

# **Ethnic Tourism -- A Helicopter from "Huge Graveyard" to Paradise?**

**Social impacts of ethnic tourism development on  
the minority communities in Guizhou Province,  
Southwest China**

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## **Abstract**

Since the beginning of the 1980s, ethnic tourism has been one of the key industries promoted by the government of Guizhou province in Southwestern China. This industry has brought tremendous changes to the communities of local ethnic peoples in destination areas, especially in improving their economic life. However, although ethnic tourism does bring many positive results to local peoples, it also has a negative side as well. This paper investigates, from a local perspective, some of these impacts, taking the Miao/Hmong communities as a case study. The author contends that if ethnic governments and residents want to sustain their culture and society, they must have an awareness and understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of tourism when considering a project in their community.

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## **Introduction**

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For its big contributions in terms of economic benefits,

tourism has been regarded as one of the most important industries for developing countries to emerge in the last several decades. However, many cases have also proven that, in addition to the positive effects, tourism also brings negative consequences to the natural and cultural environment of the destination areas. The awareness of the relationship between the development of tourism and the development of local communities has been increasing, leading to growing efforts to bring about "sustainable tourism development."

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This concept has been widely accepted by most of the countries in the world, including China. However, the acceptance of the concept does not mean that all the principles of sustainable development are applied in practice in all related projects and activities where they could be relevant. The problem of achieving sustainable tourism development is certainly not simple. This author believes that an important key to sustainable tourism development is an understanding of the impacts of various types of tourism on the natural and cultural environment of the tourist destinations, since tourism is built upon the maintenance of the natural and cultural environment for its own survival. To build up such an understanding, a detailed empirical analysis of the impacts of tourism on the natural and cultural resources of an area is necessary in the early stage of tourism development in a certain community.

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Although there has been considerable debate regarding the impacts of tourism development in the western world and in Southeast Asia, until now, little research has been done inside China, not to mention Guizhou Province in the southwest part of China. Furthermore, in Guizhou, the leading view is that tourism is "a non-polluting industry,"

and a "long-life industry." Many people in this province normally over-estimate the positive effects from this industry. They have been promoting tourism enthusiastically, with very limited consideration of its negative effects. To avoid repeating the same mistakes that some other countries have made and to avoid many hidden costs that have hit other developing countries, the present study analyzes some of these changes in Guizhou, offering personal observation in some minority communities, as well as discussion of the work of other scholars.

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The main purpose here is not only to show how many and how serious the impacts are, but also to raise awareness of their consequences for the future of the tourism itself, both among decision makers and among the public.

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There have already been many voices celebrating the positive effects of tourism, and negative impacts on nature have more recently become the concern of certain environment protection institutions, but the negative social and cultural impacts remain neglected by society. Therefore this study will pay attention to social and cultural aspects of tourism development in Guizhou.

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Two additional points should be considered before moving on: 1) It is often difficult to separate the effects of tourism from the effects of other processes and events, such as industrialization, the improvements in communication and the influence of the mass media, educational exchange, and so on. Therefore some argue that we cannot link the adverse social and cultural changes to tourism alone. The cases studied here may make things simple: Before the introduction of tourism, very little of those processes and events

typically associated with modernization occurred in this study's selected villages. The main economic activities in these areas are subsistence agriculture; very little surplus can be sold on the market. The economic reforms from planned collectives to household responsibility contracts, and the increasing focus on commercial-oriented production, did have some influence on the rural economy, thus impacting social life. But looking the local economy in these villages as a whole, the influence from these changes is not yet significant. Tourism here plays the major role in the cultural changes observed in this study area. 2) There are 49 minority groups in the study area, but most of my observations were carried out in Miao destinations. So my presentation of the effects of tourism development in Guizhou refers primarily to Miao society, yet much of my analysis can be also applied to other minority communities.

## **The development of tourism in Guizhou**

### **From "closed land" to tourism destination**

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Situated in the southwest part of China, Guizhou is a province populated by 36 million people.

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Ethnic diversity is one of the most distinct features of Guizhou society. Of the total population, over 40% belong to minority nationalities; and 55.5% of Guizhou's territory is occupied by minority populations. Among these groups, the Miao are the most numerous. The Miao originated from north part of old China. This group has a long history of migration, first southward and then westward, due to the expansion of the Han. To avoid slaughter by early Han rulers, the Miao escaped into mountain areas that were difficult for outsiders to reach, and too marginal and

disadvantaged to interest the Han. With its typical karst topography marked by many steep cliffs and deep gorges and carbonate caves, Guizhou provided a relative safe habitat for them. Today, Guizhou has the largest Miao-populated territory in the world.

