

Cultural Exchange in the Red River Basin

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Somewhere after *zhashutiao* (French fried potatoes) and before *hewuqi* (nuclear weapons), a third-year student of Mandarin Chinese can expect to learn the phrase *wenhua jiaoliu* (cultural exchange). In post-reform China *wenhua jiaoliu* is emphasized in many aspects of daily life. From camera-armed tourists hoping to acquire evidence of photographic *wenhua jiaoliu* with gangly Westerners, to formal meetings among academic and governmental officials, visitors to China can expect to share their views (or at least their view-finders) with a populous increasingly exposed to outside influences.

This January I had the opportunity to participate in a formal, three-day, four-night, all-expenses-paid *wenhua jiaoliu*: An international conference on the Red River Basin's ecological and cultural significance, sponsored by two nations with vested interests in the Red River, China and Vietnam. With my husband and around 150 other conference participants, I sauntered around the countryside near Chuxiong in Yunnan Province, exchanging impressions on local efforts to preserve everything from culture to dinosaur bones. After several days of these exchanges, I felt naively optimistic about international efforts to protect the people and environment of the Red River Basin. However, between the state-sponsored *bai jiu* binges and the state-monitored talks, my conclusions on whether the conference achieved its own purposes of cultural exchange remain unclear.

Fieldwork or Field Trip?

As a US graduate student, I had become accustomed to a predictable conference itinerary: Arrive in conference hotel and share a bed with a potentially unknown colleague; spend days flitting between awkward hallway conversations; attend sessions just long enough to digest the major points while avoiding the

scathing commentary that would inevitably issue forth from the designated moderator; gossip about scathing commentary and professional transgressions over drinks; repeat. The schedule of a Chinese social science conference, however, is quite different. This

conference took place over three days, the first two of which were spent engaging in "fieldwork." Fieldwork consisted of visits to tourism areas around the Red River Basin. This included stops in Yi (a local ethnic minority)



Three women dressed in traditional Yi costumes present conference-goers with horns of bai jiu while singing drinking songs. Photo courtesy Peter M Mattison

historical villages, where we were encouraged to put on our tourist caps, and sing, dance, eat and drink with costumed Yi performers. Though this made up the bulk of our fieldwork, we also visited the local pharmaceutical and dinosaur-fossil treatment factories.

While I fully enjoyed time spent visiting local interest-sites (especially after a few goat horns of *bai jiu*), I left wondering whether the fieldwork had any deeper impacts on the conference-goers. On the one hand, ethnic tourism was

obviously related to the conference agenda; on the other hand, fieldwork consisted of only the most tourist-friendly and arguably superficial aspects of "ethnic culture and ecological civilization [in] the Red River Basin." Ecology was sidelined so that Culture could perform front and center. Conference-goers surely learned something about the Red River Basin's evolving ethnic tourism industry, but was this fieldwork or a field trip?

every paper. They also accompanied us to local fieldsites and were available during meals to facilitate even informal communication among attendees.

Strangely, though academic exchange was emphasized and encouraged throughout the day, two things hampering its occurrence were notable: (1) Questions by and large were not expected and (2) moderating comments were always approving, never contradictory. Talks were exception-

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The Real Meat: Conference Carpaccio

If the first two days of the conference were an unexpected vacation, day three of the conference was business as usual for the most part: A day packed with

ally positive—presenters spoke of impending environmental remediation and the economic benefits of cultural preservation in the context of tourism. Potential negative impacts were largely ignored and attendees were ebull-

papers, organized in sessions and split into separate rooms according to theme. Each session had a designated chair who, with varying degrees of success, timed and moderated presented papers. Aside from the occasional incoming call, attendees were attentive to the issues at hand and seemed genuinely concerned about the preservation of the Red River Basin's cultures and ecology. On top of this, to facilitate *wenhua jiaoliu* in an international setting, simultaneous interpreters were on hand for

lient with hope, not only for the preservation of the Red River Basin, but for increased international communication between Vietnam and China over the its fate. As a graduate student in the US, I had grown used to talks that were met with furrowed eyebrows, disapproving whispers and rancorous questions. In China, I was shocked by the complete lack of pessimism. It was like eating carpaccio: a delicious sauce to coat the actual nutrients, which might benefit a great deal from cooking.

