

Genealogy making and lineages in post-socialist China: Space, labor, and rituals under processes of heritagization

Visual Ethnography

n. 1 · 2022
dx.doi.org/10.12835/ve2022.1-108

Marina Svensson *Lund University, Sweden*

Abstract

This photo essay addresses the work and rituals surrounding the making and printing of genealogies in post-socialist China. The essay documents how lineages and printmakers negotiate a new socio-economic environment under the process of heritagization, the materiality and labor of printmaking, and the spaces in which work and rituals takes place. It adds to our understanding of the continuing importance of lineages in Chinese society and how ancestral halls take on new forms and functions in a rapidly changing semi-urban environment.

Keywords

China, lineages, genealogies, printmaking, heritage, heritagization, transmitters, ancestral halls, rituals

Bio

Marina Svensson is professor of modern China studies at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University, Sweden. Her research and publications address issues related to cultural heritage, human rights, visual production and digital developments in contemporary China. She has conducted fieldwork on culture and rural changes in Zhejiang province since 2003. <https://portal.research.lu.se/en/persons/marina-svensson>

Email

marina.svensson@ace.lu.se

Throughout history lineages (sometimes called clans) have played an important social, cultural, and economic role in Chinese society (e.g. Szony 2002; Svensson 2012). Lineages share a common ancestor and the same surname, and they celebrate and manifest this connection through different objects, rituals and physical constructions. In the home, families would have an ancestral altar, and from the Ming dynasty onwards separate ancestral halls were also built for the whole lineage. As families grew the different family branches built their own separate halls. Many villages, especially in the south of China, were dominated by one lineage, and over time came to have several ancestral halls of different sizes. Apart from the halls, ancestor graves and local temples also played an important role for the lineage. During different times of the lunar year rituals were held culminating with the Chinese New Year when sacrifices were made to the ancestors. This included food offerings and the burning of incense. The lineages and the villages would also worship local gods in temples, and in many cases religious and ancestral worship and events would merge in joint activities such as temple fairs. The lineage owned land and was involved in a range of welfare work, supporting poor members and running schools. The lineage and its individual (male) members were documented in genealogies (宗谱). These books recorded the lineage's origin and history, its rules and prominent members' achievements and official titles, and the different generations, including birth and death dates, and kinship relations. They would also include some maps of the village with the ancestral halls and graves, and sometimes portraits of the most significant ancestors. The genealogies were printed in a few examples and updated on a regular basis, around every 20-30 years, with information about deaths and new generations.

It is not surprising then that after the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949 it turned against lineages as they were seen as an alternative and threatening power institution on the countryside. Ancestral halls were now taken over and turned into schools, community centers, or warehouses, whereas rituals and ancestor worship were forbidden. Different objects including statues, ancestral tablets and genealogies were destroyed or hidden by villagers. Lineages and ancestor worship were attacked as feudal superstition and replaced by communism as a unifying ideology. But despite attacks, old belief systems were not completely erased, and once the ideological and economic environment changed with the reform period in 1978, lineages started to revive their ancestral rituals. Lineages were also active in reclaiming and restoring their ancestral halls, and they also started to revise their genealogies. This part of Chinese history and heritage continued to be neglected by the state, giving villagers some scope to revive and manage rituals and the ancestral halls. However, in the late 1980s the state began to re-evaluate the country's cultural heritage, and erstwhile neglected or vilified historical structures and practices now became a source of national pride, as well as an economic asset in the tourism industry (Svensson and Maags 2018). This meant that some old villages and ancestral halls came to be listed as cultural heritage and incorporated into the national heritage management system (Svensson 2016). Different rituals and practices, including in some cases ancestor worship and temple fairs, that had been regarded as superstition now also became elevated and listed as intangible cultural heritage (Gao 2014; Svensson and Maags 2018). The traditional way of printing genealogies using moveable types was among the practices listed as intangible cultural heritage. This printing method was by then only practiced by a few families of printmakers in Fujian province and in Zhejiang province, and in order to ensure the survival of this tradition some of the masters received status as transmitters of heritage.

