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UNESCO and the Politics of Cultural Heritage in Tibet

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[Abstract: This article examines United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) cultural heritage policies and Chinese state-directed tourism policies in contemporary Tibet. It begins with a brief overview of the tourism industry in Tibet, and moves to a discussion of UNESCO's focus on the preservation of world cultural sites in the name of universal values, noting how this aids state claims to authority over culture as a tool in state-building in places such as Tibet and Indonesia. The article then examines the effects state tourism policies have had on specific Tibetan sites, based on field visits to Lhasa and Shigatse in 2001 and 2002 and Xiahe (Gansu Province) in 2004.]

KEYWORDS: Tibet UNESCO World Heritage tourism China Indonesia

In a word, the Potala Palace, as a World cultural heritage and a place of religious activities, has drawn the attention of the world. With the deepening of the reform, opening and modernization drive and along with the implementation of the going-west strategy, the Potala Palace has become a treasure of the world. - Potala Palace Management Office (2002)

In her most recent work *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Encounters*, Anna Tsing (2005: 3) questions the usefulness of framing globalisation as a clash between the universal and the local, noting that abstract concepts such as development, human rights and environmentalism always take concrete form within grounded, particular social places. She uses the metaphor of "friction" to describe this encounter between global and local, emphasising the unpredictable and unstable nature of global interactions, her point being to recognise the productive tension that results.

One universalist assumption Tsing does not discuss is the relatively recent phenomenon of "cultural heritage." Over the past three decades, cultural heritage, transformed into the universalist notion of a shared world heritage, has been the organising logic behind United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) efforts to preserve particular physical sites of culture and nature in the name of global cultural diversity. UNESCO does so by listing and promoting "World Heritage Sites" and offering technical and financial assistance to state authorities for the preservation of these sites. This list, currently standing at 812 sites in 137 states, has become a powerful symbolic marker of international cultural politics. Indeed, success as measured by state cooperation with UNESCO's efforts has become so normative that the rejection of UNESCO's interventions, such as when Taliban forces destroyed...
the Bamiyan Valley Buddhist ruins in 2000, or when Serb forces bombarded the Croatian city of Vukovar in 1992, stand out in the popular consciousness as transgressions against world heritage. Returning to Tsing's metaphor, the friction in the context of heritage is found in the competing interests of not only global and local, but also national and local, and leads to a central question: Whose heritage is being preserved, by whom, and for what purposes?

In this article I will explore this question by examining the relationship between UNESCO's efforts to preserve Tibetan culture and heritage and Chinese state efforts to more firmly incorporate Tibet into China through official tourism and heritage policies. Since the early 1990s Chinese authorities have opened up Tibet to tourism while welcoming the assistance of UNESCO in state-directed efforts to restore and preserve important Tibetan cultural and religious sites in the name of World Heritage. While many critics have complained about the "touristification" of Tibet, less attention has been paid to the role UNESCO plays in the politics of representation in Tibet. More specifically, who controls the narratives these heritage sites tell? And to what extent can these narratives be controlled?

By way of illustration, I shall draw on examples from a similar state-building project in New Order Indonesia under former President Suharto. I begin, however, with a brief overview of the tourism industry in Tibet and then review changes in UNESCO cultural objectives since its founding in 1948, particularly a shift from a perspective grounded in biological-determinist universalism to one premised on a celebration of cultural diversity.

Tourism Comes to Shangri-la

The benefits and costs associated with tourism are debated across a range of disciplines. Within anthropology and sociology, the focus has historically been less on the economic effects of tourism in terms of employment, living costs, and money flows and more on the impact of tourism on local cultural practices (cf. Greenwood 1977: 129-38). These concerns about the commodification of culture have in turn led to questions about the perceived power of tourism and the tourist gaze to turn culture into spectacle and local subjects into facades of themselves (cf. MacCannell 1994: 99-102).

There are few more graphic images supporting the argument that tourism undermines cultural traditions than Tibet, Western symbol of Shangri-La. In recent years a tourism boom in Tibetan regions has raised new concerns among critics of the Chinese presence. After decades of fears about cultural destruction through forced assimilation, critics now charge that tourism will do what the Chinese military has been unable to do: turn Tibet into a less authentically Tibetan place (Adams 1996: 514). For example, recent articles in *Time International* and *The Economist* focus on the disappearance of authentic Tibet, criticising everything from Chinese architecture and tour guides to Han shopkeepers hawking made-in-Nepal souvenirs and the elimination of the Dalai Lama from public discourse (Cheng 2000; *The Economist*, 13 April 1996). These concerns resonate so much because one narrative about Tibet dominates and shapes both academic and popular cultural Euro-American views of Tibet: a pre-Maoist Tibet of holiness and harmony that has been ruined by, first, a Maoist drive to physically destroy Tibet's cultural and spiritual Being and, more recently, a post-Maoist commodification of any

