TOURISM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

HERITAGES, IDENTITIES AND DEVELOPMENT

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11.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF TOURISM WORLDMAKING: A CASE OF SHANGRI-LA COUNTY, SOUTHWEST CHINA

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Introduction

Within the tourism industry and academia environmental issues are discussed intensively and extensively, due to tourism's dependency on the resource and quality of 'nature' (Holden 2003). To avoid an overly simplistic and instrumental view of the relationship between tourism and 'nature', we need to ask what the word 'nature' means (Soper 1995). Nature has been regarded as a more complex concept than it appears to be in our daily life (Luke 1997, Williams 1988) and becomes even more complex when people use the word in different contexts. Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary study about the literature of environment, criticizes environmentalism and its various approaches to understanding and coping with the so-called 'environmental crises' (Garrard 2004, Glotfelty and Fromm 1996).

One particular challenge of ecocriticism is how to confront, in a context of globalization, the accusation that 'environmentalism is neocolonialism' (Shiva, 1989), in particular that 'the environmentalist 'advocacy of an ethics of place' has often resulted in hostility toward displaced human populations' (Wright 2010). A recent shift in the studies of ecocriticism is to recognize that, besides ecocriticism conducted by Anglo-European trained scholars, ecocriticism from other scholarly traditions may have its own cultural ramifications, for example, 'Chinese ecocriticism seems to be developing more

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independently and growing rapidly in several institutions' (Garrard 2010). A blog entry 'Unreasonable development could result in people's wearing animal fur in Yunnan' (hereinafter Unreasonable Development) from a leader of an environmental non-governmental organization (e-NGO) in China unravels the issues around 'nature' and 'people' from the perspective of that organisation:

> There was a provincial officer told a Western media that, in promoting the notion of 'developing Yunnan province with ecological awareness', us grass-roots environmental NGOs expect people in rural Yunnan to remain their poverty; and that we hope to keep their 'primitive lifestyle (i.e. living on the trees, wearing animal furs)' to feed eco-tourists' brutal exoticism… (to this accusation) I would say this officer knows little about Chinese grass-roots environmentalists. In China, the groups who first sense the environmental issues are...literati and intellectuals who are sensitive and emotional; many of them are women. …First they saw injustice in human rights, resource distribution, education rights and discourse power. Then they saw the people who suffer most from such injustice also often entangled with the consequences of environmental deterioration… Therefore these 'literati environmentalists' always put human rights and discourse power issues as key points on their agenda of solving environmental issues. (Feng 2008 my translation)

It is pertinent here to note that the idea emanating from Unreasonable Development (Feng 2008) first challenges the fundamental perception of the relationship between people and nature, and states that they are one inseparable being. It may not necessarily demonstrate the 'Chinese ecocriticism' Garrard (2010) identifies, but certainly views environmental problems from a more political perspective. This challenge, therefore, shifts our attention away from the dualistic debates between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism; debates which are traditional in environmentalism and enlightenment thinking, to an emerging interaction between the concerns for people and the environment they rely on. This echoes the ongoing debates of the nature/culture division in both social and natural science research, especially in geography and anthropology fields (Braun and Castree 1998, Castree 2005, Franklin 2003, Gerber 1997, Alan et al. 2003).

In Unreasonable Development (Feng 2008), tourism is presented as a controversial industry, however not understood to be a context. It brings us to wonder whether the traditionally used term 'tourism impact' is again a simplistic and dualistic convention in that it describes the model of changes brought to certain people by certain

other people through tourism; for example both the provincial officer and Feng the environmentalist leader have the impression that ecotourism is a vehicle for tourists to purchase natural/exotic images and experiences of primitive peoples and places. In order to look into the more complex relationships between environmental discourse and tourism development in this paper, I adopt the notion of 'worldmaking' to understand tourism's role and function as 'an interpretable and malleable carrier/creator/confirmer of being and becoming' (Hollinshead et al. 2009), that often results in a dominant vision over others. How such a dominant vision happens in tourism 'worldmaking' has been discussed in critical postcolonial studies that focused on unbalanced power relations between East and West. In this paper, I argue that through tourism 'worldmaking' there is always a dominant vision in the binaries of nature/culture, host/guest, East/West and North/South, and we need to understand how such dominant 'worldmaking' is normalized from a political ecology perspective (Huggan and Tiffin 2009, Morton 2007, Roos and Hunt 2010).

