

Tourism and Prosperity in Miao Land: Power and Inequality in Rural Ethnic China

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Tourism and Prosperity in Miao Land: Power and Inequality in Rural Ethnic China

By Xianghong Feng. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. xxvi + 183 pp. US\$ 90.00. ISBN 978-1-4985-0995-4.

This is the second volume in the Lexington series *The Anthropology of Tourism: Heritage, Mobility, and Society*. It is a very thoroughly researched ethnography of a widespread form of rural development in contemporary China: the promotion of tourism from urban to rural areas of ethnic and scenic distinctiveness. In the many accounts of this 2-decades-old phenomenon (see Graburn 2015, 2016), few are as intimate with their collaborators, based on many years of research, exposing the thoroughly corrupt exploitation of the local minority by collusion between Han politicians and businessmen. The subtitle is far more germane than the main title.

The author herself is of part Yao minority background, raised in the countryside, by her Han grandparents. She became interested in the topic of ethnic tourism and rural development when sent to Guizhou as a newspaper reporter. Eventually she decided to focus on detailed analyses of such situations, and switched to anthropology, entering the doctoral program of Washington State University, and more recently working at Eastern Michigan University. Thus she has more than 15 years of research experience, most of it among the Miao of Fenghuang County, western Hunan Province, but the book is based mainly on her detailed research into the economic and political dimensions of tourism development in the past few years. As such, the book is unusual in its depth of understanding of individuals at

different stages in their careers, her witnessing of development projects through their life cycles (usually 5 years) and their antecedents and consequences, and her knowledge of economic and political organizations with different personnel over time. All this underpins an outstanding and trustworthy book on these difficult topics.

From the start, the author is able to relate events in terms of individuals known intimately for many years, especially among the Miao and other poor people in Gu Cheng, the historic part of Tuo River Town, and in the surrounding, until recently more isolated, villages. These places are described in chapter 1. Since the 1990s, the government has attempted to develop (ie increase income, decrease isolation, modernize and urbanize) these poor areas, using tourism as a mechanism. But, as Feng describes in chapter 2, the domestic tourists who are the visitors are urban, not very wealthy Chinese, and profits are possible only by scaling up numbers—mainly in busloads; minimizing tourist experiences by limiting time and distance; and creating monopolies (food, accommodation, transportation, guiding and entertainment) to enable higher markups among fewer entrepreneurs. Thus, prepaid set-meal restaurants outcompete individual a la carte servings, guided bus services outcompete freelance guides and taxis, and delimited souvenir shops with mass-produced items outcompete individual sellers of handcrafted objects. Feng calls this scaling up of village tours McDonaldization: quantity over quality. A few travel agencies control as much as possible, aided by government land grabs and edicts controlling locals' behavior.

In "Spatial Transformations" (chapter 3), Feng shows the devastating effects of governmental control of (local peoples') space. One major feature was to lease development rights (access) to

favorable destinations to outside commercial companies, and impose an entry fee for tourists and locals to what may have been their own property. Similarly, rights to sell souvenirs or snacks on the streets or to conduct boat rides were sold off to outside capital, excluding the locals from making a living on their own areas. All of this was conducted with the excuse of "maintaining order" or satisfying the tourists, whereas the actual purpose was to produce cost-free "rent" or extract fees from entrepreneurs to swell the local government's income. Chapter 4 shows how, even under commercial development, Miao gender ideology separates "men's work" from women's work, and always relegates the latter to the more precarious and less prosperous. In case after case in chapter 5, Feng looks at the restricted achievement of prosperity. She shows how the resources of poverty—how the poor used to get along—gave way to a poverty of resources, when even those few assets the poor used to survive on were taken away by those in power. Local village cadres (members of the party) were in a bind: as "people with *wenhua*" (culture), they succumbed to the temptation to form strategic comradeships with tourism developers to realize their advantages.

Examining everyday resistance (chapter 6), the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), we see how the poor and the marginalized are unable to organize overt mass protests against their exploiters. However, families and individuals often manage to subvert the rules excluding them from profitable activities. Some are ignored by authorities as they continue to sell or offer services in banned areas; it is too much trouble to go after all the "small fry." Others are more disruptive, taking over others' stalls, blocking roads with rocks, locking the toilets, or damaging investors' property. In many cases, they can get away with minor acts because retaliation by the

government would look like trouble, attract sympathy, or frighten tourists away. Nevertheless, the book's title *Tourism and Prosperity* refers to the prosperous owners of capital, mainly outsiders, and the suffering of the locals, the original peoples of the region.

The brief conclusion suggests “‘Small’ as a Solution.” Feng admits that the picture of vicious exploitation is the norm in rural and ethnic tourism areas, where extensive outside capital dispossesses the locals by “scaling up.” In an intriguing section that could have been expanded, she shows that in a few areas, especially in Guizhou, less capital-intensive locally directed development allows the admittedly smaller benefits to be distributed

directly to local performers, using a “points system” reminiscent of the former socialist regime. Examples based mainly among the Miao of Guizhou (Donaldson 2007; Chio 2014) provide a rare alternative model, and larger villages such as Xijiang and Ping’an exhibit a combination of the good and the bad. But the main story of this well-written and convincing book is a devastating indictment of the corruption of the local and regional powers that be.

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