First mentioned in China's Seventh Five-Year Plan (1986-90), tourism was defined as a key component of the service sector only in the Eighth Plan (1991-95). Initial state policies focused on the rapid development of foreign tourism, the assumption being that foreign tourism produces foreign exchange earnings. Yet, while foreign tourism has steadily risen in China since the beginning of the reform process, the most dramatic increases have been in domestic tourism (Ghimire and Li, 1987-91). Government policies that since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 have privileged urban areas have also helped create a middle class with the means and desire to travel. These same policies have encouraged the rapid expansion of the hotel and services sectors. According to official statistics, in 2001, 784 million domestic tour trips were made in China, generating $14 billion in income. In comparison, in the same year approximately 33 million foreign tourists visited China, generating $31 billion (China National Tourism Administration, 2002). Between 1995 and 2000, the Tibetan Administrative Region received two million visitors, approximately 80% being domestic Chinese (Embassy of China, 4 January, 2003). Projections are for 1.4 million visitors by 2005, with domestic tourists accounting for over 1.1 million of this number (Xinhua, 4 December 2002).

As these statistics illustrate, both the demographics and economics of tourism in Tibet have changed over the past decade. The majority of travellers to Tibet are no longer Western backpackers or spiritual adventurers but middle-class Han Chinese. This demographic shift explains a good deal of Western unease at a perceived unravelling of Tibetan cultural forms. As Adams (1996: 521) has noted, this concern rests on an assumption that Tibetans who take on the trappings of Modernity stop being authentic vis-à-vis those who remain “traditional” (presumably in rural areas) and those in exile (who, paradoxically, have succeeded as a diasporic community to the extent that they have engaged in Modernity). He correctly asks, “Why would Sinicisation among those who actively seek to become modern in Chinese ways be so much more capable of erasing Tibetan-ness than Westernization?” The short answer is that it is not; the more complex answer is that what it means to be modern in either Chinese or Tibetan ways cannot be fully separate from what it means to be modern in “The West.”

This despair and unease over a forever disappearing Tibet is understandable in the context of the continued general Western fascination with Tibet as Shangri-La, yet it misses the broader implications of Chinese tourism policies in Tibet. While officially framed as an economic development tool by state authorities and condemned by outside critics as a policy geared towards cultural destruction, state-directed tourism aims to transform “Tibet” as a semiotic image into a de-politicised space of “culture” and “tradition” securely within the People’s Republic. This is much like New Order tourism policies in Indonesia that aimed to transform local cultural practices outside the Javanese centre into “folk” elements of regional cultures that in turn were defined as elements of an official national culture (Adams, 1997: 156-158). This explains the shift in state policy towards Tibet, from an emphasis on forced assimilation to one of difference captured for the market, in which cultural differences are only recognised to the extent that they remain “cultural” and not political.
It is thus questionable to view the rapid increase of mass tourism in Tibetan cultural areas simply as a harbinger of the disappearance or dilution of Tibetan culture. Indeed, the last thing a policy premised on utilising cultural "resources," suitably de-politicised, for development purposes, aims for is the disappearance of surface differences. Instead, this is part of a state strategy aimed at the pacification of Tibet through the simultaneous aesthetisation of Tibetan culture as an object of tourist desire and government-directed efforts to "protect" this culture by working with UNESCO to save and preserve Tibetan cultural sites from the dangers of, paradoxically, tourism.

**UNESCO AND HERITAGE**

Long considered a luxury of the affluent, heritage has asserted itself, in the course of the past two decades, as a recognized component of development. From now on heritage will be taken into account when anyone reflects on new strategies of development. UNESCO played a decisive role in bringing to consciousness a collective responsibility with regard to world heritage.

- Jean Musitelli (2002: 327), Permanent French Delegate to UNESCO

In a 1947 overview, biologist Julian Huxley (1887-1975), UNESCO’s first chair, stated that the central purpose of the new organisation was to transcend political and religious differences in favour of a philosophy based on world humanism, scientific humanism, non-materialism, and evolutionism. He defined this position as one rooted in equal respect for all peoples, the integration of science with other human activities, an embracing of “the spiritual and mental aspects of existence ... on a truly monistic, unitary philosophical basis,” and the acceptance of the “biological roots” of human values (Huxley, 1947: 7-8). Huxley argued that UNESCO should focus on what he called “the problem of constructing a unified pool of tradition for the human species as a whole” as a way of “levelling up” those in “backwards sectors” (Huxley, 1947: 17). A lifelong advocate of the application of science to social issues, Huxley viewed UNESCO’s mission as one of assisting with the development of less advanced societies as a means of achieving a universal knowledge base and value system, not of simply preserving “cultural diversity.” This is made clear in the following:

... it will be impossible for humanity to acquire a common outlook if large sectors of it are the illiterate inhabitants of a mental world entirely different from that in which a fully educated man can have his being, a world of superstition and petty tribalism in place of one of scientific advance and unity ... further, a satisfactory common scale of values can obviously not be attained so long as large sections of mankind are preoccupied with the base material and physiological needs of food, shelter, and health (Huxley, 1947: 17).