Tourism development as Worldmaking

The term 'worldmaking' was first used in the realm of art and aesthetics (Nelson Goodman 1978). Goodman's idea of 'worldmaking', that artists 'work' and 'become' creatively and intentively through experiences, is moulded by Hollinshead to be 'visionary imperatives and muscular fabricative activities of tourism' (2009: 431). Hollinshead (2009) points out that, similarly with art, those who represent reality or who make judgments in tourism are not acting alone. Rather, they are embedded in complex re-presenting reality in symbolic ways. The representation of reality hence is different from the mimetic 'copying of reality'; it functions as a force to (re) manufacture a powerful medium – tourism – to revalue things. Examples are observable, as cultural frameworks are selected and formulated through tourism, and present a strategy for destination marketing and branding, which will further enforce place-making and identity-making. During such practices, those who work within and alongside tourism act on their own positions, exchanging their influences to essentialize/ naturalize/normalize imperatives that revalue the meaning and beings of people and their place. A particular vision of the world is made more favorable than other visions, and 'becomes entrenched/embedded/hegemonic over other actual or potential interpretations or perspectives…' (Hollinshead 2009: 434).

With the idea of 'worldmaking' it is hoped that tourism researchers can avoid the grand clichés current in Tourism Studies and better contribute to such studies (Hollinshead 2007). There have been many tourism researchers trying to elaborate on the impacts/consequences that tourism practices induce, clouded however by the dualistic binaries such as authentic/fake, traditional/modern, developed/developing and north/south. Such binaries and categories have 'played a vital role in bringing about the dominant vision of the world, a vision according to which we act' (Gerber 1997) and which indicates to us as tourism researchers that we are the same as everybody else who is involved in tourism activities; that we are not only embedded within a dominant dualistic vision of the world, but remain also (at least mostly) unconscious of this dualism, due to the naturalization/normalization of this vision.

We are reminded by the academic literature that such naturalization/normalization is an expression of power about which, within Tourism Studies, we have articulated little (Jamal and Hollinshead 2001, Jamal and Kim 2005, Storey 2008, Tribe 2009, Tribe 2010). Instead of making a neat and tidy system or model of the world, the notion of 'worldmaking' aims to shed light on the hidden power tourism plays in the discursive construction of well-planned and collaborative imperatives. Additionally, some worldmaking acts are done possibly without awareness of authority or in a 'passive projection' (Hollinshead 2009: 431), because we are always 'aesthetically conditioned and politically pre-imbued' (ibid: 432).

It is this 'passive projection' that is drawing increasing researcher attention to their own positions in 'worldmaking', noticeably in a postcolonial perspective. Tucker (2009), in recognizing her own discomfort in an encounter with tourists and the toured, reflects on the colonizing tendencies of tourism researchers in a 'worldmaking' process and sheds light on the postcolonial potentialities within tourism activities. With its contribution to the discourse around 'Otherness', postcolonial studies has supplied a context of examining worldmaking in that tourism destinations often are nationally and internationally influenced by the dominant Western ways of knowing and being, resulting in the 'othered' groups and communities who 'have been under-suspectingly but ethnocentrically mis-labelled' (Hollinshead 2007: 182). To challenge such 'worldmaking', inquiry is supposed to critique the role of tourism in leading the 'revaluation of local places, cultures and cosmologies' (Hollinshead 2007: 166).

