

ETHNIC TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN YUNNAN, CHINA: REVISITING BUTLER'S TOURIST AREA LIFECYCLE

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not Butler's Tourist Area Lifecycle (TALC) is useful in explaining the development of ethnic tourism in Yunnan, China. Qualitative methods including Nominal Group Technique (NGT), Participant Rural Appraisal (PRA), secondary data from the provincial tourism bureau, and participant observation were used. The findings suggested that Butler's TALC model provides limited explanation of the role of external and internal factors on the accelerated rise and collapse of ethnic tourism destinations. In addition, the findings indicated that the TALC model falls short of explaining the geographic progression of ethnic tourism to ever more remote areas of the Yunnan province as tourists continuously seek authentic experiences in yet untouched villages.

Introduction

The current focus on sustainable tourism development has brought renewed attention to the examination of long-term trends in destination development. One destination development model commonly used to explain the long-term evolution of tourism destinations is Butler's (1980) tourist area lifecycle. According to Butler's model, destinations progress through six stages of development: exploration, involvement,

consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation. In the exploration stage, the most prevalent visitors are small numbers of allocentrics and explorers that rely on individual travel arrangements and follow irregular visitation patterns. These travelers typically seek unique natural and cultural features and pursue their own enlightenment. In these regions, locals still don't understand the needs of outsiders visiting their region and consequently they do not know how to provide the desired accommodations and entertainment. In the involvement stage, local residents begin to dedicate resources (facilities, people, events) towards their visitors. Some advertisement to attract more tourists can be expected; although most often, the advertising is not controlled or originated by the local community. The first variations in tourist numbers begin to take shape creating high and low seasons. In the development stage, the number of tourists keeps increasing and may equal or exceed the number of permanent local residents. The type of tourists also changes from allocentrics to mid-centrics. While natural and cultural attractions continue to attract tourists, these original attractions are gradually replaced/enhanced by man-made facilities. In the consolidation stage, the rate of increase in numbers of visitors declines. The local economy begins to rely heavily on tourism revenues. Due to the increased image of the destination (and its decreased uniqueness) and the growth in facilities and access, organized package tours take control of the tourism market. In the stagnation stage, the peak number of visitors and capacity levels are reached. At this time, the area has a well-established image but it falls out of fashion. The type of visitors tends to change to organized mass tourists with psychocentric characteristics. After reaching this plateau, some destinations may fall into the decline stage characterized by decrease in tourism market and collapse of tourism infrastructures. Conversely, others may recover into the rejuvenation stage identified by complete change in the attractions, or the discovery of untapped natural resources.

The tourist area lifecycle has been reported to appropriately describe the evolution of tourism in various destinations. Ioannides (1992) indicated that the path of growth of the tourism industry in Cyprus followed Butler's tourist area lifecycle. Goncalves and Aguas (1997) concluded that the six



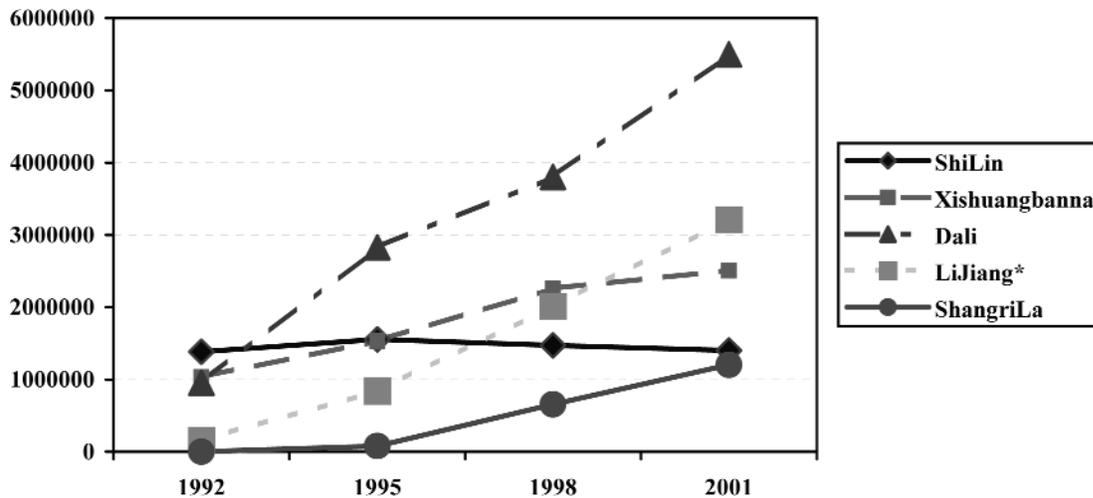
Figure 1. Map of China and Yunnan with study sites