This initial definition of UNESCO’s central mission is radically different than the one at the heart of *Our Creative Diversity* (1995), arguably the key UNESCO policy document over the last decade. In this report by the World Commission on Culture and Development, culture is defined in terms of respect, diversity, freedom, and pluralism. UNESCO’s guiding principle is stated as “respect for all cultures whose values are tolerant of others and that subscribe to a global ethics.” A “unity of diversity” of cultures is premised on a global ethics rooted in the basic principle of equality at birth, democracy, human rights, and minority rights. The report defines cultural freedom as a group’s right to follow a way of life of its choice and an individual’s right to practice “alternative ways of living” within a given group, since such cultural freedom entails “creativity, experimentation,
and diversity.” Finally, cultural pluralism is championed in the face of what the report terms an “all-pervasive” global homogenisation (Huxley, 1947: 15-16).

As Thomas Eriksen (2001: 30) has noted, Our Creative Diversity focuses on the right to culture, not the more complex questions of rights versus culture or on what precisely constitutes global ethics, democracy, and human rights. To be fair, the authors of this report do argue that some cultural practices are not to be tolerated, such as female genital mutilation, dowry attacks, trafficking, slavery, and child labour. Yet this leads to two conclusions. First, certain practices can only be labelled as not acceptable as long as they are not precisely defined. What constitutes child labour? How is childhood defined? Second, if cultural diversity and pluralism are defined as good in themselves, how are certain cultural practices defined as bad, particularly when some of these practices have as much or more to do with what Paul Farmer (2003) has termed the “structures of violence” as they may have in common with “culture”?

In short, the underlying premise of UNESCO’s worldview—a world of cultural units standing separate but equal in their diversity—is noteworthy for its apparent disregard for the social complexity of human life. Humans are born into a set of structural conditions saturated with material, social, religious, linguistic and technological inequities, and defining concepts such as human rights and democracy in concrete terms remains contested. Hence, for UNESCO (1995: 46) to assert that “universalism is the fundamental principle of a global ethics” is to say nothing, since any such ism implies a shared global value system, which in turn renders cultural pluralism irrelevant. That is to say, a UNESCO-approved cultural pluralist is pluralistic only to the extent that his or her value system mimics the institutional values of UNESCO.

Similarly, to argue that a group has a right to live life as it (communally) chooses while also asserting that individuals within each group have a right to live differently avoids the practical contradictions between communal rights and obligations and those of individuals. Such a position is plausible only to the degree that it defines what counts as authentic life in the exclusive terms of Western European and North American cosmopolitan relativism. Such a claim renders “culture” meaningless as anything other than aesthetic pleasure and/or performance.

This is precisely what one finds in the UNESCO approach to “cultural heritage,” beginning with the 1972 Convention that established UNESCO’s World Heritage List. This document defines world cultural heritage as any site, building or monument that has “outstanding universal value” (Article 1). Damage to any item that qualifies as part of the world’s cultural heritage is said to harm the heritage of all nations, thus rendering preservation crucial, a point repeated in Our Cultural Diversity: all such heritage must be preserved because any loss means a loss in the global “reservoir of knowledge” (UNESCO, 1995: 179-81).

According to the 1972 Convention, what qualifies for preservation and protection is to be determined by scientific, economic, and technical studies (Article 24). The Convention established a World Heritage Committee (WHC), which divided the field of heritage into “culture” and “nature” and established the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.
(IUCN) to judge these. ICOMOS and IUCN in turn created a list of ten criteria, six “cultural” and four “natural,” to judge potential sites. Under WHC guidelines, potential sites had to meet at least one of these criteria (UNESCO, 2005: 1). Significantly, these criteria are so broad and general that it seems reasonable to wonder what might not qualify. For example, a cultural site or object can qualify if it is a “masterpiece of human genius” (selection criteria i), “a unique or at least exceptional testimony” to a disappearing tradition (selection criteria iii), an “outstanding example” of an architectural style (selection criteria iv) or of a “traditional human settlement” (v), or represents “an important change in human values” (selection criteria ii). UNESCO recognises that cultural and natural heritage can also be simultaneously viewed (for example, by its sister organisation UNDP) as cultural and natural resources rather than as heritage. Thus Our Cultural Diversity states that each society must “assess the nature and precariousness of its heritage resources on its own terms” in order to decide what uses to make of them in “the spirit of development” (UNESCO, 1995: 176) while guarding against allowing cultural heritage to be transformed into a “tourist resource” (UNESCO, 1995: 184). Underlying this unease with tourism is an assumption that cultural products and heritage sites must be protected from market forces that might encourage the commodification of both tangible and intangible cultural forms. For example, at a recent World Bank forum on culture and sustainable development, Milagros del Corral, director of the UNESCO Publishing House, warned against relying on market forces to regulate cultural industries. Del Corral (1999: 79) advocates “the development of domestic cultural industries by creating an environment conducive to the promotion of national creativity and cultural diversity in the marketplace,” the goal being “to ensure that nationals of a country are not exposed exclusively to foreign products.” Similarly, Jonathan Bell (1999: 45) has argued that intervention to preserve important cultural sites is a “constant necessity” if UNESCO is to succeed in its efforts to “maintain for the future what remains of the past.”