However, while maintaining close attention on the changing cultures happening in tourism 'worldmaking' (e.g. Journal of Tourism

and Cultural Change), we have been limited by the binaries of East/West and nature/culture. It is argued that tourism as postcolonialism (after Tucker and Akama 2009) should now begin the project of opening critical spaces for new narratives of identity and belonging (Keen and Tucker 2012). The dominant 'worldmaking' made through tourism development offers a context where dominant assumptions about society and nature and our relations to nature are to be articulated from a political ecology perspective.

Political ecology of tourism 'worldmaking'

The culture/nature division currently is often situated within a 'sustainable development' discourse, where 'nature' can be managed scientifically and human as an active agent ought to do good for a better 'common future', for example to reconcile economic growth and environmental preservation (Escobar 1996). Political ecology is a worldview which seeks to understand the complex relationship between society and 'nature', embedded in the problematic conception of 'sustainable development' as a 'reworking of the relationship between society and nature' (Escobar 1996). It is widely understood that political ecology adheres to a constructivist philosophy that 'nature' itself and the degradation happening in 'nature' are socially constructed. Here I follow Escobar's (1996) argument that while 'nature' is made into 'ecological capital' in the current sustainable development discourse, it must be seen as a 'material-semiotic' actor that emerges from a 'discursive processes involving complex apparatuses of science, capital and culture' (Escobar 1996) because how nature, bodies and organisms are produced is always mediated by scientific and cultural narratives. Therefore, looking back to the question of what does the word 'nature' mean and how do people use the word in their own meanings, we can see that while it is almost certain that people have different answers, it is indeed a question of 'who speaks and for whom' (Huggan 2007), so whose answer is dominant over the others.

Plumwood pointed out that our knowledge, and the way we obtain such knowledge, 'harbor hegemonic concepts of agency in the land and natural systems' (Plumwood 2006) in that our anthropocentric prioritization of our own species' interests over the silenced others, to make the others available for exploitation, is still largely regarded as being 'only natural' (Huggan and Tiffin 2009: 5). The key issue here is, whether advocacy for one oppressed group could unintentionally result in further marginalizing another

oppressed group; whether the 'passive projection' aspect of the dominant 'worldmaking' is enacted no matter how we try to prevent it. These issues are identified in political ecology studies, operating particularly to challenge the naturalized binary thinking and so to challenge also the dominant vision of 'worldmaking' in an increasingly mobilized and globalized world.

While tourism researchers have endeavored to challenge the representation functions in social/environmental inequalities that occur alongside tourism's worldwide expansion, they have made their focus either mainly material or mainly textual (for example the research on 'tourism's negative impacts on environment' or 'staged authenticity'). Political ecology takes an alternative approach from any apolitical way of viewing environmental issues; that environmental problems cannot be solved 'without addressing issues of wealth and poverty, overconsumption, underdevelopment, and the notion of resource scarcity' (Heise 2010). With an emphasis on political processes of environmental changes, tourism as a potential medium of imperialism (colonialism and neocolonialism) should be challenged with regard to 'who constructs it in league with whom' (Hollinshead 2009) in the process of authenticating and authoritizing one vision of the world/truth over others. For instance, Jamal and Everett (2007) critique that in nature-based tourism, nature can be studied as a neutral, objective concept, but only as an ideological marker that is deeply influenced by geopolitical and cultural factors, social constructions and historical meanings (Jamal and Everett 2007).

The point here is that we need to listen to and understand people from cross-cultural settings, about how their perceptions of 'nature' may relate with their position in their inhabitation (not necessarily a remote and wild place) and their understanding of the universe; the cosmologies. These understandings are highly diverse and fluid, perhaps at times perceived to be spiritual and religious. It needs to be clear here that such assumptions and beliefs about 'nature' are different from one's judgment and evaluation towards 'the environmental crisis', but broadly reflect one's ontological and epistemological position.

