



# 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 socioeconomic 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)

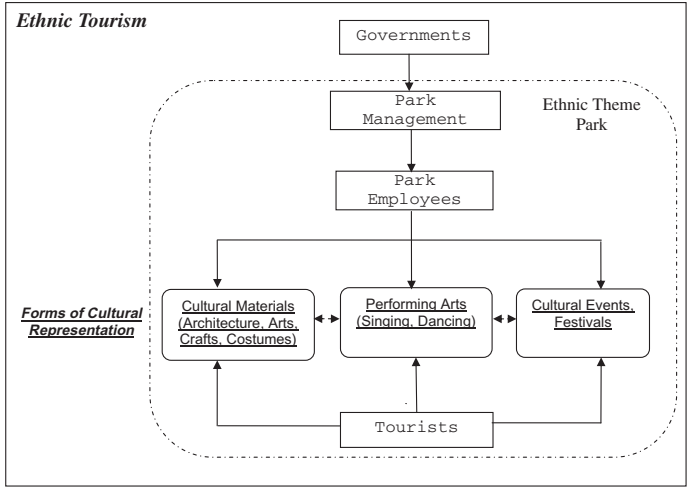
argued that such representation further entrenches the idea that minorities are of the past and ‘less developed.’ These representations may help maintain a tradition of accepted beliefs that legitimize a system of oppression based on ethnic differences. In an attempt to attract more tourists, performers have to dress the part by abandoning everyday clothes and donning costumes of the past, or ingrained representations of the past (Craik, 2001), which become their working clothes. The staged performance is adapted to suit tourists’ tastes. The culture of minority peoples has been fossilized in exhibitions, implying that it is not dynamic (Smith, 2003). As a result, many contemporary cultural attractions fall within tourists’ preconceptions, adopt fancy and colorful dress, and focus on spectacle (Stanton, 1989).

Contemporary cultural attractions are often viewed as spaces through which “power, identity, meaning, and behavior are constructed, negotiated, and renegotiated according to socio-cultural dynamics (Aitcheson & Reeves, 1998, p. 51). In Said’s (1991) study—‘How the West constructs the Orient’—he pointed out “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their configurations of power also being studied” (p. 5). Ethnic attractions reflect these configurations of power. As Ali (1991) notes, “[t]he ‘struggle over the relations of representation’, though it is not yet over, echoes strongly the legacy of empire in its ‘us’ and ‘them’ colonial relations. A politics of representation is altogether a more complex, more interesting and more open challenge for the future” (p. 211).

A large body of scholarship investigates Western-influenced representation of Others; however, a critical investigation regarding how the Other represents itself is missing from contemporary tourism discourse (Yan & Santos, 2009). Seeking to understand how non-Western cultural discourse has evolved in the context of ethnic tourism, this study analyzes a surviving ethnic theme park that was created in the period of “theme park fever” in China (late 80s—early 90s) and discusses tensions and issues associated with representations of ethnicity.

### *A Conceptual Framework*

A conceptual framework describing the possible relationships and components of the structure of a Chinese ethnic theme park experience was created (Fig. 1). The theme park is gated and features multiple cultures through material items (architecture, arts, crafts and costumes), performing arts and cultural events. Four groups of stakeholders are identified: (1) governments, (2) park management, (3) park employees, and (4) tourists. They are not the only stakeholders but they are important ones involved in ethnic tourism. Each of the groups has different powers, motives, goals, and attitudes towards minority cultures and tourism development. Most stakeholders are not members of ethnic minorities. Governments direct the development of ethnic tourism and oversee the park operation, whereas the park management supervises employees and selects, designs and controls the forms of cultural representation. Park employees embody



**Figure 1.** Cultural Representation at an Ethnic Theme Park

their cultures and represent them, while tourists receive and interpret cultures represented at the park. This framework is used to explore the relationships among the park, minority culture and ethnic tourism, and to understand how representations of multiple ethnic cultures are achieved in intercultural interactions involving power inequalities.

*Tourism and Ethnicity in Yunnan*

Yunnan is located in Southwest China and is home to the nation’s greatest geographical and cultural diversity (Fig. 2). It is one of China’s undeveloped areas with many impoverished counties, where minorities live. There are 25 officially recognized ethnic minorities comprising one-third of the province’s total population, living in two-thirds of Yunnan’s territory (Lee, 2001). The minorities’ quaint customs and traditional ways of life make up an exotic human ensemble that intrigues both Han Chinese and foreigners (Sofield & Li, 1998).

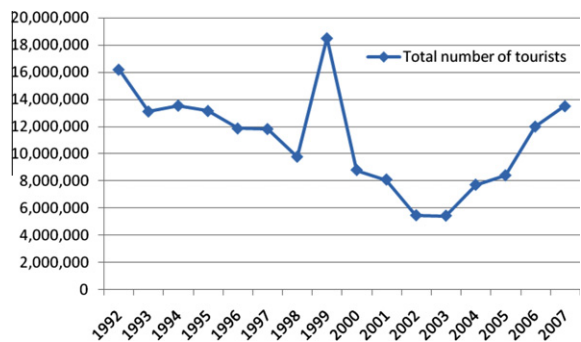
Yunnan began to embrace ethnic tourism in the early 90s as a means to help minorities break their isolation and as a vehicle for economic development and cultural sustainability (Davis, 2005). Taking advantage of its rich tourist resources and positive tourism policies, the tourism sector has achieved significant progress. It has become a source of economic growth in the provincial economy. A series of replica ethnic folk villages have been built to draw tourists and have become a model for the cultural development of other minorities (Chow, 2005).