Significantly, neither the 1972 Convention, Our Cultural Diversity, nor Del Corrall discuss the politics of cultural heritage or, for that matter culture itself (beyond the need to protect this). Framing intervention in technical terms, UNESCO avoids a key question: what happens when a cultural site is either contested, as in Chinese central government claims to Tibetan heritage sites, or claimed associations are nebulous at best, as in New Order Indonesian claims to be the heirs of the former Buddhist and Hindu rulers of Central Java?

Cultural Heritage and State-Building

The short answer, of course, is that politics cannot be ignored. Like museum displays and exhibits, heritage programs and policies are inherently political, focusing as they do on shaping particular narratives about the past for contemporary purposes. Rather than being the outcome of a neutral process of collecting important cultural objects and/or sites, “heritage” takes form as a commodity produced for specific reasons through deliberate actions and particular choices (Ashworth and Larkham, 1994: 27). UNESCO’s approach recognises the economic aspects of heritage while ignoring the political, in this way transforming political questions of control into technical questions of physical
UNESCO and Politics

preservation and aesthetic questions of protecting cultural objects and practices from economic forces. What results is an ideology premised on first, a claim to be above politics and second, a mandate to preserve culture in the face of development. This positions UNESCO as a complicit partner in the reworking of culture as a development resource in contemporary China, particularly in minority areas, a policy previously pursued by the Suharto regime in New Order Indonesia. As in the latter case, Chinese tourism and heritage policies in Tibet aim to transform a contested past into a source of allegorical allusions to the present, aided by UNESCO’s backing for proclaiming particular historical sites to be world heritage sites. This allows each state to project national roots into an imagined unitary past, thereby justifying contemporary national boundaries (Errington, 1998: 37; Wood, 1997: 11). State support for the preservation of cultural heritage is hence useful from the state political perspective because it strengthens national standing, both domestically and internationally (Tuohy, 1991: 201).

However, it is also useful because it neatly fits state-directed development efforts. This process operates within a de-ideologised framework of “development” and “modernisation,” in which state planners position the state as both the holder of the keys to the benefits and promises of modernisation and as the protector of citizens from modernisation’s supposed evils - in particular cultural pollution and the perceived chaos of economic change (McVey, 1996: 22-3), a claim that mirrors UNESCO’s emphasis on protecting cultural practices from tourism (UNESCO, 1995: 184). From a critical perspective, this simultaneous state celebration of cultural difference and claimed role as protector of the same reduces culture to the level of a showcase by transforming lived cultural experiences into performed cultural motifs: In this process culture is de-politicised, which transforms questions about development aims (such as the use of tourism as a development tool) into questions about modernisation.

State claims of cultural guardianship have traditionally been manifested in national museums, such as the Museum of the Revolution in Beijing and the Indonesian National Museum in Jakarta. These spaces have now been supplanted in two related areas, the theme park and the heritage site. In New Order Indonesia, Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (“Beautiful Indonesia Miniature Park”), funded through former First Lady Ibu Tien’s private foundation and inspired by a visit she had made to Disneyland, opened near Jakarta in 1977, while the Prambanan and Borobodur Temple complexes in Central Java were restored with UNESCO funding over a period of ten years, from 1972 to 1982 (Errington, 1998: 213-5). In China, an explosion of folk, ethnic, and historical theme parks started with the opening in 1989 of the “Splendid China” theme park (Jinxiu Zhonghua), complete with a scale model Potala Palace, near Shenzhen, ground-zero of China’s modernisation drive. This was followed in 1991 by the opening of the first “China Folk Culture Village” (Minzu Wenhua Cun) next door (Oakes, 1998: 49-50). In Tibet, the Potala Palace became an official UNESCO World Heritage site in 1994, followed by the Jokhang temple complex in 2000 and the Norbulingka Summer Palace in 2001.

