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An Analysis of the Dongba Arts and Culture in the Context of Tourism

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

To provide a critical analysis of the relationship between the *dongba* culture and the tourism industry

Objectives

1. To investigate the history, structure and current characteristics of tourism development in the ethnic area – Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China.
2. To assess the role of the *dongba* culture in the Naxi traditional mountain rural society, and the major influence of tourism development upon their way of life.
3. To examine the extent to which the *dongba* cultural elements, e.g. *dongba*, pictographs and handicrafts, figure as tourist assets in the tourism industry, and the process of commodification in relation to these cultural units.
4: To scrutinise the *dongba* culture in the process of developing the Naxi identity in the light of the emergence of tourism as a major factor in Lijiang.

Methodology

The key feature of this study is ethnography, using extensive and detailed descriptions obtained from fieldwork, unpacking social phenomena, e.g. people's behaviour, values and beliefs in the context of a very specific setting. The primary data was collected from a seven-month-long fieldwork, conducted between September 2007 and April 2008, during which the researcher visited 42 Naxi families and attended 12 cultural and religious occasions with permission, such as family parties, festivals, social gatherings, farming activities and one *dongba* funeral. The researcher also recorded each unexpected event and incident generated from the people interviewed, the families stayed with and the villages observed. The fieldwork was mainly based in the urban centre of Lijiang, and three

villages well-known for practicing the *dongba* culture. Apart from using participant observations, which was carried out in the field around the farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers and *dongba*, whom the researcher has stayed with, the researcher also completed 67 in-depth interviews. The total interviewees were divided into two groups according to their educational levels, occupations and the knowledge of the *dongba* culture and tourism development in Lijiang. The interview questions of the groups were constituted of some open-ended and closed questions. Three of the questions asked in both groups were the same so that the researcher could compare the responses from the two groups.

Results

Lijiang's tourism has contributed remarkably to the modification of the local urban/rural dichotomy. The expansion of tourism wealth is not entirely distributed according to the government's arrangements, but rather is greatly influenced by the very nature of the tourism industry itself. Whilst the government's main objectives focus on the need for economic regeneration of the area more generally, the primary concern of those who are seeking to maintain *dongba* culture is to reinforce and renew the dynamic communication between the Naxi and their mountain rural community. Meanwhile, both the local government and the Naxi farmers use tourism as a major force to define the content of the *dongba* culture divergently. The government sanitises the culture as an academic activity practised only in museums or institutes, ignoring the religious feature of the practice. In contrast, the farmers emphasise the very religious and ritual character of cultural practices as evidence of the authenticity of that culture. They embrace this religious practice as their most powerful ethnic distinctiveness in the context and in the face of tourism. This has had an effect on Naxi ethnic identity within the urban areas as well, leading to a revaluing and revitalising of Naxi tradition and culture. A wider Naxi ethnic group has now accepted the *dongba* culture as one of their most valuable cultural properties and an identical part of their ethnic identity.

Theoretical conclusions

Modernity and tourism

This study notices a flexible response to changes in the traditional order, loss of traditional culture or its commodification that triggered by tourism. In Lijiang, tourism is the most visible expression of modernity. The government-run economic growth generates a large number of public-funded investments, bringing an unprecedented improvement to the local socioeconomic environment. This alters the traditional order in Lijiang in terms of the connection with the outside world, the transformation in the locals' lifestyle, the relationship between each individual, and between individual and community. Nevertheless, these improvements are not purposely installed for the interest of those rural residents dwelling in the tourist affected areas but initially for the convenience of those tourists travelling around. Moreover, the provision of social benefits is still largely confined to areas immediately surrounding the urban area. The radiation of the tourist related improvements are limited in remote mountain regions, where farmers find still a very long way to go before they can be included into the benefits bestowed by tourism. In those tourism-untouched areas, the *dongba* culture survives as nothing more than a living practice but under severe economic hardship. This implies that the tourism strategy is not implemented entirely in line with the local needs per se, but according to the characteristics of tourism business in the first place and only secondly according to the political considerations of government.

