Heritage Commoditization in the Living Heritage Sites:
A Case of 'Creative Destruction' in Lijiang's Old Town in China

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of Lijiang's Old Town in Yunnan, China, into a major domestic and international tourist destination as a result of its 1997 designation as a World Heritage site, provides an exemplary case study into which tourism development model best explains its progress and predicts its trajectory. Mitchell hypothesized the twin poles of destruction and enhancement as the consequence of the creative powers of an economy heavily influenced by tourism. In this paper I scrutinize Lijiang's case through Mitchell's model of 'creative destruction' and assess the observations of other published researchers in light of my own observations. Most observers (myself included) see Lijiang hurtling toward the destruction pole, but there are some signs that such rapid touristic development has yielded some enhancements. The opportunity to observe Lijiang again after the Covid-19th pandemic's hiatus will allow for a reassessment in light of the schema outlined here.

Keywords: Living heritage sites, Creative destruction, Heritage preservation, Chinese old towns, Lijiang

INTRODUCTION

When I have a chance to travel, I am always interested in visiting sites in which vernacular historical and cultural heritage is being preserved. When strolling around these old towns and traditional villages, there is a sense of traveling back in time and having a glimpse of how local people lived in bygone days. This is the gaze of the postmodernist tourist who is nostalgic for an imagined glorious past. However, what is really authentic in preserved traditional villages and towns? How can a village/town be sustainably preserved while it is being developed as a touristic site? How does mass-tourism affect local culture and alter the lifestyles of local residents? Those are the questions I would like to ask when approaching a popular living heritage site.[1]

Increasing Popularity and Challenges of Historic Towns and Traditional Villages

Different national governments aim to preserve or recreate their heritage and to develop heritage tourism for similar reasons. In the age of globalization, when contemporary experiences are said to be lacking a sense of depth, originality, and place (Waitt 2000); and cities around the world appear more and more homogenous, the old towns and traditional villages become more appealing for anyone who feels alienation from contemporary life (Waitt 2000; Su and Teo 2011). Thus, heritage sites are

gradually gaining popularity, while authorities and other stakeholders utilize its heritage within political, educational and economic spheres.

As to the political aspect, preserving a country's heritage helps authorities to maintain or recreate historic narratives for strengthening national identity (O'Connor 1993; Pretes 2003; Hampton 2005; Park 2010).

The revival and restoration of heritage sites can economically benefit local residents and contribute to the further development of the place. However, preservation and development of the living heritage sites is always a challenging endeavor. The management of living heritage sites is usually accompanied by tensions between the requirements of protection and preservation of heritage, and the opportunities for economic development through tourism (Wang & Bramwell 2012). The main challenges at such sites are the tension among various stakeholders; and, the effort required to find a balance between preservation, tourism and the local ways of life of the inhabitants (Miura 2010).
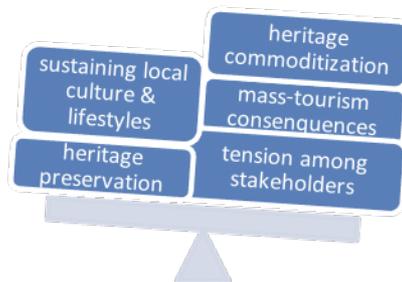

Figure 1. Main challenges in the living heritage sites. (Illustration by the author)

Even though tourism can bring economic benefits to local communities, it also can contribute to environment degradation and habitat fragmentation, and might have negative social and cultural impacts (Hall and Lew 1998; Mowforth and Munt 1998; Chan and Ma 2004; Su and Teo 2011; Avieli 2015). Popular heritage sites with an increasing number of visitors can reach a tipping point where excessive tourism development can be seen by some of the stakeholders as unsustainable. According to Mitchel (1998, 2013), that unsustainability, or advanced heritage commodification, often leads to the 'creative destruction' of the native culture, the community and the original lifestyle of the inhabitants.

