

Natural Heritage and Local Identity: A Field Study of Crested Ibis Conservation and a Secondary-School Specimen Museum in Ningshan

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Abstract

This study explores how engagement with natural heritage may contribute to local belonging in Ningshan County, Shaanxi Province, China. Drawing on one week of fieldwork in July 2026, it examines two contrasting settings: the Ningshan Crested Ibis Rewilding Station and the specimen museum at Ningshan Secondary School. Observations, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations provide the basis for comparing how conservation and educational practices connect Qinling biodiversity with personal experience. At the rewilding station, monitoring, rescue, and care for individual birds provide a setting for expressions of responsibility and professional pride. At the school museum, specimen-making, displays, photographs, and recollections connect local flora and fauna with learning experiences and school memory. The comparison suggests that participation, responsibility, and memory may mediate relationships between publicly valued natural heritage and personal attachment to place. However, commitment to conservation and attachment to a school do not, by themselves, establish identification with Ningshan. The study therefore distinguishes heritage-making from local identity formation and presents their relationship as an exploratory interpretation rather than a demonstrated causal process. Its contribution lies in identifying how care for living animals and engagement with preserved specimens offer different potential pathways through which local nature becomes connected to individual biographies. The short fieldwork period and limited range of participants constrain conclusions about wider community experiences and changes over time.

Keywords: natural heritage, heritagization, local identity, place attachment, crested ibis conservation, school specimen museum

1. Introduction

Heritage is not something that exists naturally with a fixed and self-evident meaning. Laurajane Smith [1] argues that rather than understanding heritage as a material object waiting to be preserved, it should be approached as an ongoing cultural practice: particular places, objects, and memories become “heritage” through continuous processes of selection, protection, display, narration, and use. Heritage studies therefore concern not only the question of “what deserves to be preserved,” but also how certain things come to acquire heritage value and how different groups understand their relationships with the past, place, and society through heritage.

Recent anthropological studies of heritage have also paid increasing attention to the role of local societies in processes of heritagization. Through an ethnographic study of Tibetan opera in Litang, Zhang Fan [2] argues that heritagization should not simply be understood as a process through which the state, the market, or globalization enters local society. Local communities themselves possess the capacity to interpret their own histories, organize social relations, and engage with the wider world. Museums and heritage displays can therefore become spaces in which locally embedded relationships, meanings, and forms of social order are made visible.

If we extend the discussion from cultural heritage to natural heritage, another question must be raised: How does nature become heritage?

Allio’s [3] study of the heritagization of nature in Taiwan shows that nature conservation is not merely a technical process of preserving ecological environments. When certain landscapes and species are selected, protected, and endowed with public value, nature may gradually become a vehicle for collective emotion and local identity. Research on casuarina trees and Burmese pythons in Kinmen further demonstrates that whether a natural object is regarded as heritage worthy of protection is not determined solely by scientific classification or

ecological value. Long-term local emotions and memories also shape judgments concerning the value of natural heritage [4].

This means that “nature” and “natural heritage” are not identical concepts. Forests, animals, and plants first exist as parts of the environment, but some are subsequently selected, classified, protected, displayed, taught, and incorporated into public narratives. Through these processes, they acquire particular values and gradually become forms of natural heritage capable of representing a place.

The relationship between heritage and local identity is likewise not a simple causal one. Research on Kinmen has shown that local identity may change as different heritage objects are reselected and reinterpreted. Heritage, in this context, is not evidence of a fixed identity, but a medium through which local society continually reinterprets its own history and position in relation to place [5].

Sun Jing and Yan Haiming [6] propose that treating “community” as a method means not taking community as a fixed administrative or social unit, but attending instead to “site,” “place,” and the long-term relations between people and their environment. Place is not a pre-existing space simply waiting for people to identify with it; rather, it is continually made through everyday life, human-environment interaction, and shared experience. This perspective is especially useful for understanding the relationship between natural heritage and local identity. A natural environment becomes “the nature of one’s home place” not because it possesses inherent identity value, but because people work, learn, care, remember, and continually invest it with meaning.

At the same time, heritagization also concerns how local experience is reformulated and made part of broader public discourse. Li Jin and Yan Haiming [7], in their study of ethnic cultural heritage in Southwest China, argue that when heritage enters wider systems of display and communication, it must undergo processes of selection, translation, and reformulation. Although the Ningshan case does not involve World Heritage nomination, a similar process is at work: the crested ibis and the flora and fauna of the Qinling Mountains do not enter the local public image unchanged. Instead, they are reorganized through nature conservation, school education, science communication, and local promotion, gradually becoming natural symbols through which Ningshan is represented.

