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Cultural Representation in the Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages: Tensions and Contradictions

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic tourism is increasingly recognized and studied for its economic, social and cultural importance. This research employs multiple methods including interviews, surveys, informal discussions, and observations to examine the representation of multi-ethnic cultures in a well-known ethnic theme park – Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages (YEFV) in Yunnan, China. It is revealed that cultural representations do not exist in isolation but are intertwined in a broad social, political and economic context in which cultural images are continuously produced and consumed. Historical, political and cultural discourses influence how minority people are represented in the attraction. It is argued that effective ethnic involvement in managing cultural display and tourist attractions is essential for the sustainable development of ethnic tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural representation has received increasingly attention in tourism studies in recent years (Craik, 2001; Cornelissen, 2005; Hoffstaedter, 2008; Hsieh, 1999; Oakes, 1998; Pritchard and Morgan, 2001; Rogers, 1996; Smith, 2003; Tang, 2005). Tourism exerts a powerful influence on shaping cultural images of ethnic groups in many countries (van den Berghe and Keyes, 1984). Therefore, examinations of the impacts of tourism on cultural representation are needed, particularly in sensitive areas such as ethnic tourism. The first use of the term “ethnic tourism” is attributed to Smith (1977), who defined it as tourism “marketed to the public in terms of the ‘quaint’ customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples (p.2).” Since then, the concept and its consequences have been extensively discussed, particularly with regard to links between tourism and ethnicity, and the impacts of ethnic tourism. Today, ethnic tourism generally refers to tourism motivated by a visitor’s search for exotic cultural experiences (Yang, 2007), including the consumption of artefacts, performances, and other products or services. In recent years, ethnic tourism has been used by many countries to facilitate economic and cultural development (Henderson, 2003; Walsh and Swain, 2004; Yea, 2002). It also presents significant opportunities for ethnic minorities to showcase their rich culture and heritage and to revive their traditions and cultural pride (Santos and Yan, 2008; Swain, 1989, 1990). As such, ethnic tourism has considerable ideological significance for minority groups that are seeking to display their unique culture and strengthen their identity (Esman, 1984; Henderson, 2003; Hillman, 2003).

Tourism tends to present host culture in pleasing ways, providing tourists the opportunity to sample exemplars, replicas, or facsimiles of the cultural life - past and/or present - of host peoples (Craik, 2001; Stanton, 1989; Whittaker, 2000). Lifestyles and traditions of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples have often been romanticized as exotic at cultural attractions (Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Xie, 2003). The image of minorities is often depicted as overtly seductive, exotic, and quaint relative to the tourists’ own culture in travelogues (Dann, 1996; Gladney, 1999). Represented as primitive to meet tourist desires (Jacobs, 1988), minority peoples are condemned to live only in the outback as an integral part of nature, dressed in loin

cloths, and carrying spears or stone axes (Waite, 1997). The minorities are usually portrayed as locals enacting active entertainment roles, while the ethnic majority is mostly depicted as tourists enacting physically passive roles in destination imagery (Buzinde, Santos and Smith, 2006). In a Nepali village, Guneratne (2001) observed that the representation of Tharus (an ethnic group) as primitive and living in another time meets both the desire of tourists for exotic experiences and that of high-caste Nepalese who relate themselves to the modern world. Globalization intersects with and helps to shape ethnic difference and social identity in Nepal. In the case of North American First Nations, imagery is fixed around conventions that developed in the 1930s when indigenous peoples began to be represented clad in feathered war bonnets and beaded buckskin outfits (Douglas, Douglas and Derrett, 2001). This iconic image of indigenous peoples was reinforced by popular culture representations of cowboys and natives in comics, toys, film, and television (Nicks, 1999; Parezo, 1999). Such conventions remain dominant and expected by consumers, so demand perpetuates a false image (Craik, 2001).