Through my many years of fieldwork in villages in Zhejiang I have documented cultural life, rural changes, heritagization, and the role of different actors, including lineages (e.g. Svensson 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020). I have noted the importance put on genealogies and the process of revising them,

although many of the villages instead of using traditional printmaking now use computers as this is cheaper and more convenient. I however came across families from Dongyuan village in Rui'an, Wenzhou, who continued the traditional printing method and have been doing this for several hundred years. The practice was recognized as intangible cultural heritage by the Chinese state in 2007. Ten of the printmakers later received status as transmitters of intangible cultural heritage, which gave them some monetary rewards but also came with expectations to transmit their skills to younger generations and take part in different cultural activities and exhibitions. Some 70-80 people are involved in the printmaking that historically has focused on printing genealogies but in recent years expanded into printing other books as well as producing souvenirs. In 2010, the printmaking was listed as a threatened intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. I first visited Dongyuan village in 2012 where I met some of the printmakers, visited the museum set up in the village, and also met some lineages who had come to the village to discuss the revision of their genealogy. I again visited the village in 2014 and also started to follow some of the printmakers as they were engaged in printing genealogies for different lineages in villages in the greater Wenzhou area. I was able through several visits (twice in 2014 and once in 2015) to follow the printmaking process to its culmination in a ritual consecration of the genealogy; a process that, depending on the size of the lineage, takes several months. My fieldwork site was primarily Yongzhong, Longwan district of Wenzhou city. Yongzhong consists of five residential areas and 34 villages, and in 2014 had a total population of 68,000 people as well as some 50,000 temporary residents. I followed the revision of the genealogies of the Feng and Chen lineages as the printmakers, a recognized transmitter and his apprentices, happened to revise them at more or less the same time. The Feng lineage had a small ancestral hall and was rebuilding its larger hall, whereas the Chen lineage's main hall had been renovated in 2008. Lineages take pride in renovating and rebuilding their ancestral halls as well as local temples, and are willing to donate huge sums of money for this and for various ritual activities, including the printing of genealogies. Yang (2020) describes this 'ritual economy' as characteristic of the Wenzhou area and something that creates a strong sense of and responsibility for the community.

I conducted interviews with the printmakers and lineage members and engaged in participatory observation throughout the process as well as explored the area and its many other ancestral halls and temples. I was also able to follow one of the transmitters on social media where he occasionally posted photos from his work and travel. In this visual essay I am highlighting the central role of genealogies for the lineages and the role and work of the printmakers. I also focus on space and spatial practices, showing how ancestral halls are placed and function in today's peri-urban area and their both mundane and sacred functions (compare Chen 2016 and 2017). I furthermore address the way printmakers inhabit the ancestral halls and the labor and materiality of printing genealogies, and how this labor is both mundane and sacred at the same time. The visual essay serves to show how lineages and printmakers are negotiating and upholding traditional beliefs and practices in a post-socialist environment under the process of heritagization.

Lineages and printmakers

Lineages remain male dominated communities, although increasingly female members are now also listed in the genealogies. They usually set up a special group to oversee the revision of the genealogy and make contact with the printmakers, collect money for the printing and the associated rituals, help with facilitating the stay of the printmakers and the collection of information such as deaths and births since the last revision, as well as organize the final rituals that includes communal feasts and local opera performances. It is usually

older male lineage members that are more deeply involved in this work. Some lineages have managed to keep genealogies dating back to the Qing dynasty, whereas in other cases they were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. In some cases, the lineages have already revised their genealogy a couple of times since the reform period began. The master printmaker I followed had worked on an earlier revision for the Feng lineage in 1996, whereas in the case of the Chen lineage he had revised it in 1997 but also took part as an apprentice in an earlier revision.