Ningshan County is located in southern Shaanxi Province, on the southern slopes of the central Qinling Mountains. Its mountainous environment has to some extent constrained industrialization and large-scale urban development, while also helping preserve rich forests, water resources, and biodiversity. In recent years, ecological conservation, nature education, and ecotourism have become increasingly important components of local development and public narratives. The crested ibis, Qinling forests, and the region’s rich flora and fauna are therefore not merely elements of an objectively existing natural environment; they also increasingly appear in conservation institutions, school education, local representation, and residents’ everyday lives.

Fieldwork reveals, however, that people do not relate to these natural objects in the same way. Some local residents spoke of the crested ibis, the Qinling Mountains, and the local ecological environment with a strong sense of pride. Some people who were not born in Ningshan developed a strong sense of belonging after working there for many years. At the same time, others who had lived there for a long period still understood Ningshan primarily as a place of work and residence.

These differences lead to the central question of this article: Through what kinds of practices do people establish relationships with natural heritage, and how are these relationships gradually transformed into memories, senses of responsibility, and identification with place? The discussion develops through two fieldwork cases. The first is the Ningshan Crested Ibis Rewilding Station, where I examine how long-term conservation and care establish relationships between people, animals, and place. The second is the specimen museum at Ningshan Secondary School, where I explore how local nature enters students’ experiences of growing up through specimen preparation, school education, and the transmission of memory. One case concerns living endangered animals, while the other concerns natural specimens that have been prepared and preserved. Yet both point toward the same question: how does Qinling nature gradually become part of individual life experience through sustained practices of conservation, labor, learning, display, and remembrance?

2. Research Methods

The material for this article is drawn primarily from one week of fieldwork conducted in Ningshan County, Shaanxi Province, in July 2026. The research relied mainly on participant observation and semi-structured interviews. During the fieldwork, the researcher visited the Crested Ibis Rewilding Station, the specimen museum at Ningshan Secondary School, and other sites related to local nature conservation and environmental

education. Through observation, visits, and conversations, the study documented how different institutions and participants protected, displayed, and narrated the natural environment and wildlife of the Qinling Mountains.

Interviews focused primarily on participants' personal histories, experiences of work and everyday life, understandings of the local natural environment, and relationships with Ningshan. The article draws particularly on conversations with the head of the Crested Ibis Rewilding Station, the principal of Ningshan Secondary School, and local residents. In addition to formally posed questions, explanations provided during visits, informal conversations, and personal experiences voluntarily narrated by participants were also recorded as field materials.

Because the fieldwork lasted only one week and involved a limited number of interviewees, this article does not attempt to generalize about the views of all Ningshan residents concerning natural heritage and local identity. Instead, through a small number of specific cases, it examines how people establish relationships with place through practices of conservation, care, making, learning, and narrating nature.

3. Care and Participation: The Formation of Local Identity through Crested Ibis Conservation

The crested ibis is one of the most representative species in Ningshan's conservation practices. In the early 1980s, the species was on the verge of extinction. Since then, its population has gradually recovered through captive breeding, habitat protection, rewilding training, and release programs. Today, a growing range of conservation, science-education, and ecotourism activities has developed around the species, making the crested ibis not only a rare and protected animal but also an important component of Ningshan's ecological image.

"Endangerment" itself is not merely a biological indicator of population size. Vidal and Dias [8] point out that once a form of life is defined as endangered, new forms of scientific knowledge, conservation institutions, social responsibility, and cultural value begin to form around it. The significance of the crested ibis therefore cannot be explained by rarity alone. We must also examine the practices and relationships that people have built around the species.

The Ningshan Crested Ibis Rewilding Station is an important site within this conservation system. It is responsible for professional work including conservation, training, and release, while also undertaking science communication and nature-education activities. Large outdoor spaces are used for rewilding training, while indoor areas contain specimen displays and activity spaces for young people. Conservation, display, and education are thus concentrated in the same institutional space, allowing the crested ibis to move from being the object of professional conservation work into broader public understandings of Ningshan's natural environment.

Our visit began at ten in the morning. We were received by the head of the station, whom everyone addressed as "Station Director Li." More than ten students continuously asked questions about crested ibis behavior, individual identification, rewilding and release, and rescue practices. What had originally been planned as a relatively short visit eventually lasted until half past twelve, and the discussion continued into lunchtime.