*Study Site.* Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages (YEFV), with 25 minority cultures and covering 90 hectares, is located in a southwest suburb of Kunming City. The park provides displays of ethnic diversity through cultural performances, exhibitions of minority arts, crafts, costumes and agricultural tools, and 25 replica villages. The park has facilities

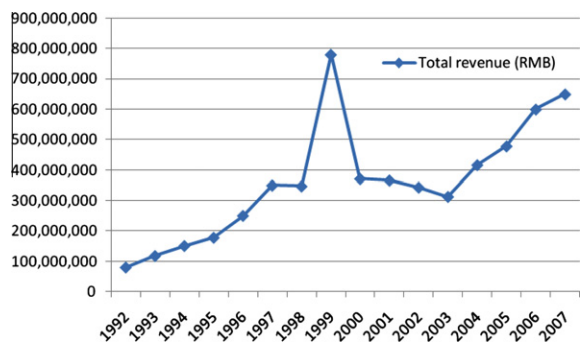


**Figure 2. Location of Yunnan**

for expositions, entertainment, celebrations and education. A variety of activities are presented to tourists, including walking tours of villages, dances, musical performances, ethnic festivals and ceremonies, food-tastings and elephant shows. It was ranked as a 4A national tourist attraction by the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) in 2001. This is the second highest tourist site rating in China. The tourist is able to gain a brief exposure to a selection of ethnic cultures without the necessity of traveling throughout Yunnan. In the past decade, the park has emerged as the one of the most popular tourist attractions in Kunming with a paid gate attendance in excess of 15 million guests in 2007 (interview with a park manager in 2008). The annual visitor numbers to the park and annual park revenues are presented in Figs. 3 and 4 respectively.



**Figure 3.** Tourist Flow in Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages from 1992 to 2007 (Interview with the manager of YEFV in 2008)



**Figure 4.** Annual Revenue of Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages from 1992 to 2007 (Interview with the Manager of YEFV in 2008)

*Methods.* Data were collected in Kunming in the summer of 2008. The working language was Mandarin and translation from Mandarin to English was done by the author. A pilot study was conducted in the summer of 2006 to test and validate field data collection and analysis methodologies. In an effort to limit personal and methodological biases, triangulation was used to neutralize bias and achieve convergence of results i.e. phenomena were examined from multiple perspectives and using varied sources of data. Triangulation is a way of improving the credibility, dependability and objectivity of study findings (Decrop, 1999). Methodological triangulation, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches—in this case, surveys, semi-structured interviews, casual conversations, on-site observation, and collection of documentary evidence—was employed. While quantitative methods can provide general information on the subject studied, qualitative research can supply a greater depth of information about how various stakeholders perceive representation of ethnicity and its relationship with tourism. Qualitative methods are often used to acquire an in-depth understanding of social phenomena in their natural

settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), to capture data that illuminate the inter-related subtleties of process and context (Creswell, 1998), or to generate deep and rich information on human activities including concepts, beliefs and values (Riley & Love, 2000). Combining both quantitative and qualitative methods helps ensure a greater understanding of questions being observed. When different methods generate similar findings, the validity of the results increases.

Interviews were conducted with key-informants including twenty-five park administrators and six government officials involved in overseeing, planning and managing the park. The interviews utilized a set of semi-structured questions to ascertain informants' perspectives on the park, minority cultures and tourism, and to explore their roles, objectives and involvement in the park, and to understand how ethnic culture is used to market tourism. Questions concerning how they are involved in and affect cultural display and park development, how they perceive tourist representations of minority culture, and how they view the commoditization of ethnicity were at the core of interviews. The interviews each ranged from half an hour to two hours. Some key respondents were interviewed twice to clarify responses or add more insights.

A questionnaire was designed to give an overview of perspectives of park employees and tourists on ethnic tourism, the park and cultural representation. The self-administered questionnaire survey was conducted with employees and tourists from June to August 2008. Before this survey, a test was undertaken with 20 park employees and 30 tourists to verify the validity and clarity of the survey questions. Several changes were subsequently made to the wording to clarify some questions. Questionnaires were comprised of both closed and open-ended questions. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 = strongly disagree; 3 = neutral; and 5 = strongly agree, was used. The survey took place over weekdays, weekends and public holidays. Each respondent was given a small souvenir as a token of appreciation in order to increase the response rate. With the assistance of park staff, surveys were distributed to 389 full-time park employees including tour guides, dancers, craft makers, souvenir vendors, restaurant workers, guards and cleaners. Two hundred and forty-one completed surveys were returned for a response rate of 62%. A variety of topics were addressed in the survey, including on-the-job perspectives on public displays of ethnic culture and everyday experiences with tourists, relationships among park management, employees, and tourists, and tourism impacts on daily life and culture. Additionally, informal interviews with 58 employees were conducted individually or in small groups to gather their views on the park's representation of minority cultures, their perceptions of the influences from tourists and other ethnic groups, and their concerns with work. The topics of misrepresentation, authenticity, commoditization of ethnicity and cultural identity were discussed. The interviewees were selected through convenience sampling in each folk village.

Five hundred questionnaires were distributed to tourists at the main park entrance and 415 (completed) were returned for a response rate



of 83%. Demographic data of tourists were collected, along with their expectations, attitudes and experiences concerning minority cultures represented at the park. The tourists' perceptions of ethnic product features, assessments of park attractiveness and the level of satisfaction with their experience in the park were the focus of the survey. Informal interviews with 62 tourists on specific topics were also conducted in more depth in order to better understand their perceptions of cultural authenticity and their experiences on their visit. The interviewees were approached in a tea shop, restaurants, or near the exit of the park. These discussions with tourists provided valuable information for understanding the tourists' expectations and perceptions, and supplemented and reinforced the information gained from the tourist survey.