Another challenge to heritage sites is the issue of authenticity. Chhabra et al. (2003) argued that a focus on authenticity is a basic principle of heritage tourism development. Authenticity is used as a promotional device (Waitt 2000). However, what is presented as "authentic" is usually staged, and far from being close to the original. Numerous researchers have argued that an important feature of heritage tourism is not only the 'original' authenticity, but also the perception of it (McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Taylor 2001; Waitt 2000). They have noted that what is considered to be authentic depends as much on the interpretation of the viewer (Prentice 1993; Cohen 1998; McIntosh and Prentice 1999; Waitt 2000). Chhabra et al. (2003) claim that staged authenticity does not necessarily mean superficiality. Moreover, they remind us that the 'original' cultures change over time and heritage is not a frozen representation of the past. It can evolve and change with time, altered by the community that created it.

In 'ancient villages' and old towns in China there are strict regulations for preserving traditional landscapes and there is usually a division between the old town and the new town. In the designated area of the old town, the vernacular architecture is meant to be preserved, in addition to the regulations in regard to new construction. However, due to the numerous difficulties to preserve original vernacular buildings, especially wooden ones, what is claimed to be a "preserved area" is

usually a rebuilt and reconstructed area, with traditional style facades encasing buildings with modern amenities inside. In many cases, such as in Lijiang's Old Town, the rebuilt area only partly resembles the original townscape (Goodman 2014; Su and Teo 2011).

CREATIVE DESTRUCTION VS CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

"Tourism is like fire: it can cook your food or burn your house down"

Old towns and villages with historic attributes and traditional landscapes are gradually reconstructed socially and economically. They evolve into over-commodified sites in light of the actions of various stakeholders driven by post-modernist values (Zhang et al. 2019).

Mitchell (1998) has developed ***a model of 'creative destruction'***, which predicted that advanced commoditization of popular heritage sites will eventually destroy the native landscape and identities of the original place. When local heritage is turned into and promoted as a tourism product, the idealized image of the village or town is commercialized and "enhanced" with entrepreneurial investment. The demand of visitors for an idyllic authentic environment facilitates the advanced commercialization of the village's heritage, which in its turn contributes to the 'creative destruction' of the original site (Mitchell 1998).

Mitchell claims that consumer demand is a key component of change (Mitchell 2013); therefore, traditional villages and historic towns have developed by responding to visitor demands. In Table 1 I have shown all the stages of Mitchell's model and their relation to the changing landscape identity of the sites. When heritage is excessively commodified, the original heritage gradually disappears and new landscapes take place, such as a heritage-scape, a leisure-scape or a boutique-scape (Mitchell 2013).

Table 1. Creative destruction stages

Creative destruction stages	Landscape identity
Stage 1: Pre-commodification	Traditional task-scape (original industries of the site)
Stage 2: Early commodification	Traditional task-scape
Stage 3: Advanced commodification	Heritage-scape (most of the commerce is evolved around heritage)
Stage 4: Early destruction	Heritage-scape
Stage 5: Advanced destruction	Boutique/Leisure-scape (most of the commerce is evolved around new enterprises – boutiques, cafes)
Stage 6: Post-destruction	Boutique/Leisure-scape

Source : Creative destruction stages. Clare J.A. Mitchell, Creative Destruction or Creative Enhancement? Understanding the Transformation of Rural Spaces (Journal of Rural Studies, 2013), p.376, table 1

However, in the later stages of her research, Mitchell came to conclude that not all the popular heritage sites in the stage of advanced commoditization will end up in 'creative destruction'. Living heritage sites can avoid 'creative destruction' by preserving their heritage and lifestyles whilst adding new functions to the original landscape and original task scape of the place, and creating a balanced hybrid of heritage and other landscapes (Mitchell calls it 'creative enhancement') (Mitchell 2013). I use the term *'creative development'* instead, to emphasize that living heritage sites can experience creative development by enhancing activities and entrepreneur's initiatives that support local