Notably, Station Director Li did not simply repeat a fixed script of science education. In response to students' questions, he recalled the condition of particular birds, their rescue processes, and what happened after their release. He also explained in concrete terms how data were recorded and how individual conditions were assessed. These details suggest that for him, "the crested ibis" was not an abstract conservation concept, but a category made up of many individual lives that could be recognized, observed, and remembered.

Station Director Li was not originally from Ningshan, but from a neighboring county. Yet when discussing the recovery of the crested ibis population, improvements in survival in the wild, and conservation achievements, he displayed a clear sense of pride. This emotional attachment cannot be explained simply by place of birth. Day-to-day monitoring, rescue, record-keeping, and release have not only given him professional knowledge of the species; they have also continually embedded his working life in Ningshan's ecological environment.

Such relationships are not limited to professional conservationists. A local real-estate agent told us that when nearby villagers encounter injured or endangered crested ibises, they sometimes proactively contact conservation staff. This account is not sufficient to demonstrate that all local residents share the same conservation awareness, but it does suggest that crested ibis conservation has, to some extent, entered everyday local life.

The transformation of the crested ibis from a "Class I nationally protected animal" into a species with particular local significance in Ningshan has therefore involved a long-term process. State conservation policies, local ecological narratives, and institutions such as the rewilding station provide an institutional framework. Yet what makes this local significance concrete is the continuous establishment of relationships between people and the birds: identifying them, caring for them, rescuing them, talking about them, and witnessing changes in their population.

Daniel Fabre's [9] discussion of heritage emotions (*émotions patrimoniales*) helps illuminate this process. Heritage emotions do not necessarily take the form of grand declarations of identity. They may also emerge through memory, responsibility, and attachment produced by long-term engagement with specific objects. In Station Director Li's narratives, local identity did not first appear as an explicit statement such as "I am from Ningshan." Instead, it appeared through a more concrete relationship: he knows the crested ibises here, remembers what has happened to them, and cares about the future of these lives and of the local ecological environment.

Seen from this perspective, crested ibis conservation establishes a relationship between people and place centered on care and responsibility. Natural heritage here is not merely something to be viewed or appreciated, but a living presence requiring long-term investments of labor, knowledge, and emotion.

4. Practice and Memory: The Formation of Local Identity through Specimen-Making

The specimen museum at Ningshan Secondary School offers a different way of looking at relations between nature and place. Unlike the rewilding station, it works with animals and plants that have been collected, prepared, classified, and preserved as specimens. What is kept here is no longer living wildlife, but material traces of the Qinling environment that have been brought into the school.

Ningshan Secondary School is the county's only general upper-secondary school. Its specimen museum was established in 1985 and had collected more than 4,000 specimens by 2014, ranging from mammals and birds to reptiles, amphibians, fish, and plants from the Qinling region. An unusual feature of the collection is that many specimens were made by students rather than by professional museum staff.

This matters because specimen-making was part of school life, not only a way of producing teaching materials. The collection gave students biological objects to observe and classify, but the work of collecting and preparing those objects also gave them direct experience of the local environment.

Most students in Ningshan grow up with the Qinling Mountains around them. Familiarity, however, is not the same as close attention. A mountain, bird, or plant may remain part of the background of everyday life until someone learns to identify it, handle it, or distinguish it from another species. Making specimens asked students to look again at an environment they already knew. Biological knowledge, in this sense, changed the way familiar surroundings were noticed.

The process also changed what happened to the objects themselves. Once a bird, plant, or other organism was brought into the school, it received a name and a place within a system of classification. It became evidence of what could be found in the Qinling Mountains. Students were involved in this transformation. They were not only learning from an already finished collection; some of them helped to produce the collection through which local nature was taught.

The museum became especially interesting during our visit when the principal began to talk about particular specimens and the people who had made them.

The principal guided us through the collection himself. As he introduced different species, he repeatedly moved away from biological description and into stories about the museum. He remembered making specimens when he was a student at the same school and recalled events connected with particular objects. A specimen could therefore call up more than the name of a species. For him, it could also recall a period of his own life.

The room itself makes this connection visible. Alongside information about animals and plants are photographs of students preparing specimens, photographs of past visitors, and certificates and awards received by the school. These materials place the natural-history collection beside records of school life. The photographs show people doing the work; the certificates and visitor records show how the collection has been presented to, and recognized by, others.