Authenticity and commodification

The discourse of these two issues is concentrated on the perspectives of the local community, which displayed in three aspects. Firstly, many mountain Naxi use the concept of 'authenticity' as a method to offset the commodification of the tradition. Secondly, the local craftsmen's vision on 'authenticity' is altered according to the influence of commodification on their control of the handicraft production. Thirdly, the

understanding of what is alleged authentic *dongba* is divergent between those senior *dongba* and mountain farmers on the one side, and those young *dongba* whose 'authenticity' is detracted by the former group on the other side. By highlighting the religious characteristic as the core value of the *dongba* culture in tourism, the mountain farmers interpret the content of this discourse with their own vocabulary. Tourism is thus involved in the struggle of defining what and who is 'authentic'. The notion of 'authenticity' inspires the locals to defy the impact of the commodification of their culture. This indicates that on the one hand, the tourism industry is characterised as commodifying ethnic culture. On the other hand, the ethnic group retains a strong will to self-defend their ethnic status and cultural characteristics. The correlation between the two issues exhibits that the authenticity of the *dongba* culture resides in the differing Naxi interpretations of their culture, which should be opened for reassessment in the light of debates over a long period. The changing contexts of the *dongba* culture dwells between past and present, between present and future, between the Naxi economic and socio-cultural concerns and between the group of Naxi who regularly practised it and those who do not.

Ethnic identity

Before the advent of tourism, the Naxi differentiated themselves from other ethnic groups living nearby, i.e. Bai, Pumi, Tibetan and Yi, by highlighting their closeness to the Han culture, such as 'love for learning', 'higher educational attendance', being 'obedient' and 'cultured', in order to stand in a preferential ethnic position compared with these groups. However, this situation has changed considerably after a large number of Han tourists travel to Lijiang. The Naxi are confronted with the necessity of presenting their ethnic identity not mainly to their neighbourhood any longer but to the tourists travelling from other parts of the country. This acknowledges that the modern mass tourism is one of powerful agencies shaping the ethnicity in a changing world. In this regard, the content of the *dongba* culture provides the Naxi with a means of downplaying their similarity with the Han. The tourism industry is thus highly valued by both the urban and rural Naxi as the leading force in the resurrection of the *dongba* culture. The increase of their cultural confidence is to a certain degree in line with the progress of their economic improvement, offsetting the majority group's cultural supremacy. Last but not least, the involvement of tourism modifies the ethnic division of the Naxi group, from based on geographical features, i.e. 'urban Naxi'/ 'rural or mountain Naxi' to cultural sphere, into 'traditional Naxi' who practise the *dongba* culture regularly, and 'less or non traditional Naxi' who do not.

Practical application of the dissertation

One of the contributions of the study is that it scrutinises the remarkable economic achievements of tourism in Lijiang in reference to the local social and geographical characteristics, so that the reasons and values of this growth can be understood profoundly. Moreover, the study also draws attention to the social contribution of the tourism industry in the modification of the urban/rural dichotomy, which has not been explicitly addressed in literatures. It demonstrates that modern mass tourism is one of the powerful agencies of modernity in Chinese ethnic regions. The results of the paper will be useful in reassessing the influence of tourism development in Chinese rural areas more generally, especially in ethnic regions. In addition, the importance of domestic tourism in ethnic regions is also addressed in connection with the manner in which the Naxi ethnic construction is affected by the commodification of local cultural property. It unpacks the correlation between highly commodified packaged group-travel and the commodification of ethnic culture. Last but not least, based on the cultural hierarchical grade between Chinese majority and minority groups, the study develops a matrix from which different groups of the Naxi are positioned according to their ethnic cultural and economic situations. It upholds that by promoting the indigenous culture and optimising the economic benefit of tourism, a minority group can stand a better chance of redressing some of the adverse effects of the

state's unequal treatment in urban and rural areas with regard to socio-cultural and economic provisions. This is one of the routes for an ethnic group to escape any political restrictions imposed upon them whilst at the same time minimising adverse effects of tourism.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of chapter one

The studied ethnic group are called Naxi, living in the Lijiang area, in Yunnan Province, southwest of People's Republic of China (PRC). Some of the Naxi living in the mountain area have been practising a religious custom called '*dongba* religion', which is closely linked to their religious belief, annual and ancestral sacrifices, and agricultural life. The key player of this practice is a group of practitioners, called '*dongba*' (priest), who are also farmers, living in the same area. The thesis consists of 10 chapters, including the literature review (Chapter 2), the background information on the research setting (Chapters 3 and 4), the applied methodology (Chapter 5), discussions of the fieldwork data (Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9), and analysis and conclusion (Chapter 10).

