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A county level inheritor of Miao silverware craftsmanship, China



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Abstract:

In this research, we attempt to introduce comics as a research practice into tourism studies. Drawing on a study of silverware tourism in Fenghuang, China, we created a manga episode to investigate the potential of this medium in co-creating and visualising narratives. Our findings suggest that ensuring emotional truth in co-created comics is challenging. Also, the process may marginalise certain voices by privileging specific stakeholders. Instead, we propose a compromised approach to understanding the co-creation process in comics. Comics-based research practices provide opportunities for exploring subjectivities and intersubjectivities in tourism studies.

Introduction

Visual methodologies have gained increasing attention in social sciences because visibility has already become an essential part of contemporary cultural life (Rose, 2016). Particularly, in tourism, visibility not only forms the foundational part of tourist experience but also is a classical analytical lens for investigating tourism phenomena (Urry, 1990). Among the existing visual methods and practices in tourism, photos and videos have traditionally been the primary visual materials collected and created for analysing and eliciting data. This chapter focuses on comics as a potential research practice for tourism studies.

In tourism studies, comics have been investigated in relation to contents tourism, where

they are regarded as a trigger for tourist motivation (Sabre, 2017). Research has focused on topics including tourist behaviours, tourist experiences, and the relationships between multiple stakeholders. Our chapter views comics as a medium for communication between multiple stakeholders, and we actually created a manga episode as a research output. Rather than a material to generate data, comics are tools for disseminating tourism knowledge, thus fulfilling an educational function (Tatalovic, 2009). However, our aim is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of the educational role of comics. As an exploratory research, we reflect on the process of creating our manga, with a focus on the communication and negotiation among the three authors. In doing so, we attempt to delineate features of co-created comics and highlight the opportunities and challenges of applying comics in tourism studies.

About the terminology, we distinguish (Western) comics and (Japanese) manga. It has been noted that their visual narrative styles differ, for example, in visual attention (Cohn et al., 2012), page layout (Cohn et al., 2017), and storytelling voice (Cohn et al., 2023). Since the first author identifies himself as a manga creator, we use manga to indicate our work and comics to refer to the narrative art in general. The following sections firstly review the development of visual methodologies in tourism research and the application of comics as tools for narration. Next, we will briefly introduce the process of creating the manga episode, followed by its presentation. Conclusion and discussions focus on features of co-created comics including emotional truth and negotiations between multiple participants.

Visual methodologies in tourism research

There has been a growing interest in visual methodologies in tourism research as well as social science research more broadly (Jensen, 2016; Rose, 2016). This rise in visual methods in tourism research is associated with the non-representational and performance turns, that highlight the dynamic, embodied, and socio-materialist aspects of tourism and tourism experiences (Jensen, 2016). Tourism, involving corporeal mobilities, is always intertwined with tourists' bodily and multi-sensuous experiences, as well as the materiality of objects and places (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Tourists not only perform and experience places through their actions but also authenticate places with their affective, emotional, multi-sensual relatedness with them (Knudsen & Waade, 2010). On top of these academic arguments, visual and sensorial dimensions have been more and more intentionally included into tourism development and cultural representations at destinations. This tendency necessitates new and alternative methods to engage with the embodied and multi-sensorial aspects of tourism (Scarles, 2010). For example, Matteucci (2013) argued that photo elicitation is a more creative, fun, and multisensory technique

than conventional methods. Lv et al. (2022) did experiments using photo elicitation methods to examine how visual features, for example, the darkness of photos, influence tourists' embodied feelings of dark tourism sites.

Visual methods have also been employed with a critical approach, emphasising the importance of examining the cultural significance, social practices, and power relations involved in the production, dissemination, and consumption of images (Rose, 2016). Visual materials are no longer viewed as neutral mediums for transmitting meanings; instead, they play an active role in negotiating, transforming, and constructing socio-cultural realities. Correspondingly, researchers also examine the ideologies and discourses embedded in visual materials, exploring their political, social, and cultural meanings. For example, Yan and Santos (2009) analysed a tourism promotional video, revealing how China conveys a specific national identity to Western audiences through orientalist discourses.

