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The subjectivity of Miao people in tourism representations

Imaginarities and representations of ‘exoticism’ are two key forces driving the development of ethnic tourism. However, a significant challenge is that tourism imaginaries and representations portrayed by external stakeholders around the globe often objectify local people as traditional signs, visualising exoticism. To understand how local people exert their subjectivity in constructing self-representations, this article examines Miao people in Guizhou Province, China. The results show that external stakeholders’ imaginaries of exoticism indeed shape local tourism representations in a traditional way. However, the traditions represented by local Miao people transcend the stereotypical understandings of external stakeholders and exemplify the value of Miao traditions in effectively managing and empowering the community. A conceptual understanding of the subjectivity of local people in ethnic tourism is offered in this study, portraying it as ‘unappropriated being’ that is structurally vulnerable but culturally resilient. The article also suggests transferable recommendations for amplifying local voices in tourism. While these suggestions may reduce the economic profitability of tourism, they are crucial for the ethical development of ethnic tourism.

Keywords: Tourism imaginaries; Local representations; Subjectivity; Community empowerment; China

Introduction

Ethnic tourism emerged in the early 20th century, initially driven by a limited number of visitors motivated by curiosity and elite peer approval (Smith, 1989). With the influx of a large number of tourists and tourism consumption, ethnic tourism has become a significant strategy for reducing poverty and promoting regional development around the world (Tian, et al., 2023a). The allure of exoticism and the desire to encounter ‘exotic others’ are two major factors for the development of ethnic tourism. According to Smith (1989), ethnic tourism is described as something ‘marketed to the public in terms of the “quaint” customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples’ (p. 2). This means that ‘exoticism’ is a collective narrative of destinations that is marketed to attract tourists. Research by Butler and Hinch (1996) shows that tourists’ imaginaries of ‘exoticism’ and their desire to encounter it in real life motivate them to visit ethnic communities. Thus, to attract tourists and fulfil their exotic imaginaries, colourful depictions and representations of people and places are bound to emerge in ethnic tourism (Fan et al., 2020).

Local traditions become the more spectacular aspects of the tourism market, showcasing exoticism (Oakes, 1998). A significant challenge is that tourism imaginaries and representations portrayed by governments and tourism companies around the globe often objectify local people as traditional signs. However, in the context of tourism management and development, tradition is often perceived as backward by the dominant majority in society, who measures the developmental pace of ethnic minorities against the yardstick of modernisation (Gladney, 1994). Local people as traditional cultural carriers thus become marginal groups (Smith, 1989), who find little room for self-representation in tourism. This leads to the neglect or misrepresentation of traditional value of communities, serving the dominant groups’ exploitative agenda (Duncan & Sharp, 1993).

To challenge hegemonic representations and alienated tourism imaginaries, some critical scholars have suggested amplifying local people’s self-representations in ethnic tourism (Duncan & Sharp, 1993; Wang & Morais, 2014). However, the widely

promoted community empowerment approach has not always proven effective, especially in contexts where rigid tourism governance prevails (Tian, et al., 2023a). For example, in China, ethnic tourism is generally organised in a top-down manner. Different levels of government and external tourism developers have played key but distinct roles in ethnic tourism development (Yang et al., 2008). The involvement of external tourism developers can provide the necessary policies, capital, and technical support for the development of ethnic tourism (Yang et al., 2008). However, for local communities, they are often marginalised in decision-making processes and lose control over local resources (Yang & Wall, 2008). The long-standing unbalanced relationship between tourism developers, villagers, and local elites is difficult to resolve merely through the devolution of power (Tian et al., 2023a). Instead, the exercise of local people's subjectivity offers an alternative method to consider for effective community empowerment in tourism development (Tian, et al., 2023b).

Inspired by Tian et al.'s studies, this study aims to explore generating mechanisms that cause local people to exert their subjectivity in tourism representations. According to Zeman (2015), "Subjectivity" is at the heart of human selfhood' (p.120). Specifically, human beings are evidently objects, but at the same time, they are also subjects—centres of experience capable of acquiring knowledge and taking action from the unique perspectives that our bodies provide (Zeman, 2015). This ontological exploration will enhance people's epistemological understanding of the subjectivity of marginalised local people within power dynamics in ethnic tourism.

Miao people in the Upper Langde Miao Village in Guizhou Province, China, are recognised as holders of decision-making power in tourism. The development model in this tourism village is an inclusive bottom-up approach, contrasting with China's prevalent top-down tourism management model (Chen et al., 2017). This makes them a compelling case for studying the subjectivity of local people in tourism representations within the context of prevalent rigid governance structures (Tian et al., 2023a). By examining this case, this study offers transferable recommendations for amplifying local voices in ethnic tourism.