As more countries, especially in Asia, turn to cultural heritage and embrace industrialization and modernization, cultural theme parks have sprung up in them (Hoffstaedter, 2008). The construction of extravagant cultural parks has become a strategy for these countries to promote tourism, reinforce their cultural identity and assert their presence on the world's economic and cultural stages. Such parks are created as a cultural showcase or "living museum" in order to re-enact or to stage the past, which represents a trend of modern society's attempt to preserve and fossilize the traditional customs of "ancient cultures", and to construct or reconstruct aspects of lifestyles that are vanishing or have disappeared in the modern world (Bruner, 2005).

In the Asia-Pacific area, China stands out with a reconstructed cultural landscape consisting of a large number of folk villages and cultural parks. In the 1990s, China experienced a "theme park fever" initiated by the success of Splendid China and Chinese Folk Cultural Village in Shenzhen (Bao, 1995; Ap, 2003). Within three years following the opening of Splendid China, at least sixteen large-scale theme parks were created throughout China, as well as hundreds of small-scale parks (Bao, 1995). The majority of these were based on themes of Chinese history and ethnic minority cultures. The cultural park landscapes have profoundly shaped modern China by offering the purportedly stable and timeless folk for tourist consumption (Oakes, 1998). However, many of such parks closed down in the late 1990s due to poor planning and management issues (Ap, 2003). This study aims to examine one of surviving ethnic theme parks that was created in the period of the "theme park fever" and to discuss tensions and issues associated with cultural display and park management.

RESEARCH METHODS

Fieldwork took place in the study site in Kunming, Yunnan, China in the summers of 2006 and 2008. A pilot study was conducted in the summer of 2006 to test and validate field data collection and analysis methodologies. Preliminary tests of interviews with park managers and surveys with park employees and visitors were undertaken to verify the validity and clarity of the survey questions. From June to August 2008, data for the study were collected using a variety of methods including interviews, surveys, informal discussions, observations, and secondary data analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with 41 key-informants including park administrators, tourism planners, university scholars, and government officials involved in overseeing, planning and managing the park. The interviews utilized a set of semi-structured, open-ended questions to ascertain stakeholders' perspectives on park, minority culture, and

tourism, and their roles and objectives in planning and managing the park, and to explore issues in cultural display, park management, and tourism development. Purposive sampling and the snowball technique were used to locate key-informants to be interviewed. The interviews ranged from half an hour to two hours each.

Questionnaire surveys were conducted with park employees and visitors. Questionnaires were comprised of both closed- and open-ended questions. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure perceptions of employees and visitors. Questionnaires were distributed to 389 full-time park employees including tour guides, dancers, performers, craft makers, souvenir sellers, restaurant workers, guards, and cleaners and 241 were returned for a response rate of 62 percent. Surveys explored respondents' attitudes towards cultural representation, park, and tourism, and their concerns about their jobs. Five hundred questionnaires were distributed to visitors at the main park entrance and 415 returned for a response rate of 83 percent. The demographic data of visitors, their expectations, attitudes, and experiences concerning minority cultures represented at the park were collected. The visitors' perceptions of ethnic product features, assessments of park attractiveness, and the level of satisfaction with their experience in the park were the focus of the survey.

The on-site activities and behaviors of park employees and tourists were observed and recorded, as was the interaction between tourists and employees. This data was used to illustrate and help fill in gaps in interviews and survey data. Detailed information on state policies on tourism, cultural parks, and ethnic minorities, the history, current situation and development plans for the YEFV, the role and objectives of government in directing the park, and socio-cultural responses from minority peoples and the general public were collected. Tourism brochures, magazines, books, video CDs, and flyers were reviewed for additional insight into promotional tactics. Tourism plans, government documents, newspapers, and scholarly publications were examined to identify issues associated with the park and tourism, and to understand the impacts of tourism on minorities and their culture.

Both quantitative and qualitative analytical methods were used to analyze and interpret data. Each item of qualitative data was categorized and interpreted according to the themes. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed by using statistical software – SPSS. Percentages, cross-tabulations, and non-parametric tests such as Chi Square were conducted to analyze survey data. Finally, the ideas and perspectives expressed by individual interviewees were compared with the information from the survey sample.

