Environmental Sustainability and Economic Development in the Chinese Tourism Industry

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ABSTRACT

One of the prominent discourses in the anthropology of tourism states that alternative tourism practices, namely ecotourism, are problematic and difficult—if not impossible—to implement. While ecotourism is attractive to wealthy, environmentally conscious international tourists, it is rarely carried out according to its theoretical foundations and ideals and this may lead to practices that are not environmentally sustainable. There is also a body of literature that focuses on alternative tourism and community development, but many of these studies also focus on the negative implications and contradictions inherent in alternative tourism methods. Fewer studies, however, discuss the political, economic, and social conditions within which tour companies work and the relationship between these conditions and tourism facilitation. This paper will analyze the practices of Hutiao Ecotourism and the Chinese political, economic, and social circumstances within which they work. I argue that Hutiao Ecotourism works within political and economic conditions that simultaneously prevent ecological sustainability and allow for economic sustainability.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hutiao Ecotourism Company advertises itself as an ecotour company and provides tours in northwest Yunnan province to a client base made up of foreign tourists, coming primarily from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Founded in 2002 with support from the Nature Conservancy, Hutiao Ecotourism is owned cooperatively by a group of families from Lashi Hai, a village outside of Lijiang, China. Their website states "The Lijiang [Hutiao] Ecotourism Company strives to empower local people in Yunnan province. . . . We employ local . . . trained guides from different villages who work closely together to support our community and build an organization that is dedicated to our environment."[1] Here, "environment" can be interpreted to mean the natural environment as well as the political, economic, and social community in which Hutiao Ecotourism is based.

The word "ecotourism" was introduced by Hetzer in 1965 with four defining characteristics: "1) minimum environmental impact, 2) minimum impact on—and maximum respect for—host cultures, 3) maximum economic benefits to the host country's grassroots, and 4) maximum recreational satisfaction to participating tourists" (Bjork 2007: 26). Since then, ecotourism as a concept and practice has gained immense popularity around the world and its definition has expanded and evolved. Ceballos-Lascurain defines ecotourism as "traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past

[1] "About Us, About Ecotourism" http://www.ecotourism.com.cn/about

and present) found in these areas" (Boo 1990: xiv), while the World Wildlife Fund defines it as "responsible traveling contributing to the protection of natural areas and the well-being of the local population" (Saeporsdottir in Bjork 2007: 27). In general, definitions include such keywords as "responsible, conservation, protection, and sustainable" (Higham 2007: 27). Ecotourism exists as an alternative to mass tourism, often being defined in terms of the ways in which it differs from mass tourism (Kontogeorgopolis et al 2012). The vagueness and vastness of definitions allow for a wide variety of groups to practice ecotourism in various forms.

Many studies have outlined the problematic nature of ecotourism and other alternatives to mass tourism (Cater 1995; Meletis and Campbell 2005; Bjork 2007; Higham and Lück 2007). Alternative tourism is an attractive idea to upper middle class and socially conscious tourists looking to "distinguish themselves from passive, nonindustrious tourists who pile in and out of tour buses" (Brooks 2000: 203-208). However, ecotourism is rarely carried out according to its theoretical foundations and ideals and this may lead to practices that are not environmentally sustainable. For example, tourists who travel by airplane to a destination leave a large carbon footprint that cancels out environmentally friendly practices once they arrive at the destination (Higham and Luck 2007: 125). Lansing and De Vries have gone so far as to argue that ecotourism may solely be "a means [for tour operators] to differentiate themselves and convey an ethically sound message to the morally conscious tourists" (2007: 76) rather than an alternative practice that actively promotes conservation or community development.

There is also a body of literature that focuses on alternative tourism and local community development initiatives, but many of these studies focus on the negative implications and contradictions inherent in alternative tourism methods. Often missing from the literature is a study of the political, economic, and social conditions within which tour companies work and the relationship between these conditions and tourism facilitation. In China, this is especially important in light of the combination of a neoliberal economy with an authoritarian government. Tilt (2010) refers to two discourses on rural industrialization and environmental sustainability in western China, which state that the need for economic development and government initiatives for development are often in conflict with environmental sustainability goals. Tilt's observations, I argue, may be applied to the case of ecotourism in northern Yunnan province.

"Sustainability" has become a buzzword in discussions of tourism, development, and their relationship. Sustainable development is broadly defined as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly 1987). The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development has defined a set of three key pillars to be "seen as the guiding principle for long term global development." These pillars are "economic development, social development and environmental protection" (Rio+20 Conference 2011). This thesis focuses on two of these three pillars: environmental protection and economic development. Environmentally sustainable tourism falls under the pillar of environmental protection and refers to preservation of natural resources

and ecosystems. Sustainable economic development refers to economic growth that is inclusive of local people and allows them to participate in economic activities on their own terms. In cases of sustainable economic development, money that is generated within a community should remain within that community.

On their website, Hutiao Ecotourism states that guests "can contribute to conservation efforts to protect the region's biodiversity and provide a sustainable alternative income source for these isolated and fascinating local communities."[2] In a study of Hutiao Ecotourism and their practices, I found that environmental sustainability was not realized through their conservation efforts, but that economic sustainability was realized through creating alternative income sources. What are the factors that create barriers to practicing environmentally sustainable tourism, and how do these same factors simultaneously allow for, or even necessitate, economically sustainable local development? In this paper, I will analyze environmental sustainability and economic development in southwestern China's tourism industry within the framework of "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey 2005: 120) and the paradoxical relationship between environmental preservation and economic development as laid out by Tilt.

