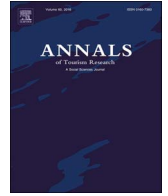


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Self-orientalism, joke-work and host-tourist relation

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ABSTRACT

Literatures in tourism research have pointed out the host-tourist relationship is co-constituted by tourists and local hosts. It is necessary to attend closely to local people's tactics and strategies to harness and re-shape effects of tourist encounters. This article is particularly interested in the subtle, covert forms of resistance that nonetheless generate circuits and networks of alternative meanings. In particular, it focuses on contestations over the notion of authenticity. With a study of cultural tourism in Lugu Lake, China, this article contributes to debates over host-tourist relations and contested authenticity by providing a nuanced ethnographic account of day-to-day interactions, engagement and power negotiations between Mosuo and tourists. The study highlights self-orientalism and joke-work as two primary forms of mediated resistance.

Introduction

China's agenda of modernisation has gained full momentum in the aftermath of 1979. Nonetheless, the inherently uneven geography of development leaves sufficient space for the tension between tradition and modernity to unfold (Chio, 2011). In China, the economically developed coastal regions are predominantly inhabited by the ethnic majority Han, while less developed southwest and northwest frontiers are home to myriad ethnic minorities. While the political centre has attempted to assimilate ethnic frontiers into progress and development, uneven development has nonetheless persisted. More recently, the tension between modernity and tradition have been manifestly played out, when cultural difference is aestheticised for the gaze of tourists. Due to tourism development, a small number of ethnic minority settlements have been incorporated into cycles of capital accumulation and modern development, while development discourses have reinforced dominant discourses of ethnic difference and rural backwardness (Chio, 2014, p. 40).

A paradox in cultural/ethnic tourism is that, while local people exploit tourism for modern economic rationality, tourists from developed places pursue pristine cultures and primitiveness (MacCannell, 1992). This ironic inversion of the primitive/modern dualism is fundamental to the unfolding of host-tourist relations. As Sutton (1967) points out, in mass tourism, both hosts and tourists recognise that encounters between them are temporary and transitory, and this gives both sides' the motives to exploit the other's distinctive attributes and qualities. Viewing ethnic others as a source of difference and exotic pleasure, tourists tend to reinforce their own sense of superiority and cultural authority (Van der Duim, Peters, & Wearing, 2005). To local people, tourists' consumption of exotic otherness may feel rather predatory and insensitive to fine-grained textures of local customs and practices. However, indigenous people and cultures are far from passive. As Wood (1980, p.566) has reminded, "we must become more sensitive to the cultural strategies people develop to limit, channel and incorporate the effects" of tourist encounters. Boissevain (1996), for example, points out that, because local people monopolise local knowledge and tourism service, they may "cheat" and "exploit" tourists to reverse unequal relations.

Dogan (1989) once attempted to theorise four approaches with which local people respond to tourist gaze: adoption, boundary

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maintenance, retreatism and resistance. *Adoption* happens when the cultural system of the host community is close to that of tourists. Local people are willing to adopt cultural practices from outside in so far as dissonances between indigenous and external cultures are within an acceptable limit. When *boundary maintenance* is the norm, local people see no need to challenge the cultural disruption brought about by tourism. But they also carefully police and maintain the boundary with tourists: either do they refrain from engaging closely with tourists, or deliberately highlight cultural differences from the latter, to preserve the wholeness of indigenous cultures (Buck, 1978; Sweet, 1989; Yamashita, 2003). *Retreatism* is an extreme expression of boundary maintenance. It is adopted when tourism becomes a cause of significant cultural anxiety for local people, who begin to minimise contact with tourists and focus on the restoration of indigenous traditions. Finally, *resistance* to tourism derives from a profound sense of relative deprivation and disempowerment, as local people come to recognise inequalities and power asymmetries inherent to tourism. As a result, they tend to deploy proactive and concerted actions to express and unleash their depression and even resentment. This study engages primarily with resistance, while not losing sight of other means for offsetting the invasive effects of tourism.

In ethnic communities, resistant actions are sometimes expressed as organised social movements (e.g. Westerhausen & Macbeth, 2003). In other occasions, protest and agitation are in the form of “open resistance” at the level of everyday life. For example, local people may frustrate the tourism industry by refusing to be the objects of tourist gaze, or, alternatively, set limits on tourists’ behaviours (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Joseph & Kavoori, 2001; Maoz, 2006). But resistance may also be conducted in subtle, covert ways, challenging tourists’ cultural authority while not sabotaging the (ostensible) rapport between hosts and tourists. As Kong (1993, p.343) once pointed out, “resistance may be overt and material, but it could also be latent and symbolic”. In tourism research, tactics of resistance of this nature has been expounded through phrases such as “veiled resistance” (Maoz, 2006) and “covert resistance” (Boissevain, 1996).