In this sense, two histories occupy the same room. One is a record of the flora and fauna of the Qinling Mountains. The other is a record of the school and of generations of students who worked with that flora and fauna.

As new groups of students took part in specimen-making, individual experiences could also become stories that later students and teachers inherited. The objects survived, but so did accounts of who made them, how they were made, and what the museum had meant at different moments in the school's history. Photographs, displays, and oral explanations repeatedly brought those earlier experiences back into the present.

Zhang Fan [2] notes that museums and heritage performances can make locally embedded social relations and systems of meaning visible. The Ningshan museum does something comparable on a small institutional scale. Its

displays show Qinling species, but the photographs, certificates, visitor records, and the principal's stories also present the school itself. Visitors encounter both a local natural environment and an account of what the school has done with it.

Han Min's [10] study of heritage representation in Heshun, Yunnan, likewise shows that heritage displays do not simply reproduce a ready-made local culture. They select and arrange objects, histories, and memories in ways that allow a locality to speak about itself. The Ningshan case is quite different in scale and setting, but the museum performs a related task: Qinling nature becomes one of the materials through which the school tells its own history and describes its connection to the place.

The principal's position makes this connection particularly clear. He first encountered the collection as a student who helped make specimens; years later, as principal, he helps maintain the museum and tells its history to visitors. The same specimens therefore link different stages of his life with the institutional history of the school and with the surrounding Qinling environment.

This also complicates a narrow understanding of nature education. Students certainly learn which species live in the Qinling Mountains, but the activity does more than transmit biological facts. A particular animal may become associated with the afternoon spent preparing it, a teacher who explained it, or classmates who worked together. Through such associations, the Qinling Mountains acquire personal references. They are no longer only a geographical name or the scenery outside the school.

A conversation with a convenience-store owner offered a useful contrast. He came from Hanzhong and now lives and works in Ningshan. When we asked what he thought of the county, his first response was that "the air is good." He had much less to say about particular people, events, or experiences that connected him to the place.

The contrast is small, and it should not be taken as a general distinction between outsiders and local residents. It does, however, show the difference between evaluating an environment positively and developing a more personal attachment to it. Good air can be recognized quickly. A sense that a place is connected to one's own life usually depends on more specific memories, activities, and relationships.

The specimen museum is important for this reason. It preserves plants and animals from the Qinling Mountains, but it also preserves evidence of what students did with them. The collection carries traces of school life across generations, so that local nature becomes entangled with memories of learning, making, teachers, classmates, and growing up.

The two field sites thus involve different kinds of engagement. At the rewilding station, the strongest connection is built through caring for living animals and accepting responsibility for them. At the school, it is built through making, learning, and remembering. In both cases, however, an environment that could remain simply "around" people becomes connected to things they have actually done.

5. Discussion

5.1 Natural Heritage and the Formation of Place Relationships

The Ningshan cases suggest that the relationship between natural heritage and local belonging depends partly on how people encounter and engage with particular organisms, objects, and environments. Conservation and museum display provide institutional settings in which Qinling biodiversity becomes publicly valued. Within these settings, monitoring birds, preparing specimens, teaching, and recounting earlier experiences may connect natural objects with individual biographies. The distinction between publicly recognized heritage value and personally experienced attachment is therefore central to interpreting the field material.

This interpretation develops Smith's understanding of heritage as cultural practice [1] and Harvey's emphasis on its continuing formation through time [11]. The contribution of the comparison lies in identifying different forms of engagement within the same locality. At the rewilding station, relationships are organized around living animals whose conditions require repeated attention. At the school museum, preserved specimens connect biological knowledge with memories of learning and institutional life. These cases suggest that similar expressions of attachment may emerge through different practices, although the available evidence does not establish their prevalence across Ningshan.

As summarized in Figure 1, participation, responsibility, and memory constitute proposed connections between heritage practices and local belonging. These connections should be understood as an exploratory framework rather than a verified sequence of identity formation.

