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Tourism dynamos: Selective commodification and developmental conservation in China's protected areas

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ABSTRACT

At scenic sites across China, rural officials compelled to maximize revenue use local state authority over protected areas to foster “tourism dynamos”. Local states set up infrastructure and institutions around rural attractions that channel the circulation of tourists, churning out revenues that meet quotas and fund further expansion of attractions and towns. To make these dynamos turn, local authorities have displaced resident-led tourism operations they had previously helped set up. Residents are reincorporated in varying ways and often retain land use rights. Meanwhile, as revenues stream out of attractions, what little is invested in environmental protection goes to maintaining scenery. Local governments also accomplish spatial transformations, within each park intensifying surplus generation in areas zoned for tourism while reserving other areas from use, and beyond park boundaries linking attractions together on tourism circuits radiating from central towns. This state-driven transformations depend on how the reservation of land from commodity exchange within protected areas comes together with specific state capacities to enable tourism intensification. These processes, which I label “developmental conservation,” call attention to selective commodifications and the mediating role of the state in protected area governance in China and beyond.

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, local states have turned protected areas across China into high-volume tourism attractions. Where previously rural residents led tours and accommodated visitors, or vehicles from outside vied for space on rough roads, now crowds of visitors arrive each day to board buses or cable-cars that shuttle them to scenic spots. These systems enable thousands to tour an attraction daily, yielding substantial revenues for firms owned by local governments. Local states channel these returns into infrastructure construction outside of each park, proliferating attractions and expanding central towns. While these operations are justified as improving conservation and rural livelihoods, they have mixed impacts on environments and on the lives of residents.

As nature tourism booms in the global South (Balmford et al., 2009; Karanth and Defries, 2011), the ways tourism intersects with environmental conservation draw growing attention (Bushell et al., 2007; Naughton-Treves et al., 2005; West et al., 2006). Much of the resulting scholarship focuses on how tourism development accomplishes neoliberalizing projects, linking conservation to efforts to draw rural territories and residents into commodity circulation

(Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Büscher et al., 2012). These actions often weaken or cut off residents' access to protected lands, make residents more dependent on volatile markets, and dilute their roles in decision-making (Dressler and Roth, 2011; West et al., 2006). The state appears as an agent of capital, packaging protected lands for nonlocal entrepreneurs who extract profits from commodified parks to flow in distant circuits (Dressler and Büscher, 2008). China, where state-owned firms dominate nature tourism, raises challenges for neoliberalizing narratives. What happens when the state keeps a robust role in park tourism? How do state agencies negotiate environmental and social imperatives alongside those of the market, and with what consequences for residents and for landscapes?

This paper uses three case studies to characterize the processes driving tourism intensification across China's protected areas and their impacts on people and places. Drawing on interviews and documentary evidence, I characterize state-led “tourism dynamos” that propel tourism intensification and describe their impacts on rural residents and conservation management practices. These transformations hinge on two elements: selective commodification and state mediation. First, the state reserves protected lands from commodity circulation, producing scenic landscapes and giving select tourism operators rights to undertake selective commodification of attraction access. Second, the local

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state plays a key role in mediating tourism intensification, shaping what happens and who profits. The processes surrounding tourism dynamos show how environmental and productivist logics intertwine to reorganize protected areas within regional tourism networks in China. They also shed light on processes of land use intensification beyond China's urban centers. Finally, they show limitations of the frame of neoliberal conservation, highlighting state projects that manage markets to serve non-market imperatives.

2. Conservation and tourism in protected areas

Protected areas¹ have been sites of wrangling over nature conservation, livelihoods of rural residents, and tourism development at least since the founding of the first national parks in the United States (Adams, 2004; Sellars, 2009). As bounded units of territory demarcated for limited human use in the name of protecting wildlife and ecological processes, for much of their history protected areas have been sites of exclusion. Narratives of environmental protection justify extending state territorial control, enclosing resources for state management, and separating residents from lands central to their livelihoods and identities (Neumann, 2004; Peluso, 1992). The state declares places where people live, farm, hunt, gather, worship, and remember, to be conservation territories that must be protected from their former inhabitants. This “fences-and-fines” approach, often part of broader state projects for controlling territories and populations, puts rural residents at odds with protected area managers, who act as agents of the state (Adams, 2004; Brockington, 2002; Wilshusen et al., 2002).

Conflicts and injustices resulting from exclusionary conservation aroused vigorous critique, leading to two interwoven turns in conservation practice: the participatory turn and the market turn. Participatory conservation subjects conservation interventions to the requirement that conservation interventions fulfill obligations to people who might be affected. The participatory turn manifests in efforts to recognize that residents' use of protected areas can enhance, or at least not undermine, conservation; to involve residents in management and decision-making; and to provide residents benefits in exchange for taking part in conservation (Brandon et al., 1998; Lele et al., 2010; Pfeffer et al., 2006). The form of participation ranges from providing economic benefits to subjecting outsiders' actions to residents' knowledgeable and autonomous consent.