To provide context, I begin with a brief economic history of modern China and a discussion of the Open Up The West campaign. The next section establishes the theoretical framework within which I will analyze my fieldwork data. I outline Tilt's two discourses on economic development and environmental sustainability. The first states

[2] "About Us, About Ecotourism" http://www.ecotourism.com.cn/about

that the need for economic development is often greater than concern about the environment. The second states that because of China's authoritarian government, there is little room for grassroots or non-governmental efforts at environmental conservation. Next, I discuss theories of post-materialism and their application to issues of environmental consciousness and sustainability initiatives.

Analysis of my ethnographic data is divided into two sections. The first focuses on ecological sustainability and the barriers Hutiao Ecotourism faces in their attempt to provide a more environmentally sustainable tourism option. The second focuses on economic sustainability and Hutiao's work to contribute to community development and empower individuals left behind by the mass tourism industry. I argue that despite political and economic conditions that inhibit ecological sustainability, Hutiao Ecotourism has situated itself in the tourism industry such that they are able to contribute to local empowerment and sustainable community development.

II. NEOLIBERALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

In order to analyze the conditions that Hutiao works within, it is important to also examine China's economic history and relatively recent transition from a communist economic system to a neoliberal one. Neoliberalism is an economic, and in many cases political and social, system characterized by minimally regulated capitalism. Neoliberal economics "reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital" (Harvey 2005: 7). In other words, government economic policy encourages capitalism and growth in the private sector.

Neoliberalism emerged first with Pinochet's coup in Chile during the early 1970s, after which Chile saw a restructuring of the economy that "privatized public assets, opened up natural resources . . . to private and unregulated exploitation, . . . and facilitated foreign direct investment and freer trade" (Harvey 2005: 8). Neoliberalism emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States and Great Britain under Reagan and Thatcher's respective leadership, relatively independently of the shift in Chile. In the United States, the emergence of neoliberalism does not seem particularly out of the ordinary: "the idea of freedom, long embedded in U.S. tradition" (Harvey 2005: 5) was simply expanded to include further economic freedom.

Neoliberalism also emerged in China in the late 1970s. Neoliberalism in China was slightly more unexpected than in the US. Since Chairman Mao Zedong's communist revolution in 1949, China's economy had been dominated by socialist principles, government regulation, and five-year plans. However, in 1976 after the death of Mao, China's economy began to see a shift toward a private sector and market economy.

With his declaration, "To get rich is glorious" (Harvey 2005: 125), China's Paramount Leader and Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, initiated China's *gaige kaifang*, or Reform and Opening Up, in 1978 as neoliberalism was emerging in the United States and Great Britain (Harvey 2005: 120). Harvey observes, "The outcome [of the *gaige kaifang*] in China has been the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control" (2005: 120). Deng's goals were to shift China's communist-era planned economy to a market economy in order to accomplish the "'four

modernizations:' in agriculture, industry, education, and science and defence" (Harvey 2005: 120). In addition to economic reforms, Deng opened China to the world market and designated certain cities as Special Economic Zones for industrial production and foreign investment.

By the mid-1980s, China was emerging as a world economic power, and has continued to see rapid economic development and a rising standard of living. However, most economic development occurred in China's Special Economic Zones and large cities on the east coast. Rural areas and western regions' development lagged behind as "the reforms also led to environmental degradation, social inequality, and eventually something that looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power" (Harvey 2005: 122). In other words, China's rapid economic development has led to an increasing *pinfu chaju*, or gap between rich and poor. China's *pinfu chaju* is exemplified in the discrepancy between urban and rural, and eastern and western regions.

In order to lessen the *pinfu chaju*, China's leaders initiated the *xibu da kaifa*, or Open Up The West campaign in 2000. The goal of the initiative was to spur economic development in China's historically underdeveloped western regions. The area referred to as "the west" includes Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Guangxi autonomous regions as well as Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces and the Chongqing municipality. In 2001, the west had a GDP per capita of 5,007 *yuan* (approximately $790) while China's overall GDP per capita was 7,543 *yuan* (approximately $1,190) (Goodman 2004: 8-9). This uneven development and wealth distribution was a result of Deng's "ladder-step" policy, a trickle-down system in which

emphasis was placed on eastern development before western development (Holbig 2004: 24). The "ladder-step" policy was based on the assumption that wealth generated in the east would gradually move to the west. Large cities and Special Economic Zones on the east coast developed rapidly while rural western regions lagged behind.

In Yunnan province, where my field site is located, the *xibu da kaifa* in Yunnan province has been manifested primarily through projects to showcase (and consequently commodify) the region's natural wonders and ethnic minority culture through tourism development, thereby creating economic growth in the region. Culture is treated "as a renewable resource" (Litzinger 2004: 175), capable of bringing a steady stream of both Chinese and international tourists to Lijiang to consume cultural heritage and boost the increasingly tourism-dependent economy.

In order to facilitate tourism growth, new roads have been constructed across the province with the intent "to open up the far corners of north-west Yunnan to tourists, eco-tourists, and adventure travellers" (Litzinger 2004: 177). The increase in transportation infrastructure has radically transformed the economy and natural landscape of the Lijiang area; one American-born Chinese traveler told me she had considered opening a hostel along the shores of previously remote Lugu Lake but that after the completion of a new highway, rent on the lakeshore quadrupled in only six months as it became a more accessible tourist destination. Stories of rapid changes in infrastructure and local economies like these are common among Lijiang visitors and residents alike.