An embracing of the concept of world heritage in minority regions by Chinese state authorities neatly fits state vision of what Oakes (1997: 42) has termed a government imagined “landscape of nostalgia.” For example, the official application for World Heritage
status for the Potala Palace states that it deserves inclusion not because it is symbolic of Tibet nationhood or Tibetan culture but because it “embodies the outstanding skills of the Tibetan, Han, Mongol, Man, and other nationalities and the high achievements of Tibetan architecture in terms of the overall layout of the Palace as well as its civil engineering, its metalwork, its sculptures, and its wall paintings” (UNESCO, 1993: 5). In other words, the Potala is significant because from the state perspective it reflects the joint technical and aesthetic achievements of the peoples of China, not of a separate nation of Tibet. The ICOMAS response to this claim is mute, although for understandable reasons. Obviously, some of its members took the pragmatic view that preservation of tangible cultural sites on any terms is better than no preservation, particularly in the case of Tibet, given that Chinese authorities directed the destruction of numerous Tibetan cultural sites for a good many years until the transformation of Tibet into a tourist destination beginning in the late Seventies. And in its response to the application for World Heritage status, ICOMAS did note its dissatisfaction with reported plans to redevelop areas around the Potala (UNESCO, 1993: 9). Yet the Committee limited its critique to urging “responsible authorities to give careful consideration to a possible reappraisal of the overall plan” and, more recently, has suggested authorities “develop an articulated strategic program for the conservation and rehabilitation of the historic fabric of Lhasa” so as to “make the most appropriate use of the historic Shol area” (UNESCO, 2004: 104). These calls have not been heeded. Instead, the area directly below the Palace (known as inner Shol), until recently home to approximately three hundred Tibetan families and numerous small Tibetan-run shops, is currently being transformed into, ironically, a museum, while across the main boulevard, Beijing Road, the area known as outer Shol was demolished and replaced in 1995 by a large Square modelled on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. These changes highlight the underlying paradox in the relationship between UNESCO and the Chinese state: UNESCO marks sites as worthy of protection because of their cultural value, and Chinese authorities comply by transforming these sites into elements in the state narrative of Chinese culture and civilisation.

Ordering Human Subjects

The new Chinese emphasis on tourism as a development tool neatly fits official rhetoric about the role of minority groups in the ongoing modernisation of China. This discourse emphasises three points: that minority peoples are less modern (xiandaide) than Han Chinese, that they are (or should be) grateful for Han help in becoming modern, and that modernisation is both desirable and unavoidable in order to become advanced (fada) (Blum, 2001: 73-4). As several researchers have noted, this positioning of minority peoples as less developed and following in the footsteps of more advanced societies is rooted in the staged-based evolutionary social model of late nineteenth century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan and the early twentieth century historical materialism of Joseph Stalin. Morgan’s three stages of social development (“savagery,” “barbarism,” and “civilisation”) were transformed in the Soviet Union via Marx into a five-stage theory of development (“primitive communism,” “slavery,” “feudalism,” “capitalism,” and “socialism”) that in turn became in post-1949 China the organising structure for ordering minority peoples
The state officially classifies the peoples of China into five “large” (Han, Manchurian, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Muslim) and 56 minority (shao shu minzu) groups in which each zu (ethnic or racial group) has “customs” while the nation (guojia) is the source of culture (wen hua) and civilisation (wen ming). According to this logic, Tibetans are recognised as different because they have different traditions while also classified as not-yet-modern and hence as anomalies in the context of the state and Party-led national project of becoming modern (Yang, 1996: 98).

Importantly, while this preoccupation with social diversity at a folk-cultural level and unity at a national level certainly resembles historical materialist approaches, it also has long had a home in popular assumptions among Han Chinese about the relationship of Han with local Others, particularly the belief that diverse folk ways are subsumed within a broader, shared “civilisation” that has Han China at the centre (Tuohy, 1991: 214). In other words, the state-directed project of becoming-modern undertaken after 1911 by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and after 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has unfolded within long-held Han cultural assumptions of what it means to be civilised. In terms of minority groups, this is tied to their cultural distance, real or perceived, from the Han (Oakes, 1997: 46). It is therefore not surprising that Mayfair Yang (1996: 96), in her fieldwork in Wenzhou, found peasants who conceptualised cultural practices in neat linear stages, or Debra Blum (2001: 125-30), in her fieldwork in Yunnan, students who characterised Tibetans as “primitive” and troublesome for their perceived refusal to learn from the Han. These complaints about troublesome peoples highlight a second aspect of Modernity, its emphasis on order and being in-place: people become out of place when they are uprooted from their “natural” places, a process which is presumed to lead to alienation and inauthenticity (Oakes, 1998: 60). As I have shown, this presumption is an underlying concern of UNESCO’s cultural policies, and lends further support to Chinese state efforts to manage (Tibetan) cultural resources.