stages proposed by Butler were suitable for the examination of how tourism evolved in the Algarve region of Portugal. A case study of Isle of Man conducted by Cooper and Jackson (1989) revealed that Butler's tourist area lifecycle was useful descriptive tool for analyzing the development of that destination. However, some researchers have reported that Butler's model needs revision or extension when studying alternative forms of tourism. A study by Choy (1992) suggested that Butler's tourist life cycle was not applicable to most pacific island destinations as it was not able to explain the large variation in growth patterns across various destinations in that region. Foster and Murphy (1991) found that the model provided a good description of early tourism trends of resort retirement communities on Vancouver Island, but that the model failed to explain the later development patterns of those resort communities. Hovinen (2002) concluded that Butler's later stages of consolidation and stagnation did not fit well with the empirical evidence he collected from Lancaster County in Pennsylvania. Cohen (1999) also argued that the tourist area lifecycle has limitations in explaining the development of ethnic tourism in Southeast Asia. Collectively, the literature appears to suggest that Butler's tourist area lifecycle may be a very useful conceptual tool for the examination of the development patterns of traditional mass tourism destinations. When the

destinations do not fit that description, however, the model begins to show limitations. The type of tourism activity and the region where the destination is located appear to influence the applicability of the model. Choy (1992) and Cohen (1999) argued that the applicability of Butler's model was limited in the Asia Pacific region. In addition, Hovinen (2002) and Foster and Murphy (1991) argued that the model had limitations in explaining the development of cultural tourism in Amish country and retired tourism in Vancouver. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to test the usefulness of Butler's tourist area lifecycle in helping understand the development of ethnic tourism in Yunnan, a southwestern province in China.

Ethnic tourism may be defined as (1) a variety of "site-seeing" tourism that (2) targets groups that do not fully belong culturally, socially, or politically to the majority population of the state within whose boundaries they live and that are (3) touristically "marked," owing to their alleged ecological boundedness or cultural distinctiveness, uniqueness, or "otherness." (Cohen, 1999, p. 28)

Ethnic tourism differs from traditional forms of tourism because it is based on the conflict between the dominating government's intent to control the



Note: *Statistics reflect tourism development affecting neighboring LuguHu.

Figure 2. Number of visitors to study sites. Statistics reflect tourism development affecting neighboring LuguHu.

unassimilated ethnic tribes and the tourists' motivation to experience authentic and marginal ethnic cultures.

Description of Yunnan Province

China is a diverse nation with 56 ethnic groups. The Han ethnic group represents 91.96% of the population with the remaining population consisting of 55 other ethnic groups. Yunnan is located in the southwestern portion of China adjacent to Vietnam, Laos and Burma. This area has limited industrial potential as it is landlocked; however, its military and trade importance is great as it is considered China's "Southgate" to important trade partners in Southeast Asia. The Yunnan Province is also one of the most diverse regions in China in terms of both biological and cultural diversity. Yunnan possesses a very rich diversity of eco-regions including major watershed systems (Yangzi, Mekong, Salween, Red River, Pearl River) and mountain ranges (East Himalaya, Hengduan, Ailao). There are 26 ethnic minority groups accounting for 40% of the population in Yunnan province (PRC, 2001). Compared to other provinces in Eastern China, Yunnan is a less developed province due to its geographic isolation. However, national and regional policy-makers have proposed that Yunnan's natural and cultural richness should be used to develop tourism industry to stimulate regional economy. Therefore, in Yunnan, tourism has been identified as a major industry in the rehabilitation of rural areas (He & Zhang, 1991). Over the last decade, more and

more Yunnan's natural and cultural richness have been developed with the support of the central and provincial governments. As a result, Yunnan's tourism attracted more than 1 million foreign tourists and approximately 38 million domestic visitors in 2000 (Yunnan Statistical Bureau, 2001).