Tourism imaginary

Research on the ‘imaginary’ originated in the field of psychoanalysis and later expanded to sociology. For psychoanalysts, the concept of ‘imaginary’ is generally defined as a fantasy or illusion created by individuals in response to a psychological need (Lacan, 1977; Colman, 2006). However, for some sociologists, imaginaries are no longer just created by individuals, instead, they represent a society’s shared, unifying core conceptions. Following Castoriadis (1987), imaginaries are reflections of collective elements of society, rather than individuals’ ideas about society. Social imaginaries are significant because they enable people to achieve mutual understanding with one another, facilitating common social practices (Taylor, 2002). However, Castoriadis (1987) has also reminded us that alienation occurs when social institutions predominate people’s imaginaries.

In tourism studies, the psychological and social aspects of imaginaries are widely discussed. According to Dann (1976), tourism imaginaries are tourists’ fantasies motivated by two desires: the desire to transcend the monotony of everyday life through experiencing exoticism or difference, and the desire to be fulfilled for the development of personality after returning home. These desires are internalised as tourists’ imaginaries toward destinations (Salazar, 2012). These studies are consistent with scholars in psychoanalysis (e.g., Lacan, 1977; Colman, 2006), who view imaginaries as fantasies. The difference is that in tourism studies, imaginaries are seen as a positive psychological need for a better life in material actualities, specifically fantasies of ego enhancement through experiencing exoticism or difference. This positive psychological need propels tourists to various destinations, making imaginaries a driving force behind tourism (Salazar & Graburn, 2014).

As opposed to focusing on the psychological aspect of tourism imaginaries, some other tourism scholars examine the social aspect. Cremers (2020) views tourism imaginaries as collective narratives of landscapes rather than individuals’ desires about landscapes. This understanding is more aligned with sociological perspectives (e.g. Castoriadis, 1987). As collective narratives, tourism imaginaries endow a destination

with a specific and seductive character, drawing tourists to them (Bishop & Robinson, 1999).

Whether understood from a psychological or social perspective, tourism imaginaries are significant because they have the power to construct the tourism world. As Salazar (2012) mentions, tourism imaginaries are ‘meaning-making and world-shaping devices’ (p.864). These imaginaries make ‘imaginary worlds that do not exist’, and invest ‘the world that does with a second, imaginative surface’ (Salazar, 2012, p.864). For instance, both tourists’ fantasies, and collective narratives of landscapes have shaped Shangri-La in China as a ‘paradise’ and Bran Castle in Romania as ‘Dracula’s Castle’, giving these landscapes additional meaning.

However, tourism imaginaries can become alienated into stereotypes of destinations, even evolving into a new form of hegemony over local people, when dominated by external stakeholders. As many critical scholars point out, tourism marketers generally objectify, reify, homogenise, and naturalise local people by conceiving them as static entities with clearly defined traditional characteristics (Oakes, 1998; Salazar, 2012; Fan et al., 2020). For tourists, such alienated tourism imaginaries may satisfy their desire to see exoticism but fail to fulfil the developmental desire for personality. It is because that ego enhancement comes not from encountering otherness that satisfies the Self’s imaginaries, but from continually drawing inspiration by welcoming the Other’s self-expression and treating them ethically (Levinas, 1979). Salazar (2012) argues that representations are not a mere replication of tourism imaginaries; Instead, they constantly re-embed tourism imaginaries into new material realities. This means, tourism representations both reflect and re-shape tourism imaginaries, making them significant references to transform alienated tourism realities.

Tourism representation

One of the first authors to research ‘representation’ is Spivak (1988). She points out the meaning of ‘representation’ is ‘speaking about’ or ‘re-presenting’, in the sense of making a portrait (Spivak, 1988). The representational dimension encompasses the

material practice elements of what people say and do, as well as iconic and linguistic images (Arruda, 2015).

In theory, every subject has the ability to self-represent and be heard (Zeman, 2015). However, in social practice, this is not always taken for granted. Wang and Morais (2014) note that, influenced by structural inequality in society, people in weaker positions often do not have sanctioned opportunities to speak. Their self-representations frequently get overshadowed by those of dominant people (Spivak, 1988). However, the re-presentation by these dominant entities no longer remains merely mimetic; instead, it may evolve into a hegemonic way to approach people, who may not wish to be represented in that manner (Duncan & Sharp, 1993).