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Although coal mining, hydroelectricity, mineral processing and defense-related industries are all important sectors in Guizhou as a whole, agriculture has been the main economic activity for most minorities. About 85% of the total population is engaged in agriculture. However, 73% of the landscape consists of highly porous carbonate rocks, and cultivators are often faced with thin, acidic soils. It is estimated that only about 3% of Guizhou's topography is suitable for generating agricultural surplus, hence the land can only provide foods for local consumption.

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In 1882, seeing such harsh geography a Sichuan-based British trade representative, Alexander Hosie, described Guizhou as "a huge grave yard" (Hosie, 1890, page 32). Guizhou is also described by Chinese with a proverbial formulation: "No more than three days are clear, no more than three feet of land is flat, and no person has more than three cents" (*tian wu san ri qing, di wu san chi ping, ren wu san fen ying*)..

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During the last few decades China has made great progress in terms of economic development. Yet, due mainly to ecological constraints, Guizhou is still a very poor province with a large percentage of people living under the poverty line set by the government. The majority of the poor in Guizhou are, of course, minorities. After the economic reforms at the end of 1970s, many scholars and leaders in Guizhou argued that the poverty in Guizhou is a kind of "poverty of

plenty," (Furao de pinkun) and that the people in Guizhou are "begging food with a golden bowl." Guizhou is actually thought to be rich in many types of natural and cultural resources. Such people believe that the "backwardness" of Guizhou society is due mainly to two factors: 1) The isolation of the local communities; and 2) the lack of "commercial consciousness" among the local minorities. Poor transportation leads to isolation, and isolation leads to a lack of awareness of commercial potential.

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Many officials and scholars in Guizhou think that tourism may offer a major opportunity to address and use these factors to its advantage. First, Guizhou's difficult geography is a constraint for agricultural development, but for tourism it can be an important resource. Second, tourism can attract investments and connect isolated communities to the outside world. It can help to change local people's social habits and perspective, broadening local horizons. Third, it can mobilize the foreign exchange that the local people need so badly, as well as diversify local economic activities and provide employment for the large supplies of local labor.

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At the end of 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, both the domestic and international situations offered a favorable environment for realizing the dreams held by Guizhou's leaders and scholars. During this period, Southeast Asia became an important destination region for international tourism. Many Asian countries experienced a boom in both foreign and domestic tourism. Since Guizhou is near Southeast Asia and has much in common culturally with that area, the spill-over effects of the tourism boom in Southeast Asia reached Guizhou not long after China opened its door to the outside world.

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In 1982, the provincial tourism bureau was established as a branch of the foreign affairs office. In that same year the provincial capital, Guiyang, and Zhenning county, were opened to foreign tourists. These were crucial events. From then on more and more counties were opened until today over half of the province is accessible to foreign tourists. The international arrivals have increased sharply, so have the numbers of domestic tourists, in response to the rapid economic growth in the coastal south, and some large cities in north.

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Both Guizhou's mountains, which have long been regarded as responsible for local poverty, and its minorities, which have long been regarded as an "uncivilized" population, have now come to be appreciated as resources for aesthetic and authentic experiences. The porous karst landscape and the ethnic diversity including "exotic" native peoples, have suddenly become attractions for foreigners and important income resources to Guizhou.

### **The nature of tourism in Guizhou**

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Since tourism is not a unitary phenomenon, its effects vary according to its purpose and activities. Therefore it is necessary to categorize the types of tourism which are promoted in different communities in Guizhou before we analyze their effects.

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There are two tourism circuits in Guizhou, extending into the western and eastern parts of the province. The western part is rich in waterfalls, caves, lakes and underground

rivers. So the main attraction offered in this circuit is scenic beauty. The eastern circuit, however, focuses on cultural attractions: this is where the largest Miao territory is found. Because of this difference between the circuits, the types of tourists they attract differ as well. In general, the dominant arrivals in the western circuit are domestic tourists. Their primary interest is scenery, although ethnic culture and costumes also add to the attraction. In contrast, the majority of the tourists on the eastern circuit are international arrivals, attracted by exotic ethnic culture and customs. The Japanese and members from the western Hmong diaspora make up the largest part of such groups, because both groups believe that the Miao represent their origins (Oakes, 1998, page 169).

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Although there are differences in emphasis between the two lines, generally speaking, we can say that tourism promoted in Guizhou is "ethnic tourism," or "cultural tourism." As it is defined by Smith (1989, page 2), ethnic tourism is the "marketing of quaint customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples for tourist consumption." From the various brochures and guide books provided by tourism agencies in Guizhou we can see that the province is described as "the last virgin land," "mysterious land" with "diversity and color." Tourists are offered "exotic" tribal peoples; their festivals and costumes are "fascinating and vibrantly unique," traditional and authentic. Exoticism is a main theme in all the media. Although nature tourism is also enthusiastically promoted in Guizhou, the presentation of the beautiful landscape is closely associated with local minority culture, since almost all the scenic sites exist in the minority territory. The most common feature of ethnic tourism in the province is the performance of minority songs and dances, the presentation of the minority rituals, and festivals.