Method

Data collection for this study used various methods. First, provincial tourism experts and researchers from Yunnan University and Yunnan's Society of Social Sciences were invited to participate in group meetings to discuss the impacts and challenges of tourism development on the main destinations in the province. The group interviews followed a protocol suggested by Nominal Group Technique (NGT) as this technique was designed specifically for development studies in which group consensus is desired (Ritchie, 1985). Community leaders from the main tourism destinations in the region were also recruited for NGT interviews to discuss the impacts of tourism on their villages. Second, the Participant Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique (Chambers, 1994) was used in meetings with villagers from the selected regions to explore how tourism affected their daily life and their socio-economic conditions. Since many informants from these villages spoke only their ethnic dialect and could not speak fluent Mandarin, translators were used to mediate communication. The PRA technique was chosen for this study because it is has proven to be an effective method to gather

Table 1. — TLAC Stage Indicators of Tourism Destinations in Yunnan

Stages	Indicators	Shilin	*1Banna	Dali	*2Lugu Hu	Shangrila
Exploration	Large percentage of allocentrics				✓	✓
	Little infrastructure					✓
	Authentic culture and nature					✓
Involvement	Local investment				✓	
	Tourist season				✓	
	Investment in infrastructure				✓	
Development	Growth in number of tourists			✓	✓	
	Visitors outnumber residents	✓	✓	✓		
	Artificial attractions are built	✓		✓		
Consolidation	Slowing growth rates		✓			
	Organized packaged tours dominate	✓	✓			
	Large number of psychocentrics	✓	✓	✓		
Stagnation	Peak visitor numbers reached	✓				
	Area is no longer fashionable	✓				
	Capacity level has been reached	✓				
Decline	Decrease in markets	✓				
	Collapse of tourism infrastructures					
Rejuvenation	Complete renewal of the attraction					
	Addition of artificial attractions	✓				
	Untapped natural resource are used					

*1 Xishuangbanna, *2 Luoshui in Lugu Hu

information in less developed regions where there are challenges in verbal communication and time limitations. Third, secondary data about tourism flows in the region was obtained from the provincial tourism organization to compare the growth rates of tourism in each destination as number of tourists is a factor central to Butler's tourist area lifecycle model. Lastly, during the one-month long field study, the researchers also conducted participant observation recording their observations through journaling and photography (DeWalt, DeWalt & Wayland, 1998).

All of interviews were audio taped with the consent of the interviewees. Information collected in NGT and PRA interviews were recorded in flipcharts. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize and compare secondary tourist flow data. All data were translated to English from Mandarin by two independent native Chinese speakers. The two translations were later compared to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Results and Discussion

Examination of the data revealed that the various destinations studied exhibited a wide spectrum of

growth levels, tourism impacts, tourist types, and resident attitudes. When compared, it was apparent that each destination studied appeared to be at a consecutive stage of Butler's tourist area lifecycle. Following is a characterization of each destination.

Shi Lin (Stone Forest), symbol of ethnic tourism of Kunming, appears to have reached the stagnation or even decline stage. The original local residents, the Yi people now account for 30 percent of the local community due to the influx of Han immigrants to work in the local tourism industry. The peak numbers of visitors has been reached and may have started to decline. Typical of destinations at the stage of development, Shi Lin has continuously added artificial attractions to the original appeal of the destination - natural wonder of unusual rock formations and the unique cultural features of the Yi ethnic group. Currently, this destination has a well-established image centered in the Yi people's colorful ethnic background and the legend of Aishma, a Yi girl portrayed in a traditional legend.

Xishuangbanna appears to have reached the consolidation stage. Dai (Thai) people live in this region characterized by romance and exoticism.

The region became very popular after poets, artists and scholars in exile during the Cultural Revolution produced art describing the wonders of the region. As typical of destinations in this stage of tourism development, the local economy relies heavily on tourism. Most tourists arrive in organized packaged group tours and the number of visitors to the area appears to have reached a plateau.