FINDINGS

Yunnan Ethnic Folk Village (YEFV) is state-owned and under the administration of Kunming Dainchi National Tourist Resort Committee, which is a body of the local government. The YEFV was created in 1992 under the government initiative to use rich ethnic culture as a resource for attracting tourists and investments and, at the same time, for promoting cultural development, ethnic diversity and national unity. The park is a part of a governmental tourism project – Kunming Dainchi National Tourist Resort, which is the only one of twelve national level resorts in the western inland provinces in China. The park is a large operation requiring a wide variety of professional and skills workers. It employs a large number of people in varied occupations including highly-trained professional administrators, experts on specific ethnic cultures and minority youth from remote and undeveloped villages. There are 389 full-time park employees, of which 189 are minority people who are in direct contact with visitors. Minority workers, representing 25 ethnic groups, play a fundamental role in presenting their culture and

interact with tourists. They wear traditional costumes, work in old-style houses, dance, sing, weave, make sculpture and crafts, and engage in tourist activities in the park. They reconstruct the exotic, most symbolic elements of their culture and put selected aspects of their unique life on stage for the visitors, especially in the realm of material culture, aesthetics and performing arts.

According to key-informants, the park was designed to exhibit diverse culture, traditions and the ways of life of minorities as a “multi-ethnic cultural center.” It was established with a three-fold purpose: (1) to represent and display ethnic cultures of 25 Yunnan ethnic minorities; (2) to preserve and revive ethnic cultures and to enhance cultural pride; and (3) to strengthen the unity of the ethnic minorities and to provide educational opportunities to the locals and outsiders. As a cultural showcase or “living museum”, the park concentrates on certain tangible and enjoyable aspects of minority culture and displays living people in native costume who are on stage performing for tourists. Although the park is recreational, it is also political. The park authority explicitly selects, markets, and promotes those perceived “healthy and progressive” aspects of minority culture. Although cultural diversity and local distinctiveness are encouraged by government policy, not all aspects of minority culture are accepted and supported in cultural tourism. The exotic, more popular elements of minority culture are highlighted in public display as positive expressions of ethnic identity and are celebrated in tourist shows. Conversely, certain traditions and activities such as religious rituals and indigenous practices are considered joyless and “superstition” and excluded from tourism. Folk songs, dances, costumes and minority cultures are all modified and staged to suit political agenda and commercial needs. What has been promoted is stereotypical in nature and featured “exoticized” and “gendered” depictions of locals engaging in cultural entertainment.

The majority of government officials and park managers interviewed believe that the park provides authentic portray of minority images and their cultures. According to a manager, in recent years many efforts have been made to improve the overall authenticity of the park, including upgrading park facilities and consulting cultural specialists and the highly respected ethnic elders. In order to make the park more appealing, each of the villages has developed some specific activity such as cultural shows, using some louder percussion instruments, involvement in a game of skill, or performing a dance that encourages visitor’s participation. The individuals who are proven experts in their own ethnic cultural background are selected to supervise each of the twenty-five cultural demonstrations or “villages.” Special training sessions are offered for young minority workers who are involved with tourists directly. A few talented minority employees are sent to college to take formal tourism and hospitality lessons.

The findings suggest that authenticity appears to be an ambiguous, fluid, and flexible concept for managers, who state that the objective of the park is to portray minority cultures authentically, but who also indicate that modification and reconstruction are necessary in tourist shows. Folk villages, songs, dances, minority dresses and customs are all modified and staged to suit commercial needs. Not all aspects of minority culture are valued by managers; tourist needs and desires are their highest concerns. They generally believe that exotic cultural images, spectacular dance shows and the quaint customs of minorities are the most marketable forms of cultural tourism. In the words of managers, “minority people are expected to continue their quaint traditions by the majority society.” Therefore, the park explicitly portrays, markets and promotes elements of minority culture deemed “primitive,” “pre-modern,” exotic and joyful. Visitors can view only limited historical aspects of minority cultures and their lifestyles. In the past fifty years, almost all of minority groups have undergone dramatic economic and socio-

cultural change and are moving towards a modern lifestyle. However, the park freezes minority culture in an older time and contrived space and provides partial, fragmented and mostly static exhibits.