## **Positive effects of the ethnic tourism development**

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Since the introduction of tourism into Guizhou, the region has experienced a significant degree of progress in terms of poverty alleviation, improved infrastructure, and an increasingly diversified local economy.

### **Increasing income**

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As it does everywhere, tourism development has brought relatively large sums of foreign currency to Guizhou. For instance, in 1996 and 1997, tourism generated more than 38 and 44 million dollars, respectively. As of October of 1996, according to the Guizhou Tourism Bureau (GTB), with the help of tourism development, 95,475 households in 648 villages with 300,000 individuals had incomes that had risen to above the poverty line (Guizhou tourism agency, January 1997).

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The economic conditions of those households living in the destination areas have improved significantly. For example, in Heitu village, a popular destination for ethnic tourism, the per capita net peasant income jumped from RMB 167 to 670 in two years. In Langde, the net peasant per capita income of RMB 114 in 1982 rose to over 700 in 1992. According to an estimate by the GTB, income from tourism accounted for between forty and fifty per cent of household earnings in these villages ( Oakes,1998, page 185 ).

### **Diversifying rural economy and changing gender roles**

[22]

Ethnic tourism development has helped alter the economic patterns in these Miao destination villages. The demand from tourists' consumption stimulates many new economic activities. Some villages within or near these popular ethnic tourist sites have experienced changes in the division of labor, and developed new forms of production, such as running small restaurants, manufacturing handicrafts, or growing fruits and vegetables.

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This economic diversity has further helped in changing gender roles. Miao women had an inferior status to men in the past. Now they become partners in household decision making. They are the majority in much of the handicraft production, such as embroidering, weaving and batik waxing and dying; they are particularly involved in the commerce of selling handicrafts. Selling souvenirs is almost exclusively regarded as a woman's job. Women travel the countryside, collecting old textiles, bamboo instruments, masks and silver ornaments from villagers, and then sell them in the destination markets. Such activities have contributed a good cash income to their families. Working in the fields, their husbands, in contrast, may earn less than their wives. This helps to increase the women's status.

### **Strengthening of ethnic identity**

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Tourism has generated a sense of ethnic pride among the Miao through the new representations of Miao culture. For so many centuries, they were regarded as "uncivilized," wild and savage barbarians living in high hills and mountains. Since 1949 their political status has improved, but economic disadvantage has continued to keep them in a position of inferiority and, until recently, affected their self confidence. Now this too has started to change. The Miao

people and their culture are now appreciated by both Chinese and foreign people. Government leaders have come to them and said: "Preserve your culture and traditions; they are important. Do it not only for yourself, but for the nation." The foreign tourists choose to come to their community, to see their life style, to enjoy their various festivals and ceremonies, to buy their hand made products, all things which had no economic value at all in the past. The newspapers report and praise their cultural activities. All this has led the Miao group as a whole to a stronger sense of identity, to think about what they stand for, and to be proud to be Miao. They say: "Yes, in the old times the Han treated us badly. Now they lose their culture and hence both they and the foreigners appreciate ours. Now our Miao culture is well known in the world ."

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Tourism also stimulates investment in improved infrastructure. The roads to the tourist destinations have improved, Guizhou now boasts a fleet of tourist coaches numbering 176, and five local trains have been added to service popular destinations.

## **Negative impacts**

[26]

Tourism development in Guizhou has generated considerable economic benefits for the destination communities. Culturally, however, some losses seem to have occurred. Maybe this is most obvious in the patterns of dress. In some destination areas the Miao traditional dress is only used for performance, especially by the young generation. The Han dress, and even the Western style, has become more and more popular in these communities. Miao language has gradually been subsumed by Chinese. Some important rituals and customs are now more adapted for performance. In sum, ethnic tourism

development has had deep influences on the local traditional culture in many aspects. Of course it is difficult to clarify which cultural or social change is positive and which is negative. Here, when we talk about negative effects on the Miao culture and society, we mean that those changes regarded as moral corruption by the local people, or something that leads to loss or disappearance of local traditions.

### **The changing of attitudes toward visitors**

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The Miao can present you with a society of very nice people prepared to treat any stranger warmly. Sincerity, hospitality, honesty, and courage are important values in the Miao moral system. Before 1970, any visitor to these communities would be moved by the way the local people treated them. The host would sing humble traditional songs of welcome to the visitors, inviting them to sit at a table covered with dishes: "It is a great pleasure to have you as our guests, we are sorry we don't have anything to offer you on the table, the only thing we can offer you are the rice wine, our sincere heart and our song." Then the host would continuously serve the visitors delicious food and wine. Any attempt at payment for the reception would usually generate a good-natured argument and rejection by the host.

