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## **A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China by Jenny Chio (review)**

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*A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China*, by Jenny Chio. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. 304 pp. US\$30 (Paperback). ISBN: 9780295993669.

In *A Landscape of Travel*, Jenny Chio presents a vivid ethnography about how rural tourism is transforming local communities in two ethnic minority villages in Southwest China. Domestic tourism, long lauded as a stimulant to economic growth, has been thriving in China since the 1990s. Thanks to their scenic landscape and exotic culture, ethnic minority regions are among the most desired tourist destinations for Chinese sightseers. But rural tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Starting in 2006, during the campaign for building a Socialist New Countryside, the Chinese government introduced a policy to promote the village-based sightseeing industry as a means to kick-start the rural economy. Colloquially dubbed as “Peasant Family Happiness” (農家樂 *nongjiale*), rural sightseeing is anticipated not only to meet the urbanites’ needs to experience the idyllic, exotic, and rustic countryside, but also to reverse the flow of migrant workers by encouraging villagers to make a living without migrating to the city. Chio conducted her fieldwork research in two sites during 2006–2007: Ping’an, an ethnic Zhuang village in Guangxi, and Upper Jidao, an ethnic Miao village in Guizhou.

Previous scholarship on tourism studies has tended to focus on the experiences of the tourists, but Chio’s research centers on the lives of the residents living in the tourist-site villages. In other words, she analyzes tourism from the perspective of the host, rather than the guests. The book particularly emphasizes the agency and subjectivities of the residents who are “doing tourism” (搞旅遊 *gaolüyou*)—those who profit from the sightseeing industry by serving as guides, ticket agents, or photo models, running souvenir shops, restaurants, or hotels, and so forth. As a form of the service trade, tourism establishes a transactional relationship between the tourist and the host. As Chio insightfully puts it, “one person’s leisure is another person’s labor” (p. xvii). Defining tourism as the movement and sightseeing of the traveler, Chio further identifies two fundamental characteristics of tourism—visuality and mobility. Since visuality is crucial to the leisure of sightseeing, the sightseer’s expectation for a bucolic, exotic, and natural scenery demands a labor devoted to the visual consumption of the tourists: the village landscape needs to be refurbished to acquire the best veneer of rusticity and ethnic exoticness, even though the desired appearances of tourism are disconnected

from the lived experiences of the modern-day rural residents. This, in Chio's terms, indicates the "politics of appearance."

In Chio's ethnography of Ping'an and Upper Jidao, we see ethnic identities in tourism are represented through the sartorial, architectural, and performative genres that are reiterated, reproduced, and reinforced by the dual power of state and market. Except for a Ping'an villager who lamented the loss of the environmental consciousness of the ethnic Zhuang under the influence of tourism (pp. 21–25), nobody else mentioned a concern over ethnicity dissolution or distortion. Most villagers seem to have internalized and comfortably capitalized on the stereotyped ethnic representation to meet the expectations of the sightseers. The most striking example of this internalization can be found in the case of "sweet talk" (discussed in Chapter 4): two female models dressed up in ethnic attire solicit male tourists for a fee-based photograph service. While promoting special clothing as an ethnic marker is innocuous in itself, Chio contends, the encoded power, gender, and socioeconomic imbalances as well as the Orientalized aesthetic pursuit for exoticness and the erotic underlying the sartorial representation can deepen the precarious sociocultural position of ethnic minorities in China.

In a time when many ethnic minority groups in China are caught in the dilemma of choosing between ethnic identity and economic development, Chio's study provides an optimistic alternative. Compared with the anguished Tibetans who are offered the "gift of development" at the cost of political and religious freedom (see Emily Yeh, *Taming Tibet*, 2013), and the young people of Lisu, Nu, and Dulong who are educated to be migrant workers by abandoning their traditional way of livelihood (see Russell Harwood, *China's New Socialist Countryside*, 2014), the Miao and Zhuang residents in tourism villages are enjoying prosperity without leaving their homeland, losing much agency, or giving up their traditional culture. Although ethnic tourism reinforces cultural stereotypes and power asymmetries, as revealed by Chio's nuanced analyses, it is clear that ethnic minorities in Ping'an and Upper Jidao are on much better terms with the market economy, the Han Chinese people, and the PRC state.

One limitation of the book is the lack of discussion on nonperformative ethnic culture. Of course, there are a host of ethnographies about Miao and Zhuang cultures, and Chio's volume should not be held responsible for satisfying readers' curiosity about ethnic cultures. However, to nonspecialists of ethnic groups in Southwest China, an

unbalanced emphasis on the visual/sensuous cultural forms might convey an imprecise impression that Miao and Zhuang ethnicity has actually been reduced to these mere representations. If the author had provided a brief yet broader picture of the ethnic cultural landscape in the two villages—such as customs and rituals of marriage, birth, disease, and death—readers would have better grasped the fact that the visual/sensuous representation of ethnic culture is highly selective, and this selectiveness is problematic.

Overall, *A Landscape of Travel* is well-organized, theoretically innovative, and ethnographically rich. Chio performed extensive solid and creative fieldwork in Ping'an and Upper Jidao. She makes a convincing argument that rural tourism has changed the way to become modern for rural, ethnic minority Chinese citizens. Chio demonstrates her inventiveness most beautifully in her idea of inviting the Upper Jidao village tourism association to visit Ping'an. Though the trip didn't unfold as she had expected, the event in itself is very revealing: through the anthropologist's ingenuous intervention, the two otherwise unconnected villages communicated, and their brief encounter brings together the two disparate tourism stories into one big narrative about rural, ethnic communities being transformed by the sightseeing industry.

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