In addition to collecting visual materials from secondary sources, more recently visual methods are also used to create visual materials for the purposes of research, aiming to understand and present the subjectivities of research participants and researchers. Encouraging participants to create visual materials can be effective in revealing psychological and internal aspects of perceptions and experiences that are difficult to communicate through words. For example, mental mapping is a common visual method in geography used to understand psychological interactions between individuals and their surrounding environments (Lee et al., 2018). Also, in an education research project, Taylor et al. (2011) asked respondents to create videonarratives to reveal reflexive self-representations.

Researchers can also create visual materials including films, photos, and drawings that serve as primary data for analysis and also as part of the research outputs. In this case, visual methods are often based on a self-reflexive approach and are frequently combined with autoethnography. For example, in a research of visual autoethnography, Scarles (2010) created photos based on her reflexive and embodied experiences and then share the photos with respondents to elicit intersubjective communication. Visual materials used and created in tourism research are primarily photos, drawings and videos. In this research, we employ comics as a visual narrative tool for intangible cultural heritage tourism research.

Narrating self and others with comics

Recently, there have been several attempts to incorporate comics into academic research in fields such as health studies, education, cultural studies, and anthropology (Kuttner et al., 2021). Comics can be understood as 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in

deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer' (McCloud, 1993: 9). This art form has been used as a storytelling tool for narrating the self and others, given its unique ability of evoking stories with sequential images (El Refaie, 2012).

So far, many works have used comics to explore researchers' reflexive inner experiences (Shaffer, 2020) and to express autobiographical stories (El Refaie, 2012). There is also research that has managed to understand participants' life experiences by asking them to create comics (McNicol, 2019). Different from these existing works, our chapter presents the process of co-creation, where the manga created for this research functions as a medium for communication among the three authors and potential readers.

There are two important points in relation to this research. Firstly, it is considered impossible to draw clear distinction between facts and fictions in comics. Unlike photos and videos, comics present images that are often created based on memory and imagination, therefore not reflecting actual facts. El Refaie (2010) argued that the authenticity of comics is embedded not in the stylistic features of the images but in the subjective perceptions of the nature of reality. Similarly, Chaney (2011) pointed out that while the narrated stories in comics may not be verifiably true, they are 'at least emotionally truthful to the way [people] perceive, remember, and make sense of their lives' (p. 3). Correspondingly, it matters to make sure that participants are being emotionally truthful during the process of creating comics, even though the narrated stories contain fictional elements (McNicol, 2019).

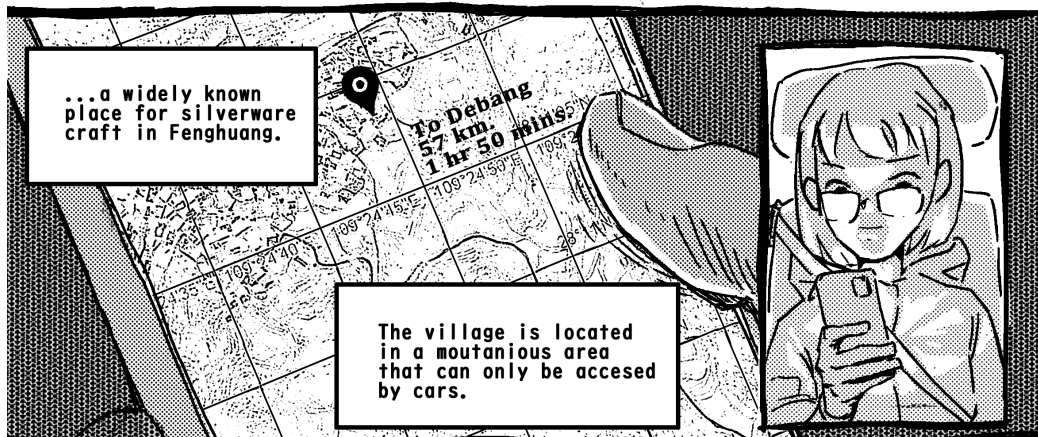
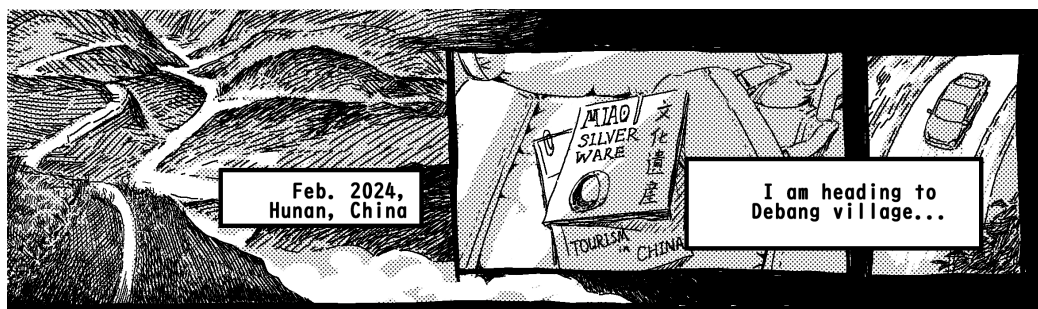
Another significant point is the co-creation of narratives in comics. One approach is to use comics to integrate and present the semiotic and narrative complexities composed of lived experiences of multiple research participants (Davis et al., 2024). In this case, comics afford numerous possibilities for creative narration with its multimodality, sequence and simultaneity, as well as its emphasis of subjectivity (Kuttner et al., 2021). Another direction is to use comics as a medium to inspire communication among multiple stakeholders, particularly those who do not share a first language and come from different cultural backgrounds (McNicol, 2019). Depending on how comics are used in research, communication take place among various stakeholders. Kuttner et al. (2021) identified three functions of comics in research, which are data collection, data analysis, and outcome dissemination. In the first two cases, comics are used to facilitate mutual communication between researchers and research participants. In the last case, the communication is intended to take place between the research and its audience.