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Today, for some people in the destination villages, the idea of "foreigner" has changed; it simply means "dollar." That the foreign visitors are now charged for food and accommodation, of course, is acceptable and reasonable to them. Sometimes, however, visitors will be charged for more unreasonable things, such as a stroll through the village or taking pictures of the people and their houses. Visitors and residents argue over these transactions. The villagers often

sell their crafts to visitors persistently and aggressively. As the guests eat their meal of many dishes, the words sung as a reception song are still the same, but the underlying meaning has changed.

### **The change of social behavior and value**

[29]

Tolerance of hardship is one of the strengths of Miao people. Having lived through prejudice and discrimination, they have done their best in an oppressive environment. They learned to tolerate hardship, pain, poverty, and suffering in order to survive independently in society. Their sense of independence, hard work, persistence, diligence and commitment had become strengths in the past. After the introduction of ethnic tourism, these traditional values have started to change for some individuals. The following cases illustrate these changes.

#### **Case 1. Under the Tramway**

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I traveled to a scenic site named Tianhetan. To let the tourists view the whole scene, the tourist agency constructed a tramway almost two miles long. At our first glance of the communities under the tramway we were very happy; the weather was nice: sunshine, a warm wind, and beautiful landscape with green trees and colorful flowers. Suddenly a small voice came from the ground. I looked down and saw a very young girl about four years old. She stood under the tramway, looking up at us and asking: "uncle and aunt, please throw some money down here." We did what she asked. Two minutes later as we were sent forward, we found that all along the way below the cable there were many kids, aged from 5 to 13. They all asked the same thing from us, struggling and fighting each other for the

coins on the ground. I saw some of their mothers with much better clothes, working in the fields, not far from them, giving instructions from time to time. Instead of showing up in the school, the children were being trained with panhandler consciousness here by their mothers! It seems that their sense of self-respect and independence had been lost.

## **Case 2. The Miao Wedding**

[31]

I visited a Miao theme park near Tianhetan. This theme park provides a specific program, encouraging male tourists to experience a Miao wedding. Pretty Miao girls take part in different stages of the wedding, continually telling the male tourists that if they pay a certain sum they can move onto the next stage to have more experience. Although in this case the girls are not represented as prostitutes, it is not impossible to stimulate such behavior by this kind of program. The Miao are known as a group which have marriage by free will in some areas. This, however, does not mean that the physical relationship between a man and woman is free. Actually, both men and women are supposed to be responsible in relation to their sexual relationships, and there are moral restrictions regarding the public display of physical affection between a man and woman. For example, kissing in public is normally not accepted by many in their society. But now in this park, if the outsider paid, he could kiss a pretty Miao stranger in public. When we came out of the theme park, we found two old Miao men sitting and sighing at the gate: "The style changed, the young people changed. What will happen later?" They were shaking their heads. And they also said: "Why they don't provide our Miao boys with the tourist girl"?

## **The danger of losing indigenous cultural forms and meanings**

[32]

Ethnic culture is presented by the tourism agency mostly in the form of folk dances and ritual performances. Most minority dances and music have their own specific origins, and sometimes very serious meanings and purposes. Without such meaning, ritual will be only a husk. By being performed too frequently in a non-serious way, the rituals may lose their purpose.

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The two most common Miao instruments, the *lusheng* and the drum, were traditionally regarded by Miao society as very sacred. Each melody or tune carries a certain meaning. When the Miao have a funeral ceremony, for example, the drum and *lusheng* will play differently in a series melodies. Each melody is supposed to direct the dead back to a certain place on the way to where their ancestors' souls live. When the Miao celebrate their harvest, the music is supposed to tell the good news and give thanks to all their ancestors. These instruments were supposed to be played only on certain occasions, and not to be for every day use. Each time before the instruments were used, one had to give a sacred ceremony to the "spirits" of the instruments to invite them to the community. The instruments were also kept in a particular place within the home.

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To attract the tourists, the official tourist agency called for the Miao to "break the old ideology and to establish commercial consciousness." These two instruments became important tourist attractions played daily. In catering to the tastes of the foreigners, in many villages the tunes played by the *lusheng* have been changed to a "disco-style." A dance group from Heitu were labeled by the tourism office

as "*Dongfang disco*" (Oriental disco).

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This commercialization of lusheng and drum music made old people nervous and sad. The music is not supposed to be played under such circumstances. Some tunes are not supposed to be played for the guests. Gradually the youth lose their understanding of the old meaning of the music and their cultural heritage. Yet it is this culture that helped to hold the group together, and created the solidarity that has helped their people to go through all the difficulties during the terrible migrations in early history. Once they lose these traditions, they may get lost themselves.