This issue is recurrently addressed in research on tourism representations. As Amirou (1995) articulates, ‘stories, images, and desires, running the gamut from essentialised, mythologised, and exoticised imaginaries of otherness to more realistic frames of reference, often function as the motor setting the tourism machinery in motion’ (quoted in Salazar, 2012, p. 865). Local people are often perceived as the unchanging, traditional, and backward ‘Other’, open to all exotic fantasies by tourism companies and governments (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). The economically profit-driven nature of the tourism sector justifies the production of such tourism representations, while governments place greater emphasis on the identification and promotion of national identities through tourism representations (Hillman, 2003).

These findings align with Said’s (1979) seminal work on how Western representations of the Orient are built on contrastive oppositions to the industrialised West (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). According to Said’s notion of Orientalism, the West’s portrayals of non-Western people as traditional, backward, exotic and sensual signs seek to valorise Western societies as the signifier of the superior groups (Qian & Zhang, 2016). Thus, these tourism representations, which objectify local people, are hegemonic and justify the exploitation of the Orient as the West’s pleasure periphery (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005).

To challenge hegemonic representations and alienated tourism imaginaries,

amplifying local people's self-representations in tourism become significant. As many tourism studies have argued, local people's tourism representations may be involved in forms of resistance and subversion against hegemonic discourse (Duncan & Sharp, 1993; Wang & Morais, 2014). Based on this, community empowerment has been considered as an effective pathway for amplifying local voice in tourism (see e.g. Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2016). As for how to empower local communities, existing studies primarily highlight the ethical and social responsibility of external stakeholders and call on them to encourage participation of local communities from political, economic, psychological, and social dimensions (Lor et al., 2019).

However, the devolution of power will not always automatically solve power inequality in ethnic tourism. As mentioned in Tian et al.'s (2023a) study of Miao villages in Hunan Province, China, rigid power structures entrenched with nepotism and favouritism impede the effective engagement of local communities during the development of ethnic tourism. Nonetheless, their expanded research shows that even though rigid governance structures often make local people vulnerable and susceptible in tourism, they have the resilience to self-organise and cope with disempowerment (Tian et al., 2023b). This suggests that the subjectivity of local people makes it possible to effectively empower communities even within the existing rigid governance structure. Inspired by Tian et al.'s studies, this study aims to explore generating mechanisms that cause local people to exert their subjectivity in tourism representations. Bhaskar's (1978) stratified reality theory acted as an explanatory framework and critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as the method of analysis.

Research Methodology

The stratified reality theory is an important foundational assumption of critical realism (CR). According to Bhaskar (1978), reality is stratified into three layers. These layers are 1) surface or experiential knowledge perceived at the *empirical layer*, 2) events that happen whether we experience them or not at the *actual layer*, and 3) mechanisms hidden in a *real layer* that produces the events in the world (Bhaskar,

1978). Based on this stratified reality theory, people are allowed to formulate vertical explanations, which move from the level of events and phenomena to be explained to that of the mechanisms and structures which generate them (Collier, 1994). Explanations derived from stratified reality theory can be regarded as potential or tendency causal laws, addressing ontological and epistemological questions about reality (Gao, 2021).

Many tourism scholars have conducted stratified analyses to explore the generative mechanisms underlying tourism phenomena. For example, Gale and Botterill (2005) argue that the rise and fall of destinations is politically revolutionary rather than naturally evolutionary through a stratified analysis of the demolition of classic tourism attractions in Rhyl, North Wales. Their finding challenges traditional understandings outlined by the tourist-area life cycle. Similarly, De Bernardi (2020) presents a novel interpretation of authenticity as a compromise by conducting a stratified analysis of Sami representations in tourism. To establish the legitimacy of tourism studies within the academic community, Botterill (2003) calls for more researchers to engage in critical realist research to explore ontological and epistemological questions of tourism practices.

Based on this, this study utilised Bhaskar's (1978) stratified reality theory as an explanatory framework to examine generating mechanisms of local people's subjectivity in self-representations in ethnic tourism. Three research questions were designed based on this theory: What tourism representations do local people construct? How are these tourism representations produced? What motivates local people to engage in these representation practices?

CDA is by far the most influential approach to discourse analysis from a critical realist perspective (Newman, 2020). It recognises the stratified reality theory proposed by critical realism, distinguishing discourse from other aspects of social reality. In this distinction, discourse transcends the language system and becomes a social event co-constructed by social agency and structures. Thus, in CDA, discourse is regarded as a battleground where traces of varying power and ideologies contend and struggle for

dominance or resistance (Van Dijk, 2008). Based on this, discourse becomes important material for this study to understand how local people manifest their subjectivity in complex power interactions within tourism representations.

