



# Travelling ethics: Valuing harmony, habitat and heritage while consuming people and places



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## ABSTRACT

A variety of ethical tourism initiatives have arisen which look at the distribution of benefits and costs arising from the movement of western tourists who are consuming places in the Global South. This paper troubles those positions. Taking the case of the rise of domestic tourism in China, the paper examines the linked patterns of ethnic and nature based tourism. Theories of how natural and cultural heritage are valued by tourists are typically derived from Western historical precedents. Notions of individualised, romantic modes of consumption of pristine nature may well be inadequate in other contexts. The paper examines the double edged role of Chinese notions of harmony of people and nature in offering new opportunities for development for poor minority groups whilst also enrolling them in 4 modes of governance that turn them into bio-cultural resources. Looking across examples drawn from Yunnan in South Western China, the paper identifies how environmental ethics are mobilised and script minority identities in 4 ways: the valorisation of geopiety, blurring nature and culture in geotourism, in quests for rural simplicity, and celebrations of place based folk culture that simultaneously render it mobile. The rise of domestic environmentally concerned tourism is shown to fit the emergence of an ecological but market led mode of governance over minority groups.

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## 1. Introduction

The literature on ethical consumption largely bifurcates between the majority of studies focusing upon processes where stationary Western consumers purchase products that travel from the global south to a consumption milieu in the metropolitan core and those on ethical tourism which look at metropolitan travellers to the Global South visiting poor indigenous peoples. The assumption for both is that ethical purchasing can lead to an ethically improved self and also to public effects on how the world is organised. The first dimension for both is a moral selfing or virtue ethic (where the virtue attaches to the person) which is often as important as the second dimension of ethics in practice. Creating the possibility for tourists to improve the lot of the poor and conserve the environment has been the concern of ethical tourism and especially eco-tourism initiatives. If this special issue largely troubles the destination of goods, looking at consumers in the Global South, then it also needs to consider what happens when tourists come from there as opposed to the Global North. Ethical tourism differs from other ethical consumption in how it makes producers and benefits visible. Rather than ‘think global, act local’ it implies

an ethics of ‘move globally, act on others’ localities’. It relies on the visitors thus being able to see the benefits or objects of conservation in terms of something that ‘looks’ like their understanding of healthy and attractive nature. The result is commercial pressure to adapt ecosystems and communities to deliver those signifiers, be they totemic flora and fauna or exotically costumed peoples, as much as actual benefits (Carrier, 2008, 2011). It further means that travel and visibility have come to ‘frame the opportunities, possibilities and meanings of tourism for village residents’ in China (Chio, 2014, page 9).

This paper will trouble eco-tourism assumptions by asking what happens when non-western tourists have different senses of what constitutes an ‘ethical’ relationship to nature, ideas of what is ‘natural’, what indigenous communities should be and thus what ‘benefits’ look like. Using Chinese domestic tourism it will seek to ask whether the ethics and the concept of ethical tourism can be broadened from niche product to mass market (Sharpley, 2009) and also travel from Northern to Southern consumers. This paper, first, looks at how Chinese ‘ordinary ethics’ (Stafford, 2013) are evolving where social relations, materialities and markets intersect. Second, it asks how systems of landscape values become conscripted into a resource for ‘sustainable’ consumption. It examines how specific cultural relationships with nature are constructed as exemplifying harmony and become a biocultural resource for

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development. Thus it takes ethical consumption beyond things produced for the market and into what Polanyi would call 'fictitious commodities' of things that are not produced directly for sale, but are appropriated in situ, like hotels selling their views or access to nature reserves (Carrier, 2011, page 205). This it will do in the context of Yunnan Province, a relatively poor and ethnically diverse province in South West China which has become prominently associated with 'ethnic tourism' – that is tourism to see minority cultures. To do so it reviews literature across a range of three of the biomes and five of the cultural groups in the province, thus drawing patterns across groups in a field where papers usually work from one case study. It uses field data, local media and advertising materials from field visits between 2007 and 2013.<sup>1</sup> In so doing it draws out comparative insights looking at the role of 'harmony' in local and Chinese environmental ethics, at the naturalising of ethnic identities through natural landscapes and the fusing of notions of ethical responsibility for the environment with forms of alternative consumption and quests for simplicity. The paper tracks the uneasy alliance of valuing nature with cultural exoticism for Chinese consumers.

The rise of Chinese tourism poses a challenge to cultural studies of tourism that have derived a series of prototypical tourist figures from Western experience. In China we encounter a country where up until 30 years ago the 'tourist' was castigated as a bourgeois western figure. Domestic mass tourism was socially and institutionally promoted only in the late 1990s in attempts to stimulate the Chinese consumer economy during an economic slowdown. The Chinese state also identified tourism as a mechanism for spreading the rising wealth in the eastern coastal cities into the western provinces and rural areas (Mackerras, 2003). There has been considerable academic interest in 'pro-poor' tourism in China especially as a way of distributing wealth from rapidly developing cities to poorer rural areas (Zeng and Ryan, 2012). The 'Open up the West' project used tourism as a mechanism for this perhaps reaching its apogee in the "Greater Shangri-la Tourism Investment and Development Project" discussed below (Sofield and Li, 2011). The current 12th five year plan announced 'we will comprehensively promote eco-tourism, [and] encourage in-depth development of cultural tourism' (Xiao, 2013, page 1).