Conference Conventions

Anthropologists are taught not to judge cultures based on their own value-systems, yet I can't help but feel that the conference culture needs some critical review. In the US, I am often mortified to ask questions for fear of public retribution; in China I fear being anything but optimistic in response to others' work. After at least half a century of instability, it is not surprising that China's academics espouse an idealistic ideology. The motivations underlying our more outspoken critics are less clear. Neither knee-jerk criticism nor reflexive praise facilitates wenhua jiaoliu. China might do well to incorporate some skepticism in their conference proceedings; we might do well to invest in their goal-oriented, hopeful approach. In the meantime, maybe we can get some advice on how to get our government to pay for it all.

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agreement designed to protect adopted children from human trafficking." As for the speed and price of Guatemalan adoptions, the same article reported, "notaries charge an average of \$30,000 for children delivered in about nine months—record time for international adoptions." As for Guatemalan policies being less restrictive, I received that information from adoptive US parents who researched many options.

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Consumer Anthropology

Connecting with People through Commerce

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From Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Passenger* (1975). Jack Nicholson is Locke, a journalist and documentary filmmaker. Charles Mulvehill is Robertson, a businessman and "globe trotter." They meet in a North African hotel room on the edge of the Sahara.

Robertson: How about Umbabene? I bet you've never been to Umbabene!

Locke: No

Robertson: Terrible place . . . airports, taxi, hotel . . . they're all the same in the end.

Locke: I don't agree. It's us who remain the same. We translate every situation, every experience into the same old codes. We just condition ourselves.

Robertson: We're creatures of habit. Is that what you mean?

Locke: Something like that. I mean no matter how hard you try, it stays so difficult to get away from your own habits. Even the way we talk to these people, the way we treat them. It's mistaken. I mean how do you get their confidence. Do you know?

Robertson: Well . . . it's like this Mr. Locke. You work with words, images—fragile things. I come with merchandise. Concrete things. They understand me straight away.

Locke: Yes . . . maybe . . .

Connecting with Strangers

Why is it so easy to talk to people about things and so hard to talk to people about ideas and abstractions? This is a critical question for anyone conducting rapid ethnographies. In consumer anthropology participant observation may rest on making a good first impression and client relations happen with people who have vastly different cultural assumptions. The answer offered by the film is that words and images are fragile and merchandise is concrete. Because, Locke says, we translate our impressions into the same old codes, the worlds between strangers remain distinct unless, as Robertson suggests, we connect through things. Does commerce move complete



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strangers into a neutral communication realm? Does an object, product or commercial transaction serve as a tool for communication? Robertson's merchandise turns out to be part of a sinister international traffic in arms, and once that development emerges the movie ceases to speak for anthropology, but the questions raised by Nicholson's character are worth considering.

Antonioni's characters capture two of the many possible aspects of ethnographic engagement and connection in fieldwork. Locke, a journalist, is burned out because he finds it impossible to shed his own cultural assumptions and behaviors enough to engage with others. Robertson, a businessman, moves easily from one relationship to another, using commerce as his vehicle for engagement.

Human relationships do take on material forms and operate through material media, so perhaps it is, in fact, easier to communicate when we unite around consumables. These days, notions of goods and services, their meanings, their flows and values have become critical to anthropology's con-

tribution to both working in and understanding the capitalist world. The practice of consumer anthropology opens the discipline to new levels of methodological and theoretical rigor.

Definitions

There's a lot to the act of consumption. Human beings devote a lot of time to talking about material things—evaluating, desiring, pricing and finally buying and incorporating objects into everyday lives. Energy, time and money are the currencies that become part of the subject matter of ethnographic studies of people and their relationships to products and services.

Consumer anthropology is the use of anthropological methods and theory in the study of consumption. Consumer research has studied the marketplace for a long time. The difference between it and consumer anthropology is that the latter is the study of the consumption process before and after the market becomes involved; and consumer research is less concerned with the money earned by the sellers and more concerned by the value gained by the buyers. Consumer anthropology examines the experiences of both buyers and sellers.

Consumer anthropology is done using fairly standard techniques like snowball recruiting, "shadowing," informal interviewing, in-home observations and video taping, photographing, journaling and scrapbooking. Some of these techniques are primarily for documenting activities and interviews; others are a simulated connection between participant and researcher—an as-if social relation that allows the participant to do the documenting and story creation for the researcher as-if they were friends or colleagues.



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