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Tourism as a territorial strategy: The case of China and Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cultural and territorial politics of the rapid post-2008 growth in tourism from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to Taiwan. Additionally, this paper presents an innovative theoretical argument that tourism should be viewed as a technology of state territorialization; that is, as a mode of social and spatial ordering that produces tourists and state territory as effects of power.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Taiwan in 2012, it explores the engagement of PRC tourists with Taiwanese hosts, political representations of Taiwan and China, the territorializing effects of tourism, the production of multiple sensations of stateness, and the possibility that tourism is aggravating contradictions between the different territorialization programs of China and Taiwan.

Introduction

In May 2012, Han Han, China's most popular blogger, published a post entitled, "Winds of the Pacific", about his recent trip to Taiwan:

> I don't want to delve into the politics. As a writer from the mainland, I just feel lost. A pervasive feeling of loss. The society I grew up in spent a few decades teaching us to be violent and vengeful, and then a few more decades teaching us to be selfish and greedy. Our parents destroyed our culture, our ethics, our ability to trust, our faith and consensus, but failed to build the utopia that was

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> promised. We may have no choice but to keep doing the same things. As a writer, I have to constantly worry about whether my words will step on some line somewhere. I assume people have ulterior motives when they treat me with warmth. Other than self-survival and competition, we have lost interest in everything else. This is how we have come to define ourselves.
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> . . .
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> Yes, I have to thank Hong Kong and Taiwan, for protecting Chinese civilization. Even when we have the Ritz Carlton and the Peninsula, Gucci and Louis Vuitton, wives of local officials with more money than their leaders, movie budgets 20 or 30 times theirs, the World's Fair and the Olympics, but, on the streets of Taipei, I didn't feel any bit of pride. Whatever we have, they already had; whatever we are proud of, their taxpayers will never approve; whatever we should be proud of, we've already lost (Han, 2012, translated in Yeh, 2012).

Despite his disclaimer, Han Han's post is nothing if not political. He may skirt the question of Taiwan independence, but he uses the island as a tinted mirror for what the People's Republic of China (PRC) could be but is not, or was but is no longer. Filled with anecdotes of the kindness of strangers—the taxi driver who returned a phone that Han had dropped in the back seat, or the eyewear store owner who guilelessly gave Han's friend a free pair of contact lenses—Han's post treats Taiwan not as a renegade province under the thumb of the United States or as an exotic tourist destination, but as a rhetorical device for an indirect critique of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) role in the corruption of "Chinese values". Han's taxi driver was not just a taxi driver—in the retelling, the cabbie came to represent of the supposed generous spirit of all Taiwanese people. Except, in Han's reading, the driver's generosity was not so much Taiwanese as it was *Chinese*, free of the corrupting influence of the CCP. Han therefore suggests he was not helped by a Taiwanese as much as he was by a more authentic Chinese subject. Taiwan's history as a Japanese colony and US protectorate, as well as its many other specificities and contingencies are elided in this account.

In this paper, based on fieldwork conducted in Taiwan in 2012 and informed by analysis of media reports and the influential posts of people such as Han Han, I argue that the recent rise in leisure tourism from the PRC to Taiwan is producing multiple, overlapping, and contradictory sensations of stateness, state territory, and national identity within Taiwan. These effects are produced in part by the highly regimented structure of group tourism as managed by industry actors from Taiwan, the PRC, and Hong Kong, which reproduces a tourist experience sufficiently similar to that of the PRC. Subtle and inconsistent linguistic performances of national identity take place throughout tours, both reproducing and undermining the effect of state territory.

Both Han Han and my informants make clear that not only is cross-Strait tourism an occasion for recreation, but that stories about seemingly simple encounters take on important symbolic value in the context of an ongoing struggle over sovereignty. Moreover, the trajectory and meanings of such narratives are not determined solely by the regulatory arrangements between state or travel industry elites in Taiwan and the PRC. The emergence of such discursive dissonance suggests that tourism may be a problematic and unpredictable weapon in the arsenal of state power. Cross-Strait tourism does not require a superstar blogger to provoke widespread discussion about the different cultural values or behaviors of people in Taiwan and the PRC. In another quite typical case, a report on PRC tourists who carved their names into plants in an east Taiwan park provoked online protest and further depiction of PRC visitors as poorly behaved bumpkins overrunning the countryside (Fauna, 2012). Importantly, tourism has been not only the subject of such raucous social debates, but also the driver for the establishment of the first cross-Strait quasi-state offices since the founding of the PRC, with Beijing opening a tourism office in Taipei and Taipei opening an office in Beijing in April 2010 (China Times., 2010).

This growing flow of tourists and diplomatic exchanges between the PRC and Taiwan is taking place against the backdrop of a sovereignty dispute whose roots go back over a century, to late imperial China's cession of Taiwan to Japan in 1895, through the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) occupation of Taiwan in the 1940s, and all the way up to the recent thaw in cross-Strait relations. Since the 1980s, following political reforms on both sides, flows of people, goods, and capital across the Strait have increased. This has come in the form of investment, family visitation, and tourism, first