On-site observations were undertaken to observe and record park employees' and tourists' activities and behaviors, and the interaction among tourists, operators and minority people. These data were used to illustrate and help fill in gaps in interviews and survey data. Detailed information on state policies on tourism, cultural parks and ethnic minorities, and history, current situation and development plans for YEFV were collected and analyzed. Tourism brochures, magazines, books, video CDs, and flyers were reviewed for additional insight into promotional tactics. Tourism plans, government documents, newspapers and scholarly publications were examined to identify topics associated with the park operation and to understand the effects of tourism on minorities.

Numerical data were coded and analyzed by using SPSS 17.0. Percentages, cross-tabulations, and non-parametric tests such as chi square were conducted. Transcripts were analyzed by searching for common themes and individual variations. This involved analyzing and exploring each transcript in regard to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about various themes pertinent to cultural display and tourism. [Table 1](#) provides major themes identified from selected interview responses. Finally, the ideas and perspectives expressed by individual interviewees were compared with the information from the survey sample.

### *Study Findings*

*Representation of Culture.* YEFV was created in 1992 by the provincial government to use ethnic culture to attract tourists and investment and, at the same time, to promote cultural development, ethnic diversity and national unity. The park is a part of a governmental tourism project—Kunming Dainchi National Tourist Resort, which is the only one of twelve national level resorts in the western inland provinces in China. YEFV is state-owned and under the supervision of Kunming Dainchi National Tourist Resort Committee (KDNTRC). The general manager is appointed by the local government and reports to the director of KDNTRC. There are 389 full-time park employees, of which 189 are minority people who are in direct contact with tourists. Minority workers, representing 25 ethnic groups, play a fundamental role in



**Table 1. Selected Interview Responses**

Interview questions	Responses	Park managers (Total N=25)	Government officials (Total N=6)
How do you perceive cultural representation in YEFV?	Presents healthy and progressive aspects of minority culture	23	6
	Genuine and authentic representation of minority culture	20	5
	Staged, fragmented or superficial cultural portrayals	5	0
What do you think about commoditization of ethnicity in ethnic tourism?	Commoditization is inevitable	21	4
	Commoditization does not necessarily destroy minority culture	19	4
	Commoditization leads to dramatic cultural change and acculturation	15	3
What are your feelings about YEFV overall?	A popular tourist attraction	25	6
	An important multi-ethnic cultural center	22	6
	Profit-oriented and consumer-driven	12	1
How do you view the privatization of YEFV?	Privatization is not necessary	20	3
	More profitable if run by a private owner	5	2

presenting their culture and interacting with tourists. They wear traditional costumes, work in old-style houses, dance, sing, weave, make sculpture and crafts, and engage in tourist activities in the park.

The park was established with three purposes: (1) to present the cultures of 25 Yunnan ethnic minorities; (2) to preserve and revive ethnic cultures and to enhance cultural pride; and (3) to strengthen the unity of the ethnic minorities and provide educational opportunities. The political and cultural functions of YEFV were highlighted by a government official:

Yunnan has the most diverse ethnicity in China, but its remoteness, weak roads, and poor transportation system have made many ethnic areas inaccessible. It was a government decision to establish a cultural theme park in Kunming, the provincial transportation hub, to give

more tourists opportunities to view rich minority cultures. Many local minority governments and organizations are interested in building partnerships with the park and participating in its projects. We [the local government] follow state policies, guide its development and oversee the management. We have provided support such as loans and subsidies to the park (interview with a government official in 2008).

An official from KDNTRC stated that YEFV is not only a popular tourist attraction but also an important ethnic cultural research and education center. It helps maintain and develop ethnic culture and preserve traditional minority architecture, art forms and lifestyles that are vanishing. Besides the economic rationale for establishing the site, YEFV is intended to provide impetus to economic and cultural exchange between ethnic minorities and with people from other parts of China and the world. It not only functions as a cultural showcase but also endeavors to introduce and encourage tourists to visit hinterland areas, thereby drawing investment to ethnic regions. A large area representing the unity of 25 minorities was built at the center of the park. Several managers pointed out that the central theme of YEFV is to present the “healthy and progressive” aspects of minority culture:

Our goal is to present the healthy and progressive aspects of minority culture to the public and meanwhile, to preserve and revive traditional art forms, music and languages, and to help minorities to develop their culture. However, not all traditional culture is worth saving such as certain religious rituals and superstitious practice. We take the essence of minority culture and abandon its dregs. Through a careful selecting process, very good aspects of ethnic culture are being protected, developed and presented to tourists. Public display of ethnic culture is a sensitive task. If it is not done properly, it may cause problems between the park and minority groups. For instance, several years ago, the Wa minority complained that the replica Wa totem pole in the park distorted their image due to displays of nude images of their ancestors. We had to rebuild the pole and apologize for it to Wa people (interviews with park managers in 2008).

A manager explained that state cultural and tourism policy has had dramatic impacts on the site. Promoting “healthy and progressive” elements is a guiding principle of the central government’s cultural policy. Historically, minority people and their culture were considered as primitive and backward by the majority Han people. When the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, China officially declared itself as being a “unified multinational country”, one republic with numerous nationalities (Lee, 2001). The focus of ethnic policy was to integrate all groups through assimilation and to preserve national unity (Lee, 2001). Many past cultural traditions were rejected and tourism development was restricted. Minority culture was branded as “feudal superstition” and an impediment to modernization during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). After the adoption of the policy of reform and opening-up of China at the end of the 1970s, China began to re-evaluate its cultural past and encourage tourism (Yan & Bramwell, 2008). Particular considerations have been given to the needs of

minorities and preferential policies have been introduced towards them. Anti-poverty initiatives have been applied to minority areas in order to convert their resource advantages into economic advantages and to foster social and economic development. Promoting cultural development among minorities has been a major focus of ethnic policy (Shih, 2002). As a post-Mao modernization strategy, cultural development implies “change and improvement toward more civilized, elite forms.... the attainment of literacy, an education in science and technology, understanding of modern commerce, expertise in enterprise management, and even an entrepreneurial spirit” (Oakes, 1998, p. 136). The objective of such development is not simply cultural but also economic: the manipulation of traditions to support modernization. Under the new market criteria, minority culture has become a marketable product (Yang & Xu, 2004). A growing affluence and nostalgia among Chinese people has also stimulated ethnic tourism.