Creating a manga for silverware tourism in China

In this section, we present how the three authors communicated, both directly and indirectly, by outlining the process of creating a manga episode about Miao silverware

tourism in Fenghuang, China. Fenghuang is located on the border of Hunan and Guizhou provinces and is home to multiple ethnic groups, with a significant presence of the Miao community. Silverware and its craftsmanship are important aspects of Miao traditions, which are still practiced in traditional Miao communities. In 2006, Miao silverware craftsmanship was registered as a national intangible cultural heritage. Since then, Miao silverware has become a type of popular souvenir in Fenghuang ancient town, a famous tourist destination in the area (for more details, see Wang et al. (2024)). This manga project is based on the postdoctoral research of Chujun, the second author, which investigates the transformation of intangible cultural heritage in tourism. During her fieldwork in March 2023, Chujun became acquainted with Liming Ma, the third author, a Miao craftsman from a traditional Miao community who runs his own silverware shop in the ancient town. Since then, they have been collaborating on projects related to the preservation and tourism utilisation of Miao silverware craftsmanship. In February 2024, they visited Debang village, Liming's hometown, to observe how silverware craftsmanship is practiced outside the tourism context. The manga episode in this research was created based on this visit and previous interviews with Liming. The manga was created by Ruofei, the first author, who is a manga creator unfamiliar with the silverware research. A 1,000-word draft in Chinese was provided by Chujun based on her fieldwork, which was later revised and attuned by Liming. The draft consists of several scenes, including observation in the ancient town, conversation with Liming in his shop, and the visit to Debang village. Ruofei created the first draft of manga and negotiated with Chujun about the details.

