

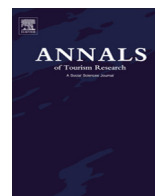


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# Impersonation in ethnic tourism – The presentation of culture by other ethnic groups

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### ABSTRACT

Adopting Goffman's (1959) theories about presentation in daily life, this paper discusses the use of the culture of marginalised peoples whose very marginality forms the focus and subject of a tourist gaze and tourism development. This paper (a) examines to what extent Goffman's theory (1959) regarding presentation of self in daily life can be applied in discussing commercial cultural performance, and (b) explores the operational mechanism of impersonation in multi-ethnic communities. The discussion is based in an ethnic community, Xinjiang, China where the first author resided for a year for fieldwork. An interdisciplinary approach is adopted in this study. Sociological theory, anthropological research method and management practice are all involved and the implications for both theory and practice are discussed.

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### Introduction

It is not uncommon that traditional ethnic culture is used and marketed by governments and the tourism industry as a resource for attracting tourists and investments (Yang, 2007). For example, Tourism New Zealand features Maori culture as something specific to New Zealand while the Australian Northern Territory identifies Aboriginal culture as one of its tourist resources at Uluru. Such marketing

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promises the tourist an opportunity to experience something unique to a given place not available elsewhere. Equally the phenomenon that some ethnicities utilise the attractiveness of another ethnic culture and impersonate membership of another cultural group for their own benefits is not unknown. Examples are cited in China, the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Fiji (e.g. Cong, 1994; Dyer, Aberdeen, & Schuler, 2003; Yang, 2012). Indeed, Maori, Islanders and Murrisees employees in Australia's Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park have been found to impersonate Djabugay people to provide a Djabugay cultural performance (Dyer et al., 2003). In such circumstances, it is these external actors who represent (and may misrepresent) the indigenous culture.

Consequently the modes of commodification associated with cultural tourism may vary from (a) one where an ethnic minority controls but commodifies a product to meet the needs of tourist schedules, to (b) one where a majority group orders representations of a minority culture with little reference to the minority, and to (c) the case described here, where there is impersonation of others by other minorities. This paper therefore examines impersonation in cultural performance.

The mode of analysis is derived from Goffman's (1959) work where he suggests that people use impression management to sustain a performance that fits the requirements of a particular situation. MacCannell (1973, 1976) adopted Goffman's work for analysing touristic performances and in particular identified the importance of what Goffman (1959) termed the front and back stages. In this paper note has also been taken of Guerin's (2004, p. 65) work where he argues 'For the populations that social anthropologists typically deal with, . . . descent groups are the most important social networks and sometimes constitute the only ones of interest'. As described in section three the paper deals with a tight knit low population community bound by blood ties and culture, but living in proximity to others drawn from a different ethnic group and subject to a summer influx from yet a third ethnic group. Patterns of reciprocity are found across the groups (Guerin, 2004) but they inhabit the different spaces of family ties (and ethnicity), proximity and competition (across ethnic groups) and commercial interests (seasonal tourism patterns posing demands and opportunities). Goffman's analysis of performance thereby remains a key concept as in this case study, where non-Tuva impersonate Tuva for the economic gain of both and other parties.

That the issues represented by these arrangements are important is due to the way in which group and personal identities are entwined with the expression of any given culture through conventions and aesthetic consideration. These expressions of culture provide meanings that differentiate one group from another, and provide intra-group status. In addition to such psychological-social attributes, the artistic performances of a cultural group may well have economic implications in tourism, when tourists pay to see something different, and where cultural performance may be used for entertainment or challenge through representing another means of seeing the world. While the artificiality of packaging performances into schedules to fit the time constrained schedules of the performance has often been criticised (Pettersson & Viken, 2007), equally the demarcation of the 'touristic' from other social functions has also been viewed as a social mechanism by which a community differentiates the entertainment from other forms of ritual used for religious or community purposes (Ryan & Aicken, 2005). The impersonation of another's culture, especially for economic gain, at the very least, deprives a group from an income that might be theirs, and equally can threaten or confuse a society to a point where its own traditions are emasculated or undermined (Xie, 2011).

This paper seeks to discuss these issues by reference to field work undertaken in Kanas Scenic Area of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China. This area of China is increasingly attracting domestic tourists drawn from the major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Being of Han ethnicity and being bound to urban environments, the spaces of Kanas with a different culture attracts such tourists and is indicative of how China is seeking to create product and employment.

The field work undertaken here has, it is suggested, importance because it not only provides empirical evidence of cultural selection in what is presented to tourists, but shows that the processes of commodification can also obtain compliance by those who are impersonated when such compliance gains benefit for the impersonated. The benefits are shown to be not only monetary but also cultural as the impersonated are able to retain core traditional practices. Commodification of culture is thus shown to be complex, and equally the marginalised are not wholly powerless as often imagined.

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