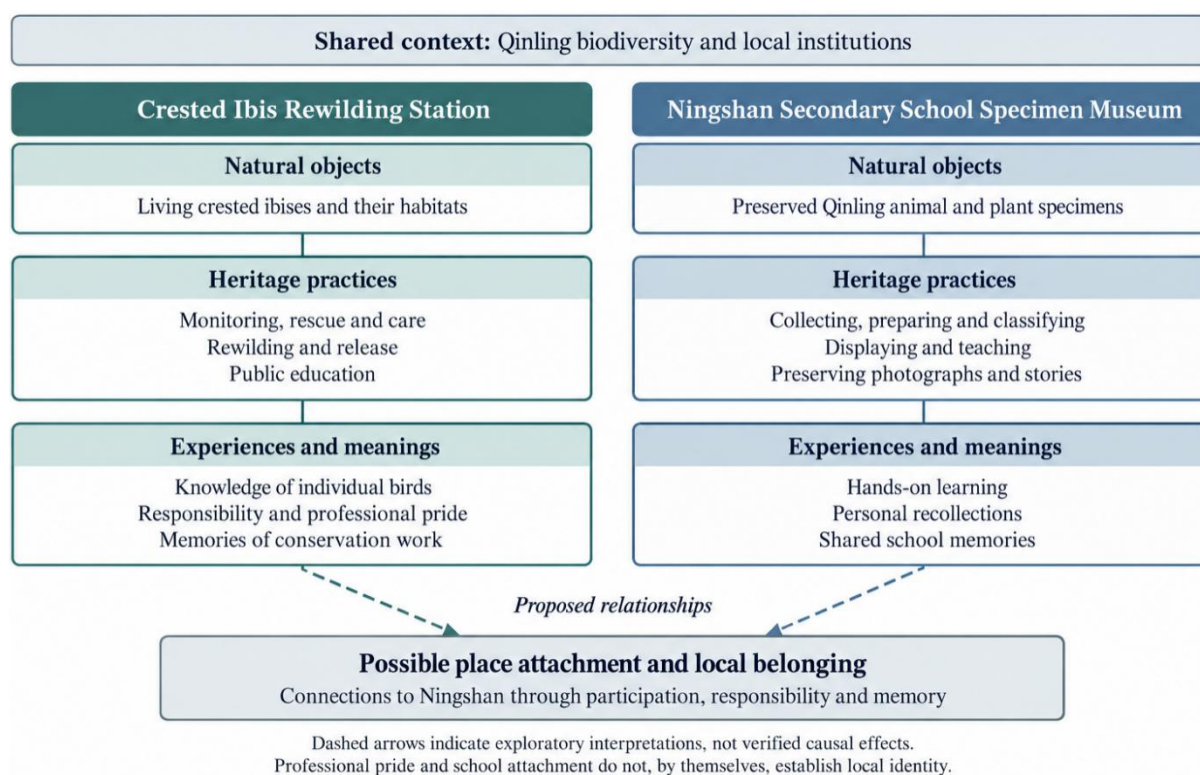


Figure 1. Proposed Pathways Linking Natural Heritage Practices to Local Belonging in Ningshan

5.2 Care, Memory, and Alternative Interpretations

The distinction between living animals and preserved specimens helps explain how the two sites organize relationships with nature. Crested ibis conservation involves responding to changing conditions, recognizing individual birds, and accepting responsibility for their continued survival. The school collection allows objects to remain available for teaching, recollection, and display across different periods of institutional life. Care therefore directs attention toward the continuing needs of living organisms, while specimen-making and preservation make earlier encounters available for subsequent interpretation.

Neither form of engagement necessarily produces local identity. Station Director Li's pride may express professional satisfaction, commitment to conservation, attachment to particular birds, or belonging to Ningshan. Similarly, the principal's recollections may concern his school and personal history more directly than the county as a whole. These meanings can overlap, but their relationship requires examination rather than assumption. Stronger evidence would include participants' explanations of how their experiences connect them specifically to Ningshan and how they distinguish attachment to the place from attachment to their occupation or school.

The convenience-store owner's account also requires caution. His emphasis on environmental quality offers a different way of describing Ningshan, but the brevity of the conversation limits interpretation. Having little to say during one encounter does not demonstrate an absence of belonging. Differences in questioning, conversational context, and willingness to share personal experiences may influence the accounts obtained.

The direction of the relationship remains uncertain. Participation may deepen attachment, while existing attachment may encourage people to participate in conservation or educational activities. The present material supports consideration of this reciprocal relationship but cannot determine how it develops over time.

5.3 Institutional Mediation and Practical Implications

Both cases show that encounters with natural heritage occur within institutions that select objects, organize activities, and communicate particular accounts of place. The rewilding station connects scientific conservation with public education, while the school museum places biological specimens alongside photographs, awards, and stories of earlier students. These arrangements influence which aspects of Qinling nature become visible and whose experiences are retained.