Thus, both theoretical and empirical studies are urgently needed. It is critical to enquire how tourism has valued and revalued the meaning of living and ways of living, especially in the areas where natural and cultural diversity are marked dualistically as two bodies of entities, and then promoted/produced separately as tourism attractions by authorities and sovereignties without taking other agents' perceptions of such diversity into account. Responding to the

criticism that critical tourism studies has failed to understand tourism's relationship with the growing inequalities produced by neo-liberal capitalism and globalization (Bianchi 2009), political ecology sheds light on the need to adjust the entangled power relations' effects on the imaginative texts in tourism 'worldmaking' and offers a broader and integrative perspective for understanding the relationships between people, place and nature.

Shangri-La – a political ecology perspective

Carrigan (2010) suggests that the role of 'stories/narratives' is important in current Tourism Studies to open dialogues between different agents; critical, creative and innovative methodologies for conducting research are urged and the interpretation of the hegemonic force of their symbolic activities needs longitudinal investigation (Hollinshead 2009). It is pointed out that, the one-off site visit and survey are simply not sufficient to comment on 'these acute interpretative and political matters of agency, authority, appropriation and aspiration' (Hollinshead 2009: 543). In my research, such a suggestion is crucial to understanding people's cosmological positions and to bring them into the changing social, cultural, political and physical environment. Shangri-La is the ideal place to illustrate the issues discussed above and also is suitable to conduct long-term ethnographic study.

Located in the northwest part of Yunnan province, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is one of the least economically developed areas in China and one of the richest areas in biodiversity and topography on earth. Since the late 1990s, the Diqing Prefecture Government has included natural resource in its economic strategy through developing four 'pillar industries', namely mining, hydropower, biological products and tourism (Diqing Development and Reform Committee, 2008). It is believed that tourism should be the priority because 'tourism revenue can potentially be kept entirely within the prefecture' (Zinda in press). However, the wish of the Diqing Prefecture Government to convert scenic and cultural resources into tourism attractions happens in a more complicated context.

For decades, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Shangri-La County had relied on logging for a living. After the 1998 Yangtze River flood the logging was banned by the central government. This ban resulted in the displacement of logging community in Eastern Tibet and parts of Yunnan, Sichuan province.

At the end of 1998 a collaborative conservation and development project between the Yunnan provincial government and a United States based environmental NGO, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) was initiated; 'The Yunnan Great Rivers Project' (Ou 2004). The rapid progress TNC and Yunnan province government made catalyzed a remarkable coalition of local residents, religious figures, local governments, academic institutions and conservation organizations (Litzinger, 2004). In the Conservation and Development Action Plan for Northwest Yunnan the project proposed to produce several national parks, including Pudacuo National Park in Shangri-La (JPO (Joint Project Office) 2001). The Diqing prefecture government's resolution for converting cultural and natural resources into tourism attraction meshed with TNC's wish to promote well planned and managed national parks (Zinda in press). The local actors viewed TNC and its project as a useful tool to bring people together to pursue their own aspiration their land and environment. However, in 2010, this coalition dissolved. TNC removed its offices in Shangri-La County and also Kunming City, the capital of Yunnan Province.

What happened in this process is well recorded (Wang et al. 2012, 2012, Zinda in press). The collaborative and market-oriented conservation model in Shangri-La County or Diqing Prefecture proved to involve many difficulties. It is portrayed that TNC's efforts in protecting and managing both nature and culture failed because 'TNC was not equipped to understand local politics and resident concerns well' (Zinda in press: 3), thus leading to the chaos of 'from ecotourism to mass tourism'. Kolås (2008) mentions that mass tourism consumption is an effect of the Chinese central government's 'Open Up the West' agenda. Litzinger (2004) pinpoints that the examination should be situated in a context of a sustainable development discourse of a competing 'mobilization of nature', rather than a simple relation to the operation of Open Up the West. Litzinger (2004) also argues that how landscapes should be named, protected and developed is at the centre of cultural and environmental politics. Indeed, from a political ecology account, Shangri-La and its tourism development, especially the establishment of Pudacuo national park manifests power distribution among decision-making involving nature's 'ecological capital' and also the narrative of nature's role in the process of development.