Abstract of chapter two

There is no static background upon which to measure the impact of tourism at all times. In many developing countries, tourism development intertwines with local ethnic culture in many ways. This varies according to certain conditions, ranging from political institutions, the distribution system of the economic benefits, the local community's self-consciousness of their culture, and people's attitude towards and participation in tourism. Some destruction can become construction, on condition that it is assessed according to the interests of different people or social groups, seen from a different angle or perhaps at a different time period. To some extent, the debates of authenticity and commodification have been overwhelmingly concentrated on the perceptions of tourists, leaving the visions of the locals, e.g. craftsmen, artists and cultural practitioners who present their arts and culture to tourists, largely ignored. The 'relative' feature of the debate implies that a detailed empirical examination is paramount for observing the specific situation of a given indigenous culture. In this regard, ethnicity within the context of tourism is not only a meaningful perspective to analyse the government's ethnic policies and the ethnic groups' history, tradition and culture, but also a useful benchmark to review their understandings and attitudes towards tourism.

Abstract of chapter three

Tourism in China has been burdened with too many political, social and economic tasks to the extent that its nature and attributes have been obscured. It has been narrowly praised as a powerful economic engine to fulfil the government's various intentions. Nevertheless, these over-loaded connotations provide an interesting perspective to investigate wide-ranging social phenomena. Due to the strategic location and the large proportion of the territories in which the minorities reside, the Chinese government's ethnic policy focuses primarily on issues of national security and the integration of national identity; while the cultural policy serves as an ideological mechanism to alleviate the conflicts between the majority and minority. Ethnic groups and their cultures are positioned in a vulnerable situation in a two dimensions (culture/economy) hierarchy discourse expecting them to move towards a more 'civilised' or 'modernised' society in keeping with the majority group and along the path of 'socialist' modernisation. Tourism becomes one of the agencies for the government to fulfil the targets through generating business, sustaining consumption and investment, and the commodification of the ethnic culture. However, studies carried out in the Chinese ethnic regions show that tourism is also encouraging those groups to display their identity and demands for their own interests.

Abstract of chapter four

Before the appearance of tourism in the late of 1990s, Lijiang was one of the poorest regions in Yunnan Province, China, due to a wide range of geographical, social and historical reasons. The establishment of the

PRC did not change this situation significantly. Under the urban/rural division, people living in rural areas suffered a huge shortage in terms of basic social provisions. For those farmers, the biggest problem is not just the shortage of cash but the uncertainty of obtaining it from their agricultural work, which drives them to work in urban regions. This situation is alleviated by the development of tourism for the provision of a large number of job opportunities and the improvements in transportation and other infrastructural sectors. By quickly responding to the emerging tourism demand, the local government accurately grasped this opportunity to develop their economy. This growth has achieved a remarkable success in the past decade. With the involvement of tourism, the *dongba* culture has become popular not just in rural but also in urban regions. However, the assessment of the impact of tourism upon this ethnic religious practice and their critical interconnection needs to be unpacked through the study of the local farmers, in particular those practitioners, *dongba*.

Abstract of chapter five

As mentioned above in the section of Methodology, the methods used for this study include participant observation, unstructured interviews, case study of several villages and historical analysis based on secondary data.