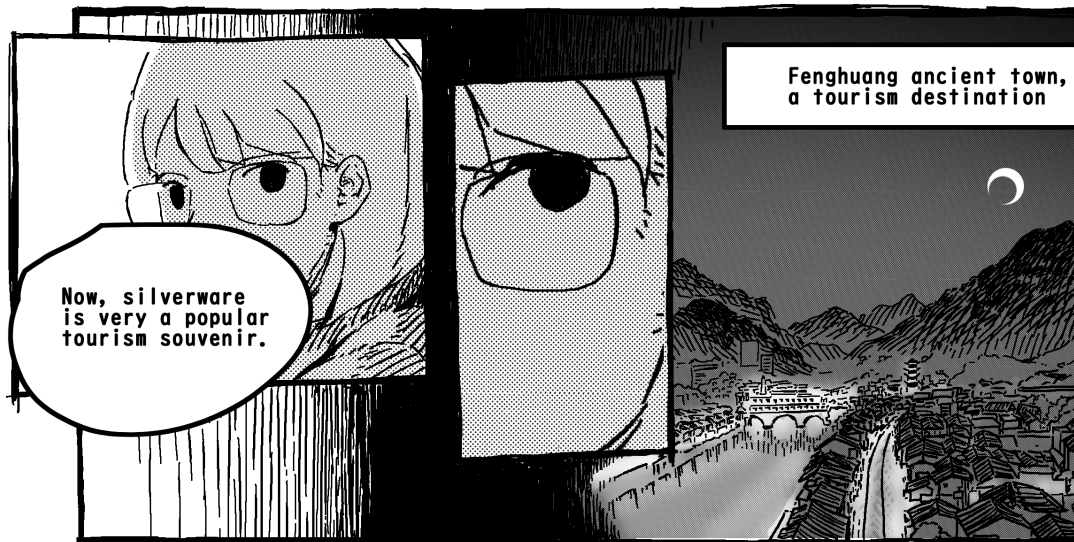
The manga was later used as a material to elicit the three authors' opinions and perceptions about silverware craftsmanship as well as the creation of the manga. Chujun conducted one-hour conversations separately with Liming and Ruofei. During these conversations, Chujun focused on comparing the manga with her actual research process, while Ruofei explained the reasons behind his visual designs. Liming cared about how the manga represents the real him. We present our reflections and opinions at the bottom of each page of the manga.



The manga does not present the actual research process...



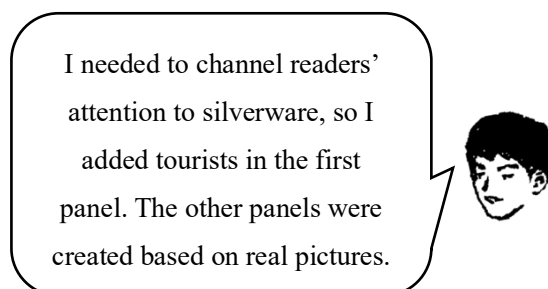
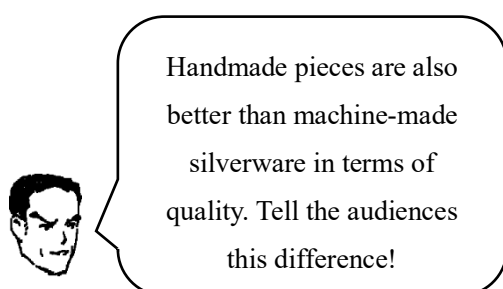
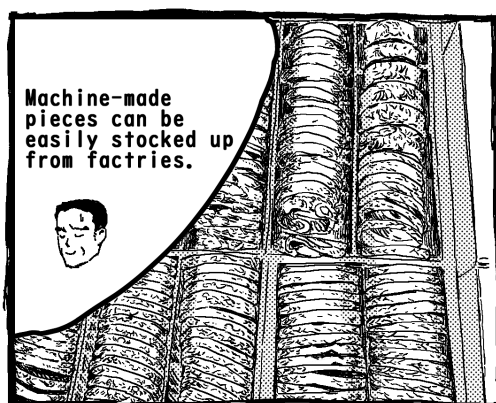
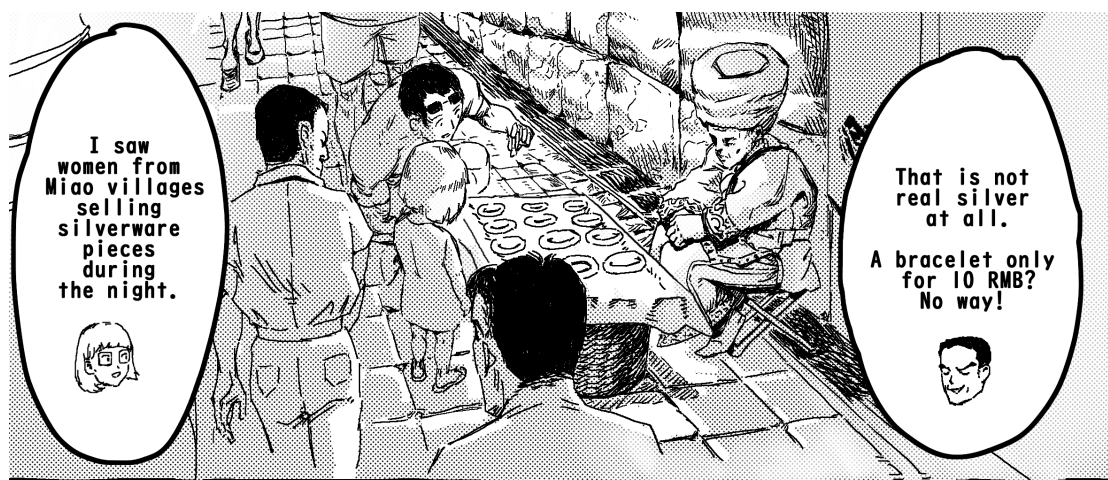
Documenting your whole research process enhances the sense of truthfulness. But storytelling needs dramatic tension and redundancy diverts attention.