While TNC, local government and provincial government were busy with battling for who has the right agency to do the 'good' thing for whom, people who live on this land found their own ways to make their tough life bearable. Besides tourism, the other three

industries in 'four pillar industries' occurred with more visible conflicts. Mining, hydropower, and biological products were studied within a political ecology framework. For example, Yang et al (2008) report that northwest Yunnan, as a place to grow wild mushrooms, has provided the villages opportunities for a non-timber livelihood. The harvest and import of wild mushrooms in general, and in particular a prized species Matsutake (pine mushroom in Japanese), generates good income, with the wholesale price in Japan USD 27 to USD 560 per kg. They also note that now in Shangri-La County, up to 50% – 80% of household income is generated by the harvest and sale of matsutake (Yang et al. 2008). A complex commodity chain between Shangri-La County and the surrounding villages' harvesters and Japanese consumers was established and conflicts arose from access to and use of the forest, managing forests as well as responding to environmental degradation (He 2010, Yeh 2000).

Compared with the industries in which 'nature' is materialized into tangible ecological capital (e.g. water, minerals, wild mushrooms), ecotourism is suggested to be a more 'sustainable' way to advance the development of Shangri-La County (Xu and Wilkes 2004, Guihua Yang et al. 2000). Engaging with political ecology thinking, an environmental discourse that involves the politics of making changes to 'nature', politics of people's ideas of 'nature', and politics of narratives or actions towards 'nature', emerges. Through tourism development different individuals are representing, and also represented by, different ideologies, epistemologies and cosmologies. How the environmental discourse in tourism development is shown in individuals' perceptions, recognition and reaction of the role of 'nature' is at the centre of understanding the political ecology of Shangri-La.

Environmental discourse and tourism development in Shangri-La

It is recognized that the sustainable development discourse, within which tourism in Shangri-La was promoted, occurs in a wider environmental discourse; to be more precise, within an evolution of environmentalism in post-Maoist China (Yue 2010). The earlier awakening of environmentalism in China was led by creative writers in the 1980s, strongly influenced by the traditional Chinese values of human-nature harmony, especially from Taoist and Buddhist views on nature. These writers urged the rebuilding of the connection with 'traditional Chinese culture' of the period before cultural revolution, or pre-Maoist China. The American conservationist ideals were

translated into Chinese and became influential with intellectuals. The more nationwide environmental awareness didn't arise until the mid 1990s, when international calls here made for awareness of China's rapid shift from being a net grain exporter to being the world's second largest grain importer. It was feared that China would cause competition and even war over food and other resources. This environmental awareness happened around the same time as 1998 Yangtze River flood, which caused the aforementioned logging ban and promotion of tourism development (Yue 2010). This environmental realisation sparked the second-wave of the environmentalist movement in China, concerning whether China can 'afford to pursue the Western model of economic development and mass consumption.' (Yue 2010: 56).

There are several competing environmental discourses: a so-called traditional Chinese (Han) environmental narrative, a global/western conservationist environmental discourse, a detested utilitarian form of engagement with nature, and an unclear transferring of 'indigenous' environmental knowledge. The tourism development in Shangri-La County on the surface is a consequence of 'ecological economic exchange' between the downstream China and East Tibetan regions since the environmental crisis in Tibetan regions must be solved to save China's water supply in the Yangtze River. Thus, Tibetan regions are reconfigured through tourism. From a political ecological point of view, tourism development is a consequence of these competing environmental discourse; a co-production of human and 'nature' and therefore an ongoing process of making and remaking people's perceptions towards 'nature'. The location of 'real Shangri-La' is selected; the image appointed of Shangri-La County being 'no conflict, no chaos, only economic prosperity, national unity and social stability'; and the identity of being a 'different Tibet' is mandated. A dominant vision is installed through tourism development, and rapidly helps 'render some ideas sayable and other notions mute' (Hollinshead 2009: 537). Such a process is discussed also in a context of Yunnan province and China (Hollinshead and Hou 2012, Hou 2012, Summers 2010).

