



The role of institutions in the production of space for tourism: National Forest Parks in China



Fen Luo ^{a,b}, Brent D. Moyle ^{b,*}, Jigang Bao ^c, Yongde Zhong ^a

^a College of Tourism, Central South University of Forestry & Technology, 410004, e-no.498, Shaoshan South Road, Changsha, Hunan, China

^b Griffith Institute for Tourism, Griffith University, Building (G27) Room 3.03, Parklands Drive, Southport, QLD 4222, Australia

^c Centre for Tourism and Planning Research, No. 135, Xingang Xi Road, Guangzhou, Yat-sen University, 512007, China

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ABSTRACT

Nature-based tourism is a global phenomenon, with traditional forms of use of natural areas, such as wood harvesting and agriculture, paving the way for ecotourism. However, there has been limited exploration of the role of institutions in driving this transition. Consequently, this paper sought to explore the role of institutions in producing space for tourism within National Forest Parks (NFPs) in China. To achieve this objective 68 national-level policy documents from 1949 to 2014 were collected and analyzed. Findings demonstrate a transformation in the role of NFPs, orchestrated by the state, capital and society for tourism. In particular, NFPs, as an ideological space in national development, were not only an outcome of economic, social, political, and ecological processes, but also balanced the power between the state, capital and society. Institutional changes mirrored the dynamic relationship between the state, capital and society in China. Future research should focus on the role of institutions in producing space for tourism for and within parks at the local level, especially in developing contexts.

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1. Introduction

Recreation and tourism is a widespread phenomenon in natural areas (Elands and van Marwijk, 2012). In many locations around the world forests have been transitioned to tourism at the expense of more utilitarian interests such as wood harvesting (Luo and Bao, 2013). The transition of forest landscapes to state governance has not been a smooth process, with considerable debate between state agencies and local residents involved in establishing protected areas (Blicharska and Van Herzele, 2015; Roth, 2008). As such, policy on the production of space and the provision of sustainable livelihoods for local people has emerged as an important aspect of forest conservation (Roth, 2008). Both are constantly dynamic, evolving in conjunction with associated social, political, economic and ecological processes (Mels, 2002). Lefebvre (1991: 49) noted that natural space is part of “the invisible fullness of political space” mediated by “knowledge, technology, money, precious objects, words of art and symbols” (Lefebvre, 1991: 51). Nevertheless, there has been limited research on the role of institutions in the production of space for nature based tourism in national forest or parks, especially in countries experiencing periods of rapid economic growth or political reform.

By the end of 2014, China had created nine different types of parks, consisting of more than 2708 national-level protected areas, managed by different government agencies. The principal types are Forest Parks, Nature Reserves, Geoparks, Wetland Parks, Mining Parks, Marine Parks, Historic and Interest Areas, Water Reserve Parks and Cultural Parks. Each type may be administered at the national, provincial or local level. A total of 791 National Forest Parks (NFPs) have been constructed and managed by the China State Forestry Administration (CSFA) since 1982, covering 1.25% of China’s terrestrial surface. The CSFA (2015) reported that forest recreation received more than 700 million domestic and foreign visitors and over US\$11 billion in revenue, playing a vital role in economic sustainability at the national and regional level.

Despite considerable growth in the number of parks in China, there has been limited inquiry into the role of institutions in the production of space for nature based tourism in national forest parks (NFPs). China is an exceptionally interesting case study to explore this phenomenon, as specific political, cultural, historical and institutional issues have affected the (re)configuration of space (Ma and Wu, 2005; McGee, 2009; Sofield and Li, 2011).

Consequently, the aim of this research is to explore the production of space for tourism in NFPs in China from an institutional perspective. To achieve this aim this research is driven by three key objectives. First, this research sets out to understand the core drivers in national-level policy that led to the production of NFPs driven by tourism. Second, this research explores the interaction between the state, capital and society

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: luofen79@gmail.com, f.luo@griffith.edu.au (F. Luo), b.moyle@griffith.edu.au (B.D. Moyle), eesbjg@mail.sysu.edu.cn (J. Bao), adely@csuft.edu.cn (Y. Zhong).

in the production of NFPs over different national-level policy cycles. Third, this research seeks to develop a conceptual model illustrating the interaction between the state, capital and society that led to the production of space for NFPs for testing and application in other contexts. The contribution of this manuscript lies in a rich case study of the role of institutions in the production of space for tourism to natural and protected areas. Specifically by using an in-depth exploration of government policy documents, this paper focuses on how the production of space for tourism in NFPs has been dynamically shaped from an institutional perspective, at the national level.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizations of space

Previous research on the concept of space has predominantly been conceptualized through the lens of western social science (McGee, 2009; Roth, 2008; Soja, 1989). Core theoretical approaches have been developed through the discipline of geography, where there has been a long-standing belief that the concept of space is shaped from the social meaning of peoples' lives (Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1989), with space no longer appearing to be a static platform of social relations (Yrigoy, 2014).