For its part, the Tibetan exile movement has responded to these issues not by criticising UNESCO complicity in state-building projects but by seizing on UNESCO discomfort at Chinese heritage approaches as evidence of UNESCO support for its own policies. For example, groups such as the World Tibet Network News (published by the Canada Tibet Committee), the Office of Tibet in New York, and the International Campaign for Tibet regularly mention UNESCO and World Heritage in their reports on urban renewal in Lhasa (see August, 2002; Saunders, 2003 and International Campaign for Tibet, 2003). However, there is little acknowledgement by these groups that, beyond verbalising its concerns, UNESCO has little or no influence over how Chinese authorities manage Tibetan heritage sites, let alone any discussion or criticism of the role UNESCO plays in strengthening Chinese claims. Yet despite the above, the on-going Chinese state effort to harness the past for its own interests in Tibet cannot avoid the fact that no one actually owns the past. Given this, state tourism policies in Tibet, like in other minority areas such as Southern Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces, only succeed to the extent that first, local subjects accede to these state efforts and accept their roles, and second, that tourists validate and authenticate state-sanctioned tourist/cultural sites through visiting these (Oakes, 1998: 80; Ashworth and Larkham, 1994: 18). In doing so, tourism certainly cannot avoid influencing local culture. For example, in the case of
Tibet's tropical counterpart in the popular Western imagination, Bali, tourism has become such an integral part of everyday life that it is not at all clear what it might mean to be Balinese and not be a tourist object (Picard, 1997: 61). Yet this implosion of local identity with an exoticised touristic vision of Balinese life has arguably led to a strengthening of Bali's relative position within the Indonesian Republic over the past three decades in political, economic, and cultural terms, not an accelerated assimilation of Bali into a state-sanctioned Indonesian state culture or a disappearance of Balinese culture.

Closer to Tibet, Timothy Oakes has shown how the state-encouraged transformation of Dong and Miao villages in Guizhou into tourist destinations has led to a similar situation. Oakes charts the competing interests of various state actors in tourism. These include political and planning authorities, residents, and tour guides in villages marked as tourist destinations, provincial tourism bureau and China Travel Service (CTS) officials, and China International Travel Service (CITS) officials and guides, officials of the Nationalities Affairs Council (minwei) and those of the state Cultural Bureau (wenwuchu) (Oakes, 1997: 57). Second, he notes differences in how culture is perceived among these actors. Most importantly, he argues that at the local level villagers seldom see any contradiction between cultural authenticity and economic development, equating the former with the relative satisfaction of foreign visitors, which leads to the latter (Oakes, 1997: 55). This contrasts sharply with concerns among state Cultural Bureau officials to protect an authenticity rooted in assumptions about the purity of culture demonstrated by standardised cultural practices. This would not matter except that it is the state Cultural Bureau that has the power to grant the status of authenticity to villages seeking to attract tourists by naming places "protected cultural relic units" (wenwu baohu danwei), and with this designation state aid for developing tourism resources. Given this, Oakes argues that one possible effect of tourism is not necessarily the touristification of places (which then leads to a decline in local "culture") but instead a means of becoming modern by embracing local traditions, be these real or imagined, authentic or invented (Oakes, 1997: 65). Or alternatively, one could argue that touristification in certain circumstances is the pathway to Modernity.

This leads to my final point: even when cultural sites become authentic by being toured and hence consumed, state authorities can never be certain these sites are being consumed in the "correct" (state-sanctioned) way, either by local residents, domestic visitors, or foreign tourists. This is because, as Oakes (1998) has noted, Modernity is a process in which subjects confront both each other and change, which in turn produces new subjectivities, new forms of change, and new ways of seeing the world.

**Touring Tibet**

Tourism certainly does transform cultural spaces. Yet just as in the case of state efforts to transform "culture" into a development resource and a state-building tool in Indonesia, similar efforts by state authorities in China aimed at harvesting Tibetan cultural resources in the name of both world heritage and development have generated responses at the level of everyday life that rework the stories certain cultural landscapes tell. At the same time, new types of domestic Han Chinese tourists have begun to emerge, including those who appear to seek from "Tibet" more than confirmation of their own benevolence
and/or superiority. In order to discuss this, I would like to take my readers on a short tour of three destinations in cultural Tibet: one of Tibet’s world heritage sites, the Norbulingka Summer Palace; perhaps the most visible marker of the Chinese presence in Lhasa, the People’s Square in front of the Potala Palace; and Labrang Monastery in what formerly was known as Amdo Province.

Located a few kilometres west of the Potala Palace, construction began on the Norbulingka Palace complex in 1740 under the Seventh Dalai Lama and continued intermittently until 1956, when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama completed the Takten Migyur Potrang (“Eternal Palace”) usually called the “new summer palace.” Following the Chinese takeover of Lhasa and the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959, the complex was turned into a public park and the main buildings, including the Dalai’s Lama’s private quarters, into a museum.

The paradox of the Norbulingka is the fact that its resident is not present. Yet the absence of the Dalai Lama creates the conditions for his presence. While the transformation of his living quarters was intended to demonstrate to common people his supposed decadence, this has not happened, as can be seen in a visit to that most private of all spaces, the bathroom. Here, Chinese attempts to control the story the Norbulingka tells its visitors fails in the face of the 1950s-era bathtub that has become a shrine to its former occupant. Bills are tossed in as offerings, and Tibetan peasants bow and pray when passing.