Participatory interventions are usually wrapped more or less tightly into marketizing interventions. The market turn rests on the proposition that residents and other stakeholders will be better motivated to conserve natural resources if there are economic rewards for doing so. This line of thinking underlies a variety of schemes for economic valuation and commodification of resources, like carbon offsets, commodity certification, and payments for ecosystem services (McAfee and Shapiro, 2010; Klooster, 2006). Tourism is prominent among them. Proponents claim that tourism development can resolve problems in conservation management by generating funding for conservation programs, providing employment that draws residents away from resource extraction, and buttressing a park's legitimacy in residents' eyes (Christ et al., 2003; Kirkby et al., 2011). It can also earn hefty sums for outside parties. Alongside other ways of commodifying nature, tourism yields benefits that are often tilted away from local residents (Dressler and Büscher, 2008; King and Stewart, 1996), raising concerns that market-based conservation practices, while justified with participatory rhetoric, in practice co-opt participatory measures (Lele et al., 2010; McAfee and Shapiro, 2010; McElwee, 2012).

2.1. Problems in neoliberal conservation

This merger of participatory and market techniques is often called neoliberal conservation (Igoe and Brockington, 2007; McCarthy, 2005). Neoliberal conservation couples a roll-back of previously existing forms of coercive state management to a roll-out of programs bringing in private firms and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate community-based conservation efforts, making conservation spaces more available to private capital (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Büscher et al., 2012; McCarthy, 2005; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Robertson, 2004; see also Peck and Tickell, 2002). The state seldom fully retreats. State agencies step in to re-regulate access to land and resources to facilitate the projects of NGOs and firms (Dressler and Büscher, 2008; Igoe and Brockington, 2007). These efforts often achieve the same kinds of transformations previously sought through coercive conservation, extending state territorial control, constraining extensive land use within protected areas, and promoting settled commodity agriculture outside them (Ribot et al., 2010; Dressler and Roth, 2011). Where protected area enclosures deprive residents of access to means of production, scholars identify patterns of accumulation by dispossession, with the state facilitating dispossession of rural residents that feeds private accumulation (Igoe et al., 2010; Kelly, 2011).

The term neoliberal conservation has become pervasive in scholarship on parks and people. But just as contradiction and ambiguity bedevil broader discussions of neoliberalism (Bakker, 2010; Kingfisher and Maskovsky, 2008), gaps and imprecisions in presentations of neoliberal conservation weaken the concept's usefulness as an explanatory tool (Bakker, 2010; Hathaway, 2014). Central among these is that neoliberal conservation's commodifications depend on landscapes being withheld from commodification. Accumulation by dispossession, a hallmark of neoliberalization, is generally considered to mean enclosing a commons by creating private property rights, opening land and resources to market exchange. But the move to commodify conservation spaces depends upon a prior move to enclose them *from* capital, curtailing extraction and reclamation (McCarthy, 2005). Hence conservationists base political claims against corporate interests and residents alike on the nature of protected areas as the “ultimate non-commodity”, insulated from market forces (Li, 2008). In some cases this move, which we can call “reservation”, is a form of de-commodification, withholding from exchange land that had previously been open to sale. Elsewhere, it stems from other sorts of colonial or state-led enclosures. In either case, the commodification of reserved land is substantially limited, as rights to use that land for cultivation, mineral extraction, or other purposes cannot be bought. The profits of conservation-based commodifications depend on this precondition.

Kelly (2011) asserts that the withholding of protected areas from commodification is illusory because contemporary conservation practices still commodify protected area contents indirectly through the commodification of genetic resources, conveyance of rights to operate tourism, and circulation of representations of protected areas (see also Igoe et al., 2010).² This argument fails to consider the extractive, agricultural, and other uses that may occur

² A confusing vagueness surrounds the concept of “commodification”. Scholars often present expansive conceptions of commodification such that, if anything related to a given object is sold on the market, that object is considered “commodified”. This conception is consistent with commonsense understandings of the word. But it is analytically blunt. Collapsing together the varying ways and extents to which different aspects of an object get commodified makes us less likely to explore their differing consequences. Whether the land used for conservation is available on markets, or is kept off the market while people pay to visit, or to buy souvenirs produced there, or to sell materials marked with a park's logo, in each case may have quite different consequences.

¹ In this paper I use the words “protected area” and “park” interchangeably.

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