Not far away from Shangri-La County, in the Mount Everest National Park and Buffer Zone in Nepal, some Sherpa ecological knowledge and understanding were noticed to have shifted from spiritual and agro-pastoralist socioeconomic values to a more tourism-centred economic logic (Spoon 2011). The blurring of ideas of religious belief or 'ecotouristic' belief of 'nature' is reflected by scholars who have lived in Shangri-La County for decades; Tibetan

biologists Pan and Yang believe ecotourism and religious tourism are exchangeable because Tibetan Buddhism believes in an 'eco-friendly' ecology (Pan and Yang 2000). Donaghe's (2012) recent research in Shangri-la County offers information of some ongoing process of influence from global 'sustainable ecotourism' knowledge. Few major newly-established institutions/organizations in Shangri-La are providing education and training and possible pro-poor projects are being investigated, through the Eastern Tibet Training Institute, The Poverty Alleviation Fund, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation and Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities. All of these agencies are involved with Ecotourism, each of them having some partnership with another. However, they have less collaborations with local government. Interestingly, Donaghe (2012) claims that in his fieldwork the participants were confused in answering what does 'ecotourism' or what is 'eco' in general mean; he questions that if the definition is not consistent, how is it possible to develop a sustainable 'ecotourism'.

The action of introducing new conservation discourses, supporting a romanticized version of the physical environment and altering indigenous epistemologies, is of concern (Coggins and Hutchinson 2006). This caution makes me recall a scene which I witnessed when first I went to Shangri-La. According to my notes at that time, one night, after a day-tour, we were talking about impressions of the national park. Everyone had something to say. The lack of resource and inefficient delivering of information were pointed out; another colleague noticed that there was too little cultural heritage information. My primary concern was how people understood the concept of 'national park' and whether they would adopt it the way the planners wished. For me, there was no way to argue or decide how to do and educate conservation before we know how the idea of 'conservation' is structured within people's mind. Hakkenberg (2008) explains that the epistemologies of the sacred sites in Tibetan areas of northwest Yunnan are far from monolithic; instead, a localized discourse on biological and cultural diversity coexist with one and another. There is, however, a risk of over-simplifications in expecting indigenous knowledge as necessarily possessing solutions where global science has failed. Empirical studies are needed to see how the role of 'nature' intersects the binary of indigenous and global.

Conclusion

Huggan and Tiffin (2009) ask whether there is any way of 'narrowing the ecological gap between coloniser and colonised' and thus freeing them from their 'seemingly incommensurable worlds'? (p.2) Political ecology studies appeal through an awareness that social justice cannot be separated from environmental justice. In this paper, I have elaborated the point that the political ecology approach to view environmental issues in tourism development may contribute to a better understanding of tourism's role and function in 'worldmaking'.

Shangri-La County in Southwest China as a tourism destination is perhaps seen by some as a set of distant natural, cultural, and ethnic resources. More likely it is seen as an overall mythical product located in a remote part of the world, waiting to be visited. From a political ecology perspective, the tourism development there is a negotiation between ecological and economic surveillance, a set of products closely intertwined with environmental discourse. China's environmentalist movement, set in a global context, shows that 'worldmaking' is not merely one type of ideology dealing with the way people view things, but involves also cosmologies, assumptions and beliefs about place, space and the universe people inhabit. I suggest that more longitudinal ethnographic studies are acutely needed in order to understand what role 'nature' plays in peoples' changing identities and thus their role in the 'worldmaking' process.

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