The *xibu da kaifa* is not completely without environmental protection initiatives. The Chinese government does enact policy for environmental protection, but these initiatives often are emphasized in "official discourse" rather than in practice (Holbig 2004: 31). In addition, initiatives to protect the environment have negative economic implications for local people. In 1999, a logging ban was enacted, forcing many people who previously made a living from logging to turn to tourism. In Lashi Hai, a village outside of Lijiang in which I conducted some fieldwork, residents previously lived off of fishing and agriculture, but when the government banned fishing as an environmental protection policy, residents began to live off of tourism.

The *xibu da kaifa* created a need for a change in development and natural resource politics as government initiatives for economic development (and in some cases, even environmental preservation) conflicted with local needs for development and preservation. Despite the goal of lessening the wealth gap in western China, issues of economic development and disenfranchisement are still prevalent. As rapid economic growth and initiatives such as the *xibu da kaifa* continue to change the economic and natural landscape of western China, cities such as Lijiang have gone through major transformations.

III. LIJIANG, YUNNAN

My field site included the city of Lijiang and its surrounding area. I conducted participant observation research and interviews. I spent time in Lijiang Old Town and neighboring Shuhe Old Town, both part of the Lijiang Old Town UNESCO World Heritage

site. I went on an overnight trekking tour to Wenhai Valley, a nature reserve outside of Lijiang, with Hutiao Ecotourism in order to find out what form Hutiao's ecotours take. On my tour, I had two guides from Hutiao Ecotourism as well as a guide from Wenhai Valley. I lived for five days with a local Naxi ethnicity family in Lashi Hai, a smaller village outside of Lijiang. Lashi Hai has started to become a popular tourist destination in recent years while Wenhai will most likely emerge as a new destination in the coming years. Visiting Lijiang Old Town, an established destination, along with these two emerging destinations allowed me to see various stages of tourism development. I was also able to speak with people not directly involved in the tourism industry to learn how the influx of tourists has affected their community. I did volunteer work in Lijiang for Hutiao Ecotourism, helping with translations, blog entries, and online marketing. Going through blogs and tour descriptions allowed me to learn more about the range of tours Hutiao operates and to get tourist perspectives.

Lijiang is located in the northwest part of southwest China's Yunnan province. Yunnan is known for its stunning natural beauty as well as its many Chinese ethnic minority and indigenous groups, called *shaoshu minzu*. In 1994, Yunnan's government initiated a push for tourism development in Lijiang, leading to its transformation from a small, rural agricultural town to a booming tourist destination. In 1997, Lijiang Old Town received UNESCO World Heritage site status, further increasing its popularity with tourists. In 2010, 9.09 million tourists traveled to Lijiang (Su 2012: 32).

Along with the rise in tourism came a rise in consumerism. Lijiang Old Town now has over 1,000 stores (Su 2012: 32); nearby Shuhe Old Town and Baisha Old Town (both

included as part of the UNESCO World Heritage designation), while smaller than Lijiang Old Town, also have many shops and bars. In addition, the new and growing city surrounding Lijiang Old Town is home to international hotel chains, karaoke bars, restaurants, and more shops.

Consumerism in Lijiang is driven by commodification of *shaoshu minzu* culture, especially that of the Naxi ethnic group. Tourists can stay in guesthouses boasting rooms "decorated in the traditional Naxi style"[3] and see Naxi music and dance performances. Lijiang Old Town itself is a construction of authenticity in its displays of architecture, arts, and crafts advertised and sold as manifestations of traditional Naxi culture. Most business owners in Lijiang are not Naxi people or even native to Lijiang. When the tourism boom began, migrant entrepreneurs from elsewhere in China arrived to open businesses, driving the local people out of the old town. In fact, while the old town used to be a residential village, it is now home to a population of less than 1,000 people and continues to decrease (Su 2012: 32).

Most domestic Chinese tourists come to Lijiang to relax and *wan'er*, or "play." While *wan'er* (玩儿) literally translates to "play," it also means to have a good time or to enjoy. It is often used when referring to nightlife, including drinking in bars and singing karaoke, or to travel and leisure activities. Travelers often greet each other by asking, "Where will you go tonight to *wan'er*?" An early morning wanderer through the old town will find deserted streets littered with empty beer bottles from the night before. Around 8:30 am, the tour buses arrive, discharging groups of twenty to thirty tourists

[3] "Bruce Chalet" http://www.brucechalet.com/

following a flag-waving guide. In the late afternoon, they retreat to teahouses and in the evening to bars, where they party late into the night. A guesthouse owner told me that in some cases, tourists skip all historical sites and "just sleep. . . . You know, if we didn't see a guest before noon we used to worry they were dead!" Now, he says, they know that many wealthy businessmen from Beijing or Shanghai come to Lijiang to escape the pressures of work and rest for a few days, staying at the guesthouse and sleeping rather than sightseeing or hiking.

Lijiang does not only draw domestic tourists, however. Many foreign tourists, while avoiding the old town because of its artificiality and crowding, are drawn to the area's stunning natural landscape. Due to its variety of terrain and ecosystems, northern Yunnan is considered a "biodiversity hotspot," home to a wide array of flora and fauna. Lijiang sits in the shadow of the Himalayas, making it "a mountaineer's dream and a backpacker's playground" (Litzinger 2004: 174). *Yulong Xueshan*, the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, and Tiger Leaping Gorge draw backpackers and ecotourists, who are primarily foreigners.

Lijiang is, according to Hutiao Ecotourism's promotions, "a place where mountains, lakes, canyons, forests, animals, plants, villages, religion, and culture merge into a peaceful setting for exploring Northwest Yunnan's incredible natural and cultural diversity."[4] However, Lijiang is also the site of intense conflict between conservation and consumption, ecology and economy.