Seminal work which sought to examine the relationship between space and social change was developed by Lefebvre (1991). He defined spatiality as “both the medium and outcome” of situated human agency and systems of social practice, proposing a unitary theory of space that ties together the physical, the mental and the social, which introduced a “triad” for the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991, 2003; Lefebvre and Enders, 1976). Simultaneously, space is both a *spatial practice*, including an externalized, material environment, as well as a process by which materiality is produced. Concomitantly, a *representation of space* is the verbal description, language and the written word created by scientists, planners and social engineers (Lefebvre, 1991). Alternately, *space of representation* is space that is symbolic, subjective, “qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (Merrifield, 1993 p.11). Furthermore, Lefebvre (1991: 84) denoted that national parks, similar to NFPs, are “products of an activity that involves the economic and technical realms but which extends well beyond them, for these are also political products, and strategic spaces”. Recent research often applies Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad as a theoretical framework for empirical research on the production of space (Buser, 2012; Frisvoll, 2012; Hossain, 2012; Leary, 2013; Mels, 2002; Roth, 2008). Despite the various interpretations, the spatial triad has been criticized for its intuitive simplicity, conceptualization and totality (Gottdiener, 1993; Leary, 2013; Schmid, 2008; Ye et al., 2014). In addition, Lefebvre (1991) does not account for complex interactions that occur in the rapidly shifting dynamic nexus of the spatial triad, resulting in difficulties interpreting and adapting the concept (Merrifield and Lefebvre, 2000).

2.2. Interplay between the state, capital and society

Empirical studies have concluded that space is often used as a political tool for state regulation (Roth, 2008), primarily focusing on the production of a social world to commodify the productive factors and livelihood assets (Butler, 2009). Arguably, the concept of “social” in spatial production should be considered in a broader sense, reflecting all social actions and relations (Ye et al., 2014). This assertion leads to the conclusion that space is constantly dynamic, evolving in conjunction with associated social, political, and economic processes (Roth, 2008). As a result, the concept of space is often divided into three interrelated subcomponents – political, economic and social – which are also intricately intertwined with the state, capital and society (Schmid, 2008; Ye et al., 2014).

Historically, policies implemented by states tend to prioritize the production of space in specific locations and at precise scales

(Brenner, 1999). Consequently, policy initiatives have been found to neglect, marginalize or exclude other viable locations (Jones, 1999). Space is inherently connected to emergent political strategies that are oriented towards the creation of new geographies, created by state policy and political-economic life (Brenner, 2004). For instance, Harms (2011: 238) asserted that “state power endures only by virtue of violence directed towards a space”, with “idealized conceptions of spatial order”, which would have a substantial impact on tourism development processes by political philosophy and ideology (Hall, 1998). In a study on Swedish national parks, Mels (2002) argued that empty space represents the understanding of national parks as “pure” nature; organic space links nature to the conception of “Swedishness” and optical space embodies the visual immediacy by a multimedia dialectic of images, texts and maps respectively.

In addition, previous studies have identified capital as critical in generating economic interest in the production of space (Harvey, 1982; Lefebvre, 1991; Yrigoy, 2014). However, capital has been found to have the potential to produce space solely to produce a profit (Yrigoy, 2014). Market-based modernization and economic growth strategies have been critiqued as viewing land as a commodity, rather than as a social-ecological resource for livelihood generation (Hansen, 2013; Lefebvre, 1991; Roth, 2008). Inquiry has also centered on the potential dichotomy between state and society, with flexible spatial strategies demonstrated to strengthen social relationships between local communities and state conservation agencies (Roth, 2008). Negotiation between core stakeholder groups has been identified as a key part of park-people conflict, with outcomes intertwined with community sentiment towards the production of space (Roth, 2008).

2.3. Political economy in tourism

The “political economy of tourism” emerged in the early 2000s (Nunkoo and Smith, 2013), yet arguably still remains relatively conceptually underdeveloped within the tourism field (Yrigoy, 2014). The production of space has been applied to tourism in recent times as a means to analyze the political economy and develop new, special strategies for landscape conservation. For instance, Roth (2008) argues for the reconceptualization of spatial conflict among parks and people, noting the production of space should be viewed not as a process whereby state (abstract) space erases or destroys local (complex) space, but as a moment of spatial reorganization resulting from the continual process of state and local spatial production. Hansen (2013) noted that in Thailand spatial conflict often emerges through tensions between the imposed conservation objectives of World Heritage Sites and the subjective space of users and inhabitants. Yrigoy (2014) found that the “spatial fix” of capital could not be explained without including the state and local agencies in tourism. Thus, institutional mechanisms need to be created to encourage active state and community participation in tourism planning and governance (Hansen, 2013; Roth, 2008; Ye et al., 2014; Yrigoy, 2014).

Although there is no universally agreed school of thought institutions are often considered as the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction (North, 1981, 1990). Broadly, a plethora of literature documents a strong connection between economic institutions and economic performance in different countries (Knack and Keefer, 1995; Mauro, 1995). With growing recognition of the need for theory that can account for institutional change, there has been a subsequent increase in tourism literature in relation to institutional research (Bramwell, 2006; Bramwell and Cox, 2009; Bramwell and Lane, 2014; Bramwell and Meyer, 2007), specifically tourism transformation (McLennan et al., 2012, 2013, 2014) and governance (Hall, 2011; Hultman and Hall, 2011). Within these two interconnected bodies of knowledge it has been argued that institutional change is a critical factor with the capacity to drive tourism development (Dredge and Jenkins, 2011).

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