Villages in Transition
The Rise of Tourism in Lijiang, China

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Abstract

Dwindling water supplies and large-scale landscape change caused by increasing human footprints are posing challenges to myriads of cities in China. This essay is about the rise of tourism in *Lijiang* in southern China and its social and environmental consequences. Lijiang made a dramatic leap into the circuit of international tourist destinations in the mid-1980s. Currently, some five million tourists per annum visit Lijiang and are enchanted by its novel, exciting, yet comfortable and serene environment. The city’s experience of emerging as a tourist venue in the international market is noteworthy: local tourism was largely stimulated and subsidized by the central government, not by local political leaders or indigenous groups whose goal was to generate revenues. The opening-up of Lijiang was an integral part of the central government’s early experiment in commodifying local resources in remote ethnic towns, thereby reducing the potential risks of overinvesting in the development of new tourist sites. The centrally driven model tourist city is being reshaped by the local government and the involvement of different communities.
The Rise of Tourism in Lijiang

Lijiang is located in southern China, bordering Laos and Myanmar to the south and Tibet to the west. Until the 1980s, the city was a relatively small rural village. The minority Naxi people – Tibetan nomads who settled in the region more than a thousand years ago – built their settlements in Dayan, the old town of Lijiang, in the thirteenth century. The region’s subtropical monsoon climate, rich timber resources and meadows, productive agricultural lands, and multiple waterways with numerous springs provided an attractive natural environment for the early settlers. Glacier-melted water from the Yulong Snow Mountain and several springs from a carbonate rock aquifer run into the Black Dragon Pool (Heilongtan), and from the pool, a number of crisscrossing canals and an ancient water supply system run through the city and villages (Jishun 1991). Since the nation’s economic reform in 1978, Chinese cities have responded to greater fiscal autonomy and economic opportunities by developing their own revenue sources. Small-sized cities and towns, often having far smaller budgets and managerial capacities than large-sized cities in the coastal regions, simultaneously faced the daunting tasks of lifting rural households above the poverty line, providing basic infrastructure like roads and power lines, and opening up their territories to the outside world. Lijiang was not an exception. Mobilizing massive labor forces for rebuilding and repairing the infrastructures that had deteriorated under centralized planning, echoing how numerous reservoirs were constructed by volunteer labor forces in the 1950s and 60s, was no longer a feasible strategy.

Nonetheless, Lijiang’s abrupt transition from a remote rural village into one of the most rapidly growing tourist cities in China began during the mid 1980s. The potential economic value associated with a majestic panorama of Yulong Mountain, vast meadows traversed by canals, the historic wood-structure buildings in Dayan, and authentic cultural assets captured the attention of central government. In 1985, Lijiang was designated the fourth tourist site of Yunnan Province by the central government, following the Stone Forest, Xishuangbanna, and Dali in 1982 (Donaldson 2007). More recent – and perhaps far more influential – events took place in the 1990s. Then vice-premier Zhu Rongji made an official speech supporting the development of tourism and relevant industries in Lijiang in 1995.1 The Lijiang Airport was built in the same year, changing a painful two-day bus ride from Kunming into 30-min flight experience. The process of “guided place-making” to turn remote regions into accessible tourist venues was dramatically facilitated by the city’s designation as a UNESCO world heritage cultural site in 1997, along with the inflow of substantial relief funds after the 1996 earthquake (Perry & Goldman 2007). Master plans for Lijiang were revised according to the overarching goal of building “a national-level historical and cultural…tourist city.”2 The thriving pre-modern culture of the minority Naxi people has taken the tourist experience beyond the mere thrill of gazing at

different villages or taking pictures of unique buildings. A sense of engagement in a real, but unfamiliar society often prevails in Lijiang, where one can witness the Naxi people’s everyday ritual performances and their craftsmanship of ethnically distinct goods, such as handicrafts, art, hieroglyphics, and literature. Once this culture was promoted by the central government and marketed by the local government, the Lijiang experience came to be intertwined with much broader political economy of the nation.

Fig 1. Location of Lijiang in China

Fig 2. Dayan in Lijiang
The combined efforts of governments, international communities, private enterprises, and villagers resulted in great success, at least if success is measured by the increased number of tourists flowing into Lijiang. For example, the number of tourists almost tripled within a decade, from some 1.7 million in 1997 to 4.6 million people in 2007, including both Chinese trekkers and foreign travelers from Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States (UNESCO 2008). This number comprised some 10% of the total number of annual overseas tourists visiting Yunnan province, indicating the rapid emergence of Lijiang as a mainstream venue in southern China. The city’s geographic proximity to other tourist attractions like the Tiger Leap Gorge and Shangri-la (renamed from Zhongdian with the approval of China’s State Council in 2002), plus intensive infrastructure development, such as a new Lijiang airport (built in 1995 with a new terminal expanded in 2010) and roads, interactively contributed to the city’s appeal (Perry & Goldman 2007). However, several studies indicate that Lijiang’s natural resources, such as freshwater and mature oak trees, have been degraded far beyond a certain threshold of self-regeneration (Ives 1994; Gao 1998; Murphy & Chen 2007).