[4] "About Us, About Ecotourism" http://www.ecotourism.com.cn/about

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT/SUSTAINABILITY PARADOX

Tilt (2010) analyzes perspectives on environmental sustainability in the context of rural industrialization. Tilt illustrates the inherent contradictions between economic development and environmental sustainability and the state's role in development. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a rural community in southwestern China and its industrialization after Deng's economic reforms, Tilt develops the argument that there are two frameworks for situating research on environmental issues and development in rural China:

> The first response is that Chinese people likely don't care about pollution because they are focused on the immediate need for economic development. The second is that even if people did care about pollution, public opinion doesn't matter very much in the context of an authoritarian, single-party government that consistently emphasizes economic development over environmental protection (Tilt 2010: 23).

Thus the development/sustainability paradox—this contradiction between the need for economic development and the need for environmental sustainability—is an integral factor in analysis of environmental issues in China.

Tilt brings up the question as to "how to balance the immediate and acute need for economic development with the long-term goal of environmental sustainability" (Tilt 2010: 22). However, as evidenced in the above discussion of China's rapid economic development and transition to neoliberalism, "immediate" development may not be sustainable in the long run, leaving many people behind. Thus, there is a need for both sustainable economic development (as opposed to the more commonly seen rapid economic development) and sustainable environmental development in southwestern China.

Where do sustainable economic development and environmental sustainability intersect, and where do they conflict with one another? Tilt defines sustainable development by the "simple assertion that economic growth should be undertaken within ecological limits" (Tilt 2010: 29). Sustainable development becomes complicated, however, when one asks the question, "What precisely should be *sustained?*" (Tilt 2010: 31). As Tilt observes, "The trend toward controlling industrial pollution in the name of sustainable development has a direct effect on people's economic livelihoods" (2010: 31). Here Tilt emphasizes the discrepancy between environmental sustainability and economic sustainability. Tilt goes on to assert, "Villagers and cadres alike viewed industrial development and the revenues it generated as key to remedying the problems of ethnic, geographic, and economic marginality" (2010: 41). In Lijiang, similar trends can be observed. Tourism development, like the industrial development Tilt refers to, has created employment opportunities and improvements in infrastructure, fueling the local economy despite its destruction of natural resources and nature areas.

Tilt's second discourse deals with China's authoritarian government and its influence on development initiatives. Although China's economy has reformed over the past thirty years, the government has opened up considerably less. The emphasis placed on rapid development by the government as evidenced through Deng's Reform and Opening Up as well as the more recent Open Up The West movement largely neglects both ecological and economic sustainability for the sake of creating an economic boom in the west. Government-supported initiatives value mass tourism because of the potential for profit and rapid economic boosts. Environmental initiatives

tend to be backed by non-governmental organizations and must work within spaces left by the dominant mass tourism industry.

Tilt observes that China's authoritarian government system sets the stage for a concept known as rightful resistance. Tilt describes rightful resistance as

> a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public. In particular, rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy disloyal political and economic elites (Tilt 2010: 28).

Tilt argues that people at his field site use rightful resistance to address environmental issues that government initiatives have overlooked. Rightful resistance is a means for people to contest government action within channels left open by governmental entities; in fact it "must remain within the bounds of legality set by the government and, if it is to be successful, must invoke some of the ideas and discourses of the government itself" (Tilt 2010: 28).

In examining environmental consciousness and definitions of environmental sustainability, there are discrepancies among people of different backgrounds. While a foreign researcher or tourist may determine that locals do not value environmental sustainability, it may actually be that "his informants 'lack environmental consciousness only in the sense that they are not concerned with the same issues as national and global elites'" (Tilt 2010: 27). In other words, when evaluating environmental sustainability or sustainability in general (here referring to both ecological and economic manifestations), we must take into account cultural, geographical, and political

differences in how sustainability is defined. For American academics or upper middle-class tourists, it is easy to assume rural Chinese farmers are uneducated and do not understand environmental sustainability. However, in reality they simply have a different understanding of their environment and consciousness of sustainability.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy in environmental consciousness is Inglehart's post-material theory. Post-materialism is a way of conceptualizing societies as they continue to develop economically after the emergence of a consumer class: "As survival becomes increasingly secure, a 'materialist' emphasis on economic and physical security diminishes, and people increasingly emphasize 'post-materialist' goals, such as freedom, self-expression, and the quality of life" (Inglehart and Abramson 1999: 665). In his discussion of post-materialism in the Chinese context, Tilt maintains that valuing environmental sustainability is a post-material desire as well (Tilt 2010: 6). However, in rural southwestern regions that have been left behind by national economic development, many communities have not gone through sufficient economic development to be considered post-material.

City-dwellers I spoke with in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, still perceive Lijiang and its surrounding area as relatively *luohou,* or lagging behind. A teacher in Kunming who grew up in a small town told me that even Kunming is considered *luohou* by people in larger cities such as Beijing or Shanghai that were included in China's first phase of rapid economic development. She explained that the transition from *wenbao*, meaning "clothed and fed," to *xiaokang*, or being relatively well-off, is the informal measure of a

rising standard of living in China. Because many western regions are still less developed than the east coast, people in the west are more concerned with *wenbao* than *xiaokang*.

Typically only those whose standard of living is *xiaokang* have the material wealth and leisure time to actively work to protect the environment, whether it be through consuming more environmentally friendly (and thus more expensive) goods or by altering their lifestyle as a means to conserve natural resources. In western China especially, citizens' "concerns are balanced against other pressing issues such as economic growth [and] employment" (Tilt 2010: 7).

