Recovering tradition in globalizing rural China: handicraft birdcages in Da’ou village

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The birdcage village
Revitalising a traditional craft to negotiate a changing present
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Da’ou Village

• One of several case studies in China
• Collaboration with IGSNRR, Chinese Academy of Sciences
• Interviews in Chinese by Xiaoyu Zheng and Yuanyuan Yang
• 13 interviews over 3 days in October 2016
• Transcribed and translated by first language Chinese speaker
• Study one with cooperation of local government
The Da’ou Birdcage

- Craft introduced to Da’ou village by migrants from southern China in **?? Century**
- Village developed distinctive style of bamboo birdcage
- Traditionally sold in markets in Qingdao and other local cities
- Fashionable with imperial elite during Qing dynasty
- Reputation throughout China
The Da’ou Birdcage

- Handmade by individual craftsmen
- Skill jealously guarded by village
- Innovated own tools
The Da’ou Birdcage

• During Maoist era, village production shifted to clothes pegs and coat hangers
The Da’ou Birdcage

- Traditional birdcage craft revitalised
- Demand from growing urban middle classes
- Craftsmen formed cooperatives
- Birdcages sold through agents
The Da’ou Birdcage

• Any information about number of sales / income?
Da’ou Village

- Brought village prosperity at time other Chinese villages struggling with depopulation
- Village beautification and modernisation schemes
Da’ou Village

• New housing and renovated housing
Da’ou Village

- Helping to keep young people in the village?
New connections

• Growth of e-commerce
• Da’ou named as a ‘Tabao village’, with sales of over RMB10m (€1.25m) on Tabao online platform & at least 10% of households engaged
New connections

• E-commerce particularly led by women and younger people in village
• Older craftsmen sceptical
New connections

• Dreams of reaching international market
• Problems of language and customs bureaucracy
New connections

- Emphasis also on tourism
- New museum and showroom
- Hopes from new Qingdao international airport
New connections

- One craftsman opening shop in new Jimo Ancient City tourism development
New connections

- Featured in travel magazines and TV programmes
Summary

• Like many villages in China, Da’ou village facing significant change
• Challenges of out-migration and decline of agriculture
• Da’ou turning to traditional crafts to secure future
• Assisted by global technologies and connections – e-commerce and tourism
• Blending the traditional and new opportunities
• Shifts in village social structure
• Tensions between old and new
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