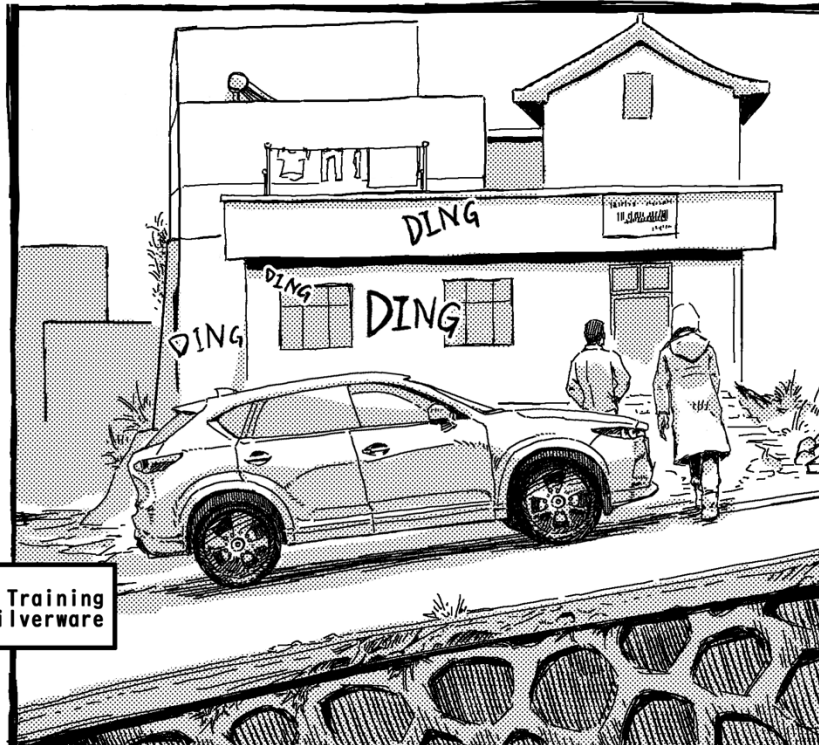
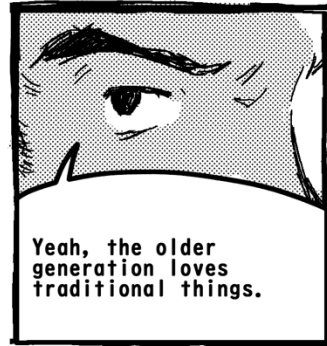
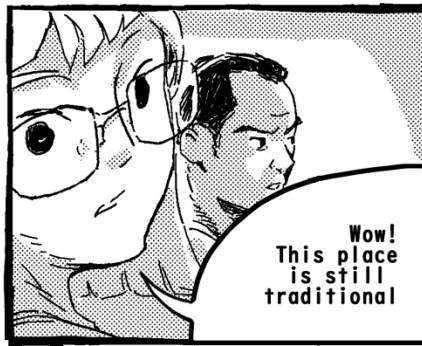
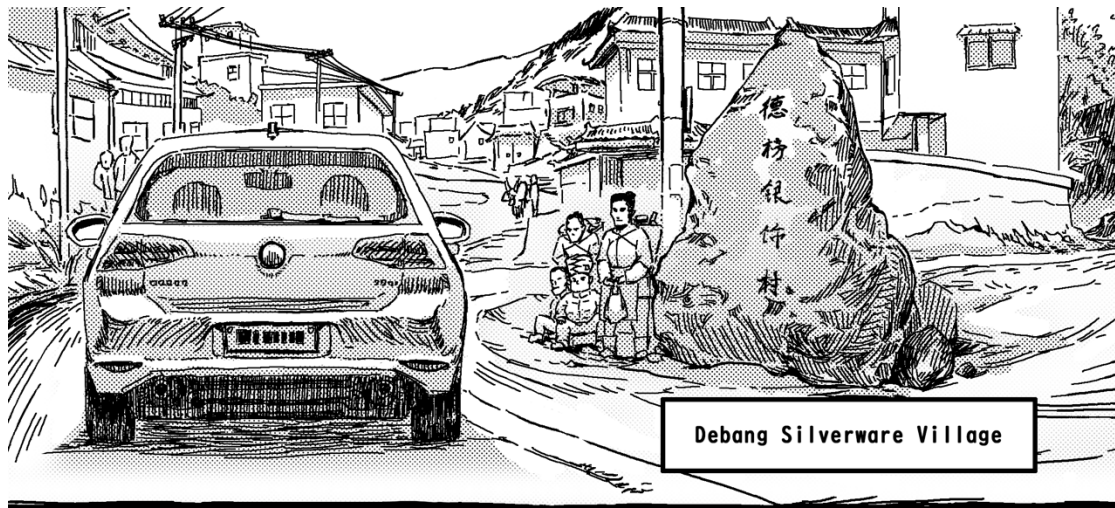