Building upon CR's stratified ontology, Fairclough (1995) articulates a three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis (CDA) (i.e., text, discourse practice, and social practice). The 'text' dimension of the CDA approach identifies explicit meanings represented in discourse through linguistic analysis. The 'discourse practice' dimension examines material practices that, in our case, local Miao people adopt to produce discourse. Through this analysis, the subjectivity of local Miao people manifested in tourism representations becomes evident. Lastly, the 'social practice' dimension analyses the macrostructural context within which discourse is embedded. This analysis illuminates the generative mechanisms that cause local Miao people to manifest their subjectivity through specific strategies.

In analysing the data, several measures were taken to enable us to better unearth the embedded meanings. Firstly, we thoroughly reviewed the data collected from the field work repeatedly to locate major foci. Then, we combined theoretical knowledge with experiential observations to form an interpretation of the meanings reflected in discourse. Moreover, we acknowledged and embraced our subjectivities in the data analysis. The Chinese first author is partially of Miao descent and has also worked as tourism staff in an ethnic minority village, whereas the Caucasian second author was brought up in a national minority language group. Both authors are minorities in the countries where they live and are therefore, themselves, confronted with making self-representations for compromise and resistance. Additionally, contrasting cultural backgrounds brought unique interpretations to the examination of the macrostructural context of the data.

Data collection took place over five extended periods in September 2019, July, August, and November 2021, and finally in January and May 2022 (77 days in total) by using participant observation and unstructured interviews at the Upper Langde Miao village. Interviews were respectively conducted at the Upper Langde Dalu Eco-

Tourism Company (ULDEC), village committee, performance venues, and home of villagers. Informants included 10 local Miao people, 2 tourism staffs (totalling 12 persons). The questions centred on their views on tourism management, tourism experience, Miao ecological culture, social system, lifestyle, and livelihoods. During the interviews, both Mandarin Chinese and Miao language were used. For parts conducted in Miao language, we hired a local Miao college student to help in translating data into Chinese. All the information gathered during the interviews was ultimately transcribed into text form for analysis.

Apart from interviews, travelling in the village to observe and experience local Miao people's tourism practices, their hospitality, as well as their lifestyle, was also undertaken. Specifically, to understand how local Miao people represent themselves in tourism, observations of tourism performances and commerce at the 'frontstage', and daily life at the 'backstage' were conducted. In order to develop an 'insider' emic perspective, beyond what a tourist would normally see or experience, we participated in their daily activities (such as harvesting peas with local Miao people in the fields, selling goods together with souvenir shop owners, assisting local Miao cadres in collecting tourism work-point cards, and participating in traditional festival activities, such as Shaman rituals). All data collected during participant observation were recorded in a field diary in text format for analysis. All informants were informed about the research being undertaken and had an opportunity to review and comment on all the data collected. Quotes and photographs used in this study were also permitted by members of the community.

Miao people, tourism in Miao villages, and the Upper Langde Miao village

This study focuses on Miao people, a unique Chinese ethnic minority group. According to China's 2021 census, Miao people number around 11.06 million, making them the fifth largest among China's 56 recognised ethnic groups (NBSC, 2021). They are one of the oldest minorities, with a history that can be traced back over 4000 years (Henderson et al., 2009). The mythological character Chi You, who is in opposition to

the Yellow Emperor, the ancestor of the majority Han people, is worshipped as the mythological ancestor by Miao people (Yang, 2010). To avoid assimilation by Han civilisation, Miao people continued fleeing to remote southern mountainous regions, beyond the control of the imperial government and Han culture (Scott, 2009). Moreover, to preserve their culture amidst turbulent times, they transmitted their history, religious beliefs, moral values, and societal changes through songs, dances, and embroidered clothing (Zou, 2019). External geographical isolation and internal transmission have ensured the preservation of Miao traditions, which remain integral to their daily lives. Miao people are thus perceived as the ‘Other’ by Han people in history and were seen as traditional and barbaric rebels in opposition to Han civilisation (Oakes, 1998).