Photo 1 The printmakers usually set-up office in the ancestral hall to study the old genealogies and input new information. The revision and printing of genealogies requires some knowledge of classical Chinese and the traditional composition of genealogies as well as the printing technique and the rituals. .

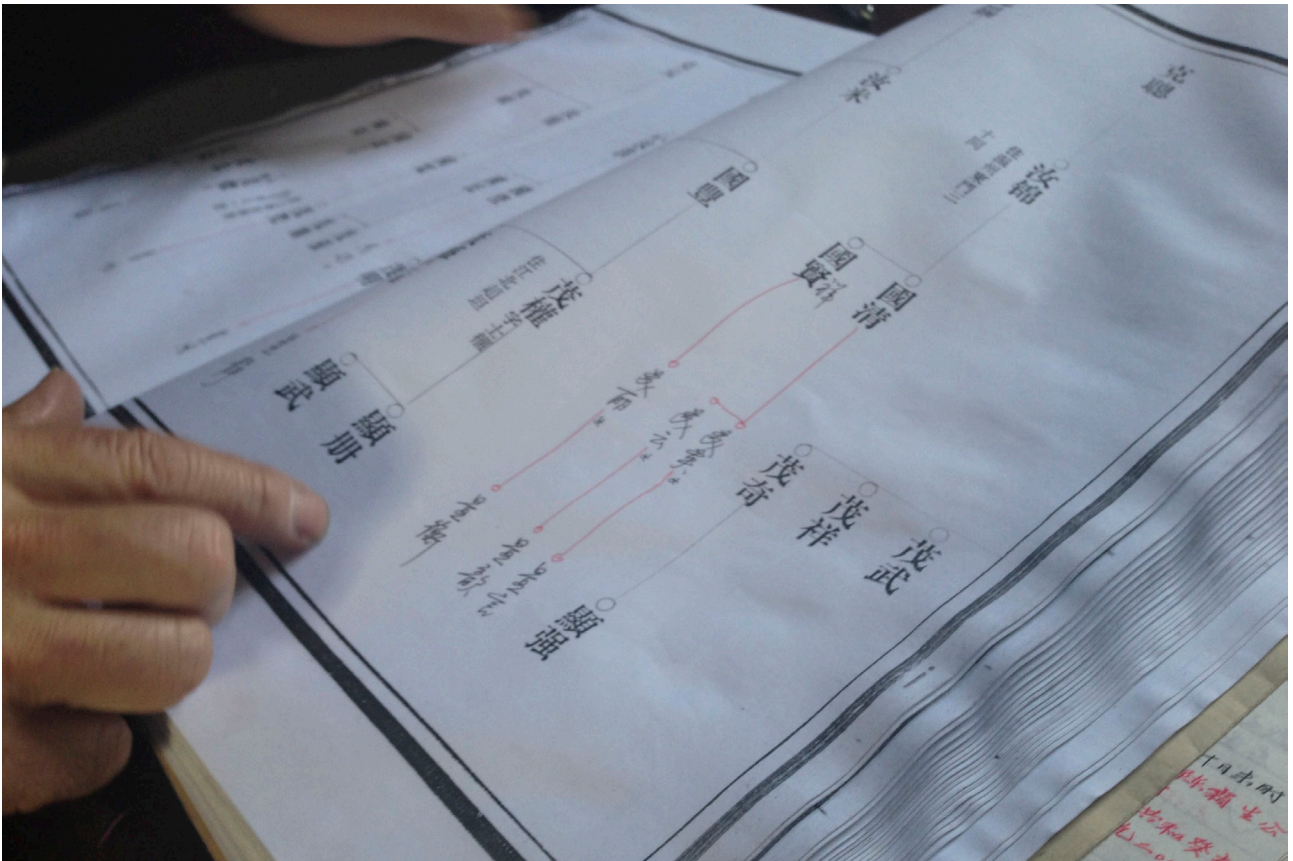


Photo 2 The old parts with text on history and basic information are kept and reprinted so it is mainly information regarding individuals that is updated and expanded. The printmakers can make some three genealogies per year depending on the size of the lineage which means that the work takes many months.