The employee survey suggests that the perceptions of authenticity of the folk villages and cultural shows were strong among the majority of park employees. Most respondents were minority people (68%) and nearly half (48%) were between 20 and 30 years old, followed by 23% under 20 years old and 20% aged 31 to 40. Although the survey sample had slightly more males than females (52% to 48%), the park actually has more female employees than male (60% to 40%). As indicated in Table 1, most of them (74%) believed that the folk villages and cultural shows authentically represent the life and culture of minority people. Close to 57% of respondents agreed that ethnic souvenirs are authentic. Many respondents (55%) perceived that tourism has increased commercialization of minority culture and a considerable proportion (41%) were concerned that staged shows make minority culture less valuable. Chi Square tests indicated perceptions of minority workers regarding authenticity differed significantly from those of Han employees ($\chi^2=133$, $df=3$, $P<0.05$ for folk villages; $\chi^2=58$, $df=3$, $P<0.05$ for cultural shows; $\chi^2=78$, $df=2$, $P<0.05$ for ethnic souvenirs). Minority workers tended to support the statement of authenticity, while many Han employees were not sure about it.

Table 1. Park Employees' Perceptions of Cultural Authenticity (N=241)

Statement	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral/ Don't know %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Ethnic folk villages are authentic	0.0	15.8	10.0	59.2	15.0
Ethnic cultural shows are authentic	0.0	4.6	21.3	55.0	19.2
Tourism increases cultural commodification	0.4	0.4	44.6	47.1	7.5
Staged cultural shows make ethnic culture less valuable	17.5	21.7	19.6	21.7	19.6
Ethnic souvenirs are authentic	0.0	16.7	27.1	56.3	0.0

Minority workers generally take pride in their cultural heritage and appreciate the opportunity provided by the park to present their culture to visitors in a positive context through the model villages. They appreciate knowledge and skills learned at the park. Many people

indicated that they had little direct contact with their cultural heritage and knew little about their history before they began their work at the park, but they have not only learned their own cultural heritage, they have also learned about other groups' cultures and languages through training programs and interaction with other minority people. The multi-ethnic nature of the park allows a genuine intercultural exchange to take place. Friendship has been made with members of other ethnic groups and intermarriages have occurred. Some felt that the park provides them with a sense of identity, meaning and attachment, and their ethnic identity has been reinforced through their association with work. Several people said that they took their culture for granted at home, but now they value their heritage and are interested in learning their history and native languages. Many minority workers expressed positive views of the site and indicated that the park is authentic and reflects essential elements of minority culture. However, about one-third (30%) asserted that the park provides inappropriate and inaccurate representations of minority culture.

Tourist surveys reveal that the perceptions of the authenticity of cultural shows and folk villages were positive among the majority of Chinese tourists. Since few international tourists visit the YEFV, the sample was confined to nationals. The clientele included a large proportion of young Han Chinese, who were relatively well educated and mainly from the economically developed areas of China. As indicated in Table 2, most of respondents (64%) perceived cultural shows as authentic, 58% believed that the park authentically represents the life and culture of minority people and 62% thought that ethnic souvenirs are authentic. A large number of tourists could not judge authenticity due to lack of knowledge (36% regarding the folk villages, 27% cultural shows and 24% ethnic souvenirs). The result is not surprising given the fact that Chinese schools teach predominately Han culture and most tourists (62%) have little information about minority culture prior to the visit. The spectacular images of shows, exotic minority costumes and traditional architecture portrayed in mass media and tourism advertising are mainly used to evaluate authenticity. Thus, tourists' perceptions of authenticity are very blurred and fluid.

