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Rural Intangible Cultural Heritage and Ethnic Tourism: Experiences of Yunnan, China

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Abstract:

China is an active player in the international arena of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). While China is transforming from an agricultural country to an industrial country, rural heritage, either tangible or intangible, is facing tremendous challenges and opportunities. Among Chinese provinces, Yunnan in Southwest of China can be regarded as the best case to investigate the issues of protection, use and transmission of rural heritage as Yunnan is a unique province of China because of its ethnic cultural diversity and geographic diversity. Based on literary studies and fieldworks, this paper illustrates history, cases, theories and practices in the protection and use of ICH in ethnic tourism development in the past 20 years. Yunnan has long been regarded as a “peripheral” part of China and ethnic cultures were treated as “primitive” that needs transformation. However, after China's reform in 1978, the ethnic culture in rural areas in Yunnan has been changed into traditional and folk culture, cultural heritage (ICH, World Heritage, protected traditional villages and towns, etc) and ethnic tourism attractions. Meanwhile, several rural areas in Yunnan have evolved from a backward area into a popular tourism destination recognised home and abroad. With specific cases in terms of performing arts (dance, music, etc), handicrafts (metal, ceramics, textile, wood carving, etc), festivals and ICH related to cultural spaces (traditional villages, towns, landscapes, etc) in Yunnan, the paper will elaborate how rural ICH is transmitted, and/or re-created in a matrix of tourism commodification with participation of the local governments, entrepreneurs, local elites, community members and tourists. As well as advancing theoretical discussions in regard to authenticity, commodification and continuity, this paper also reflects on the practical strategies in commodifying rural ICH in ethnic tourism.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), ethnic minority, commodification, authenticity, continuity, Yunnan, China, rural tourism

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