Shifting socioeconomic and political contexts and growing decentralization in China’s governance since the reforms have had significant impacts on the development of YEFV. Local governments have gained greater autonomy after reforms and have actively promoted regional development using rich ethnic resources. The creation of YEFV matched the government’s agenda and became a valuable socialist tourism project. In the 90s, the local government had strong influence on the development of the park through investment and allocation of resources. Cultural selection strictly followed the “healthy and progressive” policy and limited commercial exhibitions were presented at the park. Since 2000, the local government has cut back subsidies and turned the park into a market-oriented enterprise. Park management has gained greater autonomy in selecting and marketing cultural items and tourist shows. They are less concerned about the consolidation of socialist values, but care more about business success.

As indicated by the general manager, YEFV selectively portrays the best of those tangible, popular and exotic aspects of minority culture that tourists can identify with and appreciate in a one-day visit. The emphasis is on the cultural materials (old-style houses, costumes, arts and handcrafts), the performing arts (singing and dancing), and cultural events and festivals. Tourists can walk through the “villages”, look over the shoulder of an ethnic worker making crafts, taste minority food, watch shows and even briefly participate in a simple dance or celebration. Although the park presents only replicas of ethnic culture, its unique location close to minority areas provides a high degree of authenticity to tourists (Li, 1995). As a manager noted,

YEFV is blessed with rich ethnic resources and beautiful landscapes in Yunnan. We have combined ethnographic exhibition of ethnic arts, crafts and architecture with live performance of minority music, dances, ceremonies and festivals. We have consulted cultural experts, selected those exotic, enjoyable and meaningful aspects of minority culture, and carefully designed programs for tourists. Many young ethnic employees from remote minority villages have been hired and trained to present their culture in a professional way. Several traditional wooden houses from minority villages were bought and

shipped to the park to create a more authentic atmosphere. Ethnic festivals and celebrations are held and the media are invited to come and help promote the site (interview with a park manager in 2008).

Although minorities are encouraged to revive their culture and to maintain ethnic characteristics as members of a multi-national country (Li, 2004), not all aspects of ethnic culture are accepted in the process of cultural revival and tourism development, and only officially recognized “healthy and progressive” elements are supported in the park. The exotic, more popular elements of minority culture such as traditional architecture, bright minority clothing, and happy dancing shows and festivals are highlighted in public display as positive expressions of ethnic identity and are celebrated in shows for tourists. Conversely, certain traditions and activities such as religious rituals and indigenous practices are considered joyless and excluded from tourism. Minority folk songs, dances, costumes and festivals are all modified and staged to suit political agenda and commercial needs.

*Perceptions of Authenticity.* Authenticity is an ambiguous concept for most managers interviewed, who believe that the park provides an authentic portrayal of minority cultures, but who also indicate that modification and reconstruction are necessary in tourist shows. A manager stressed the necessity of cultural selection as follows:

We are trying to portray the best of those original minority cultures and give tourists authentic cultural experiences. However, we have to modify some aspects of minority culture in the shows to meet tourist demands. It is impossible for the park to give a detailed representation of all facets of the various minority cultures. The best one can hope for is a representation that tourists can accept and appreciate. Most tourists are on a vacation and they are only looking for fun, relaxation, and experience of exotic people and different culture. Nobody wants to see disease and poverty, which are also authentic aspects of minority life. Most people only spend half a day at the park and they do not have enough time to learn the deep, complex aspects of minority culture. Few people know minority culture deeply, nor care about cultural accuracy (interview with a park manager in 2008).

Not all aspects of minority culture are valued by managers; tourist needs and desires are their highest concerns. They generally believe that exotic cultural images, dance shows and quaint customs of minorities are the most marketable forms of cultural tourism. In the words of managers, “minority people are expected by the majority society to continue their quaint traditions.” Therefore, the park explicitly portrays, markets and promotes elements of minority culture deemed “primitive,” “pre-modern,” exotic and joyful. Tourists can view only limited historical aspects of minority cultures and their lifestyles. In the past fifty years, almost all minority groups have undergone dramatic economic and socio-cultural change and are moving towards a modern lifestyle. However, the park freezes minority culture in an older time and contrived space and provides partial, fragmented and mostly static exhibits. Ethnic images are standardized into predictable and non-confrontational stereotypes and are commodified into easily consumed forms.

According to a manager, in recent years many efforts have been made to improve the overall authenticity of the park, including upgrading park facilities and consulting cultural specialists and the highly respected ethnic elders. In order to make the park more appealing, each of the villages has developed activities such as cultural shows using some louder percussion instruments, involvement in a game of skill, or performing a dance that encourage tourists' participation. Festivals and events have been added to evening shows and holiday programs to attract more tourists and local residents. In fact, ethnic festivals have become a new highlight of tourist activities during the holidays. The individuals who are proven experts in their own ethnic cultural background are selected to supervise each of the twenty-five cultural demonstrations or "villages." Special training sessions are offered for young minority workers who are involved with tourists directly.