lifestyles, culture and heritage preservation, while creating sustainable new functionality of the site (Figure 2).
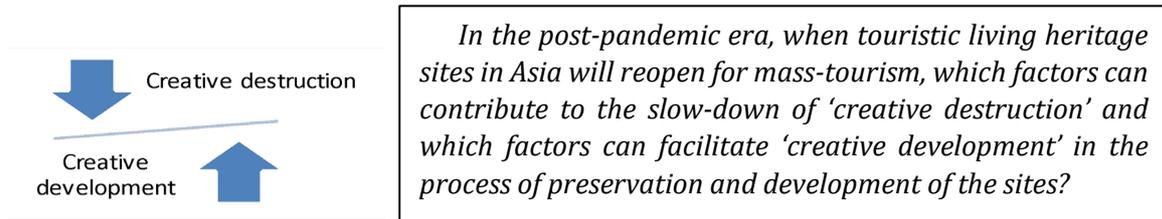

In the post-pandemic era, when touristic living heritage sites in Asia will reopen for mass-tourism, which factors can contribute to the slow-down of 'creative destruction' and which factors can facilitate 'creative development' in the process of preservation and development of the sites?

Figure 2. Creative destruction vs creative development. (Illustration by the author)

Since Mitchell based her model of 'creative destruction' on the case studies in Canadian small towns, I aim to scrutinize its applicability on living heritage sites in China, by examination of Lijiang's Old Town's case in the further sections.

CREATIVE DESTRUCTION IN LIVING HERITAGE SITES OF CHINA

In the times of Mao Zedong, traditions and cultural practices were often condemned as backward by the Chinese government. During the Cultural Revolution, in order to establish a new socialist China, Mao called for a nationwide movement to get rid of the 'four olds' – old thought, old culture, old custom, and old tradition (Su and Teo 2011). What makes the current politics of China different is the fact that cultural practices and materials have been redefined as resources under the guise of development, sustainability (Daly and Winter 2012), and, more recently, the establishment of a 'harmonious society' (Coggins and Yeh 2014).

In the recent decades, before the Covid-19th pandemic, China's rapidly growing economy and improved infrastructures and transportation systems have led to a significantly increasing number of domestic tourists visiting popular heritage sites (Chan and Ma 2004; Su and Teo, 2011).

China's governmental policy of sustainable development is mainly economically driven; local community and cultural considerations often give way to economic objectives (Chan and Ma, 2004). However, when developers of living heritage sites are mostly motivated by modernization and economic profit rather than by preservationist motives, the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage becomes increasingly challenging. Chan and Ma claim that despite the efforts of archeologists and architectural scholars and heritage preservation regulations in China, preservationist groups have weak lobbying powers. They note that the main difficulties at the heritage sites in China is the conflict between economic development and archeological protection, insufficient funds for preservation, and human damage due to a loose enforcement of law, and lack of public awareness on heritage preservation's significance (Chan and Ma 2004).

The entrepreneurs respond to the demands of Chinese tourists who are interested in visiting traditional places, but also prefer modern and urban facilities for a comfortable stay (Chan and Ma 2004). What happens to the local population when a village/town turns to a consumptive space? When a site is in a stage of advanced commoditization, one of the negative impacts on local population is that numerous local residents are compelled to leave due to the increased cost of life (products and land), and inconvenience of living in a touristic locality. They tend to sell their property to the entrepreneurs and leave the town (Goodman 2014).

The main concern for the heritage preservationists is that increasing tourism flows to a site will inevitably lead to a dilution of authentic cultural practices, as local residents leave, and those who stay take on performative roles, as it occurs in Lijiang with Naxi people, who relocated outside of their

previous home in Lijiang's Old Town, but keep wearing ethnic costumes and perform traditional dance for the tourists in the Old Town (Su and Teo 2011).

Zhang et al have implemented a study on the *creative destruction model* in three traditional villages in China – Likeng, Wangkou, and Jiangwan. The authors report that "in the commercial development of China's traditional villages, the government directly drives the process of creative destruction as decision-makers and as investors. Because of the symbiosis of corporate and government interests in tourism development, the productive rural landscape suffered fundamental destruction" (Zhang et al. 2019). In the next chapter I would like to discuss the applicability of Mitchell's model to the case of 'creative destruction' in Lijiang's Old Town.

