

Wengding's "Primitive" Tribe: Capital, Power and the Spatial Production of Uneven Development

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Abstract. In the dominant discourses, ethnic tourism is often presented as a tool for rural development, but it does not lead to equal benefits for all members in the rural area. This research examines Wengding, a Wa ethnic village in southwest China that was once known as "China's last primitive tribe." The study utilizes Wengding as a case village for exploring the impacts of tourism development on the production of space, power, and everyday life in the village. Methodologically, this study combines policy discourse analysis, qualitatively coded data from 20 travel reviews on Trip.com and Ctrip (2021–2024), and secondary studies on Wengding and ethnic tourism in China. Findings suggest that the development in Wengding has not been a simple story of economic growth, but rather a story of a political economy in which outside capital and local elites capture the highest returns, while villagers pay the long-term costs of staged authenticity and risks associated with tourism development. The fire incident in Wengding in 2021 is used as an example of how such a conflict has been revealed in the village. This research ends with a discussion on the possibility of cooperative governance in the reconstruction of Wengding for a new type of tourism.

Keywords: ethnic tourism, production of space, elite capture, livelihoods, Wengding

1. Introduction

Ethnic tourism is often celebrated as an engine of development, but the benefits are not shared as evenly as such accounts imply. The transformation of Wengding, previously known as "China's last primitive tribe," is an important case in point in exploring the implications of tourism development for changing space, power, and daily life [1]. Previous scholarly works on the case of Wengding and ethnic tourism in China have focused on tourismification, authenticity, and spatial transformation [1]. However, there is limited exploration on the implications of tourism in redistributing benefits and risks within the community. Based on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space [2], this article argues that the transformation of Wengding is not only one of development but also a political-economic process in which capital and local elites reap the greatest benefits whereas local residents bear the long-term consequences of staged authenticity.

To examine this case, the article uses policy discourse analysis, platform review analysis, and secondary scholarship. In this regard, conceived space is examined in the policy planning discourse, with special attention given to the Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County tourism and cultural

development plan [3]. In addition, a sample of 20 reviews on Trip.com and Ctrip, covering 2021-2024, is used as an exploratory analysis of perceived space [4]. Consequently, the two sources are examined in conjunction with secondary works on the case of Wengding and ethnic tourism in China in exploring the implications of tourism for capital accumulation and the redistribution of benefits and risks within the community [1,5,6]. Instead of providing an account of the success story of tourism in Wengding, this article explores who benefits, who bears the risks, and what changes can support a better tourism model.

2. Methodology and analytical framework

2.1. Sample and coding strategy

For conceived space, this study analyzes relevant policy discourses, including the 14th Five-Year Plan of Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County and plans for upgrading Wengding's tourism landscape [3]. For perceived space, this study uses 20 reviews from Trip.com and Ctrip (2021–2024) to analyze themes including post-fire reconstruction, performative labor, and tourist expectations [4]. The frequency of key themes in these coded reviews, which reflects the shift in tourist attention over time, is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Theme frequency in coded review sample (n=20) [4]

Keyword / Theme	2021-2022 (n=10)	2023-2024 (n=10)
Fire / loss	10	4
Reconstruction	3	8
"Primitive"	8	6
Performance	5	8
Relocation	2	7
Commuting labor	1	6
Safety / infrastructure	1	3

The coding of the reviews points to the change in the tourist gaze. While the reviews from Trip.com in 2021 highlighted the concepts of loss, destruction, and disappearance, the reviews from the same platform in 2024 highlighted the new spatial configuration as a workspace.

2.2. Theoretical framework: Lefebvre's spatial triad

In examining the transformation of Wengding Village, the study draws on Henri Lefebvre's theoretical framework [2], conceptualizing space as a process rather than a static setting. His theory of space as a process is composed of the following concepts.

2.2.1. Conceived space (representations of space)

This concept represents the blueprint or plan of the space created by experts or institutions. This is evident in Wengding Village through the label of the "last primitive tribe," as well as the planning logic underpinning the stagnation of development and the conversion of the Old Village into a tourist destination [1,3].

2.2.2. Spatial practice (perceived space)

This concept represents the real or physical form of the space and the activities necessary to maintain life within the space. It is evident in the village of Wengding as the shift from farming and ritualistic activities to tourism and performance [1,4].

2.2.3. Representational space (lived space)

This concept represents the lived or remembered spaces imbued with meanings by the individuals within the spaces. It is evident in the village of Wengding as the connection of the Old Village to the Wa as the sacred social world of the ancestors [1,5].

3. Spatial production and the branding of "the primitive"

3.1. Conceived space: internal orientalism

The space of Wengding is described as a "living fossil" of a primitive society. This can be seen as a form of internal orientalism [1,3]. The pre-modern standard used to judge the Wa culture has led to a conceived space that views modernization as a force that threatens heritage rather than as a force that can improve one's life. This is seen in the planning discourse surrounding the Cangyuan area, with emphasis on visual authenticity and upgrading Wengding to a more prestigious level as a scenic area [3]. Wengding is framed as a "living fossil" to allow planning discourse to justify restricting development in the Old Village and limiting residents' use of modern fireproof materials—all to preserve the marketing appeal of the "primitive" space for urban tourists [3,7].