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A sense of continuity with the ancestors and of having a cultural heritage instills a sense of responsibility toward community and society, and makes sacrifices for the collective possible. Yet the maintenance of the underlying meanings of the Miao rituals and ceremonies have been threatened by the development of ethnic tourism. The ceremony of sacrificing animals, which is part of ancestor worship, is an example.

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The Miao suffered a great many difficulties during their early history. The belief that their ancestors would always accompany and protect them has helped them gain confidence in their daily struggles. Sacrificing a bull to show their respect and appreciation for the ancestors was highly valued in this society. During the different steps of the ceremony, the shaman would sing different songs, telling about folk law, moral principles, their migrating history, and so on. The ceremony is both offered as history review and moral education for the youth. It is held once every 13 years, 16 years or even 30 or 60 years, depending on location and



group. It is a royal and solemn ceremony. Among the many different steps of this ceremony, there is one stage which is called "guest outside." During this stage, all the people who do not belong to this kinship or clan are not allowed to take part, including all the women, since they all come from other clans. Today when the Miao have such occasions tourists are allowed not only to join this secret stage, but also allowed to take as many photos and videos as they want. This is especially regarded by old Miao beliefs as ill-omened.

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Superficially it seems that "tourism has as yet had little noticeable impact on traditional rituals." Participants in the colorful religious ceremonies and processions make no distinction between the flashbulbs and video cameras. "The more spectators there are, the more the participants enjoy it." Actually, the reason for the participants to enjoy more spectators is absolutely not because they are practicing their traditional rituals. The local participants are happy because so many people enjoy their performance, and because more spectators means more income. In addition, such ceremonies cost a great deal. In the past the local people had to save money for many years to stage them. Nowadays the tourist agency and local government normally give their support, with the purpose of attracting tourists. At the same time, the Miao also need cash. Therefore they do not care that much about the commercialization of their rituals. They regard such ceremonies as performance only, not their original rituals. As some Miao have said: "this is performance for tourists; it has nothing to do with our own beliefs." Every time the Miao in these destinations arrange such occasions, the official tourist agency will advertise it and bring many tourists to watch. In fact, the GTB has already scheduled all of the region's Miao festivals and ceremonies. There are no longer any festivals arranged for their original purposes.

## **The danger of losing traditional production skills**

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Because there are few opportunities to earn cash, tourism industry offers a better opportunity for cash income than agriculture. When local Miao are confronted with the conflict between participating in the tourism activities or doing farm work, they normally put tourist receptions first; they do not want to miss any opportunity to get cash from tourism. This kind of prioritizing has certain long term effects on their farm land. Normally, for example, May and June are the best months for tourists to come to these communities. They are, however, also the key months for the farmers to cultivate their land and fertilize the wet rice fields with organic materials. Because of tourist activities, the only work the farmers have time to do during this important season is the very necessary transplanting. There is, however, no evidence of decreasing production, perhaps because the Miao farmers now have cash to buy chemical fertilizers. It is known that organic soils may be damaged in the long run if the soil is maintained only with chemical fertilizers. Some old people worry about the loss of the traditional skills and fertilizing knowledge. This will influence the quality of their land in long run. Since tourism does not guarantee their security in the future, they must still rely on arable land.

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More and more young people have lost their interest in farming as more tourists arrive in their communities. In some destination areas, for example Gaopo, even during the busy season, one can often see young people idling about in their village, in the open fields, and on the roads. They do nothing but watch passersby and chat, leaving all work in the fields and homes to their parents. They do not want to master farming skills; they do not want the same occupation

as their parents. The only jobs attractive to them are cash-oriented. Their dream is the "good life" represented by tourists. They view tourists as very rich, their cash unending. The tourists are seen with good cameras and video recorders, both very attractive to young local people. They don't appear to need to do any hard work in the sun and rain as the local young people's parents do, but rather possess a great deal of abundance. The tourist's life is just like "*shenxian rizhi*" (God's life): "They dress so well, eat what they want, spend money just like we consume water, (which doesn't cost anything), they pay a lot to buy something with no value, they stay in a good hotel where we're not allowed to go..." The young Miao people do not understand that to enjoy an overseas holiday, the tourists also have to work hard in their home countries to earn enough money. The misconception of the idyllic life in the western countries has made the young Miao people unsatisfied with their fate.

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In addition to threatening traditional farm skills, some traditional handicrafts skills may also be at the risk. Many designs of embroidering, for example, have specific meanings. According to the legends, the Miao used to have a writing system, but lost it in a river crossing when they were escaping from the Han. After crossing the river the leaders asked Miao women to embroider the words according to their memories. This may only be a myth, but the fact is that certain designs are regarded as genuine repositories of ancient Miao culture. For example, the three bands of different color embroidered at the fringe of women's skirts represent the three rivers crossed by their ancestors on their migration from north to south China. They maintain these beliefs by passing embroidery skills down from generation to generation. Such designs and the skill to make them are useful both for the historical and cultural education for the society and for the outside scholars. Now, most of the designs have changed to cater for the tastes of

tourists. In addition, most village girls no longer learn how to weave and embroider. They prefer to buy modern clothes in town.