Despite the relative poverty in many rural communities, locals are environmentally conscious and many daily practices place importance on *huanbao*, or environmental protection. For example, small-scale, organic farming and composting are everyday practices. Thus, when examining environmental sustainability in the case of Hutiao Ecotourism, it is important to focus on the company's own definition of sustainability. Their mission states that they "strive to empower local people" and to "support our community and build an organization that is dedicated to our environment."[5] Here "environment" can take on both an ecological and an economic definition and refer to both environmental sustainability and community development. Before dismissing instances of less-than-ideal environmental sustainability in ecotourism, we must first contextualize environmental consciousness and determine the desired outcomes of ecotourism among local people.

[5]"About Us, About Ecotourism" http://www.ecotourism.com.cn/about

While Tilt focuses on rural factories and industrialization of the countryside, I will demonstrate that this development/sustainability paradox is also apparent in an analysis of Lijiang's tourism industry. Although Hutiao is not actively resisting or contesting government action and government-supported mass tourism development, the company acts in a manner similar to Tilt's notion of rightful resistance in that they create a space for their business to positively impact a community overlooked by government development initiatives. In the following sections I will discuss the factors that are barriers to environmental sustainability and those that simultaneously allow for economic sustainability, and the ways Hutiao positions itself as a provider of alternative tourism.

V. BARRIERS TO ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN (ECO)TOURISM

Ecotourism as a means to preserve and protect nature is inherently paradoxical as it "offers great potential to destroy the very resource. . . upon which it depends" (Higham and Lück 2007: 120). This contradiction has led to scholarly criticism of ecotourism as alternative tourism. In general, the push for economic development—both sustainable and non-sustainable—takes precedence over natural preservation. During my fieldwork, I observed economic development valued over environmental sustainability by both the ecotour company and by government initiatives. As a tour company, Hutiao must satisfy guests to make a profit. Thus, the importance of making money overshadows eco-friendliness as Hutiao attempts to satisfy guests' paradoxical desire to consume nature and provide guests with comfortable accommodations and

ease of travel. The Chinese government, too, evidently values economic development over environmental sustainability, overshadowing grassroots environmental initiatives with large-scale infrastructure projects. The following paragraphs will discuss instances of the contradictions inherent in the attempt to provide environmentally friendly ecotourism, namely the contradictions between consuming and protecting nature, guest comfort and green travel accommodations, and government and grassroots efforts.

Ecotourism emphasizes visiting preserved natural areas, which is essentially consumption of nature, while simultaneously emphasizing preservation of natural areas. Tour companies also see a discrepancy between being environmentally friendly and providing guests with comfortable accommodations. In many instances I observed during my fieldwork, environmental sustainability was sacrificed in order to provide guests with a higher level of comfort. Finally, the environmental degradation caused by government-supported mass tourism and infrastructure development counteracts the small-scale grassroots efforts at providing an alternative form of tourism.

There is a contradiction between the preservation of nature and the consumption of nature. Ecotourism—sometimes also called nature tourism—emphasizes the natural beauty of destinations, but also commodifies natural areas and disturbs ecosystems. The untouched, "off the beaten track," nature that tourists desire becomes increasingly scarce as tourism increases. Thus, traveling to natural areas conflicts with preservation goals, despite the notion that ecotourism is eco-friendly. In some ways, participating in ecotourism is an excuse or a means to justifying tourism:

although ecotourism may be environmentally degrading or culturally exploitative, it is an alternative to mass tourism and thus can be seen in a more positive light.

Tourists at guesthouses and hostels often exchange travel tips and frequently express a paradoxical desire to stay away from "touristy areas," instead participating in "the ceaseless search for unspoilt places" (Higham and Lück 2007: 123). In informal interviews with foreign tourists, one of the most common subjects that came up was this desire to experience untouched nature: one woman told me that on her travels her goal was to "stay as far away from the big cities as possible" and "avoid the tourists," despite her own role as a tourist. Here she refers mostly to domestic Chinese tourists. In contrast to American and European tourists, who tend to travel in small groups, Chinese tourists usually join large guided tour groups that travel together by bus. In informal interviews, many foreign tourists expressed annoyance at the size and practices of domestic tour groups. In order to avoid domestic tour groups, foreign tourists share their favorite remote locations with one another. It is possible that demand for these locations will soon outweigh supply as they become more and more overrun with travelers.

Many actors in Lijiang's tourism industry view guest comfort and environmental sustainability as mutually exclusive. Thus, eco-tours become less eco-friendly as facilitators and tourists neglect sustainability in favor of ease of travel. On an overnight hiking trip, I was able to see firsthand the disconnect between Hutiao's ecotourism ideal as presented in their marketing materials and the reality of their tour. I traveled with guides to Wenhai valley, a natural area outside of Lijiang. According to the itinerary the

company provided me, we were to stay at an ecolodge in the valley. The ecolodge was opened with the goal of providing environmentally sustainable accommodations to tourists while providing opportunities for the local community to facilitate and participate in tourism. An American organization, The Nature Conservancy, was instrumental in its establishment, but has since ended its involvement.

However, after about five hours of hiking, when my group reached Wenhai valley, our guides bypassed the ecolodge and took us to a nearby guesthouse. This guesthouse was also locally-owned, but did not consider itself eco-friendly. When I asked my guide why we weren't staying at the ecolodge, she responded, "We don't stay in the ecolodge because it isn't very comfortable. The food at the other guesthouse is better." I later found out that the guesthouse we stayed at was owned by a local community leader and guide who rented it to a local family, whose ancestors have lived in the area "forever." Thus, by using his guesthouse Hutiao was supporting local involvement in the tourism industry on the locals' own terms (facilitating tourism themselves rather than working for a non-local company) and even, I would argue, supporting community development more so than the ecolodge as this enterprise was entirely established, owned, and operated locally. However, they were sacrificing environmental sustainability for guest comfort.