The employee survey suggests that the perceptions of authenticity of the folk villages and cultural shows were strong among the majority of park employees. Most respondents were minority people (68%) and nearly half (48%) were between 20 and 30 years old, followed by 23% under 20 years old and 20% aged 31 to 40. Although the survey sample had slightly more males than females (52% to 48%), the park actually has more female employees than male (60% to 40%). As indicated in Table 2, most of them (74%) believed that the folk villages and cultural shows authentically represent the life and culture of minority peoples. Close to 57% of respondents agreed that ethnic souvenirs are authentic. However, many respondents (55%) perceived that tourism has increased commercialization of minority culture and a considerable proportion (41%) were concerned that staged shows make minority culture less valuable. Chi square tests indicated perceptions of minority workers regarding authenticity differed significantly

**Table 2.** Park Employees' Perceptions of Cultural Authenticity (N = 241).

Statement	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral/Don't know %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	$\chi^2$	P-value
Ethnic folk villages are authentic	0.0	15.8	10.0	59.2	15.0	133	0.000
Ethnic cultural shows are authentic	0.0	4.6	21.3	55.0	19.2	58	0.000
Ethnic souvenirs are authentic	0.0	16.7	27.1	56.3	0.0	78	0.000
Tourism increases cultural commoditization	0.4	0.4	44.6	47.1	7.5	3.22	0.521
Staged cultural shows make ethnic culture less valuable	17.5	21.7	19.6	21.7	19.6	57	0.000

from those of Han employees for both cultural shows and ethnic souvenirs. Minority workers tended to support the claim of authenticity, while many Han employees were not sure about it.

Interviews revealed divergent views on authenticity of the site. Twenty percent of interviewees thought that the park is partially authentic as it reflects some aspects of minority culture. However, nearly a third of interviewees asserted that the park is too commercial and provides inaccurate representations of minority culture. Several minority dancers pointed out that the performances were superficial shows and not high quality programs that could faithfully represent minority culture. They were concerned about the profit-oriented park operation and staged cultural shows. A dancer complained about dance shows in the park:

I dislike the dance shows performed here because dances have been modified dramatically. Our ethnic group are friendly and hospitable people. We have subtle culture, beautiful songs and elegant dances, but the park manager only allows us to perform simple and primitive dances. Girls have to wear short skirts and keep swinging their long hair in the show and boys need to make loud shouts like animals. We become barbarians in the tourist shows (interview with a park employee in 2008).

Interviewees generally agreed that all cultural shows are focused on entertainment, not education. They have little say in a representation of their culture. Several interviewees complained that “authentic cultural shows are rare, but fake cultural exhibitions are everywhere. We felt as if we were working in an amusement park with an emphasis on entertaining tourists. We do not like showing fake culture and we may quit the job after gaining some experiences.” A few interviewees indicated that cultural shows presented to tourists are different from their native cultures. They are practicing indigenous customs and religions behind the direct gaze of tourists.

A number of interviewees pointed out that most park guides who wear ethnic clothes and act as minority people are not real minority members, but tourists do not know this. A manager explained that the guide job requires government certification and good interpersonal skills, but most minority workers have very low education and they lack business skills; therefore, they have hired many certified Han girls who know how to please customers. Ninety-nine percent of guides are young girls. The gender imbalance was acknowledged by a manager, but he added that “bright and colorful minority women’s clothes better catch the tourists’ eyes.” They do not discriminate against male guides, but customers’ preference influences the labor market and tourists always choose young and attractive girls clad in ethnic attire as their tour guides. Here, the image of minority women’s youth, beauty and sexuality has been used to allure customers. The park has constructed a feminized image of exotic otherness for tourists’ consumption.

In fact, it is common to see gendered representation and marketing of ethnic culture and tradition (Gladney, 1999; Yang & Wall, 2009). In

the creation of the exotic, gender plays a critical role in the construction, representation and consumption of tourism landscapes (Aitchison, Macleod, & Shaw, 2000). Among many ethnic minorities, females usually bear the burden of upholding cultural traditions as women are more closely linked to ethnic commodity production (Gibson, 2001; Swain, 1995). The contemporary consumer-driven economic and media context has made it profitable to include stereotyped representations of minority women within tourism promotion. Images of ethnicity and gender are effective marketing tools not only within local cultural economies, but also in the global tourism market (Banet-Weiser, 2009).

Minority interviewees generally take pride in their heritage and appreciate the opportunity provided by the park to present their culture to tourists in a positive context. Some interviewees felt that the park provides them with a sense of identity, meaning and attachment. However, several interviewees expressed concerns regarding acculturation, change of identity and the sustainability of minority culture. They worry about the negative influence of Han culture and urban values on minority youth. Many young minority people came to work in the park because they are attracted by the modern world and wish to change their “destiny.” However, they may receive a distorted, atypical view of the modern world.

Tourist surveys reveal that the perceptions of authenticity were strong among the majority of Chinese tourists. Because few international tourists visit YEFV, the sample was confined to nationals. The clientele included a large proportion of Han Chinese, who were relatively young, well-educated, and mainly from the economically developed areas of China. As indicated in Table 3, most of respondents (64%) perceived cultural shows as authentic, 58% believed that the park authentically represents the life and culture of minority people, and 62% thought that ethnic souvenirs are authentic. A large number of tourists could not judge authenticity due to lack of knowledge (36% regarding the folk villages, 27% cultural shows, and 24% ethnic souvenirs). The result is not surprising given the fact that Chinese schools teach predominately Han culture and most tourists (62%) have little information about minority culture prior to the visit. The spectacular

**Table 3.** Tourists’ Perceptions of Cultural Authenticity (N=415)

Statement	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral/ Don’t know %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Ethnic folk villages are authentic	1.0	4.3	10.0	50.0	7.8
Ethnic cultural shows are authentic	1.1	3.0	21.3	53.0	10.6
Ethnic souvenirs are authentic	3.0	10.0	23.6	54.2	8.0



images of shows, exotic minority costumes and traditional architecture portrayed in mass media and tourism advertising are mainly used to evaluate authenticity. Thus, tourists’ perceptions of authenticity are very blurred and fluid.