Space and spatial arrangements



Photo 3 View of Yongzhong with a mixture of buildings and a funeral procession passing on the street.

In the outskirts of Wenzhou it is difficult to distinguish one village from another as they have grown together amidst rapid urbanization. The ancestral halls are thus surrounded by new constructions and it might be difficult to even spot them amid new high-rises and residential buildings, factories, and shops, including a big Wanda shopping mall. Although villages have undergone dramatic physical transformations since the reform period, the landscape still retains its older spatial and ritual configuration as ancestral halls and temples continue to serve as sacred spaces central for local communities and lineages, creating a layered landscape where traditional spaces, socialist spaces, and new commercial spaces co-exist.



Photo 4 The size and style of ancestral halls vary widely, although most would have traditional upward-curving tiled roofs. In Wenzhou, in contrast to other places in Zhejiang I have visited, many ancestral halls today are two-story buildings. Some halls traditionally also have an opera scene for performances during festive occasions. Many ancestral halls apart from being a site of rituals today often function as old people's centers or cultural centers sponsored by the state. The Feng lineage hall is a site for intangible heritage where the Wenzhou guci (drum chant) is performed twice a month. It also has different exercise equipment and a small library.



Photo 5 In some cases, ancestral halls house small factories or, as in the case of the Chen ancestral hall, a shop on the first floor, which brings in money to the lineage (compare Chen 2016 and 2017). The blue sign on the building to the right informs that it serves as the office for the revision of the genealogy.



Photo 6 The ancestral altar with portraits of the ancestors, tablets and sometimes statues, is placed at the rear end of the main hall, or in the interior hall or in the hall upstairs, depending on the size of the ancestral hall itself. This is where sacrifices are held during special times of the year, including the Chinese New Year, the Qingming festival, and when the genealogies have been revised. The ancestral halls thus are a significant symbol of lineage history and collective identity.

Labor and materiality



Photo 7 The printmakers need to bring all their tools and equipment with them as they travel to the lineage and village in question. In the past this was cumbersome and heavy travel, often by boat and on foot, but today the printmakers have their own cars. They have to transport many boxes with types, printing frames, knives and brushes, as well as ink and special handmade paper, Xuan paper from Anhui province. Although the ancestral hall is a sacred space it also serves as a functional and appropriate space for the making of genealogies so the printmakers set-up their printing shop there. The printmakers not only work in the ancestral halls but often sleep and cook there as was also the case in these two villages. The ancestral halls usually have a kitchen that is used when the lineage organizes communal feasts and sacrifices.



Photo 8 The types consist of characters carved in reverse on small wooden block made of the Birchleaf Pear Tree. They can be reused many times but often new ones need to be carved, a skill that is often only mastered by the transmitters. In order to become qualified as a transmitter they need to pass a special exam that the cultural heritage bureau organises. Transmitters are furthermore ranked according to their skills into national, provincial, and local level transmitters with different remunerations, obligations, and status.



Photo 9 Work tables with all the types, up to 20,000 characters, are set up. The apprentices pick out the characters they need and put them together to compose the text in special frames that equal two pages. In order to find the right character fast they are placed in a special order depending on the character strokes and their position is memorised through a rhyme. The work requires a good memory, deft fingers, and a lot of walking back and forth between the tables and the different steps of printing.



Photo 10



Photo 11 Once a frame is finished it is covered with ink and a paper put on top that is lightly brushed to ensure that the characters will be clearly printed. Several copies are printed depending on how many copies of the genealogy the lineage wants. Then the frame will be dismantled and the types put back and the work starts all over to put together the next pages.