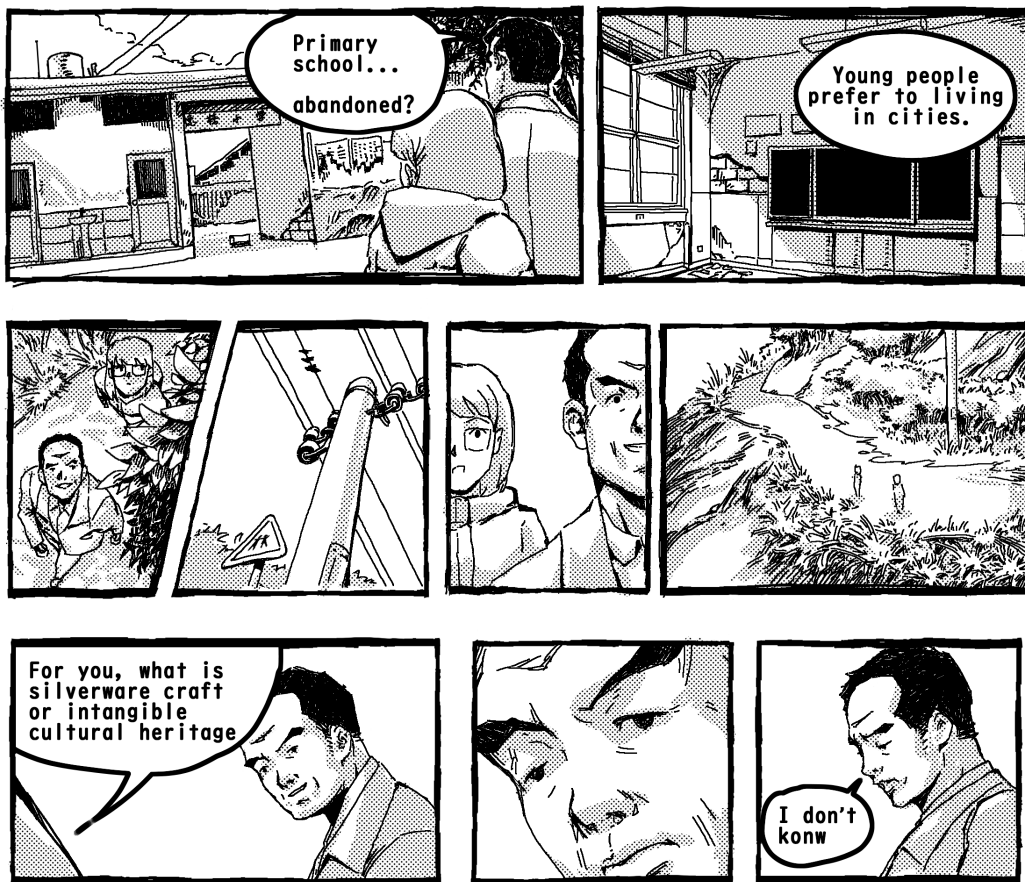
It took me a long time to visualise the text. I need to imagine pictures and design panels based on the story.