The levels of satisfaction of respondents with their visits were very high. As indicated in Table 4, almost all (90%) were satisfied with the shows, 85% enjoyed their overall experience at the park, 77% liked ethnic food, 75% liked park services, 82% enjoyed tourist facilities and 88% favored the educational information provided by the park. Most (82%) indicated they would visit the park again in the future and 88% said that they were motivated by the park to visit real ethnic villages. Tourists generally are aware that the settings are staged and they are mainly in search of enjoyment and relaxation on their visits. The interview results were consistent with the survey findings. Most interviewees described the nature of their experience at the park as “fun”, “enjoyable”, “playful” or “relaxing.” Comments made by interviewees include: “It is cool! I have seen real natives at work in their own grass huts.” “I enjoyed shows and dancing with minority people. I felt like in an authentic setting.” “I like ethnic festivals on the long weekends. They are great fun and entertaining.” “I love elephant shows and our cute minority guide.” In fact, elephant shows were the highlight of the trip for many interviewees.

Informal interviews with tourists indicate that cultural exoticism is the primary draw for tourists. Most of them were satisfied with staged cultural shows and enjoyed their experience, while a small number were disappointed with the superficial portrayals and brief encounters between guests and hosts. A few tourists complained that minorities are losing their exotic image as they saw cell phones or iPods hang around dancers’ necks. Tourists suggested that more interpretation of the exhibits and more educational programs are desirable. Some recommended adding more ethnic festivals or cultural events on the long weekends. Authenticity is not a significant problem for many tourists and they do not object to pastiche, manufactured goods, and modern constructions.

*Economic Factors.* Although the park is state-owned, it is self-supporting. It raises funds by charging for admission: RMB 70 (\$10). This in-

**Table 4.** Tourist Satisfaction (N = 415)

Statement	Very dissatisfied %	Dissatisfied %	Neutral %	Satisfied %	Very satisfied %
Ethnic architecture	3.6	1.0	8.7	62.9	23.9
Cultural shows	3.6	0.5	6.3	55.4	34.2
Overall experience	2.9	1.4	10.1	70.6	14.9
Ethnic food	1.9	0.7	20.2	42.2	34.9
Park services	2.9	1.0	21.0	54.9	20.2
Tourist facilities	0.0	5.3	12.8	53.3	28.7
Educational information	0.7	1.2	10.8	29.6	57.6

cludes admission and participation in some activities for the day (walking tour of the villages, music, dance and elephants shows). Visitors pay extra for food and some special programs. A large number of professional administrators, the majority of whom are Han Chinese, constitute the park management. They function as entrepreneurs in that they are responsible for securing the budget and maintaining the successful operation of the park. The government finances the park when local festivals and events are held at the park. From its first days of operation, the park witnessed an up and down trend in its clientele. It drew over 16 million tourists in 1992, and it reached the peak of 18 million tourists in 1999 when the World Horticulture Exposition was held in Kunming. However, following the failure of hundreds of cultural theme parks in China, YEFV has also faced many challenges due to a decline in visitor numbers and revenues since 2000. A new management board was set up in 2004 to search for ways to increase village patronage and financial performance.

New managers are more concerned with how to attract new patrons, increase repeat visits, enhance the amounts spent in the park in addition to general entrance fees, and how the expansion of offerings and exposure to the village have affected potential tourists. In attempts to make the park more appealing, they have upgraded park facilities, beautified the environment, added variety to park offerings such as elephant shows, cultural events and festivals, and consulted university experts on minority cultures. The multiple food and souvenir options have also contributed to revenue-generating opportunities. Commercial profits have become a driving force in operating the park. Consumer satisfaction and entertainment programs have been emphasized, while less attention has been paid to cultural representation and education. Many managers stated that they work towards profit first and cultural accuracy later. Several said that the park could be more profitable if run by a private owner.

In fact, privatizing the park has been discussed many times in government meetings since 2000 and has caused fierce debate. Some officials argue that the park should be a private enterprise, thereby getting rid of the financial burden for the government. Others insist that privatizing the park and outsourcing cultural heritage into private hands must be viewed with caution because it may jeopardize the park's cultural and educational functions. The privatization plan is still under review, but some officials anticipate that privatization will occur sooner or later. Managers generally believe that government support is essential for a successful tourism business. Most of them have negative reactions to the privatization plan and hope to get more governmental subsidies. Only a few managers are concerned that minority cultural resources are threatened by the short-term profit-oriented business operation. A manager expressed his concerns as follows:

This is a cultural park representing 25 ethnic cultures in Yunnan. However, tourists can see only "superficial smiles" of minority workers, happy dances and comical elephant shows. Ironically, elephant shows have become the most popular program in a cultural park.

Meaningful educational programs have been cut back and similar souvenir shops are all over the park. A tea house was built last year and luxury hotels will be built soon. Authenticity is a struggle. Our goal is to make folk villages a genuine reproduction, but inauthenticity is constantly built into the site. The focus of the general manager is on profits rather than culture. It is frustrating! YEFV is becoming an “amusement park” (interview with a park manager in 2008).