Eco-tours are also making increasing use of cars, even in instances when locations are accessible by foot. The blog of an ecotour guide reads, "Before…we [had to] walk at least four hours through forest and cross mountains. Now there is one very

nice paved road; we can just drive about one hour from Lijiang up to Wenhai village."[6] On a bike trip I took with Hutiao Ecotourism, a van followed us while we rode our bikes around Lashi Lake. After riding a few kilometers, the guide suggested driving the rest of the distance because it was "too hot" and "too far" to continue biking, and insisted that we would be "more comfortable in the van."

In running a tourism agency, guest satisfaction is one of the most important factors in determining success. If a guest is uncomfortable, he or she is unlikely to be satisfied by the tour and the provider will profit less. Thus, guides strive to ensure guests' enjoyment. In ecotourism, however, the tourists may have lower expectations for comfort because they know that their tour theoretically has a lower carbon footprint or is less detrimental to the local area than mass tourism. Tourists who specifically seek out an ecotourism experience rather than a mass tourism experience tend to be more willing to "rough it." In addition, these tourists are often motivated by a desire to experience "authentic" Chinese culture, and thus stay out of large, westernized cities. It follows that they should want to experience "authentic" ecotourism and nature as well, but this rarely happens in practice.

As my group hiked over the final peak to reach Wenhai valley, we were assaulted by construction smog, something I had become accustomed to in large Chinese cities, but had never expected to see in a locale I was told was only accessible by foot, horse, or jeep. It turns out the information provided by the itinerary Hutiao gave me was slightly out-of-date: a new road to Wenhai is being constructed along with a rock quarry

[6] "Day Trip to Wenhai Village" http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_7024694201018353.html

and a dam. There is a water shortage in Lijiang's Old Town, a favorite destination for domestic tourists, and in order to have water in Lijiang's famous canals, they must pipe it in from Wenhai. In support of tourism development that will boost Lijiang's economy, the "authoritarian, single-party government" (Tilt 2010:23) allows for these infrastructure development projects despite environmental impacts. While Hutiao Ecotourism and similar companies may be attempting to provide alternative options to tourists, the reality of the situation is that the government wields the most power and is more concerned with mass tourism development than environmental sustainability.

Tourism development goals of the state conflict with those of local grassroots groups. While local tourism facilitators may use relatively eco-friendly practices that have lower impacts on fragile environments, the government's encouragement of tourism development overshadows these efforts. Especially due to the campaign to Open Up The West, it is evident that "[t]he growth of the tourism industry has been driven by economic development" (Butcher 2003: 5) rather than a desire to preserve natural landscapes.

My tour group hiked to Wenhai, but as infrastructure development increases this will change. Community members I spoke with in Wenhai expressed fear that their relatively remote village would soon be a popular tourism destination. A Chinese backpacker from Hong Kong who had traveled extensively in the Lijiang area told me about the changes she had seen over the past several years. She was also worried about the negative impact tourism will have on these areas, both in terms of natural environments and cultural heritage. Even if a location is initially an environmentally

sustainable destination, as it grows in popularity, the potential for profit increases. Even if some tourists travel with sustainable practices, the majority of tourists, at least currently, do not. Mass tourism companies seeking to capitalize on these opportunities receive support from the state in encouraging infrastructure construction because it contributes to the initiatives and goals outlined in the Open Up the West campaign.

In addition, the Open Up the West movement places heavy emphasis on the importance of drawing foreign investors to western China. Ensuring that foreign tourists have a satisfactory experience may encourage further investment into the Chinese tourism industry and beyond, providing further support for Open Up The West initiatives.

While policies such as the Open Up The West campaign are well intended, rapid economic development has implications on the natural environment that cannot be overlooked. Mass tourism calls for improvements in infrastructure such as new highways and roads, water transport, and tourist accommodations. Mass tourism development aligns well with China's neoliberal push for economic growth in the west, and thus it overshadows grassroots efforts at environmentally friendly tourism.

Thus the world of ecotourism is rife with contradictions that are reinforced by tourists' desires, the tour company's need for profit, and large-scale government initiatives. The paradoxical relationships between consuming and protecting nature, comfort and environmentally-friendly accommodations, and state and grassroots efforts inhibit efforts to provide ecologically sustainable tourism.

VI. HUTIAO ECOTOURISM'S SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The influx of non-locally owned businesses into Lijiang and government policies that affect rural income sources are significant barriers to achieving sustainable economic development. The growth of the mass tourism and luxury tourism industries has driven the indigenous people away from Lijiang and relocated them to the periphery of the tourism industry. Local participation is often limited to low-paying jobs as waiters, housekeepers at hotels, and taxi drivers. In addition, government environmental protection policies have made it difficult for people outside the city to make a living from agriculture. This forces them to enter the tourism industry as a supplemental source of income. Hutiao Ecotourism has overcome these barriers through their commitment to community development through tourism. Hutiao's practices give locals an opportunity to work in the tourism industry on their own terms; through its position as an alternative tourism provider, Hutiao empowers local people and creates a means of making profit that remains within the community.

Before Lijiang became a popular tourist destination, the town was home primarily to people of Naxi ethnicity, one of China's ethnic minority groups. However, as opportunities to make profit from tourism increased with the Open Up The West movement and Lijiang's burgeoning tourism industry, entrepreneurs arrived and set up shop. A guesthouse owner told me that the majority of these entrepreneurs are Han, China's majority ethnic group, and come from cities in the eastern part of China. As Lijiang's Old Town became a center of consumption, filled with shops selling Naxi

culture-inspired souvenirs, karaoke bars, and music and dance performances, the indigenous Naxi people were driven out and Han people moved in.