Following the collapse of feudal dynasties and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Miao tradition has become a valuable resource for developing Chinese modernisation (Oakes, 1998). Many Miao ethnic villages have become thriving experiments by commercialising their traditional culture. Along with rapid economic growth brought about by ethnic tourism practices, tourism activities in these Miao villages have become increasingly linked to broader markets and politics, thereby changing the means of production and the local division of labour (Oakes, 1998). In line with the general management model of ethnic tourism in China, a top-down approach is the prevailing method for developing tourism in these Miao villages (Lor et al., 2019; Tian et al., 2023a). The rationale behind this phenomenon is that local people, as traditional carriers, are naturally perceived or imagined as lacking the intellectual capacity and financial resources necessary to manage ethnic tourism development (Michaud & Turner, 2006). Thus, in the extensive top-down governance model, Miao people’s voices are often overshadowed in the process of ethnic tourism development (Oakes, 1998; Lor et al., 2019; Tian et al., 2023a). Such structural inequality in ethnic tourism has led to the erosion of traditional value of communities, resulting in another form of neo-colonialism for local people. However, the issue of structural inequality cannot be simply resolved through community-level participatory platforms that connect local people to development organisations. It also requires the

activation of local people's subjectivity in tourism development processes (Tian et al., 2023b).

The Upper Langde Miao Village provides a compelling case to study the subjectivity of local people in constructing their own tourism representations. This village is part of Langde Town, which lies in the north of Leishan County in the Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in Guizhou Province, China (Figure 1a). Located at the eastern edge of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, this village has served as a highly secluded refuge for these state-fleeing Miao people since the Yuan Mongolian Dynasty (1271–1368) (Chen, 2007). To this day, the Upper Langde has a history of over 600 years. By 2019, it has 213 households with a population of 871 (Feng & Li, 2020). Apart from a few daughters-in-law who married into the community from other ethnic groups, everyone else belongs to the Miao ethnic minority.

The beautiful natural environment and traditional lifestyles results in this village receiving a lot of praise (Figure 1b). In 2001, the State Council listed it as a protected national heritage site due to its well-preserved traditional Miao culture. In 2006, the Upper Langde Miao Village was listed as a 'world-class rural tourism village' by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Chen et al., 2017). Both domestic and foreign tourists are attracted to this village. The village receives an average of 1,000 tourists per day; By participating in tourism activities, each household increases their annual income by at least 7,000 yuan (approximately US\$ 1,094) (The CCP Government, 2024), accounting for about 20% to 30% of household earnings.



Figure 1 The Upper Langde Miao Village

(Source: Authors)

Local Miao people have maintained their decision-making power since this village began developing tourism (Chen et al., 2017). In 1987, as part of the first batch of ethnic villages to develop tourism in China, local Miao people emerged as pioneers, taking on the role as primary decision-makers in the tourism development. Since 2008, the nearby Xijiang Miao Village (see Figure 1a) has developed tourism under the management of the county government. A highway built by the county government, directly connecting the provincial capital, Guiyang, to Xijiang Miao Village, has made it convenient for large numbers of tourists to visit. In contrast, due to the relatively inconvenient access, the Upper Langde Miao Village experienced a decline in tourist numbers and tourism revenue. Under this context, in 2015, the county government established the Langde Culture Tourism Company (LCTC) to assist the Upper Langde village's secondary tourism development. LCTC invested 200 million yuan (approximately US\$31.3 million) in land requisition and tourist facility construction in the Upper and the Lower Langde¹ (Feng & Li, 2020). In addition, LCTC pays the Upper Langde village a monthly performance fee of 100,000 yuan (approximately US\$ 15,640). LCTC generates revenue by charging tourists an entrance fee of 50 yuan (approximately US\$ 7.82) and operating a Miao educational base² along the route from the Lower to the Upper Langde. While, within the village, tourism performances are organised by local Miao people and tourism businesses are primarily run as small-scale family businesses.

Accordingly, local Miao people in the Upper Langde Miao Village maintain their decision-making power during the development of tourism (Chen et al., 2017). Thus, it is a good case to research the subjectivity of local people in constructing their own tourism representations within the context of prevalent rigid governance structures (Tian et al., 2023a).

¹ The Lower Langde is one of the natural villages in Langde Town. It is where the town government is located, and about twenty-minutes' walk to the Upper Langde.

² This base generates profit by offering experiential activities to group tourists, including farming culture experiences and Miao handicraft experiences such as embroidery, batik, and woodworking. Local Miao people are hired as part-time mentors in this base and each mentor can receive approximately 150 yuan (approximately US\$23.46) as remuneration per day.

Displayers of Miao tradition

The first typical representation of local Miao people is as ‘displayers of Miao tradition’. This representation can be easily perceived from tourism performances in this village at the empirical layer. The tourism performances are performed by local people at two set periods of time that are 10:30 to 12:00 and 16:30 to 18:00 (except when it rained heavily, or the village had major religious ceremonies). Specifically, there is a welcoming ceremony i.e. ‘twelve barrier gates liquor’ (十二道拦门酒) which is the most solemn ceremony for welcoming guests in the Miao culture (Figure 2). Subsequently, 7 performances of Miao traditional culture (‘toasting song’, ‘colourful drum dance’, ‘Lusheng dance’, ‘flying golden rooster dance’, ‘Miao ancient songs’, ‘high row Lusheng dance’ and ‘national unity dance’) are displayed by local Miao people on a simple outdoor square.