The increasing commercialism has also raised concerns of minority employees. Many interviewees thought the park is becoming too commercial and they were disappointed with superficial representations of minority culture. They were concerned that the fragmented and limited exhibits may mislead tourists into thinking that minority people still live a “pre-modern” and “backward” life. Some employees refused to perform some heavily modified cultural shows or work overtime. Several said that they take off work uniforms as soon as work is over because work uniforms are cheaply made by the Han factory and they are not authentic ethnic clothes. Many indicated that a park career is short as workload is heavy and pay is meagre; therefore, they may quit the job and look for a better job opportunity. Others stated that they would return to their home town and start their own business after gaining skills and experiences at the park. In fact, minority employees tend to leave the park after two or three years. The operators have to recruit new workers every year. Lack of skilled minority workers has become a big obstacle for park development.

Potential visitors have the choice of a wide variety of leisure opportunities, thus requiring the park to compete against a broad range of tourist attractions. In spite of the conscious effort being made to improve the park, continuing problems exist, including cultural issues, dissatisfaction of tourists, management problems, labor disputes and other difficulties that occur when large numbers of different minority people work together. It is a challenge to satisfy the needs of the curious tourists and to provide for the enrichment and improvement of its ethnic employees as well as to meet the goals of the government and park management and, thus, to fulfill the three objectives for which the park was created. Pressures from within the administration board as well as from the market make management a difficult task.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Since 1978, China has undergone unprecedented change, moving from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. The state has initiated a series of strategies to forge national unity and ethnic harmony. Ethnic tourism has been used as a mechanism to alleviate poverty and integrate minorities into the dominant society since the 1980s (Oakes, 1998; Shih, 2002). Minority groups have been gradually incorporated into tourism through the commoditization of ethnicity—the production and consumption of ethnic goods and ethnic ways of

life. Many standardized and performance-oriented ethnic theme parks have been built to educate the public about the history and culture shared in an imagined Chinese community throughout the country (Dong & Li, 2006). The consumption of ethnic culture is not only driven and shaped by market needs, but is also subject to changes in political and cultural climates. Thus, on the one hand, the selection of culturally significant themes and representation of ethnic diversity depend on the socio-economic framework in which cultural tourism exists. Ethnic representation, on the other hand, can be a powerful political instrument in shaping a collective Chinese nationalism or legitimising a dominant regime. This paper has investigated cultural representation in an ethnic theme park and tourism impacts on cultural authenticity. The general challenges identified are not unique to the study site but, in fact, are common in places where socio-economic and power imbalances are large and cultural traditions are being developed for tourism.

A conceptual framework was designed to examine how minority cultures are presented to the public. Four key groups of stakeholders—governments, park managers, employees, and tourists—were identified in the case studied as foci of analysis. These stakeholders differ not only with respect to the influence they wield, but also in regard to the positions that they hold on cultural display and tourism promotion. As a product of the socialist market economy, YEFV is borne out of complex exchanges, competitions and collaborations between these stakeholder groups. The representation of ethnic landscapes conveys multiple, different and even competing ideologies. The site is filled with tensions about the authoring and marketing of culture, which reveals how dominance and resistance between the powerful state and capital and the less powerful ethnic individuals within society is expressed.

The park affords examples of the tensions between dominance and resistance, themes that have been discussed in a number of studies (Nyiri, 2006; Swain, 1989; Wall & Xie, 2005). These authors have argued that tourists are interested in minority culture and heritage in China, whereas ethnic groups are either passively or actively resisting the representation of their culture for the sake of tourism revenue alone (Su & Teo, 2009). Their main concerns are over cultural hegemony and the relations between cultural preservation and tourism development. Representation is a key concept for revealing how cultural hegemony is attained and maintained (Lefebvre, 1991). Oakes (1998) argued that external capital originating from the majority Han, and supported by the state, has overtaken small-scale indigenous tourism businesses and incorporated minority people into the broader labor and commodity markets. The dominant group can exert influence and control over the minority groups through manipulation of representation. The representation of ethnicity reflects a contested selection of what various stakeholders think should be presented to consumers. The ultimate choices contribute to the creation of public memory that shapes understanding of the place and people (Waitt & McGuirk, 1996).

YEFV is full of latent conflict. Hegemony is perpetuated in representations of minority culture. Through the representation of “otherness,” the powerful are able to construct hegemonic discourse, and reinforce their values and orders (Cresswell, 1996). The state and capital can shape ethnic landscapes for political and economic interests in the course of tourism development. Meanwhile, the less powerful can also use representation to contest hegemonic discourse. Minority employees are not passive receivers of the dominance imposed by the state and capital. They show resistance by refusing to perform certain heavily modified shows or quitting their job. They are increasingly demanding equal rights and negotiating for more job benefits. They are also reviving their traditional customs and practicing indigenous religions behind the direct gaze of the state and tourists. As a means of attaining hegemony, representations serve different agendas of particular groups in expressing symbolic meanings and defining or reinforcing their identities (Jackson, 1989). Hegemony is readjusted and re-negotiated constantly in the cultural discourse (Gramsci, 1971). The inherent power imbalance between the state, entrepreneurs and ethnic groups shapes tourism practices of minorities and determines the public discourse of ethnic identity.

YEFV serves as a good example for understanding tourism and Chinese nationalism. Similar to many cultural attractions in developing countries, YEFV is constructed not only in response to the requirements of cultural tourism but also to the needs of internal domestic politics (Bruner, 2005). The desire for nation building and economic development has been emphasized by park authorities. The park caters primarily to a domestic market rather than foreign tourists and serves national political purposes. Most of Yunnan’s ethnic groups have a history of conflict and subsequent negotiation with the Chinese government (Swain, 1990). Strengthening unity among ethnic groups is the essential objective of China’s ethnic policy (Lee, 2001). Designed as an educational center, YEFV showcases an official version of minority peoples and their cultures. It demonstrates ethnic harmony by portraying minorities as “happy” groups united in a socialist “harmonious” society. The significance of YEFV in national identity building is considerable.