### **Losing the land and other property**

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Much land in the destination areas is taken away from the Miao farmers for tourism development, in the form of plots for restaurants and shops, parking lots and roads. The remainder of the land left to farm is mostly rocky slope-land. Compensation given to the local residents is often too small and unfair.

#### **Case 1: Huangjia Piaoliu (Royal drift)**

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Based on policies meant to attract outside investment, foreign investors can easily lease land in Guizhou with the right of use for more than 50 years. In such cases, the compensation to the local people is very small. For example, in one Miao community, a river in a beautiful valley was leased to a Hong Kong company for 70 years to be developed as a rafting destination named "Huangjia Piaoliu." What the local residents got were: 1) a very small payment for the community (According to the interview, most of the members did not know how much it was); and, 2) 50 jobs provided by the company.

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For the company, it cost little to get access to such a large area of land and river. On the one hand, the company needed more than 50 laborers to serve the tourists, i.e., folklore dancers, singers, and security guards. The contract, however, did not say anything about employment conditions. Local residents

only get regular pay during the busy tourist season. On the other hand, the improvement of local infrastructure is very important for the company business. The little money that the community got was supposed to improve basic local amenities, but was a necessary cost for the company anyway. What had the local Miao received? Almost all of the income from the tourists, of course, went to the company. Now, if the households want to build a simple shelter to open a fast food restaurant, they have to rent a space on the land where they previously farmed.

## **Case 2: The Grave Cave**

[45]

In a village named Gaopo, the Miao used to bury their dead differently than other groups. They did not bury the coffins under the ground, but laid them in a cave high in the hills. Year by year, the cave became full of coffins. Without any prior consultation with local people, the GTB introduced the cave to tourists. Some smart Miao people followed the example offered by theme parks and tried to charge a gate fee at the foot of the cemetery hill. They were immediately chased away by the local authorities. There was also some discussion in the newspapers, criticizing similar behaviors in other places. Some Miao resented this: "It is our cave. Those people in the coffins are our dead ancestors. Why can they charge tourists a fee, while we are not allowed? The cemetery is our property." No matter how they complained, the cave became an economic asset to the agency without any compensation to the Miao owners.

## **Summarizing the effects**

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It is impossible to list all the positive and negative effects of ethnic tourism in Guizhou, but we can list some of them here:

*Positive effects:*

Increasing income

Generating foreign currency

Diversifying the local economy

Improving local infrastructure

Enhancing intercultural understanding and communication

*Negative effects:*

The loss of necessary hospitality

The loss of pride and traditional values

The loss of indigenous meanings hidden in traditional cultural forms

The loss of traditional subsistence skills

The loss of land

[47]

Comparing these two types of effects, we can find that: 1) the positive effects relate more to the economy, while the negative relate more to the cultural aspects of community. 2) the positive effects are immediately apparent and easily perceived by the society. Negative effects hide deeply in people's lives. They are less easily noted by the people. 3) Most of the positive effects depend on the extent of the negative effects, because they result specifically from ethnic tourism, which relies absolutely on local minority culture. If the negative effects are serious enough to threaten the cultural attraction of the community, ethnic tourism may disappear from this destination. Then the positive income effects and employment opportunities will also disappear from the local people's hands. Of course the positive effects may counteract the negative effects. For example, if a community could get enough income from tourism

to increase the level of education, the local inhabitants may have a higher capacity to participate in tourism management, and with greater control they may be able to design a healthier strategy for developing tourism in their community. And, 4) Almost all the costs of tourism are borne by local minorities, while the benefits mainly go to the outsiders.

## **Some reasons for ethnic tourism's negative effects in Guizhou**

### **Misunderstanding the implications of tourism development**

[48]

In China, especially in Guizhou, the dominant perspective has been that the tourism is an industry of "quick investment returns," that it is "pollution free" and that it has a "long life." These ideas have been expressed in almost all related newspaper and research articles since the 1980's. Most of the research on tourism in Guizhou has paid a great deal of attention to its economic benefits, and holds an over-optimistic view of tourism development as an efficient means to alleviate poverty. Very few voices have been heard on the negative impacts caused by tourism on the destination areas.

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In some ways, tourism is different from the traditional industries of modernization. It does not create a black smog. It may not produce as much waste as some manufacturing industries. Its consumption form differs from the consumption of other industries, too. People have to come to the destination personally to consume it, and they go back home without taking with them much material related to destination's physical resources. Therefore the resources of tourism are seemingly "renewable." Theoretically, this may

be true, but in reality the success and sustainability of tourism depends on its promotion strategy, and the type and scale of tourism development in a specific community. Under proper planning conditions tourism may in fact help protect the natural and cultural resource base of a community. Otherwise it may act to seriously degrade both the natural and cultural environments of the community. When introducing tourism to a society, it is thus very necessary to help people properly understand the full implications of tourism.