Dali is at the development stage. The Bai people govern this region and, contrary to many of the other destinations, they appear to maintain control in the local tourism industry. An interesting finding was that most Bai people now think of their culture as a commodity and are willing to change traditions to fit the market needs - an example is their desire to change the way they serve food from banquet style to western style due to greater efficiency. Large-scale bus tours dominate tourism in Dali. Modern lodging facilities have been recently built in the new section of the city providing accommodations for the ever growing influx of organized mass tourists.

Luoshui in Lugu Hu natural area has characteristics of a destination at the involvement stage. Luoshui is a Mosuo village situated next to the Lugu Hu (lake). Villagers maintain close control over the tourism industry regulating how many families may benefit from tourism, imposing a mandatory dress code for tourism workers and supervising the distribution of revenues from the industry equally among the village families. The lodging is provided mostly in homestay accommodations offered by local families, although there are already a couple of outside investors building hotel-style accommodations in the areas surrounding the village. The number of visitors in to Luishui has increased substantially in the last decade. The village is approximately 10 hours of mountain driving from the nearest airport; therefore, the majority of the visitors are still foreign (mostly Asian) tourists in small groups.

ShangriLa appears to be at the exploration stage. The residents in this area are Tibetans. This destination is still visited by a small number of visitors, mostly allocentrics (many from western countries, but some from other Asian countries). Lodging is still scarce and of unpredictable quality in this area, although a number of tourism groups have begun to build large hotels in anticipation of

the projected growth of the industry in the region. As typical in destinations at this stage, the major difficulty is that local residents still do not understand tourists' needs. There are still limited souvenirs, most guides are from different areas, and there are limited opportunities to experience representations of the local food and culture.

Butler's model appeared to have some limitations in explaining the role of external and internal factors that may accelerate or delay the rise and collapse of ethnic tourism industry. In this study it was evident that local involvement in tourism was intimately related to religious beliefs, political control, and traditional family structure. The Mosuo people, for example, have maintained control of the tourism industry whereas the Naxi have remained as tourees despite the longer history of tourism in their region (Walsh, 2001). The same contradiction was observed between the Bai and the Dai people in Dali and Xishuangbanna respectively. In addition, the tourist area lifecycle's focus on a limited geographic area limited its usefulness to examine ethnic tourism due to the expansionistic character of this type of tourism (Cohen, 2001). The data suggested that as with other ethnic tourism destinations, tourism in Yunnan progressed geographically from one destination to the next. Namely, ethnic tourism in Yunnan begun in Shi Lin with the increased interest in the Yi culture and the geological formations in the Stone Forest. Soon after the growth of that destination, however, tourists begun to explore other exotic regions "untouched" by the Cultural Revolution. After Shi Lin came Xishuangbanna, then Dali, LiJiang, and Lugu Hu. Currently, the ShangriLa region is being marketed to explorer tourists looking for an authentic experience off the beaten path.

Conclusions

In sum, this study suggests that, despite some limitations, Butler's tourist area lifecycle may be useful in understanding how ethnic tourism development occurs in Yunnan. The "youngest" tourism destinations presented characteristics that fit Butler's exploration and involvement stages (ShangriLa and Lugu Hu). Dali was clearly at the development stage with heaving infrastructure investments and increased control by tour groups and national tourism corporations. Finally, Xishuangbanna and Shi-Lin were clearly at the

other end of the continuum with stagnating or declining numbers of visitors and distinctiveness.

An important addition to this model is that ethnic tourism in this area expands geographically to ever more remote areas. Today, ShangriLa is marketed primarily for allocentric tourists; however, there are already tourists looking beyond this destination for the really untouched villages deeper in the mountains. As access in the region improves and as globalization diminishes bureaucratic barriers to foreign visitors, it is expected that this expansion will continue.

Another important finding was that the level of local involvement in tourism does not follow a predictable cycle. As discussed earlier, the Mosuo and the Bai have maintained some control of the tourism industry in their regions. In most cases, however, the tourism industry is almost completely controlled by Han outsiders (national tourism groups and "tourism immigrants"). The data appears to suggest that this discrepancy may be due, at least in part, to the openness of the dominant religion. The Bai believe in the Basu religion - a religion known for being very adaptable to political and religious influences. Subsequent studies should examine this notion.

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