Table 2. Tourists' Perceptions of Cultural Authenticity (N=415)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral/ Don't know	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%	%	%	%	%
Ethnic folk villages are authentic	1.0	4.3	10.0	50.0	7.8
Ethnic cultural shows are authentic	1.1	3.0	21.3	53.0	10.6
Ethnic souvenirs are authentic	3.0	10.0	23.6	54.2	8.0

The levels of satisfaction of respondents were very high. As indicated in Table 3, almost all (90%) were satisfied with staged cultural shows, 85% enjoyed their overall experience at the park, 77% liked ethnic food, 75% liked park services, 82% enjoyed tourist facilities and 88% favored the educational information provided by the park. Most (82%) indicated they would visit the park again in the future and 88% said that they would be motivated by the park to visit real ethnic villages. Tourists generally are aware that the settings are staged and they are mainly in search of enjoyment and relaxation on their visits. The interview results were consistent with the survey findings. Most interviewees described the nature of their experience at the park as “fun,” “enjoyable,” “playful” or “relaxing.” Comments made by interviewees include: “It is cool! I have seen real natives at work in their own grass huts;” “I enjoyed shows and dancing with minority people. I felt like in an authentic setting;” “I like clean air, beautiful scenery and the tranquil environment here. It is so relaxing!” “I have found that minority people are very friendly. I like to talk to them” and “I love elephant shows and our cute minority guide.” In fact, elephant shows were the highlight of the trip for many interviewees. Some visitors indicated that they only had superficial glimpse of minority culture in the few hours they spent at the park and indicated that it was hard to get feel for how these people really live. Several people were disappointed with very brief encounters with hosts and wished they could observe minority people more closely. A number of visitors complained that the park charges too much and that there should be only one overall admission fee. A few said that the park was crowded and felt a bit like a zoo. Several suggested that it would be more helpful if the park provided more interpretation for the exhibits and more educational programs for visitors.

Table 3. Tourist Satisfaction (N=415)

Statement	Very dissatisfied %	Dissatisfied %	Neutral %	Satisfied %	Very satisfied %
Ethnic architecture	3.6	1.0	8.7	62.9	23.9
Cultural shows	3.6	0.5	6.3	55.4	34.2
Overall experience	2.9	1.4	10.1	70.6	14.9
Ethnic food	1.9	0.7	20.2	42.2	34.9
Park services	2.9	1.0	21.0	54.9	20.2
Tourist facilities	0.0	5.3	12.8	53.3	28.7
Educational information	0.7	1.2	10.8	29.6	57.6

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

This paper serves as an empirical investigation of cultural representation in an ethnic theme park and the tourism impacts on cultural authenticity. Attention to cultural representation in ethnic tourism can provide insights into the planning and management of cultural attractions. The general issues identified are not unique to the study site but, in fact, are common in places where socio-economic and power imbalances are large and cultural traditions are being developed for ethnic tourism. It is hoped that recommendations developed from this study can be applied to mitigate the negative impacts and to reinforce the positive aspects of ethnic tourism in China and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

The ideal of ethnic tourism is to provide authentic or genuine cultural representations or samples for tourists. However, ethnic minorities tend to be under-represented in tourist attractions because they have traditionally lacked the power and control to determine exhibition content and interpretation (Smith, 2003). Operation of ethnic attractions and even the interpretation of exhibitions are often left in the hands of non-ethnic people who may not understand fully the displayed culture and traditions (Hsieh, 1999; Xie, 2003). In the case studied, the representation of minority culture has been strongly influenced by the government and the Han managers who select the cultural products and direct the tourists' gaze. Thus, the images of the "exotic other" through the vehicle of tourism are loaded in favor of collective middlemen's needs (the government and entrepreneurs). Minority people are mostly employed as lowly-paid laborers such as singers, dancers, performers, craft makers, and souvenir shop attendants. Display of a staged culture has become a way of making a living. Although most employees are chosen from the relevant minorities from the remote ethnic regions, they have little say in presenting and interpreting their culture. The culture presented is not determined by the authentic source of the culture, minority peoples, but by the powerful stakeholders, usually Han. Therefore, cultural representations do not exist in isolation but are intertwined in a broad social, political and economic context in which cultural images are continuously produced and consumed. Historical, political and cultural discourses influence how minority people are represented in contemporary tourism attractions.

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