As China is rapidly being transformed from a communist country “serving the people” to an entrepreneurial state, the boundary of commoditization and politicization in tourism and other industries is blurred (Su & Teo, 2009; Yang & Xu, 2004). Commoditization allows the state, through a public-private partnership with tourism corporations, to employ the power of bureaucracy and capital to “secure the economic foundations of its hegemony through promoting the economic interests of subaltern classes and thereby consolidating their support” (Jessop, 1982, p. 151). Economic benefits generated through commoditizing minority culture can help peripheral places such as Yunnan catch up with the pace of development in China’s eastern coastal region.

Tourism commoditization thus spawns a coalescence of consent from the majority and gains legitimacy for the producers of ethnic tourism (Su & Teo, 2009). Cultural commoditization naturalizes the discourse of ethnic tourism development in China and becomes a hegemonic mechanism of control of tourism space (Su & Teo, 2009). Under the new market criteria, the visitor has become the focus of the park's activity: everything from the physical layout to the choice of exhibition and cultural shows to organization of festivals and tourist events is assessed in terms of how it will appeal to potential visitors. The original purposes of the park, preservation and representation of culture, and education of the general public, are now subordinate to an array of commercial activities. Its function has been twisted to fit perceived demands, most of which are arbitrarily chosen by the government or park authorities themselves, and which often have no connection with the original core objectives for the site. In keeping with the new market-driven spirit, the park is forced to justify its existence by proving its profitability. With the active encouragement of government, park management is much more interested in classifying and segmenting the public and meeting the diverse needs of visitors. The real forms of ethnic culture are condensed into a superficial performance show akin to a product manufactured in an assembly line (Su & Teo, 2009). Although the increasing commercialism and capitalism has raised concerns with a minority of tourism stakeholders, the majority has mainly focused on market expansion.

Ethnic minorities tend to be under-represented in tourism management and, as a result, they have lacked the power to control exhibition content and interpretation (Smith, 2003). Operation of ethnic attractions and even the interpretation of exhibitions are often left in the hands of non-ethnic people who may not understand fully the displayed culture and traditions (Hsieh, 1999; Xie, 2003). In the case studied, the representation of minority culture has been strongly influenced by the government and Han managers who select the cultural products and direct the tourists' gaze. Thus, the images of the "exotic other" through the vehicle of tourism are loaded in favor of collective middlemen's needs (the government and entrepreneurs). Although most employees are chosen from the relevant minorities from the remote ethnic regions, they have little say in presenting and interpreting their culture. The culture presented is not determined by the authentic source of the culture, but by powerful stakeholders, usually Han. Therefore, cultural representations do not exist in isolation but are intertwined in a broad social, political and economic context in which cultural images are continuously produced and consumed. Historical, political and cultural discourses influence how minority people are represented in contemporary tourism attractions.

A central challenge in ethnic theme parks is the way of reconstructing ethnic pasts in the present through staged representations. As China has shifted from a command to a market economy, the lives of minority people have changed rapidly. The signs of traditional

culture are fast disappearing. In fact, some tourists complain that minorities are losing their exotic image and “they are not like they used to be.” The image of a primitive and exotic world is ruined in the view of the tourist by use of modern devices such as cell phones and iPods.

Tourism is often seen as a catalyst of change in the ways people perceive themselves and others (Stronza, 2008). As ethnic identity is represented, perceived and reinvented through “the tourist gaze” (MacCannell, 1984; Urry, 1990), acculturation might happen with the intrusion of tourists, consumerism and commoditization of culture (McLaren, 1997). Commodities, although desired by many, are seen as a corruptive force among indigenous peoples (Reed, 1995). Hosts may lose their cultural identity as they adopt the new lifestyles and then begin to act and think like tourists (Stronza, 2001). In the case of YEFV, many minority employees are attracted to materials in the modern world and they are eager to change their identity and adapt to the mainstream life of Han Chinese. The growth of ethnic tourism modifies many of the qualities traditionally associated with regions and people through identity re-creation brought by rapid commercial development and cultural adaptations induced by contrived attractions and interactions between visitors and hosts (Smith, 1989; van den Berghe, 1994).

Ethnic tourism allows Chinese urbanites to seek temporary reprieve from large crowded cities. Seeking the sublime and exotic minority life is a trend common among middle-class consumers. Peripheral regions like Yunnan have been imagined as a mysterious frontier and ethnic groups are portrayed as “primitive” living a “pre-modern” and “backward” life. YEFV constructs simplified and standardized versions of an imagined “primitive” world of minority peoples to satisfy metropolitan tourists’ yearning for the entertaining, unusual and exotic. However, culture, ethnicity and tradition are not static but dynamic (Hitchcock, 2001). One of critical challenges in the park is the focus on the primitive as opposed to a balanced representation of pre- and post-modern life. Cultural exoticism draws tourists, yet there are countervailing forces from the government and market to promote political, economic, and cultural integration of minority groups into a mainstream culture. The contradictions between development and preservation and between cultural exoticism and modernity are intensified in ethnic tourism. YEFV, although controversial and not fully authentic, is a powerful cultural institution and has significant influence on ethnic tourism development in the region (Jiang, 2005; Yang & Xu, 2004). It is inevitable that incomplete representations of ethnicity will occur in staged settings but, with greater care and sensitivity, and with greater input from the bearers of the cultures that are displayed, the authenticity of presentations can be enhanced. Further research is required to explore strategies to promote more authentic tourism representation and discourage the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes. There is, in particular, a need for longitudinal research on tourism impacts on cultural representation and socio-cultural changes in ethnic minorities. **A**



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