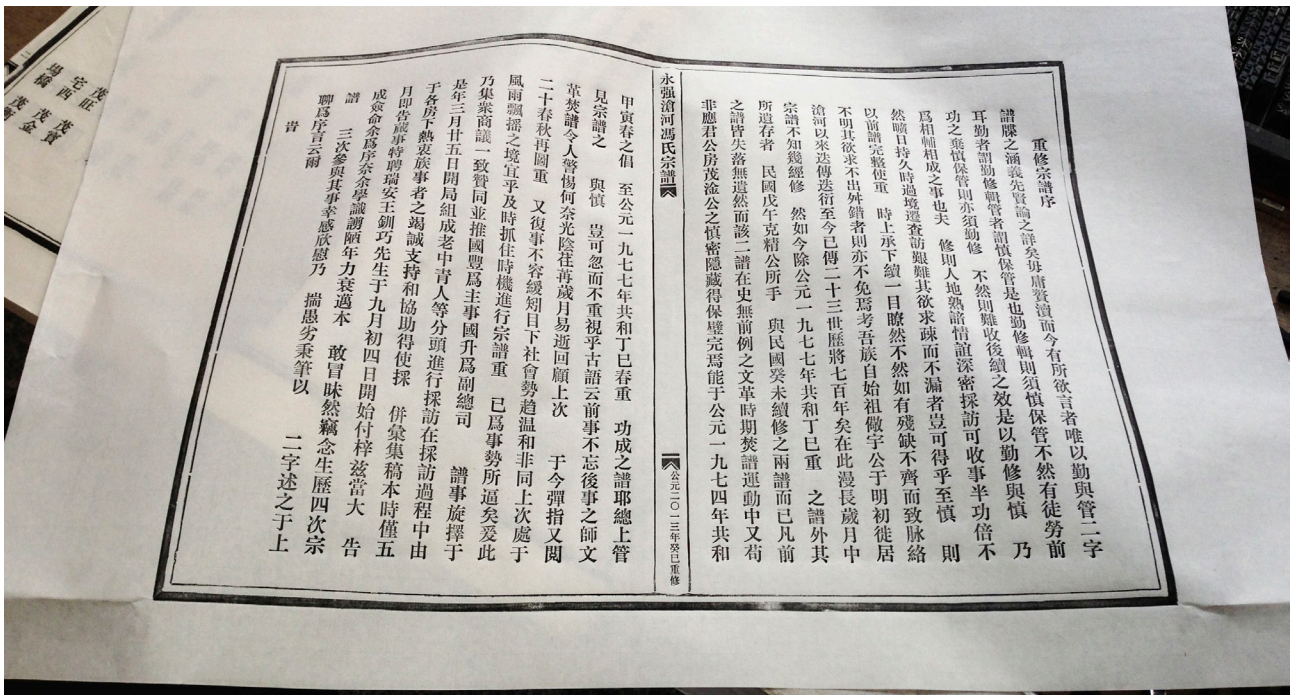


Photo 12 The preface detailing the revision of the genealogy.

Rituals and celebrations

The genealogy making is associated with different rituals that vary between villages ,as well as between Fujian province) see Gui Shuzhong's 2010 film (and Zhejiang province .The start of the genealogy making is marked by a small ceremony called ' opening the genealogy) *kaipu* '(whereas the finishing of the genealogy ,called' completing the genealogy) *luanpu* '(is a more lavish and elaborate ritual .Many lineage members who live elsewhere return home for this occasion .A communal dinner is prepared and usually an opera troupe invited to play for several days.



Photo 13 In some places the ceremony is presided over by Daoist priests. The Feng lineage instead invited a ceremony master who ensured the proper offerings and read the texts.



Photo 14



Photo 15 The Feng lineage invited a film team to record the whole ritual but many individual members also took the opportunity to document it on their mobile phones and also posted photos on their social media accounts. The genealogy that had been bound with a blue cover was decorated with red ribbons and springs of green and then put into boxes that were sealed. The genealogies and the rituals are part of memorial practices that show respect for the ancestors and bind the lineage together and strengthen their ties. Many lineages are again also engaged in welfare practices and provide help to poor members and give scholarships to students which show how lineages continue to play an important role in post-socialist China.



