. Suojia Ecomuseum influences the village and its inhabitants in a material way whilst the Living Museum pays attention to raising a sense of place among the local communities. For Suojia Ecomuseum it is a long term process for raising locals’ consciousness of the value of their heritage.

6) The extents of local involvement are different. The program and activities of the Suojia Ecomuseum are organised by ecomuseum staff only while locals have the right to participate. Local involvement in the Living Museum is optimised, with local people involved in the decision-making process. This is because in each case local people have different levels of understanding of the value of local heritage.

All in all, the two ecomuseum have different cultural and economic backgrounds, thus having different objectives and management structures. Nevertheless, in terms of local empowerment and involvement, the Living Museum has been a greater achievement.

Unlike the Living Museum built in post-industrial areas, based on initiatives from local communities and operated in a democratic way, the Suojia Ecomuseum is created
for sustainable development in economically poor but ethnically rich rural areas, and is guided by the Chinese government and experts without local empowerment. Nevertheless, Chinese academics have generally accepted that this management structure is a valid Chinese version of the ecomuseum concept.56

According to Hu, Chinese ecomuseums should go through three stages—in the initial stage, when the ecomuseum gets established and is accepted by the local people; the transition stage is localisation which includes economic development and nurturing of the local people’s understanding of the significance of their culture; the mature stage is when the local people have both their material and spiritual lives improved, and only then can they be the true curators.57 However, de Varine has warned that this process could be a very long one because of the explosive growth of large-scale tourism.58 The author’s research indicates that the Suojia Ecomuseum is presently at the initial stage.

However, both ecomuseums are having funding problems, and the change of societal expectations is making it hard to attract passion and enthusiasm from the local people to wholeheartedly and voluntarily involve themselves in museum operations. It is important to use heritage as an untapped resource for income generation.

Conclusion
This author undertook interviews and field studies of the Suojia Ecomuseum and the Living Museum and described their backgrounds, objectives, management structures, programs and activities, outcomes and problems. The research identified organisational divergence between the two cases, each with its own specific objectives related to its place and local cultural and natural heritages. Suojia Ecomuseum is not a democratic or community-based ecomuseum in accordance with the original definition of the ecomusée. However, in both cases the sustainability and success of the ecomuseums requires outside financial assistance. In addition, as reflected by both cases, perhaps another and more urgent need is to pass the knowledge of the value of the museums and their ideals and develop a more heritage-passionate younger generation.

The ecomuseum, in its original concept, is a community-managed open-air museum, for the conservation and sustainability of heritage resources. It embraces the conservation of architecture, artifact, built environment as well as the intangible
culture within such territory. This concept has been widely adopted over the world. However, like Suojia, many ecomuseums gear themselves towards cultural tourism with a view to sustaining communities by providing real tangible and economic benefits for local communities to entice the local people to willingly participate in ecomuseum programs and to promote ecomuseum ideas. The reverse of this situation is reflected in the Living Museum which shows that it is very difficult to sustain an ecomuseum without tourism as a financial resource. The futures of these two ecomuseums are uncertain—once again specialist curatorial and financial expertise are both necessary.

Note:
This project was subject to a successful Australian national ethics application.

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Endnotes

1 Georges-Henri Rivière (1897–1985): a French museologist, and innovator of modern French ethnographic museology practices. He was working in the 1930s advocating the creation of open-air museums in France and was serving as the first acting director of the International Council of Museums (thereafter ICOM) between 1948 and 1965, to which he returned as Permanent Advisor in 1968.
2 Hugues de Varine: Director of ICOM (1964-1974): consultant in local and community development, France.
9 Peter Davis, Ecomuseums A Sense of Place (2nd Edition), (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).
11 Instituto Ricerche Economiche E Sociali (IRES), Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop (Trento, Italy, 2004).
12 Peilin Liu, Abby Liu & Geoff Wall, ‘Ecomuseum conception and Chinese application—a case study in Miao Villages, Suoga, Guizhou Province’ (生态博物馆的理念及其在少数民族社区景
There is a supplementary reason that as the researcher was physically based in Australia, choosing Australian ecomuseums as case studies will make the case studies more convenient, quicker as well as to gain the first-hand data.


16 China has fifty-five ethnic minorities accounting for 8.41% of the population, the remainder being the majority Han. These minorities have their own villages which present great values of cultural heritage but were in poor physical conditions. Chinese ecomuseums were all opened in these ethnic minority villages to relieve the conflict between poverty alleviation and heritage conservation.


18 Under central state, planning Fifth Year Plan charts the direction for economic development. It covers the development of all industries including, now, tourism and cultural industries.


26 Hugues de Varine, pers. comm., 2010

27 Hu Chaoxiang was the Director of the Cultural Administration of Guizhou Province (贵州省文化厅).


30 This information is from Wang (the Head of Longga Village), pers. comm., 2010.


33 Davis, ‘Ecomuseums and sustainability: reflections on recent developments in Italy, Japan and China’

34 Myklebust, ‘The Ecomuseum Project in Guizhou from a Norwegian Point of View’, 11-22.
36 Xu Meiling, pers. comm., 2010.
38 These Interviewees included the deputy curator and volunteers of Suojia Ecomuseum and the leader of Guangxi Ecomuseum groups.
41 Davis, 'Ecomuseums and sustainability: reflections on recent developments in Italy, Japan and China'
44 Peter Haffenden, pers. comm., 2011.
46 Haffenden, *Your History Mate*
47 Haffenden, *Your History Mate*, 16.
48 Peter Haffenden, pers. comm., 2011.
49 This information is from the official website of Parks Victoria at: [http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/](http://parkweb.vic.gov.au/).
50 Peter Haffenden, pers. comm., 2011.
51 Maribyrnong is made up of the suburbs of Braybrook, Footscray, Kingsville, Maidstone, Maribyrnong, Seddon, Tottenham, West Footscray, and Yarraville. The information was accessed from [http://www.maribyrnong.vic.gov.au/](http://www.maribyrnong.vic.gov.au/).
52 This information was from the official website of Arts Victoria at [http://www.arts.vic.gov.au/Home](http://www.arts.vic.gov.au/Home).
53 This information is from the official website of this ecomuseum: [http://www.livingmuseum.org.au/](http://www.livingmuseum.org.au/) (assessed at 3 December 2011).
54 Peter Haffenden, pers. comm., 2011.
55 Peter Haffenden, pers. comm., 2011.