Back in the main reception room is one of a series of murals depicting the journey to Chang An (Xian) by the Tibetan envoy Gar Tongstan in 640 AD to negotiate a marriage alliance with the Tang Emperor Tai Tsung. According to the standard historical narrative, after being rebuffed several times by the Tang Emperor when he proposed a marriage alliance, Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (617-650), the first builder of the Potala Palace, sent an envoy to the Tang court in early 640. Upon payment of 5,000 ounces of gold, an agreement was reached and the Emperor dispatched his daughter Princess Wencheng to Lhasa to be Gampo’s bride (Beckwith, 1987: 21-6; Smith, 1996: 61). The Chinese narrative stops here, while Western accounts argue that this alliance only took place in the face of a growing Tibetan military threat (Feigon, 1996: 26). The mural in the Norbulingka offers a third interpretation, one that foregrounds Tibetan cunning in the face of Tang duplicity. According to this visual story, the Tibetan envoy faced competition with other potential suitors for the hand of the Princess. The Tang Emperor created three hurdles for these potential suitors: to identify the mothers of a group of calves, to select the chicks of a hen, and finally to choose the princess from a large group. The envoy solved the first two puzzles by the use of grain; for the third, he relied on human nature, offering a large bribe to the princess’s nursemaid for help in identifying the right women. The Tibetan man who told me this story put a particular emphasis on this third test, noting how it was evidence of Tibetan intelligence. In fact, to make sure I understood his point, he switched from English to Chinese, emphasising the envoy’s demonstration of being congming. While this term usually is translated as “intelligent,” it carries a more complex meaning in Chinese, roughly “intelligent in a clever way,” in the sense of pulling one over on another person – in this case, the Tang Emperor.

Moving to the front of the Potala, visitors reach the Potala Square, visually a gash
on the landscape and a bit of Chinese geometrical imagination that is starkly out of place. With its lone flagpole and wide flat spaces, the Square is designed to mimic the spatial expanse of Tiananmen in Beijing: to stand in the midst of either is to feel small and insignificant in the face of the state. At the back of this square is a high modernist monument built in 2001 commemorating the liberation of Tibet. It is surrounded by a plot of grass and manned by an honour guard, while a Korean war-era fighter jet confronts the Potala. While the square is intended to serve as a visual reminder of the power of China in Lhasa, it has itself become a tourist attraction, both for local Tibetans and visiting Han Chinese. Indeed, Chinese tourists generally ignore both the monument to liberation and the fighter jet in favour of the souvenir photo tables that line one side of the square. There, they can dress up in “authentic” Tibetan robes and have their photographs taken by Hui Muslim entrepreneurs with the Potala Palace as a backdrop.

In addition to being a tourist attraction, this Square also serves as a spatial marker denoting the separation of “Tibet” and “China.” Beijing Road going east leads to the crowded alleyways and twisting streets of old Lhasa. Running west it leads to “China,” both figuratively and literally (connecting as it does to the airport road and Qinghai-Tibet highway), and thus to the heart of the ambiguity of Chinese tourism. What is most noticeable about this part of the city, officially called the “western district” (xi jiao) in Chinese but simply referred to as “China” by some Tibetan residents of the city, is the preponderance of not just nondescript Chinese hotels and restaurants (which, after all, one would expect in a place that is officially a tourist boomtown), but also karaoke clubs and hair salons, staffed by Han migrants. A “hair salon” in China is sometimes a hair salon but often a brothel. Much of what is categorised as “domestic tourism” is from this perspective less about Lhasa as a historically situated site than it is about the city as a marker for the colonial Other and an escape from the binds of everyday life. Just as with other colonial cities, Lhasa functions as a dual city - as the home of local residents and as temporary abode for those whom, because of job circumstances or economic necessity, become non-local locals - Han entrepreneurs, service workers, soldiers, and a legion of prostitutes, mainly rural or working-class migrants from Sichuan Province.

A very different kind of tourism is found in the older Tibetan quarter of Lhasa, in the growing number of small hotels and cafes that once catered exclusively to foreign backpackers and now increasingly host young Chinese urban residents off on an adventure. In these bars and cafes Tibet and Tibetans are cool, not backwards, exotic, not primitive, and mystical, not feudal. Or, more accurately, they are “primitive” and exotic, not yet modern and therefore mystical. Tibet is once again being Orientalised, this time not by Western Orientalists but by the urban elite of new China. This trend transcends Lhasa and encompasses the broad area of cultural Tibet (covering the Tibetan Autonomous Region and parts of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan provinces, formerly Kham and Amdo). For example, during a recent visit to Xiahe, located six hours south of Lanzhou in Gansu Province and site of Labrang Monastery, I met many such young Chinese tourists. Labrang, founded in 1710, had nearly 4,000 Gelugpa monks before the Chinese military occupation of the region began in 1951. From 1958 until 1970, the entire complex was shut down by security forces, and only began to function as a monastery again in 1980. Today there is a thriving community of approximately 500 official monks and many more unofficial
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ones or visitors, as well as a growing tourist presence, both foreign and domestic. What is most interesting about these domestic tourists is their appearance. While Labrang is approximately 10,000 feet (3,000 metres) in elevation, the climate and material conditions are not extreme in summer. Nevertheless, most of the young Han Chinese tourists I encountered were dressed as if they had just stepped out of an outdoor adventure catalogue. Gone were the high heels, the suit coats (sometimes with the price tags still attached), and the white dress shirts of the 1990s group tourist, replaced by khakis, mountain boots, raingear and wraparound sunglasses an indigenous form of the backpacker motif, sans the lack of soap and odd dress styles, such as Afghan caps with Indian drawstring pants and generic Third World peasant blouses.