The Case of Lijiang's Old Town

Lijiang Ancient Town is located in northwest Yunnan, a province in southwest China, nestled against the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. It is located 2,400 m above sea level and connected to the Tibetan Plateau. It was built at the end of the Song Dynasty (AD 960 – 1279) and it has been the home of various ethnic groups, most notably the Naxi group, for more than 800 years. Lijiang's Old Town has a clear spatial boundary, demarcated by the local planning authority (Su and Teo 2011).
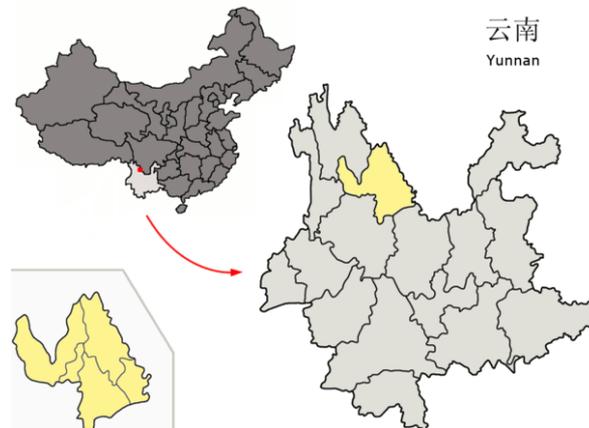

Figure 3. Lijiang's location in China. (Drawn by Croquant, *Location of Lijiang prefecture (yellow) within Yunnan provice of China***, September 2007, map, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijiang#/media/Datei:Location_of_Lijiang_Prefecture_within_Yunnan_ (China).png, used under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported.)**

In 1997 Lijiang was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site (UNESCO 1997) due to its rich cultural heritage, abundance of vernacular buildings and bridges, cobblestoned streets and an ancient canal system. The designation was given despite a powerful earthquake (7.2) in 1996, which had torn down most of Lijiang's Old Town, killed 322 people, destroyed 358,000 buildings, and turned 320,000 people homeless (USGS 2009).

After Lijiang was designated as a World Heritage site, the number of visitors exploded. Mass-tourism began there in the late 1990s with strong support from the central government which initiated a "great western development" of western China. Yunnan is one of the poorest provinces of Western China, a home to 25 ethnic minority groups, which are used as Yunnan's major selling point for this development drive. Western China accommodates 75 percent of the country's ethnic population and 60 percent of the rural poor population. Tourism was considered as a vital component of this development plan (Su and Teo 2011).

As to the authenticity of Lijiang's traditional townscape, the rebuilt Old Town is an idealized version of the traditional Lijiang (Goodman 2014). After the earthquake the old city was rebuilt to suit its

designation as a World Heritage site. The modern concrete buildings that were built during the 1980s and 1990s were demolished and a new Dongba Street was built in a traditional style. Local authorities claimed that without UNESCO's designation, Lijiang's Old Town would have been destroyed by the powers of modernization (Su and Teo 2011).

Lijiang's newly rebuilt Old Town became an imagined destination for the middle and wealthy class of domestic tourists, portrayed as "a frontier which will release the tourist from the stifling confines of "modernity" in China (Wang 1999b, cited in Su and Teo 2011). Local authorities have constructed an idealized narrative about the Old Town: a beautiful destination, which is a showcase of the successful heritage preservation, with a, "unique Naxi culture which is still practiced in the town and shall be experienced by visitors." (Su and Teo 2011)

Local leaders claimed in the late 1990s that "Lijiang will never suffer from the invasion of modernization" (Su and Teo 2011). However, the influx of tourists has led to a dramatic change to the place and to the daily lives of the Naxi community. Lijiang once was a popular destination for Western backpackers and group tourists, and later became popular among domestic tourists, mainly the ethnic Han majority (Goodman 2014).