Defining Water Scarcity in the Chinese Context

China’s environmental diversity and recent urbanization have pushed the nation to fight against floods, drought, and water pollution, often simultaneously. China’s per-capita water resources were 2,145m³ in 2005 – the volume of total water resources divided by the total

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3 Ives (2004) reported that more than 90% of tourists in Lijiang were domestic, based on the data sets released by the Lijiang Tourism Bureau in 2001.
population – which is far above the commonly used threshold for water sufficiency of 1,700 m$^3$ (Falkenmark & Widstrand 1992; Yang & Zehnder 2001). According to Falkenmark and Widstrand, nations with more than 1,700 m$^3$ of water resources per capita have sufficient water (no water stress).\(^5\) Compared to the nation’s moderate freshwater abundance, per-capita water supply in 2005 was no more than 431 m$^3$, which makes a China water-scarce country based on the 1,000 m$^3$ standard (2,740 liters per person a day). Researchers have often used the 1,000 m$^3$ standard to evaluate water scarcity based on water supplied per capita (Falkenmark 1981). For example, Falkenmark assumed that roughly 20% of the total water resources were available for use and compared this availability with the 1,000 m$^3$/person per year standard: “the ultimate water demand during late stages of socio-economic development…”\(^6\) In the big picture, China’s southern provinces, such as Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guizhou, show a positive condition both in terms of water availability and water quality. However, even though cities like Lijiang are situated in a broader region with large bodies of water available, they have faced water scarcity due to their geographic isolation, the unmitigated use of their resources by people, and their traditional water supply systems that were designed to serve only a small number of people. This explains Lijiang’s low per-capita water consumption for living – no more than some 48% of the average water consumption of Yunnan province, or some 69% of Beijing in 2005.\(^7\)

Table 1. Water Scarcity Index by Falkenmark & Widstrand (1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per-capita Water Resources (m$^3$ per capita)</th>
<th>Water Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 1,700</td>
<td>Sufficient (No Water Stress)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 – 1,700</td>
<td>Water Stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 – 1,000</td>
<td>Water Scarcity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 500</td>
<td>Absolute Water Scarcity</td>
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</tbody>
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**Searching for New Balance: Water Scarcity and Deforestation**

Not surprisingly, an increased number of tourists meant that larger amounts of water and resources were consumed in hotels, restaurants, and bars – exceeding the original capacity of the water supply system designed to serve indigenous people. One interviewee reported that, facing

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4 “Total water resources refers to total volume of water resources measured as run-off for surface water from rainfall and recharge for groundwater in a given area, excluding transit water.” Source: Appendix IV: Explanatory Notes on Main Statistical Indicators, China Environmental Statistical Yearbook 2006 (http://english.mep.gov.cn/standards_reports/EnvironmentalStatistics/yearbook2006/).

5 Other researchers, such as Gleick, proposed a similar index of 1,667 m$^3$ per capita or more to describe a condition of water abundance. It is doubtful that China’s relative water abundance could be sustained in the long run, since the Ministry of Water Resources predicted that per-capita water resources could drop to 1,700 m$^3$ by 2030, reaching the critical level of water availability (Thomson 2002).


Fig4. Old Town of Lijiang
shrinking water resources, private developers used numerous water pumps that have led to the increasingly lower groundwater levels. The size of glacier and snow-capped land covers on the mountain decreasing from 1.39% to 0.22% of the city area between the years of 1986 and 2006 worsened this situation (Peng et al. 2010). This land-cover change may seem relatively minor. Nonetheless, the immediate impact was significant: the canals that enchanted the numerous tourists who passed through the old town dried up. Since the city’s remote location meant that it was not feasible to divert freshwater from distant cities into Lijiang, an alternative decision was made by the Yulong County government in 1994. A dam was built to artificially transport freshwater from Lashihai – a high-land lake reserve that is located at an elevation of 2,500 m and provides extremely valuable habitats for migrating birds – to Lijiang and its county (Lazarus 2003). The lure of consumption and the private entrepreneurs’ preoccupation with economic gains had an unintended influence on the limited water resources.