Drawing from Scott’s (1985) influential thesis, this article understands everyday resistance as informal, covert and concerned with the immediate benefits of actions, rather than systematic and radical change to tourism as an institution of unequal power. Covert resistance is ambivalent and non-radical, because local people “strive to adhere to their own cultural norms of representation and concepts of the self” to redeem their commodified persona (Bunten, 2008, p. 389), but at the same time depend on the economic wealth generated by tourism (Cheong & Miller, 2000). Despite this ambivalence, non-conspicuous episodes of everyday resistance create circuits and networks of alternative meanings, and embody different symbolic and social rhythms from dominant rhythms of the tourism and hospitality industries (Routledge & Simons, 1995). Even when defiance is exercised in purely rhetorical ways, it constitutes a form of “mediated resistance”, which “transform an ambivalent and disempowered relationship into one that is culturally acceptable to the host community” (Joseph & Kavoori, 2001, p. 999).

This article contributes to the literature on host-tourist relationships, especially the ways in which local people shape power relations in tourism, by providing a nuanced ethnographic account of the day-to-day interactions and engagement between local people and tourists in an ethnic minority community in Southwest China. It builds on theoretical points reviewed above but aims to operationalise these ideas by suggesting an analytical framework that addresses systematically: (1) the ways that local people understand and interpret the cultural privilege and authority of tourists; (2) everyday social and interactive milieus in which relations of unequal power are felt, negotiated and resisted; (3) the specific approaches and tactics that local people deploy to conduct resistance in informal, covert ways; and (4) alternative meanings and power relations that the acts of resistance may effectuate.

The case study draws from cultural tourism in Lugu Lake, located in the borderland between Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces, Southwest China. Roughly 60% of the total area of Lugu Lake is under the jurisdiction of Yongning Township, Ninglang Yi Autonomous County, Lijiang Municipality, Yunnan Province, while the rest is administrated by Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. The region consists of a number of rural settlements inhabited by ethnic minorities, foremost the Mosuo. Since the 1980s, the pristine natural landscapes, the alleged “matriarchal” social organisation of Mosuo, and their distinct marriage practice (*ti-se-se*, literally “walking marriage”) have contributed to the making of a popular tourism destination. Mass media, tourism agents and local communities have worked in tune with each other to transform the locality into a cultural “exhibition” (Mitchell, 1988). Now that tourism is the primary source of income for Mosuo, local communities have become adept in staging cultural performances to satiate tourists’ expectations.

In Lugu Lake, while authenticity displays and Orientalist discourses are adopted in tourism marketing and the selling of tourist experiences, they also veil two important facts: (1) tourists often confound alternative systems of values and orders with the *absence* of values and orders, leading to a fantasy of unconstrained sexual freedom in a land of otherness, which is nonetheless at odds with lived realities of local people; (2) indigenous communities do not remain stagnant, but *co-evolve* with tourism, and are more receptive to modernity, progress and development than tourists would like to see. Discourses portraying Lugu Lake as an “Arcadia of sex” embracing libertine sexual behaviours contradicts sexual ethics and moral codes by which local people abide. Mosuo are not comfortable with tourists conceiving of authenticity as timeless and unchanging, based on the dichotomies of civilisation/primitiveness, development/backwardness. As a result, local Mosuo often deliberately exaggerate rhetorics and displays of authenticity, and make fun of tourists who accept *tout court* pre-programmed authenticity performances. In doing so, Mosuo justify their claim that, in contrast to self-claimed authority to know and appreciate otherness, tourists are in reality biased, ignorant, easily deceived, and, above all, unable to grasp realities on the ground. Hence, staged authenticity puts into question the symbolic authority of tourists, and re-affirms local people’s agency in the production and consumption of authenticity.

This article also sheds light on cultural transformations in reform-era China in general, and cultural tourism in particular. On the one hand, given that ethnic identities in China were largely imposed by the state through the Ethnic Identification project starting in the 1950s and concluded in the 1980s (Harrell, 1995), this study supplies a vivid account of how cultural tourism in contemporary China draws on state invention of fixed notions of ethnicity, built on contestable ethnological evidence, discourses and signifiers. On the other hand, this article also suggests that the advent of modern development processes into China’s southwest ethnic frontiers

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