Maybe put some real pictures of mine here? Then, more people can know me and my shop from this work.









I designed the ending based on an interview with you.

I do think that ICH is for a better life. But I also want to pass on the craftsmanship [to future generations] from my heart. I would like to teach anybody who wants to learn. Please add this if you plan to create more episodes.



Conclusion and discussion

This research attempts to introduce comics as a research practice in tourism studies. The research team consists of a manga creator, a tourism researcher, and a tourism practitioner. We created a manga episode about silverware tourism in Fenghuang, China, based on the second author's research experience. The manga was then used as a tool to elicit individual perceptions, revealing the negotiations and communications among the three authors during the creation process.

Our work illustrates the blurred boundary between actual facts and fictions in comics (El Refaie, 2010). We consider this as an unavoidable compromise for applying comics as part of academic research, especially when comics are created as outputs of research. Comics have a particular language by combining pictures, words, and a set of semiotic resources like bubbles and frames (McCloud, 1993). This combination conveys more meanings than words alone, making comics a more efficient medium than text. For example, we used one single panel to depict Liming's life stories which would have taken hundreds of words to describe in detail. However, since comics are also a sequential art that presents narratives in their processes (Kuttner et al., 2021), additional effort is required to explain character movements and scene transitions. In our work, to ensure the effective expression in comics, we sacrificed some actual facts.

Existing literature prefers emotional truth to factual truth in comics-based research (Chaney, 2011; El Refaie, 2010; McNicol, 2019), but we argue that it depends on genres of comics. Both Chaney (2011) and El Refaie (2010) focused on comics-based autobiography, therefore paying attention on whether authors are emotionally true about their narratives. Similarly, McNicol (2019) asked participants to be emotionally true when creating comics about personal feelings and experiences. In contrast, the manga creator in our project is less emotionally attached with the story, giving him less room to convey emotional truth. Additionally, the story provider in our project had to sacrifice some of her personal opinions to ensure a smooth and coherent sequential narrative. Therefore, rather than insisting on emotional truth in a strict sense, we argue for a compromised approach to understanding co-created comics. The co-creation of comics may complicate the politics of representation.

Davis et al. (2024) pointed out that collective creation of comics ensures respondents to anonymously represent marginalised experiences. However, they also pointed out that composite narratives might further silence some already muted voices due to the spatial limitations of comics. As a matter of fact, the limitation of this research lies in its incomplete nature of co-creation. Due to the physical distance, the three authors did not communicate as a group. Instead, the second author acted as a mediator, contacting the other two authors separately. This situation made her the primary decision-maker in

formulating the narrative, and consequently the manga is narrated from her perspective. In contrast, the third author was a more passive participant throughout the process, primarily reviewing the textual draft and providing feedback on the manga. Given that the research and the manga are related to intangible cultural heritage—a category deeply rooted in the subjectivities of cultural communities—future research could focus on creating comics from the perspectives of the Miao communities. Comics-based research practices are not suitable for all types of tourism studies, particularly those grounded in positivist and post-positivist approaches. An important reason is that comics, as an sequential art, are inherently narrative-based, which makes them difficult to align with objective measurement. Alternatively stated, comics-based research practices provide huge opportunities for tourism studies that aim to explore subjectivities and inter-subjectivities, such as tourist experiences and host-guest interactions. Also, compared to other visual materials in tourism research, comics have greater potential for disseminating academic results and influencing the general public. Future research could focus on investigating how comics-based research practices can provide new insights into specific tourism research topics.

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