I have visited Lijiang's Old Town three times, in 2006, 2008, and 2019, and have noticed some significant changes in the last decade. In 2006, I stayed in Lijiang for two weeks, attracted to the quiet idyllic atmosphere of the town. At that time, I was not aware that a decade previously Lijiang had suffered from a major earthquake, and the city had been replaced with a new version of itself, a change which saw as a consequence most of the local Naxi population being driven out of the Old Town (Goodman 2014). In 2006 and 2008 the atmosphere in Lijiang was less sinified than in 2019, when I visited for the last time. In the 2000s, at the time when Su and Teo conducted their research, they cited one local Naxi man, someone who was interested in the preservation of traditional Naxi music. "Lijiang's Ancient Town is dead," this man said, thereby addressing the problem of the fading Naxi culture in Lijiang (Su and Teo 2011).

Figures 4-5-6. Images of Lijiang in 2019. (Photographed by the author)

As of September 2019, Lijiang was already one of the most popular tourist localities in Yunnan Province, dramatically different from a decade before. It was evident that the World Heritage designation, mass-tourism development and the excessive heritage commoditization lured outside entrepreneurs to operate their leisure and fashion businesses in the Old Town. In 2019, Lijiang seemed in a stage of advanced commoditization, and to be as well in the stage of advanced destruction, according to Mitchell's model, due to the absence of Naxi people's cultural domination, and instead - the domination of boutique and leisure business activities in the town.

Jim Goodman, the author of several books on Yunnan, claims that what killed the Old Town of Lijiang 大研 (In Chinese: Dayan) was not the strong earthquake in 1996, but the designation of the town as a World Heritage site. Goodman writes: "Before the designation of Lijiang as a World Heritage Site, Dayan was the last major traditional urban entity in southwest China. It was basically an autonomous town, whose 50,000 or so <u>Naxi</u> inhabitants grew their own food, brought in their own fuel, organized their own markets, got water from the streams that ran through town and were dependent on the outside for basically just electricity. Life in old Dayan ran pretty much the same way it had for centuries. All but a handful of its buildings were in the traditional Chinese style, characterized by red wooden walls, stone foundations and tiled roofs. In terms of Heritage Site qualifications, Dayan lacked nothing" (Goodman 2014)

Goodman writes that the only positive impact of the earthquake on Lijiang was a new awareness in China in regard to Lijiang and its cultural value. Millions of domestic tourists flocked to Lijiang's Old Town even while reconstruction was still in progress. Goodman claims that the World Heritage site designation brought a "death sentence" on Lijiang because the reconstruction of the Old Town drove the local Naxi community outside of Dayan, and with the departure of the majority of Naxi the local culture is waning while the Naxi ways of life is disappearing. Goodman writes: "It turned out the authorities had their own idea of what a Heritage site should look like. That view did not stress preservation so much as transformation. Apparently, they thought that recognition as a World Heritage Site gave them the right, even the duty, to recreate Dayan as an idealized version of itself. This was not a decision made by insensitive Han bureaucrats from the north. This was the choice of the Naxi-run city government itself, a policy that eventually resulted in the removal of all the Naxi living in the Naxi old town" (Goodman 2014).

Goodman claimed that the transformation of Lijian's Old Town was oriented to attract tourist money, and not to restore the town to what it was before the earthquake. Naxi people whose houses were damaged in the earthquake did not have enough means to reconstruct them. Chinese businessmen, largely from Hunan province, flocked into Dayan and made deals with these Naxi owners to rent their buildings. They paid for reconstruction, kept the traditional architecture but made the buildings bigger, more ornate, and converted them into guesthouses, restaurants or high-priced souvenir shops. Within a year Naxi houses were rebuilt in a new fashion to adjust for the commercial activity in them, while Naxi people moved into a subdivision outside Lijiang the government had created for them. Naxi people were compensated with new houses outside the Old Town. "{They} lived more comfortably than before, but they had lost the whole social and cultural environment they had enjoyed before the earthquake" (Goodman 2014).