3.2. Intensifying spatial practice: from production to consumption

The 2018 resettlement transformed the spatial practices of the Wengding community, creating a disconnect between livelihood spaces and display spaces [1,5].

Life is now restructured into a scheduled labor pattern, with locals seated in thatched houses, posing with tea and cigarettes to perform an orderly existence. Young Wa men are dressed in navy uniforms and work as guards instead of their traditional attire [1,4]. Thus, an unfair pattern of development is created where the spatial practices that were previously life-giving are replaced with practices that are tourism company and consumer-centric [1,6].

3.3. Lived space: identity fragmentation

The Old Village is not only a picturesque destination but also a sacred social space for the Wa people [1,5]. Therefore, the fire of 2021 not only destroyed structures but also created an increased disconnect between people and their social space. Secondary sources documenting local testimonies reveal growing fragmentation of their lived space, where residents are physically present but losing control over their social environment. Thus, the rebuilt thatched houses are not seen as their places of dwelling but as places maintained for the consumption of tourists.

4. Distributional outcomes and mechanisms of power

4.1. Institutional filtering and the elite capture of the benefits from the transition of Wengding Village to tourism development

The benefits from tourism development in Wengding Village are unevenly distributed and structured by spatial hierarchies of social relations [1,6].

4.1.1. State and corporate control

The initial appropriation of rents from monopoly profits is controlled by actors with conceived space, including the state and tourism businesses [1,3].

4.1.2. Local intermediaries and the tourism elite

The second tier of actors involved in the appropriation of benefits from tourism development includes cadres and villagers from the community, particularly those with more social capital and hence more ability to act as an intermediary between locals and outsiders or to translate their cultural capital into economic benefits [6]. This is consistent with Li et al.'s concept of elite circulation, where pre-existing status advantages persist and reproduce themselves in the tourism sector [6].

4.1.3. Marginal households and the risk transfer

The majority of original villagers occupy the bottom of the perceived spatial hierarchy, working as wage laborers or performers. They lack access to and control over the means of production, yet bear responsibility for preserving cultural landscapes and shouldering the risks of tourism development [1,8].

4.2. The safety paradox of aesthetic preservation

The fire incident in 2021 should not be seen as a singular event but rather as part of a larger phenomenon that manifests the tension between aesthetic preservation and safety [7,9]. The tourism model heavily depended on dense thatched structures and continuity to preserve the aesthetic image of a "primitive" settlement. Resettlement, however, disrupted the fire monitoring that had long been part of the village's traditional safety mechanisms [1,7]. In this sense, the fire incident highlighted a form of distributive justice, wherein tourism profited from preserving an aesthetically pleasing image, but the risks associated with this image were shouldered by the local residents.

The evaluative corpus following the fire incident supports this argument. There are several evaluations that portray the rebuilt village not as a space of habitation but rather as a rebuilt space of work or performance [4]. Rather than showing that space has been rebuilt, this change in tourism discourse suggests that lived space has been increasingly replaced by a managed scenic space. The villagers' traditional function as custodians of a cultural landscape has been largely replaced by that of performers within a tourism system managed by external actors [1,4].

5. Optimization paths: towards a more equitable landscape

If the real concern in the case of Wengding is not tourism itself but the uneven distribution of power, benefits, and risks, then the remediation strategy cannot be limited to surface-level preservation.

Instead, the correct response would involve moving away from elite-centered management towards more resident-centered and institutionally accountable revitalization [8,10].

5.1. Reducing elite capture: the Azheke model

Wengding could benefit from the internally derived logic found in the Azheke Plan in Yunnan Province, which has already been recognized as a successful community-centered tourism governance model [11].

Rather than allowing outsiders to control value distribution, a more equitable framework could adopt a community-majority cooperative ownership model, where local residents hold primary claim to tourism resources [11].

5.2. Addressing the safety paradox: material innovation and participatory governance

The safety issue can be addressed by using fire-resistant construction techniques and by taking a more pragmatic approach to the concept of "authenticity" in the context of the living village [8].

If the local population is asked to maintain the heritage area but also assumes the risks involved, then the local population must also have more power in the reconstruction and governance processes. As such, the concept of more participatory governance cannot be seen as merely symbolic but as involving the actual distribution of power [10].

6. Conclusion

This study argues that changes in Wengding cannot be explained by the tourism-led development narrative proposed by the tourism-led growth hypothesis. Rather, it is argued that these changes should be understood as a political-economic process wherein space, value, and risk are unevenly distributed. The application of an integrated approach that integrates the production of space, elite capture, and qualitative review discourse has shown that tourism-led development in Wengding has created value and visibility, and concentrated power in the state, capital, and intermediary actors. In contrast, ordinary villagers have remained closely associated with performance, displacement, and risk-taking, rather than with control of the most profitable sectors of the economy.

The fire incident of 2021 was an important event that shed light on the tensions between aesthetic conservation and safety in the current form of tourism economy in Wengding. The research has shown that Wengding is not only an important site for understanding dynamics at the village level, but it also provides an important reference for understanding the ethnic tourism economy as a whole, especially with regard to how ethnic tourism creates value from culture and distributes risk and power unevenly.

Moving forward with the development of the ethnic tourism economy, we must move beyond the tourism-led economic growth paradigm and the concept of staged authenticity.

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