Photo 16 The Feng lineage's new ancestral hall was finished in time for the ceremony celebrating the revision of the genealogy and an auspicious date chosen for this occasion. A parade took place in the early morning with men marching with the Chinese flag and the lineage flag, women in traditional red qipao dresses holding lanterns with the lineage name, and a music band playing while members of the lineage put off firecrackers along the road. This resembles the ritual walkabouts that aim to protect the community and delimit the spiritual borders of a village, which is quite common and still carried out by both lineages and religious communities (e.g. Svensson 2020). Religious communities for example parade statues of gods on occasion of their births or other significant dates, and during the Lantern festival on the 15th day of the first month of the lunar year many local communities organize dragon parades that are met with sacrifices and firecrackers along the road.



Photo 17



Photo 18 An ancestor portrait as well as sets of boxes with the genealogies were put on palanquins and paraded through the original village while smoke from the firecrackers filled the air.

Heritagization and performance

In Dongyuan village a big courtyard house has been converted into a museum of printmaking, and printmakers who are not busy elsewhere will sit there demonstrating their skills to visiting tourists. The transmitters are also expected to take part in different exhibitions elsewhere in the country and are furthermore expected to teach their craft in schools and to take on apprentices which means that their life and work has changed due to the heritagization process. While they still continue to revise genealogies in villages, they are now also engaged in a more performative work in new exhibition spaces as well as make appearances in the media.



Photo 19 An ancestor portrait as well as sets of boxes with the genealogies were put on palanquins and paraded through the original village while smoke from the firecrackers filled the air.