Figures 7-8. Images of Lijiang's in the 1990s, before the massive earthquake. Reproduced by permission of Jim Goodman, Why Lijiang Deserved its World Heritage Status - and what happened next?, 24 December 2014.[2]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Lijiang's case shows that the changes wrought on the local Naxi community after the massive earthquake in 1996, and after the designation of the Old Town as a World Heritage site in 1997, led to a slow death sentence on the Old Town as a home to Naxi people. Lijiang, without the vibrant life of the Naxi community as it was before 1996, is described by a local man as a "dead Old Town". Su and Teo wrote in the summary of their book that "the town is no longer an ordinary living space for the Naxi people but it is almost a theme park" (Su and Teo 2011). According to my informant from Lijiang in 2021, Naxi presence in the Old Town's business is just about 10 percent, and Naxi culture is mostly performed for the development of tourism, rather than for the sake of preserving it.

However, has the transformation of Lijiang brought a death sentence to the Old Town with its new identities? Has the commoditization of Naxi culture turned Lijiang's Old Town from a living heritage site into a dying heritage site, or has the museumization of Naxi's heritage facilitated its preservation? I assume, relying on the research on staged authenticity mentioned in the Introduction section, that the current simulacrum of Naxi culture for the purpose of tourism development might stimulate further tangible and intangible preservation of Naxi's heritage when tourism is revived, and the Naxi's representation of Naxi identity will become more prevalent in the Old Town. Without an increased Naxi presence in Old Town Lijiang, it is worrisome to think that the revival of mass-tourism might escalate commercialization, leaving Lijiang a soulless site of sinified homogenized development. Further research is required to scrutinize how the future demands of domestic and international tourists will shape Lijiang's identity in the future.

According to Mitchell's model of 'creative destruction', Lijiang's case can be categorized as in stage five – the stage of advanced destruction. The model seems applicable for Lijiang's case with regard to the main business activities in the *boutique/leisure-scape*, as well as the perceptions of locals as they gaze upon the new landscapes and identities of the site. Lijiang's Old Town can be seen as a case of advanced 'creative destruction' due to its transformation in the past two decades, when most of the commerce in Lijiang has evolved around new enterprises (boutiques, cafes, etc.) owned by Han entrepreneurs from outside Lijiang, while the majority of native Naxi population has left the Old Town. However, further research is required on the applicability of Mitchell's model for Lijiang's case, since the model does not take into account the political and bureaucratic implications of the site's transformation that occur in a Chinese context. As Su and Teo mentioned, the central government has encouraged Lijiang's development as a "political symbol of ethnic harmony" and China's unity in diversity (Su and Teo 2011), so the museumization of Naxi's culture is continued as part of this political agenda.

Lijiang's case has challenged me to continue my research on living heritage sites in China and other developing Asian countries, to examine the feasibility of steps which might be taken to avoid 'creative destruction' and to determine the most suitable approach for the enhancement of similar sites in the stage of advanced heritage commoditization, without compromising their tangible and intangible heritage and local residents' traditions, prosperity and lifestyles.

Given the current hiatus in the tourist economy as a result of the imposition of Covid-19th pandemic restrictions, it would be surprising not to find a change in Lijiang's development trajectory as a result of that hiatus. Having identified several different vectors which impact the perception of Lijiang as a tourist destination, I look forward to returning to Lijiang to continue my fieldwork and to assess these changes in its Old Town.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A Living heritage site is a town or village which has both been designated as a World or National Heritage site and which has an indigenous population sustaining livelihoods distinct from the economy of the tourist site.

[2] Jim Goodman's photographs of Lijiang in the 1990s were taken from his article: https://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/3391/why-lijiang-deserved-its-world-heritage-status-and-what-happened-next?fbclid=IwAR0PvALothWQkzJL5XAgK_yQrD0kVpZdqLGvHoMaZXPSvtqIT5cMKZj57kA