The accounts presented in this study rely substantially on institutional leaders. Their knowledge is valuable, but their positions may also encourage narratives emphasizing conservation achievement and educational continuity. Students, former students, villagers, and other workers may interpret the same institutions differently. Examining such differences would help distinguish institutional representations of local identity from the varied ways individuals experience belonging.

The comparison suggests several possibilities for conservation and heritage education. Repeated, meaningful participation may offer opportunities for people to develop detailed knowledge and personal connections beyond those available through a single visit. However, the study does not demonstrate that participation programs increase local belonging. Such an outcome would require separate evaluation. Conservation activities should remain appropriate to animal welfare and professional responsibilities.

For the school museum, documenting specimen provenance, makers, preparation dates, and associated memories could support both scientific interpretation and the preservation of school history. The relationship between collecting and conservation also deserves explicit attention. Historical specimen-making should be interpreted in its context, while contemporary educational activities should consider lawful sourcing and alternatives that avoid harm to wildlife. This issue concerns how a museum presents responsible relationships with nature, rather than implying misconduct in the collection examined here.

5.4 Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study draws on one week of fieldwork and a limited range of conversations. It offers situated interpretations of selected encounters, with insufficient evidence to establish changes in identity over time or to represent the experiences of Ningshan residents generally. Claims about long-term relationships depend largely on retrospective accounts and the interpretation of displays, rather than longitudinal observation.

Further research should combine repeated visits with interviews across different participant groups. School records, specimen documentation, conservation records, and historical photographs could help contextualize recollections and institutional narratives. Cases in which sustained participation coexists with weak attachment would be especially useful for examining the limits of the proposed framework.

Greater attention to the researcher's role during group visits would also strengthen interpretation, since guided encounters shape what participants explain and what visitors observe. A fuller account of recording, analysis, consent, and confidentiality would make the relationship between field material and conclusions clearer. These developments would allow future studies to examine more closely when heritage engagement becomes part of local belonging and when its meanings remain primarily professional, educational, or personal.

6. Conclusion

The fieldwork in Ningshan suggests that natural surroundings do not become heritage, or a source of local belonging, by themselves. Rare species and rich biodiversity may provide the material for heritage, but the connection to place is made through practice. In the cases discussed here, people came to know Qinling nature by caring for birds, making specimens, teaching, learning, recording, and remembering.

This point is consistent with Harvey's [11] argument that heritage is an ongoing process rather than a fixed set of objects inherited from the past. In Ningshan, the crested ibis and the region's flora and fauna acquire local significance because they are repeatedly drawn into conservation, education, display, and everyday narration. The important question is therefore not only what natural objects exist in a place, but what people do with them and what kinds of relationships those activities make possible.

The two sites show this in different ways. At the Crested Ibis Rewilding Station, long-term monitoring, rescue, and release produce detailed knowledge of individual birds as well as memories and responsibilities attached to them. At the school museum, collecting and preparing specimens turns the surrounding environment into something students handle and study, while photographs and stories connect that work to the history of the school. One relationship is organized mainly around care; the other around making and memory.

These cases also help explain why birthplace or length of residence cannot, on their own, account for local identity. Station Director Li was born outside Ningshan, yet years of work with crested ibises have tied much of his professional life to the county. The convenience-store owner lives there but described the place mainly through its environmental quality. This is only a limited comparison, but it points to the importance of accumulated experience. As Waterton [12] argues, relations between landscape, belonging, and identity have to be understood through the memories and meanings that people bring to place.

Bender's [13] account of landscape is useful here as well: landscape is shaped through people's engagement with the world rather than existing only as a static background. The Qinling Mountains in this article are geographical terrain, but they are also encountered through particular practices. A released ibis, a specimen made at school, or a story remembered by a teacher gives the landscape a more specific place in someone's biography.

For this reason, the movement from nature to heritage and the movement from heritage to local identity should be kept analytically distinct. Conservation, classification, display, and education can turn animals and plants into publicly valued natural heritage. Whether that heritage becomes part of a person's sense of place depends on further experiences: participation, responsibility, memory, and emotional attachment.

The argument of this article is therefore modest. Local identity is not an automatic outcome of living near valued nature. It develops unevenly through relationships that are made over time. In Ningshan, the rewilding station and the school museum show two ways in which Qinling nature can move from being part of the surrounding environment to being connected with particular lives.

What begins as "the Qinling Mountains" may, through repeated involvement, become a bird one has cared for, a specimen one remembers making, or a story that belongs to one's school years. It is through such concrete connections that a landscape can gradually come to feel like part of one's own place.

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