[50]

Unfortunately, an uncritical acceptance of the idea of tourism as a non-polluting, sustainable industry is strongly apparent in China. Tourism is regarded as bringing only benefits to society, and is promoted as a desirable activity for minority communities because these communities normally are the poorest and badly need investment. Therefore, from the policy makers to the local people in Guizhou, there is extreme enthusiasm for developing tourism, and no accompanying consideration for preventing or minimizing its likely negative impacts.

### **Unequal distribution of benefits from tourism development**

[51]

Benefits generated from tourism were not distributed equitably among all the social groups involved in Guizhou's tourism industry. First, there is a policy relating to reception of foreigners in China. Only a few standard hotels recognized by the state are allowed to provide accommodation to foreigners. Almost all such hotels are run by state units or foreign enterprises. Their revenues are kept by those units and enterprises.

[52]

Only the state has the official right to run tourist



agencies. In Guizhou the active body is the Guizhou Tourism Agency (GTA). It collects the tourists and takes them to different destinations. Normally the destination village will be asked in advance to prepare a cultural show, which will include a welcoming wine service and dancing. Such a show lasts about two hours. The GTA normally pays the whole group of about 20 to 30 villagers about RMB 300 as a reception fee. In situations when village leaders have asked the GTA to increase the reception fee, GTA makes it clear to them that they will lose their tourism business because the GTA will take the tourists to other villages (Oakes, 1998, page 181).

[53]

Scenic tourism is more place-bound than ethnic tourism. Few landscapes have similar qualities and it is impossible to move the landscape to some theme park. It is thus not easy to shift tourism from one such destination to another. For ethnic tourism, however, there are many villages with similar cultures in one area. In addition, it is possible to build a village theme park by copying the culture, since what is presented to the tourists is normally minority dress, dance and food. To shift from one village destination to another, or from a village to a theme park, is relatively easy. To keep their status as tourist destinations, the villagers have to accept conditions set by the GTA.

[54]

By restricting the local people from hosting foreigners, and by leasing land and the right to build infrastructure, government-owned and the foreign-owned travel agencies control large parts of the revenue generated by tourism. Little is left to local people. The villagers could only earn money by selling souvenirs, by collecting toilet fees from tourists, or by providing labor with low pay and low status to the tourists.

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Reasonably, the cost is supposed to be born by those receiving the benefits. If the residents are going to endure the negative impacts that is brought by tourism, they should be given every opportunity to benefit from the positive impacts. This is not the case in Guizhou. The local community is losing control over their own "resources," including their culture, due to lack of capital and power. Unable to take control of tourism development in the beginning, they have lost control over any consistent income from tourism.

### **Feeding a misunderstanding of modernization**

[56]

Different tourism development strategies may very well have different social-cultural consequences. The above mentioned popular attitude toward tourism in China has significantly influenced decision makers and conditioned tourism policies for minority areas. China's present goal is to realize modernization in four fields. But what is modernization? Both the government and academics fail to give a clear description of it. What the media presents and what most impresses the local people are Western living standards and style. But the gap between living standards in minority areas and the West is so large that to reach such a goal requires a great deal of outside investment to meet the cash needs of the individuals in the community. As a result, from leaders to the ordinary people, attracting investment and capital to build up such modernization has been the main concern. The isolation of these areas is not favorable to investment, and the only avenue toward earning capital is to sell their natural and cultural resources. The following expressions, often used by state officials, help to explain this desire: "Economic trade performing on a stage built by tourism" (*luliu datai, jingmao qiatan*), and "You help me to

develop, I help you to make a pile" (*nibangwo fazhan, wo bangni facai*). The principle of "lure business through festivals, lure investment by favoring business" also illustrates tourism's link to people's modernization desires. In 1993, for example, during the Huangguoshu Festival, the provincial government arranged to have RMB 1.85 billion worth of cooperation projects, according to the *Guizhou Daily* (Oakes, 1998, page 129).

[57]

By observing the tourists' life styles and other sources of information, the local minorities get a simple but specific picture of modernization, i.e. televisions, cars, videos, compact disks, etc. All these require cash. Since the government is preparing to sell material assets as well as rights, local minority people are eager to follow the same behavior. To speed up modernization, the government and the local people together are ready to sell the whole of Guizhou. Cash has become the main theme which occupies people's minds and affects their behavior.