In conversation after conversation with these travellers, the same answers to the question of why they were visiting a Tibetan monastery came up: Tibet was a “mystery” and full of “magic,” while Tibetans were “unique,” “special,” and “mysterious.” Xiao Wang and her travelling companions were typical of these travellers. All from Nanjing, they were on a two-week trip to Lanzhou, Xiahe, Xining, and Qinghai Lake. However, they had not known each other until their trip began. They had met via a Nanjing website for people interested in adventure travel, “not in big groups,” as Shen, an English teacher at a Nanjing institute, put it. Leaving aside the fact that what these travellers had done was in effect to recreate the typical domestic travel group – complete with an informal leadership hierarchy and a strict travel schedule – what is important here is Where they were travelling – not to Guilin, or Xian, or Beijing, but to what until very recently was considered by most urban Chinese as “remote,” “backward,” and “primitive.” I still remember my officemates’ reaction in the spring of 1990 when I told them of my plan to travel overland to Lhasa that summer. Several looked baffled, one simply asked, “Why?” It was left to Dong Aijun, who has since quit teaching and made a small fortune running a group tourism business in Beijing, to tell the others knowingly, “Bob’s a foreigner. They all think Tibet is wonderful.”

Concluding Comments

Is this re-imagining of Tibet as a place of “magic” in the Chinese popular consciousness simply another case of cultural degradation, no different, ultimately, than the Han Chinese male search for a brothel in the shadow of the Potala? To be more specific, is this one more example of the inevitable cultural decline many associate with an cultural opening to global market forces, in this case of how China’s “opening up” has allegedly warped social values and led to such symbols of decadence as cyber-porn, miniskirts, overweight and lazy city kids, and men cheating on their wives?

These examples demonstrate there is no simple answer to the question of what happens when a people and a landscape are turned into tourism resources and/or heritage destinations. This can be seen in the subtle transformation of Tibet in the popular Chinese imagination. For centuries, Tibet has been viewed through the prism of Han China as a land of barbarians, full of danger and deprivation. This is changing, as urban China is increasingly seduced by a Shangri-La fantasy concocted by an Englishman about a land he never visited. Finally, whatever one’s position on the issue of Tibet, one must acknowledge that having young Chinese think of Tibet and Tibetans as “mysterious”
and “magical,” while in academic terms another example of the late Edward Said’s Orientalism at work, is certainly an improvement on thinking of Tibetans as savages and barbarians in need of saving. It is in this sense that tourist exoticism may trump great Han chauvinism (da Han zhuyi), and complicate UNESCO’s idealised worldview of culture, politics, and world heritage.

Notes

1. Foreigners who wish to visit Tibet are required to be members of official tour groups. This necessitates using the services of China International Travel Service (CITS) or one of its affiliates and paying what amounts to a user fee for the right to visit.


3. Paradoxically, once on the ground at these sites, an observer realizes that, while officially framed as authentic cultural sites, they are consumed and toured much like Taman Mini, Jakarta’s ethnic theme park. Indeed, what is most striking about Borobodur is the absence of its authentic, in the sense of intended, practices - namely, Buddhist meditation. Borobodur, originally constructed in the 9th century, fell into disuse after the fall of the Majapit Empire in the 13th century. It was ‘rediscovered’ by Dutch archeologists in the 18th century, and reconstruction began in 1907. In 1970 UNESCO and the Japanese government began a joint reconstruction effort, and the complex officially reopened in 1982. Since then it has served as a site of authentication for state legitimacy, tying the predominantly Muslim Republic of Indonesia to a long-past Javanese Buddhist Kingdom. For a discussion of Borobodur and Prambanan and their relation to Taman Mini and the New Order government (see Errington 1998, 188-264).

4. For a discussion of Indonesian tourism programs and policies, see Adams (1997), Picard (1997), and Kipp (1993).

5. For a discussion of the use of authenticating historic cultural markers for contemporary political purposes in New Order Indonesia, see Matheson (1993: 2) and Picard (1997: 61). For details on the decision to grant Tibetan sites world heritage status, see UNESCO, “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage,” World Heritage Committee, 18th Session, Phuket, Thailand, 12-17 December 1994.

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