As a result, most Naxi families that used to live in the Old Town rent their property to Han entrepreneurs at highly inflated rates. The Naxi families then move into new apartments in Lijiang City. While they are able to make profit off renting their Old Town storefronts, Naxi people who moved into the city often expressed regrets. One respondent told me she felt that she lost a part of her cultural heritage when she moved out of the Old Town; despite the upgrade in living standard, she missed the comfort and familiarity of the town her ancestors had lived in for generations. She says, "Now, even though the Old Town still has traditional Naxi architecture, it is very different than it was before."

In the now-gentrified Old Town, storefronts have been remodeled and updated while maintaining Naxi-inspired architecture styles. A Han guesthouse owner told me that many Chinese tourists do not want to see a "real" Old Town; rather, "They've seen the real old towns, so they want to see a new version of it." According to him, China's age of communism, with rampant poverty and famine especially in the west, is still a recent memory for many people, so they want to visit a gentrified town where they can experience an "exotic" culture in relative comfort.

Wang Peng is a guesthouse owner in Shuhe, a smaller (but equally popular) town about fifteen minutes away from Lijiang. He is Han, and came to Yunnan to open his guesthouse. Originally from Hong Kong, Wang studied in Canada and speaks fluent Cantonese, English, and Mandarin. He tells me he did not speak Mandarin before he

came to Lijiang, but has picked it up over the past few years. Wang is an example of the migrant entrepreneur: a relatively well-off businessperson who came to Lijiang to profit from the tourism industry. Wang's website advertises that his guesthouse's architecture, décor, and food all showcase authentic and traditional Naxi culture. As he showed me around his neighborhood, Wang pointed to some women sitting in their yard and said, "These are Naxi people. They are not wearing their traditional clothing now, but you can see them in costume tomorrow at the dance performance." Thus, Wang, as a non-local tourism facilitator, participates in exploitation of the indigenous Naxi people. I do not mean to imply here that Wang's exploitation of the Naxi culture and people is malevolent or unique to his business; rather, his actions exemplify the "tourist gaze" and its exploitation and Othering of Naxi culture in Lijiang. I also witnessed instances of members of other Chinese ethnic minority groups gazing at Naxi people.

Because of the gentrification and "Han-ification" of Lijiang, most of the profit generated by tourism activities does not stay within Lijiang or go to local people; in fact, the mass tourism and luxury tourism industries exclude local people. Lijiang is home to many upscale resorts, including Banyan Tree Hotel, Pullman Resort and Spa, and Crowne Plaza Hotel. A St. Regis Resort is set to open in the summer of 2014, and many of my respondents believe more international luxury resorts will follow as Lijiang's popularity continues to increase. These resorts are international chains, headquartered in Thailand, France, the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. The hotels cater to wealthy guests; accommodation for one night in these hotels can be more than

half of the GDP per capita in western China. Not only are luxury hotels exclusive; they exoticize, orientalize, and commodify the local people and cultures they exclude. The Banyan Tree boasts that Lijiang is "the Venice of the Orient" where guests can "explore the ethnic charm, historical milieu and architectural landscape of the Old Town of Lijiang. . . . The resort is an hour's drive from the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a sacred sanctuary which has protected the ethnic minorities and their unique cultures since ancient times."[7] Ironically, the hotel itself enables mass tourism and exclusion of the "unique cultures" the company uses as a marketing strategy. Down the road, a high wall surrounds the Pullman Resort grounds, establishing it as a space that is physically separate from the city of Lijiang and the local community. Local people do have the opportunity to work in these resorts, but leadership is based outside of Lijiang, so many people work as housekeepers or wait staff.

Bai Ying Ai, a guide who works for Hutiao Ecotourism, came to Lijiang from a small village north of the city. Having studied English, she was able to get a job as a tour guide for foreigners. Bai told me that many people from her village move to Lijiang to find work, but that people who were not able to study English do not have as many opportunities to work as guides. A few of her friends work as housekeepers for the international resort chains, such as Banyan Tree and Pullman Resort. Hutiao's guides are all from Lijiang and surrounding villages; they are also all members of China's ethnic minority groups—people who have been historically excluded from economic development and the tourism industry.

[7] Banyan Tree Lijiang home page, http://www.banyantree.com/en/lijiang/

Hutiao does not only privilege guides who speak English, however. Zhang Tianming, an elderly, nimble, chain-smoking mountain guide, does not speak a word of English; in fact, at times I have difficulty understanding his Mandarin because his primary language is the Naxi dialect.[8] He grew up in the Lijiang area and takes great pride in telling me his ancestors have lived in Wenhai valley "forever." He has seen Lijiang's transition from a small, rural agricultural community to a booming and increasingly urban tourist destination. As a Naxi person, he has seen his culture commodified and sold to tourist consumers by Han entrepreneurs. He says he doesn't like the city, because "the tourists expect to see our traditional Naxi clothing and dancing, but I do not want to perform my culture. I don't wear traditional clothing, I wear normal clothing." Zhang's "normal" clothing harkens back to the communist era: he wears a faded blue Mao suit every day. Before the tourism boom in Lijiang, Zhang's family sustained themselves through agriculture. However, due to droughts in recent years and the growth of the tourism industry, Zhang has turned to tourism as a source of income. Zhang's family has always been relatively well off in comparison to other villagers and he is a leader in the Wenhai community. He is helping to establish a school and orphanage there and has also assisted other families in building coal ovens to supplement farming income. Zhang rents some of his property to another family that runs a guesthouse. Although he tells me he is retired, he still works as a guide. Having lived in the area all his life, he is accustomed to the high altitude and knows the

[8] Many of China's ethnic minorities have their own "dialects" which, despite their categorization as dialects, are usually unique languages with little or no ties to Mandarin.

mountain trails like the back of his hand. Because he does not speak English, he does not have the opportunity to work with foreign tourists, which are the tourists who most commonly seek hiking guides. Hutiao Ecotourism supports him by bringing tourists to his guesthouse and providing additional English-speaking guides to act as interpreters. The income Zhang makes from helping to facilitate tourism goes directly to his family and development initiatives, such as the school, to help Wenhai families.