The effect has been rapidly rising visitor numbers to rural tourist destinations as China's newly wealthy middle class seek to escape polluted cities and travel to places with clean air and water and forest landscapes. Affluent urbanites from the economically developed areas of China seek out minority ethnic cultures partly to experience harmony with nature (Yang, 2012; Yang and Wall, 2009a). The appeal of 'rural ethnic villages in China is rooted in the circuits of a (trans)national nostalgia for a landscape that appears to embody, nourish and sustain a more fundamental relationship between nature and human society' (Chio, 2014, page 10). The scale of domestic demand is striking, with 274 million tourists visiting forest parks during 2008 (Wang and Buckley, 2010) leading to celebrated sites such as the ethnic minority world heritage city of Lijiang facing demand management issues (Cros, 2008).

This upsurge tapped into long traditions of valuing nature that both mobilised and clashed with new modalities of valuing other people and places. The state aimed to create an individualised and desiring subject but this has created 'a possibility for linking this new self with a (western style) cosmopolitan ethics of global

neoliberalism and consumerism' (Yan, 2011, page 47). This ethical shift to an individualised system of rights and self-development, instead of collective responsibility and self-sacrifice, entails a concomitant shift from traditionally particularistic morals where 'treating an outsider poorly is taken lightly' to the rise of a generalised notion of compassion and caring that applies equally to all (Yan, 2011, pages 59–63). Thus it is only in the 2000s that a notion of individual responsibility for the distant environment (and distant impoverished others) has risen (Jankowiak, 2004).

## 2. Mobilising ethics, localising values: approaches to ethics, consumption and tourism in China

The tourism promoted by environmental values varies in terms of ethical commitment to the environment and people. The weakest form is 'nature tourism' which says little about the effects of tourism but trades upon elements of nature, be that the scenery to 'wilderness' to geological features in 'geotourism'. More strongly 'eco-tourism' commits to not only benefiting people from visits to natural attractions but benefiting the natural world, or at least mitigating any damage. The oft recited three elements of ecotourism are (1) conservation; (2) benefiting, respecting and empowering local communities; and (3) educating as well as entertaining tourists (Tisdell, 1996). A general critique of ecotourism is that it is 'blue-green' treating nature as a resource and environment and local cultures as things to be consumed by outsiders (Duffy, 2002). It values people and places extrinsically – looking to protect them by creating a market value for them. Approaches such as Community Based Eco-Tourism attempt to maximise both local economic value capture and local control of 'intrinsic' nature values (Gui et al., 2004).

There is a fair amount of confusion around what counts as 'eco-tourism' in China, depending on whether it focuses upon options of environmental protection, benefit to inhabitants, a getting back to nature experience, promoting a ethic of environmental responsibility or celebrating nature (Wu et al., 2007). Although the usual translation of ecotourism in Mandarin is *shengtai luyou* (Wang and Buckley, 2010), the confused practice also is refracted through an ambiguous set of translated analytic terms where there is clear overlap but not complete alignment – not least since Chinese practice tends to include health outcomes for visitors and allows the 'enhancing' of nature (Buckley et al., 2008). There is a slippage under the label ecotourism/*shengtai luyou* between conservation minded initiatives limiting the incursions of tourism and those seeking to maximise the revenue from nature based activities for local and regional development. This means pretty much any nature based development in China will claim the eco tourism label (Xu et al., 2014). This fluidity is enabled by claiming the Chinese ordinary ethic of "harmony" which functions as a common, everyday instrument of choice for dealing with potential conflict and tension, between development and conservation, people and nature (Xu et al., 2014). It says both what is valued in minority relations with nature – a balance of humans and environment – but also permits development through tourism.

If there is then a gamut of different degrees of environmental engagement in producing different destinations, there is a similarly wide range of engagement by tourists consuming them. As McKercher and du Cros (2003) argue one can stretch out cultural or environmental tourists along a field of how important the issue is to their trip and how that relates to their engagement so they might be just sightseeing, incidentally, serendipitously through to actively engaged with the natural environment.

Chinese practice restages but also challenges another dualism in most ecotourism analysis, a vision of small, traditional communities being the scale for 'good' action and a template for 'good

<sup>1</sup> The data have been collected on a series of visits by the author and field assistants. Especial thanks goes to Chen Yapin of Yunnan Normal University for a wealth of material, Lei Fi and Peter Eliot at Durham who spent 3 months in northern Yunnan and a month in Southern and then Northern Yunnan respectively. The data collected include tallies of enterprises and scenic sites, promotional and display materials from those sites, and meetings with local officials and tourist workers in Dêqên, Shilin and Yuanyang Counties and Xishuangbanna National Park.

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