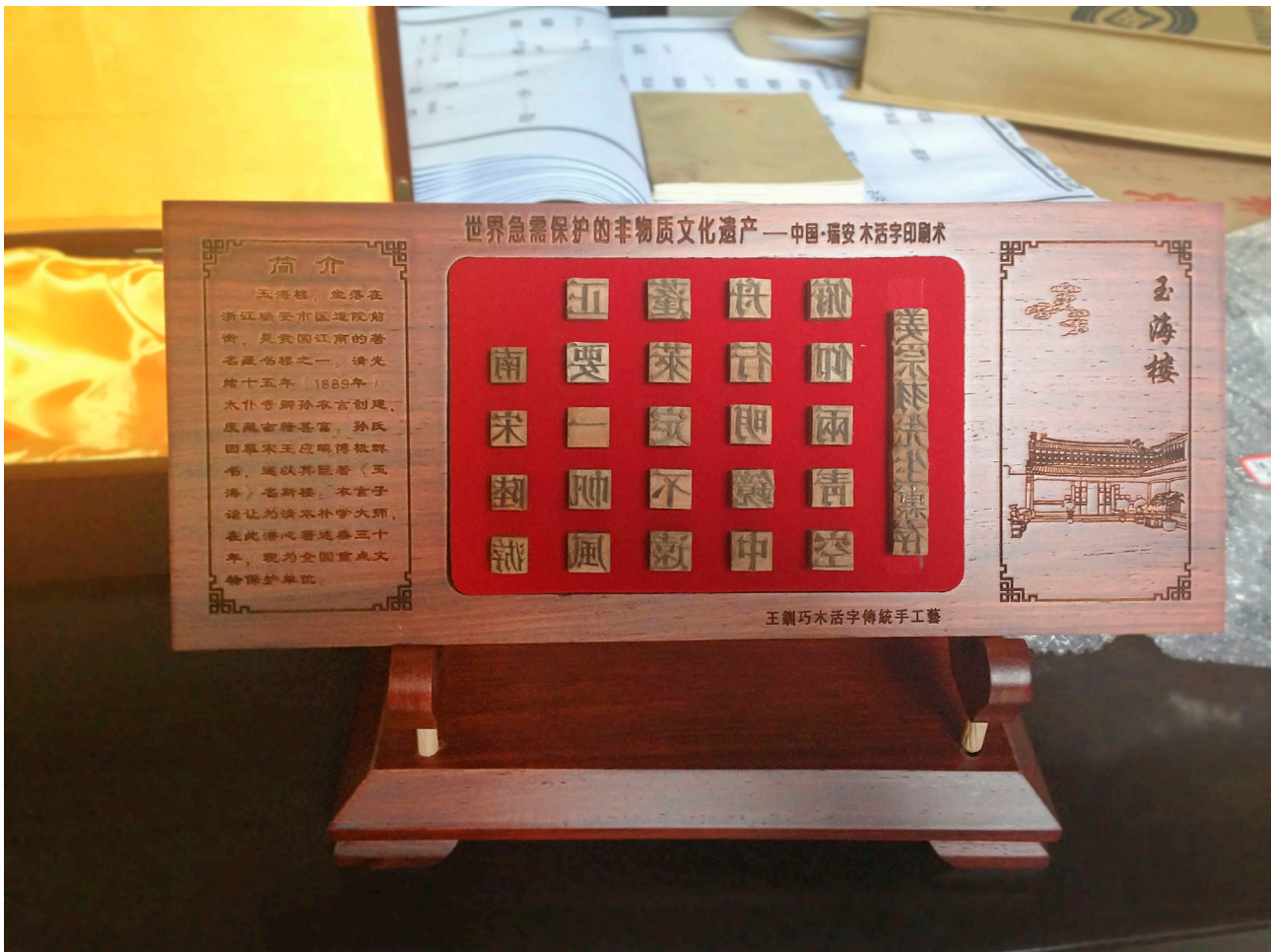


Photo 20 Transmitters are themselves also investing in the new heritage economy and develop new products and souvenirs.

References

- CHEN, Ningning
 2016 Governing rural culture: Agency, space and the re-production of ancestral temples in contemporary China, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 47, 141-152.
- CHEN, Ningning
 2017 Secularization, sacralization and the reproduction of sacred space: exploring the industrial use of ancestral temples in rural Wenzhou, China, *Social and Cultural Geography*, 18(3), 530-552.
- GAO, Bingzhong
 2014 How Does Superstition Become Intangible Cultural Heritage in Postsocialist China? *Positions (Asia Critique)*, 22(3), 551-572.
- GUI, Shuzhong
 2010 *Old genealogy*, documentary film.
- SZONY, Michael
 2002 *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China*. Stanford University Press.

SVENSSON, Marina — Christina MAAGS

201. Mapping the Chinese Heritage Regime: Ruptures, Governmentality, and Agency, in *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*- Christina Maags and Marina Svensson eds, Amsterdam University Press, 11-38.

SVENSSON, Marina

- 2020 Local Voices and New Narratives in Xinye Village: The Economy of Nostalgia and Heritage, in *The Heritage Turn in China: The Reinvention, Dissemination and Consumption of Heritage*. Ludwig, C., Walton, L. & Wang, Y-W. (eds.). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 239-258.

SVENSSON, Marina

- 2018 Heritage 2.0: Maintaining Affective Engagements with the Local Heritage in Taishun, in *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*. Christina Maags and Marina Svensson eds., Amsterdam University Press, 269-292.

SVENSSON, Marina

- 2016 Evolving and contested cultural heritage in China: The rural heritage-scape, in Akira Matsuda and Luisa Mengoni eds. *Reconsidering Cultural Heritage in East Asia*. Ubiquity Press, 31-46.

SVENSSON, Marina

- 2012 Lineages and the State in Zhejiang: Negotiating and Re-inventing Local History and Heritage, in Ane Bislev and Stig Thøgersen eds. *Organizing Rural China, Rural China Organizing*. Lexington Books, 157-172.

YANG, Mayfair

- 2020 *Re-enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*. Duke University Press.