ETHNIC TOURISM AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: The representation of minority culture is central to ethnic tourism development. However, only limited attention has been paid to cultural representation in ethnic attractions. This research examines representations of multiple ethnic cultures in the Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages, China. The perspectives from four key groups of stakeholders—governments, park managers, employees and tourists—are analyzed in the paper. Recognizing representation of ethnicity as a political process capable of reflecting and reinforcing power relations in society, it is argued that cultural hegemony is perpetuated in tourism representation. Also, stereotypical conceptions of minority people are both reinforced and challenged by representations in ethnic tourism. **Keywords:** ethnic tourism, cultural representation, ethnicity, authenticity, Yunnan, China. © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic tourism is used by many governments for economic and cultural development (Henderson, 2003; Walsh & Swain, 2004; Yea, 2002). It also assists ethnic minorities in showcasing their culture and reviving their traditions (Santos & Yan, 2008; Swain, 1989, 1990). However, while ethnic tourism has the potential to bring economic and social benefits, it can also adversely impact the culture and sense of identity of ethnic groups (Oakes, 1997; Picard & Wood, 1997; Smith, 1989). Although there is substantial literature documenting the impacts of ethnic tourism, limited research has been devoted specifically to cultural representation in ethnic attractions (Bruner, 2005). This paper examines representations of multi-ethnic cultures in an ethnic theme park: Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages (YEFV) in Yunnan, China. A conceptual framework is developed and employed to explore the relationships among the park, minority cultures, and ethnic tourism, to compare the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, and to address challenges associated with cultural representation and ethnic tourism.

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ETHNIC TOURISM AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Culture is a concept that is constructed and represented symbolically (Linnekin, 1997). Representations not only reflect reality but help to constitute reality (Duncan, 2001). Cultural representation has received increased attention in tourism studies in recent years (Cornelissen, 2005; Hoffstaedter, 2008; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Santos & Yan, 2008; Smith & Robinson, 2006; Tang, 2005). Tourism exerts a powerful influence shaping cultural images of ethnic groups in many countries (van den Berghe & Keyes, 1984). Therefore, examinations of the impacts of tourism on cultural representation are needed, particularly in areas such as ethnic tourism.

The first use of the term, ''ethnic tourism'', is attributed to Smith (1977), who defined it as tourism ''marketed to the public in terms of the 'quaint' customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples'' (p. 2). Since then, the concept and its consequences have been discussed extensively, particularly with regard to links between tourism and ethnicity, and the impacts of tourism on ethnic minorities. Today, ethnic tourism generally refers to tourism motivated by a tourist's search for exotic cultural experiences, including visiting ethnic villages, minority homes and ethnic theme parks, being involved in ethnic events and festivals, watching traditional dances or ceremonies, or merely shopping for ethnic handicrafts and souvenirs (Yang, Wall, & Smith, 2008). It has been promoted and widely adopted as a strategy for regional socio-economic development (McIntosh & Johnson, 2005).

Ethnic theme parks or folk villages are among the most common ethnic tourism attractions globally. These parks are commercial entities where the ethnic diversity of a nation or region is represented for visitors in a single locality in one panoptic sweep (Bruner, 2005). They differ from most other amusement parks in that they are rarely developed with the sole intention of providing a recreational experience. A major goal of these parks is to display, preserve, or restore some aspects of a nation or region's ethnicity, cultural diversity, and heritage (Bruner, 2005; Xu, 1998).

As modern tourists become more interested in close contact with locals and experiencing authentic culture, images of ethnic peoples are increasingly used to attract tourists to cultural attraction settings such as heritage sites, museums, galleries, folk villages, cultural theme parks, performing arts venues, and festivals. These attractions stage ''otherness'' and organize diverse cultural elements into complex collections and representations (MacCannell, 1976, 1984). Traditional life-styles and tourists are brought face-to-face by ethnological exhibits; however, when culture and traditions are transformed into tourism products by using labels, guides, mannequins, and living re-enactments of traditional activities, a composite representation of minority people is formed (Ryan & Aicken, 2005).

Because ethnic minorities are often perceived as a dying breed, the capturing of cultural images is deemed necessary. Minority peoples' diverse histories, cultures, and contemporary living as well as the evolving nature of their culture are denied (Gladney, 1999). Schaffer (1988)