The loss of forest poses another challenge at both the local and regional scales. The Yunnan province has been a major source of timber to other parts of the nation, since before the 1960s. Thus, large-scale logging and the extraction of forest resources was not a new phenomenon. Even a conservative view reported that the ecological condition of Lijiang’s forest patches is not devastated, as described in eight scientists’ 1985 field research (Ives 1985): “The detailed results of the expedition must await analysis...[but] there has been serious over-dramatization and over-simplification [of the deforestation and pressure on Lijiang’s natural resources].” Additionally, due to the central government’s efforts to ban logging in protected forests under the Natural Forest Protection Program (NFPP) of 1998, a number of large state-owned logging companies substantially scaled back their activities (Lazarus 2003). Yet, small-scale illegal logging and firewood collection by villagers and private enterprises continued. This was partly due to a lack of basic infrastructure for electricity or natural gas, and partly to increased housing construction by villagers using local materials. The resultant decrease in mature oak trees posed numerous threats, for example, affecting the livelihoods of poor villagers who used the trees for the production of charcoal (Ives 1994). More recently, this trend began to change: illegal logging was under strict control and nature reserves were protected and carefully managed. Ironically, the booming tourism industry in Lijiang seemed to provide the impetus for the local government and community leaders to protect their natural ecosystems. One government official reported that the potential financial benefit from protecting and managing valuable localized resources was likely to exceed the gain from exporting natural resources.

**Discussion**

The inflow of tourists and the rising tourism industry create a contested relationship between visitors and the visited. On the one hand, the authenticity of the Naxi’s Dongba culture, the serene rural landscape, and simple but sophisticated architectural styles could have been retained because Lijiang had limited exposure to waves of commodification and modernization. Dissenters of mass-tourism, therefore, may argue that limiting the number of visitors is the inevitable way to both protect natural resources and to slow down the city’s degeneration into a standardized resort town. On the other hand, increasing tourist revenues and global attention on Lijiang might motivate the planners and consumers of the city to reinvent the model of the tourist
city by integrating historic preservation and nature conservation. The tourist experience in Lijiang, at least up until today, is far from being vulnerable to certain forms of standardized experiences or fabricated rural landscapes. A sense of reality, novelty, preservation, and dynamism – replete with somewhat complicated signifiers of the past, rural life, the East and the West, and a distinct minority juxtaposed with a symbol of nationalism – transcended compromised equilibrium of commercialism and heritage. In order to support the rising tourism industries, the provincial government, along with the Yulong real estate development company, initiated a private-public partnership development project of 490-ha called Yulong New Town, located 6 km to the south of Dayan. While the impact of the new town development is yet to be revealed, locating a mixed-use new town for rural villagers and their descendants who are involved in service industries within commuting distance to the old town seems to be a responsible political decision. After all, the so-called “outsiders” who migrated into Lijiang for commercial purposes do not share a common memory of the minority Naxi tradition, thereby the new town will provide more practical and comfortable living place for them than the old town.

Obviously, Lijiang has not been without difficulties in its economic and cultural transition. For instance, anthropologists and tourism experts noticed movements organized by marginalized locals to ban outsiders who incrementally replaced local people with better entrepreneurial skills and accumulated capital (McKann 2001). Yet, a community’s sectoral shift or developer-driven urban change is by no means unique to Lijiang; rather, it is the norm in a number of cities. As long as the entrepreneurial competition follows fair market rules, it is hardly justified to restrict the business opportunities of outsiders for the exclusive benefit of the insiders’. This premise does not rule out an argument that indigenous people’s contribution to remaking their towns should be highly valued and prioritized. Additionally, there is no guarantee that keeping the number of tourists to a minimum will necessarily lead to a remediation of their negative impacts on the local culture or natural environment of Lijiang, as long as sites with the highest ecological and historic values are protected at the city or provincial levels. In Lijiang, the diversity of real lives that is nurtured by both the people and the governments represents a multifaceted experience of real history, real nature, and original architectural styles within its commodified tourist venue, in comparison to the entirely themed environments of Disney World, manufactured entertainment in Las Vegas, or the provision of relaxation in Hawaii – though the aforementioned also have their own functions in contemporary society. Thus, Lijiang with millions of tourists can still be Lijiang without having to sacrifice its natural environment, indigenous culture, or local livelihoods. The optimal balance between the visited and the visitors will be determined by the subtle intervention of urban policies, timely preservation efforts, and participatory planning by the local leaders and villagers who actually supply the tourist experience.
Bibliography


Appendix

Appendix Fig1. Old Town of Lijiang
Appendix Fig2. Tourist Venue in Lijiang
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Appendix Fig4. Villages Situated between the Old Town of Lijiang and Yulong New Town
Appendix Fig5. Building a New Canal Near the Yulong New Town