Abstract of chapter six

After many years of progressive growth, tourism and its related businesses have become a leading force in Lijiang's social and cultural development. In the social context, tourism is a well-planned industry, largely run by the government from the outset. Owing to the government-run massive infrastructural expansion, more rural residents, in particular, those living in suburban areas, are included into an amended process allowing them to share in the provision of social benefits from which they had been previously excluded. In the cultural aspect, the presence of a large number of tourists coming from different places has enormously escalated the Naxi ethnic pride in their tradition, history, life and natural environment. The locals value tourism as a window that has widened their horizon of the country and the world in many respects. As far as the problems of Lijiang's tourism are concerned, two factors need to be considered. To begin with, there is no appropriate procedure to accommodate the interests or conflicts of the players participated in the tourism business. Second, as the primary purpose of developing tourism in Lijiang is to improve people's social and economic situations, so the major concern is on the distribution of tourism-related wealth.

Abstract of chapter seven

Dongba can be regarded as a group of religious workers in the Naxi community but not in a stable 'full-time' position. Their power and influence in the mountain rural communities is established on the basis of their practical knowledge from which farmers can derive benefits in their social and cultural life. The passing-on of the knowledge used to be undertaken in a traditional apprenticeship, structured by formal kinship patterns between a *dongba* master and his disciples in the pattern of father-son or uncle-nephew. This time consuming learning model entailed the transmission of religious commitment as each young apprentice had substantial opportunities to participate in every ritual in real life. However, the continuity of the practice was severely devastated due to the over 25-year-long ban from 1954 up to 1981. To cope with the shortage of the experienced *dongba* masters, a number of *dongba* schools were established in many villages in the mid-1990s. Unfortunately, since tourism onboard in Lijiang, many graduated *dongba* are quickly employed by tourist companies, setting at souvenir shops to entertain tourists' curiosity of the *dongba* culture. Under this circumstance, some of the schools have unintentionally ended up training a hybrid 'tourist-*dongba*', concentrating on the learning of skills, e.g. writing and dancing, rather than the religious understandings.

Abstract of chapter eight

The commodification of the *dongba* culture manifests in two aspects. In the first place, the government's policy of developing mass tourism shifts the production of *dongba*

cultural handicrafts from hand-made to mass-produced products. The local craftsmen are exposed to the commercial competition without enough protection for maintaining their ability to produce locally made handicrafts. The traditional family-run business loses the control of selling local made handicrafts to tourists, leaving room for the migrant businesses, which sell semi-industrialised goods at considerably cheaper prices. As a result, the handicrafts market has turned the downtown of Lijiang into a big shopping mall selling mass-produced souvenirs made in other parts of the country, albeit labelled as 'locally made'. Secondly, the 'authenticity' of those *dongba* who working in the tourism industry is challenged by either some senior dongba or many mountain farmers for their religious commitment, understanding of the tradition and abilities of handing various rituals. Nonetheless, those 'tourist-*dongba*' argue that the tourism industry has sustained them with regular payments and longer time to study the religious literatures. Their improved economic situation lures a large number of *dongba* working in the urban centre, leading to unprecedented extensive cross-regional intercommunications between *dongba* from different parts of the region, which, in return, substantially improves the unevenly developed *dongba* tradition.

Abstract of chapter nine

There is no coherent agreement between the government and the Naxi concerning the preservation of the *dongba* culture. The lesson learns from the government's cultural policy is that the most important issue centred round the recovery of the rituals in real life. Without resuming those *dongba* rituals, neither the practice nor the contents of the manuscripts can be preserved or understood appropriately. The key thing that should be dealt with is not to reduce the mobility of *dongba* but to maintain the communication between the *dongba* and their community vigorously. As a result, the improvement of the living conditions of *dongba* would be a more urgent and efficient means of implementing the government's cultural aspirations. By comparison, the Naxi living in the tourism-affected regions view the *dongba* culture as a valuable cultural bonus for the whole group. Tourism offers them a broader arena in which to express their cultural confidence. To those Naxi living in mountain regions, the *dongba* culture has a dual value. First and foremost, it is mainly believed in as a religion. This practice has more practical meaning to them than to those Naxi scholars and officials who grasp major resources to define the culture according to their interests.

Abstract of chapter ten

It is the analysis and conclusion of the whole thesis, much of which it has been mentioned in the sections of Results, Theoretical conclusions and Practical application of the dissertation.