The environmental policies put forth by the provincial government as well as those laid out in the Open Up The West campaign have had negative implications for local community members' livelihood. Bans on logging and fishing in certain areas of northwest Yunnan were put in place in order to protect local ecosystems, but these bans also forced local people to find alternative sources of income. In Lashi Hai, a village about thirty minutes outside of Lijiang City that is becoming increasingly popular as a tourism destination, the effects of government control of natural resources are particularly evident. When a fishing ban took away the main source of income from many families, people turned to tourism to make money. Most families now own horses or boats they rent to tour companies that provide day trips to Lashi Hai. Government policies, even those motivated by environmental protection, force people to turn to new means of making money, which in the Lijiang area nearly always means entering the tourism industry.

The Liu family is one of the families that cooperatively owns Hutiao Ecotourism. They live in Lashi Hai, and have seen their hometown transformed by tourism just as Zhang has in Wenhai. Over the course of the five days I spent in Lashi Hai, I saw builders

construct a guesthouse from foundation to near completion. Lashi Hai is quickly being developed for tourism, which means that guesthouses, roads, and restaurants are taking land that was used for farming in the past. The Lius are concerned about the future of Lashi Hai. Grandma Liu tells me that almost none of the families in their village are able to rely solely on agriculture to make a living anymore. On the shuttle bus between Lashi Hai and Lijiang, most of the passengers I spoke with work for large hotels or restaurants in the city to supplement their families' farming income. Hutiao provides an alternative to this in the form of cooperative ownership of the company. The Lius have a steady source of income from tourism without being exploited by large non-local tourism companies.

The establishment of Hutiao Ecotourism as an alternative to mass tourism companies allowed for its employees and cooperative of owners to resituate themselves within the tourism industry. Rather than working for non-locally owned businesses, these people are able to earn a living and keep profits within their community. Ten percent of profits are reserved for community development, helping to fund local schools and environmental preservation projects in local villages. By positioning itself as an alternative to mass tourism while still working within the dominant tourism industry in Lijiang, Hutiao is able to satisfy local needs while also complying with tourism development initiatives put forth by the Open Up The West campaign.

VII. CONCLUSION

The outlook of ecotourism as an environmentally-friendly alternative to mass tourism is grim. Critics are quick to discount ecotourism completely when it is not successful in protecting nature, and indeed "the likelihood of a genuine relationship serving the mutual interests of tourism and conservation is difficult to foresee" (Higham and Lück 2007: 121). Ecotourism as a means of ecological conservation is inherently problematic. Higham and Lück go so far as to argue that "the ultimate ecotourist is one who stays at home" (2007: 124). However, ecotourism's potential expands beyond environmental protection. Kontogeorgopolis suggests that we view ecotourism as "a set of goals" (2012) rather than as an ideal that may or may not be achieved in entirety. It is easy to discount ecotourism as problematic because, in many cases, it does not accomplish preservation goals. However, as evidenced by Hutiao Ecotourism's practices, alternative tourism is capable of contributing to sustainable community development and local empowerment.

Ringer notes that people who are unfamiliar with ecotourism often ask whether the "eco" refers to ecology or economy (Kontogeorgopolis et al 2012). While ecotourism is often used as a marketing tool for tour companies hoping to attract socially conscious tourists looking to reduce their carbon footprint, the economic aspect of alternative tourism is equally, if not more, important. Despite the shortcomings of ecotourism to (paradoxically) preserve the natural environment through tourism, Hutiao's form of ecotourism succeeds in creating opportunities for economic growth in communities left out of the mass tourism industry. While Hutiao makes sacrifices in

environmental protection in order to provide tours that satisfy guests, this enables the company's success as a tour provider and consequently allows them to work for sustainable economic development in the Lijiang area. As Wood observes, tourism "is an export market where the customer, the tourist, actually visits the country where the service is offered—making it one of the few globalized industries where small producers can sell directly to the end user" (Wood 2007: 165). While some "producers" in Lijiang are large transnational hotel chains, Hutiao is an example of the "small producer" Wood refers to. As a locally and cooperatively owned company, Hutiao creates capital that remains in their community and empowers those individuals historically pushed to the periphery of the tourism industry.

Based on my research, it appears that ecotourism itself is not the problem. While Hutiao Ecotourism's environmental protection measures were lacking, they are making great achievements in terms of community development. If an observer were to evaluate Hutiao solely on their conservation efforts, it is unlikely that they would be considered very different than mass tourism. However, upon taking a closer look at the work Hutiao is doing, it is evident that they are taking progressive action. Hutiao evaluates the needs of the communities it works within, runs a successful business, and uses profits from the business to provide the communities with what they need, usually in the form of capital.

I propose that there is a need for a change in the language used when discussing tourism and development. As evidenced by my research, "ecotourism" is not ecologically sustainable, but it does provide opportunities for locals who have been

largely excluded from the mass tourism industry to participate in the industry on their own terms. Despite political and economic conditions that inhibit ecological sustainability, Hutiao Ecotourism has situated itself in the tourism industry such that they are able to contribute to local empowerment and sustainable community development.

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