Figure 2 The welcoming ceremony: ‘twelve barrier gates liquor’

(Source: Authors)

These phenomena exhibit two distinct characters: uniqueness for tourists and public community participation. Representing uniqueness is a common phenomenon in ethnic tourism, where local traditions become spectacular attractions, showcasing exoticism and fulfilling the exotic imaginaries of external stakeholders (Oakes, 1998;

Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). However, local people in this Miao village, while representing traditions as unique attractions, also highlight the role of their traditional wisdom in effectively promoting public community participation in tourism.

To ensure public community participation, local Miao people have created a transparent distribution system which is the so-called work-point system. This system specifically selects traditional cultural elements that allow different groups equal opportunities to participate in performances. All tourism performance activities are recorded on cards and assigned different points (Figure 3a). Every participant will be allocated point-cards based on their participation (Figure 3b). Elderly people over the age of 65 and people with disabilities are allocated 5 points per performance, whether participating or not. All participant's work points are calculated at the end of month. A salary is monthly paid based on work points one accumulates during participation. Work points and revenues are published and scrutinised by local villagers.

This system stands out for its emphasis on 'equal participation opportunities', 'self-government' and 'fair benefit distribution'. The village secretary, the elder Shaman, and 10 village elders are the core members of this system. The village secretary represents official certification, the village elders represent the interests of the villagers, and the elder Shaman represents spirits and gods, thus giving the system inclusivity, encompassing official authority, popularity, and sanctity. However, this system heavily emphasises egalitarianism at the cost of efficiency, since the core members need to engage in ongoing negotiations to reach a consensus among different members. Despite this, local Miao people have embraced this system for over 30 years, emphasising its value to safeguard their interests comprehensively, including economic benefits as well as internal unity and harmony.



Figure 3 Distributing point cards

(Source: Authors)

Furthermore, an analysis from a social practice dimension can provide a more meaningful explanation for the exertion of their subjectivity. The practical strategies of local Miao villagers reflect their strong identification with traditional culture. The Upper Langde Miao village has consistently maintained its traditional social structures with specific roles, such as village elders and the elder Shaman, and cultural patterns like internal unity, and harmony. As Tenorio (2011) asserts, people's engagement in social practices is always influenced by their individual and social cognitions. Thus, motivated by a strong identification with traditional values, Langde Miao people have spontaneously organised and managed the community to enable opportunities for tourism profit equally, creating an inclusive tourism management system. This management system is informal, rooted in shared traditional values, and organised horizontally. Unlike formal authority systems, which are hierarchical, equality and joint governance are core values of this informal system (Chen et al., 2017). This system mitigates nepotism and favouritism typically associated with rigid power structures (Tian et al., 2023a). Consequently, the traditions of the local Miao people transcend mere visual representations of tourists' exotic imaginaries; Instead, local representations of traditions further encapsulate their valuable role in effectively promoting public community participation in tourism. This point aligns with Salazar's (2012) research, which suggests that representations are not merely replications of

tourism imaginaries. Instead, they re-embed tourism imaginaries into new material realities by incorporating local understandings.

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that while local Miao people may compromise with tourists' exotic imaginaries, they also strategically highlight the value of their traditions to promote community participation. This resonates the present study's theoretical thesis that marginalised local people are not merely exotic objects, but rather proactive subjects actively engaged in self-representations in tourism (Wang & Morais, 2014). In the drive of traditional wisdom, local Miao people successfully show that prioritising community equality and self-governance over efficiency can contribute to an effective pathway for community empowerment in tourism development. This contrasts with external stakeholders' imaginaries of traditional local people as backward groups, requiring 'help' from modern knowledge to develop tourism (Qian & Zhang, 2016). This verifies the conceptual assertion that hegemonic discourse can be subverted through the construction of alternative local representations (Duncan & Sharp, 1993).