### **Commodifying minority culture as the dominant strategy for ethnic tourism**

[58]

The fact that part of the traditional Miao culture has turned into a commodity can be seen as the key to the corruption of culture. The question of selling culture is not simply an economic issue. Marketing culture is different from marketing a beautiful landscape. Values and moral attitudes are embedded in rituals and ceremonies. When culture is sold, the intrinsic meaning of festivals, dances and ceremonies may also be sold. Among these, rituals express the core of the value system. Values and moral concepts relate closely to belief, mirrored by rituals. They function as the main supporters to community and are the

main regulators of community life. The commercialization of ceremonies might change people's beliefs and so change their behavior. Therefore, when marketing culture, one should be careful in selecting programs, and it is extremely important to consult with the local people. For example, when promoting the Miao wedding as a tourism attraction, the program could allow tourist couples -- instead of providing Miao girls to male tourists -- to experience a wedding with Miao tradition.

### **The shortsightedness of the local minorities**

[59]

Even though ethnic tourism development has brought so much cultural damage to their society, many Miao people seem to not resent tourism. Rather, from time to time, leaders from different villages often go to their local authorities to petition the opening of their village as a destination for ethnic tourism. By developing tourism in their community, they hope to solve their present problems. Benefits are quite real and visible in the short run, while the costs only become apparent in retrospect. Almost all the positive effects meet the needs urgently faced by local people in the present, while many negative effects have a longer time perspective. The current lack of resources and opportunities constrain people. They may not perceive clearly that to sustain their benefits from tourism, they must first be able to protect their culture.

### **Conclusion**

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There are many definitions of sustainable tourism development. For the present purpose, those offered by Inskeep and Vassilious are appropriate. Inskeep suggests that the maintenance of natural and cultural integrity and

equitably distribution of socio-economic benefits of tourism to local people should be the essence of sustainable tourism development (Inskoop, 1992, page 31). Vassiliou stresses that the development of tourism should take all factors into consideration "environmental, social availability of resources, etc." rather than simply responding to the requirements of tour operators. (Vassiliou, 1995, page 55). In general, these definitions stress three components of sustainable tourism development: efficiency, equity, and conservation. If we consider the requirements of sustainable tourism development as well as the effects presented above we may say that ethnic tourism is, at the present, not sustainable in Guizhou, despite laudable efforts in the implementation of sustainable development there by the government.

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Culture is not a static entity, it is a dynamic process, it changes over time. But such change should lead to a more healthy society. If people were given enough time, they could adjust themselves toward a new situation and choose the possibilities, to build a healthy community. Tourism is a different process, it bridges two societies that have a significant cultural, technological, and income gap. A relatively isolated society might experience adverse culture shock by such a sudden and close meeting. If a proper strategy for managing this process is lacking, the "disadvantaged" society may become a victim.

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In the case of Guizhou, negative effects brought by ethnic tourism threaten the sustainability of the minority society. The expected Butler cycle (Butler, 1991) of tourism development has already been observed in some Miao destination villages. Some villages have experienced a phase of intense popularity, but then as newer villages begin to

open up, the number of visitors to these destinations begins to decrease. Among other reasons, the villagers' behavior might explain this eventual decline in these villages. Some of the guides in Guizhou tourism agencies explain: "These people in these villages are too commercialized, they only worry about cash. They are spoiled" (Oakes, 1998, 167). Once a village has become too "modernized" and the people too "commercialized," tourists will be less interested in seeing it. They prefer new sites, so the GTA has to shift their business to the "more remote villages," because the people there are "more primitive," and thus are not so "commercialized."

[63]

The Miao ideology and value system give great importance of collectivism and hard work. Self-determination and self-respect are encouraged by the whole population. It is believed that it is these characteristics that have enabled the Miao as an ethnic group to survive through so many social, political, and ecological troubles and constraints. If the negative effects of tourism are extended, the society might not only be poor in economic terms, but also poor in spiritual terms. For the ethnic tourism industry it is very easy to shift business from one village to another; what is left to the local minorities after the tourism has shifted away might simply be more poverty. In this sense, we can say that with the current tourism development strategy in Guizhou, ethnic tourism may act as an amorphous mobile culture polluter. If the Guizhou government does not examine its current policies, and design new policies and strategies, based on the basic principles of sustainable tourism development, the victims will be the minorities: they will lose the last thing they have.

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Fortunately, all the adverse impacts today brought by ethnic

tourism are found in a limited area of Guizhou. There are as yet no indications that the minority culture and natural resources for ethnic tourism in Guizhou as a whole have been significantly overexploited. The total number of visitors to Guizhou as a whole is small but increasing every year. This indicates that this industry is still in its growth stage. However, when indicators of unsustainability become visible, it may be too late. Early awareness and more healthy strategies may allow the local minorities a better future with the help of the ethnic tourism industry.

[65]

Let me end my paper by borrowing Fox's words: "Tourism is like fire. It can cook your food or burn your house down" (Fox, 1976).

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