Traditional businesspeople

Another typical representation of local Miao people is as 'traditional businesspeople'. This representation can be easily perceived from the tourism businesses in this village at the empirical layer. Businesses in the Upper Langde village include homestays, restaurants, souvenir shops, and convenience stores. Local Miao people own and operate these businesses from their own homes. No matter what kind of business they are running, selling souvenirs with traditional elements seems to be a must for every shop. Handcrafted clothes and embroidery patches occupy a significant portion of the retail space within the shops, while a few machine-made embroidery patches and small souvenirs like necklaces, bags, and earrings are displayed at the entrance for tourists to select from freely. The sellers are mostly middle-aged and elderly women, often dressed in traditional attire to welcome visitors (Figure 4). Interestingly, no one in the village eagerly markets products to tourists. They often

focus on their embroidery work, only engaging enthusiastically when tourists inquire about the products. They seem not to care about making quick sales, as they spend a lot of time chatting with tourists, teaching them how to identify handmade and machine-made embroidery, and patiently explaining the meanings of various patterns on the embroidered pieces.



Figure 4 A vendor of the souvenir shop and tourists

(Source: Authors)

Based on the description of the commercial phenomena above, the casual attitude and behaviour of local Miao people as businesspeople contradict the concept of economic agents, which assumes that individuals will pursue the achievement of their own maximum utility in any given transaction based on the idea of rational choice (Caton, 2012). Generally, the explanation for this contradictory phenomenon is attributed to the village being in the early stages of tourism development; Villagers lacked the capital, skills, tourism-related business acumen, and experience needed to run tourism enterprises (Tian et al., 2023b). However, for a village that was among the first to develop ethnic tourism in China, operating for over 30 years, and continues to attract a steady stream of visitors, this general explanation is debatable.

According to an embroidery seller, ‘lazy to sell’ is a core practice among villagers that leads to this casual attitude and behaviour in the tourism businesses.

We are lazy to sell. Now most tourists prefer machine-made embroidery patches with low price. We cannot accept selling our handmade embroidered patches at current low prices. (translated by authors).

‘Laziness’ in Chinese can be understood as ‘indulging in comfort and hating work’ (Boutonnet, 2010). People often perceive ‘laziness’ as a negative characteristic. However, here ‘lazy’ serves as a form of self-deprecating humour, distinguishing local Miao people who have freedom to operate according to their own preferences from other merchants who are seen as ‘hardworking’ in aggressively marketing goods that consumers prefer. As the above embroidery seller said, for local villagers, their ‘laziness’ manifests in their reluctance to sell their meticulously handmade embroidered patches at low prices to tourists, as well as their reluctance to aggressively sell machine-made embroidery patches that tourists prefer. This allows them to focus on activities they find more fulfilling, such as crafting handmade clothes and embroidery patches, as well as patiently explaining Miao culture and history to interested tourists. This also demonstrates that local Miao people’s preference for preserving and disseminating traditional culture over pursuing rapid economic growth in tourism.

Operating small-scale family businesses is a practical strategy that enables local Miao people to manage tourism businesses according to their preferences. Such an operating mode reduces investment costs for locals in tourism (Dahles, 2017), so they do not need to rush to recoup their expenses. As the owner of a homestay said: ‘Even if no one makes a reservation, the house belongs to our own family and there is no loss for us.’ (see Figure 5).



(a)

(b)

Figure 5 Homestays in this village

(Source: Authors)

Treating small-scale family businesses as one of livelihoods activities, alongside agriculture and other jobs, is another practical strategy that empowers local Miao people to run tourism businesses based on their preferences. Agriculture is a traditional livelihood that the local people have never abandoned. As described in the commercial phenomena above, women are primarily responsible for managing businesses, while men often only appear in front of tourists during performance times. At other times, they are busy farming or herding in the fields. These agricultural activities not only provide sufficient food for family consumption but can also be sold in the local markets. Some cattle can even generate substantial additional income through participating in bullfighting competitions, a grand event held annually during the Miao New Year.

In addition, their handcrafted embroidered patches are not just sold to tourists but have also expanded into numerous other sales channels. Many local Miao people take some of these patches to a weekly Miao embroidery market in the county town, where lots of people who are interested in purchasing handcrafted embroidered patches gather at that time. Besides the traditional sales channel, they have expanded into new ones. They also sell their products on online platforms. Some of them have even started their own personal studios, accepting orders from creative and clothing companies both domestically and internationally. Thus, diversified livelihoods alleviate the local Miao people's dependence on the tourism economy (Leu et al., 2018), empowering them to

run tourism businesses based on their preferences.

From the social practice dimension, local Miao villagers' practical strategies reflect that traditional values, such as strong identification of traditional culture and way of life, are embedded in their tourism business practices. The resulting small-scale family businesses weaken the economically profit-driven nature of tourism. However, as part of a diverse livelihood, they complement traditional occupations such as cattle herding, allowing Miao patterns of life to continue. Thus, businesses operated by local Miao people enhance the role of tourism in serving community's socio-cultural development, creating a good example of 'culturalising' the commerciality (Bunten, 2010). Tourism businesses under this local context become an as authentic way of life as that of tilling the farm and embroidering. These responses corroborate the research of Wang and Morais (2014). They argue that local people, by accepting the objectifying imaginaries and representations of external stakeholders, establish their identity and assert their subjectivity in their own affairs, appropriating and transforming these objectifying actions to their own benefit whenever possible (Wang and Morais, 2014).

From the above analysis, it is clear that local Miao people operate tourism businesses and sell goods within traditional elements driven by tourists' desire for exoticism. However, they also highlight the role of their traditional wisdom in 'culturalising' the commerciality. This finding further challenges the hegemonic discourse that views traditions of local people as exotic but backward signs (Gladney, 1994; Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005), and underscore the significant value of local representations in undermining hegemonic representations and mitigating alienated tourism imaginaries (Salazar, 2012).

Conclusion and implications

This study has analysed two themes: 'displayers of Miao tradition' and 'traditional businesspeople' that local Miao people showcase to represent themselves in the context of ethnic tourism, based on the explanatory framework of stratified reality theory (see

Table 1). Traditional elements in these representations remain consistent, which satisfy tourists’ exotic imaginaries towards Miao people.

Moving to the actual layer, tourists’ imaginaries of exoticism indeed shapes local representations in a traditional way. However, the traditions represented by local Miao people transcend tourists’ perception of them as mere signs or attractions visualising exoticism. Instead, they exemplify the role of their traditional wisdom in effectively empowering their community during the tourism development process.

Tracing back to the real layer, traditional values, such as the strong identification of traditional culture and way of life, empower local Miao people to construct self-representations. This shows that the subjectivity of local people is ‘unappropriated being’, though structurally vulnerable, but culturally resilient. Despite being vulnerable to asymmetrical power dynamics, local subjectivity possesses resilience, continuously creating representations that embed local understanding, as forms of counter-hegemonic discourse. This reinforces Tian et al.’s (2023b) argument acknowledging local people’s subjectivity in empowering the community even within the existing rigid governance structure.

Table 1 The analysis based on the stratified reality theory

(Source: Authors)

Stratified reality theory	Case study	
Empirical layer	Displayers of Miao tradition	Traditional businesspeople
	Traditional elements	
Actual layer	Representing Miao traditions to visualise tourists’ imaginaries of exoticism	Representing Miao traditions to empower the local community
Real layer	Traditional values: strong identification of traditional culture and way of life	
	Subjectivity of local people as ‘unappropriated being’	

Although the Upper Langde Miao village is confined to a small region, the practical strategies represented in the village are considered highly significant as useful

references for inspiring policy formulation. Specifically, local Miao people's practical strategies demonstrate the rationality of 'Chinese-style modernisation', formally proposed by President Xi Jinping (The CPC Government, 2023). President Xi's proposed concept aims to demonstrate the success of modernisation with Chinese characteristics, suggesting it can serve as a universal theoretical model. However, achieving this goal urgently requires addressing two long-standing doubts that have persisted since the era of Deng Xiaoping. One is the scepticism that China's development of modernisation is subservient to Western modernisation models (Schein, 2000; Yan & Santos, 2009), and the other is the concern that, in order to showcase uniqueness, China is coercing and domesticating ethnic minorities, keeping them rooted in their traditions (Sun & Xie, 2020). Based on this, Xi encourages ethnic minorities to play their subjectivity in the revitalisation of their traditional culture and enrich themselves through this process (The CCP Government, 2017). While official governments assume the responsibility of empowering local people to exhibit their subjectivity in activating their traditional culture, the optimal practical approach to achieving this remains unclear. This means that the strategies employed by local Miao people serve as a reference for political authorities to consider establishing more inclusive interactions between locals and other tourism stakeholders.

When formulating ethnic tourism policies, it is crucial to grant local people more self-management powers and reduce external interventions. This involves empowering unofficial traditional governance systems with greater political authority, economically and policy-wise supporting small-scale family businesses, and assisting local people in diversifying their livelihoods to resist the temptations of economically profit-driven tourism. Even though this may reduce the economic profitability of tourism, it is crucial for activating local subjectivity and promoting the ethical development of ethnic tourism.

Moreover, this study applied the stratified reality theory of critical realism to investigate the ontological aspects of local people's subjectivity within ethnic tourism contexts. This enhances people's epistemological understanding of the subjectivity of

marginalised groups in tourism as unappropriated beings, structurally vulnerable but culturally resilient. Such insights contribute to the legitimacy of tourism studies and provide a basis for further examination of local representations and community empowerment in tourism.

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