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Performing ‘Exotic Otherness’ in a Backpacker Enclave of Dali, China

Irena Ateljevic a & Stephen Doorne b

a Faculty of Business, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
b Department of Tourism and Hospitality, School of Social and Economic Development, University of South Pacific, Fiji, Islands

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Dialectics of Authentication: Performing ‘Exotic Otherness’ in a Backpacker Enclave of Dali, China

Irena Ateljevic  
Faculty of Business, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Stephen Doorne  
Department of Tourism and Hospitality, School of Social and Economic Development, University of South Pacific, Fiji Islands

This paper explores dialectics of entrepreneurship and cultural consumption in the backpacker tourist enclave of ‘Foreigner’s Lane’ in Dali, Yunnan Province, PR China, focusing on the role of ethnic identities and their representation. The discussion uses the performance metaphor to conceptualise tourism as a carefully staged act and illustrates the context of authentification. The paper focuses on the activities of local entrepreneurs and their construction of ‘exotic Otherness’ that reflects the preconceptions and demands of identity obsessed backpacker travellers. It is argued that the agency of local entrepreneurs undermine traditional notions of cultural producers as passive victims commodified by the globalised tourism complex.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, backpacker, culture, performance, ethnicity, authenticity and PR China

Introduction

The ‘de-differentiation of the economy and culture’ is central to the emergence of ‘new’ theorisations of tourism (Amin & Thrift, 2000; Crang & Malbon, 1996; Sayer, 2000). Tourism and leisure have surfaced as a critical realm for understanding broader issues of culture and society in a global era (e.g. Aitchison, 1999; Crain, 1996; Lanfant, 1995; Morgan & Pritchard, 1998; Ringer, 1998; Rojek & Urry, 1997; Squire, 1994; Urry, 1990). Franklin and Crang (2001: 17), for example, advocate for more critical perspective of tourism as a social phenomenon whereby ‘it seems all too clear that the theoretical nets need to be cast much wider so that tourist studies is constantly renewed by developments in social and cultural theory’. Responding to their call to investigate performative and embodied dimensions of change in tourism cultures, this article seeks to enhance these ‘new’ projects in the context of identity formation and to simultaneously elaborate on new arenas through which these processes are being articulated.

The study of the representation of culture through performance has an established lineage in tourism studies in terms of reflexive explorations of the social dynamics through which cultural production takes place (Boissevain, 1996; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1988). These perspectives have themselves built upon
critical examinations of cultural commodification and ‘staged authenticity’ (Adams, 1984; Britton & Clarke, 1987; Crick, 1989; Greenwood, 1978; MacCannell, 1976; Smith, 1978; Turner & Ash, 1975). Central to emergence of contemporary theoretical perspectives surrounding these issues is the conceptualisation of tourism as performance which seeks to move beyond the passive gaze of the visual and explore the embodiment of the acts of production and consumption (Coleman & Crang, 2002; Crang, 1997; Crouch, 1999; Edensor, 1998; Swain, 2004).

Edensor (1998) reviews explorations of tourism as a set of performances referring to the Adler’s (1989) pioneering work on travel as ‘performed art’ and Crang’s (1997) examination of tourist workers as ‘cast members’. Similarly, Urry’s (1990) passive sightseeing is reconceptualised by Perkins and Thorns (2001) in the context of adventure tourism, observing the participation of tourists seeking active bodily involvement. Ateljevic and Doorne (2005) further apply this concept to the performance of backpacker tourists in Fiji using explicitly theatrical metaphors to decode the consumption of place and culture. In this article, we build upon these studies to introduce the dialectical nature of performance as a mutually negotiated relationship between producers and consumers.

In this context, we build on earlier observations of the changing nature of backpacker tourism, particularly its heterogeneity and the embodiment of explorer performances in the search for ‘otherness’ beyond the increasingly institutionalised backpacker industry (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001). Specifically, we explore the nature of backpacker performance in the cross-cultural context of Yunnan, China, but simultaneously reveal that the notion of performance is intrinsically intertwined with performances of local entrepreneurs and their own constructions of identity, ethnicity and place. We argue that this relationship is dialectical in nature and is embedded within a spatial and cultural hierarchy through which the ‘exotic other’ is informed by remoteness and peripherality. In doing so, we build upon work of Oakes (1993), Crain (1996) and Doorne et al. (2003) by inverting the notion of commodification from the arguments pertaining to an exploitative overarching capitalist system to direct attention to the perspectives of local agents and their construction and production of identities.

The argument begins with the discussion of the relationship of backpacker travel and its preoccupation with the peripherality and the ‘exotic other’. Following this, we explore ways in which local entrepreneurs have been represented in tourism literature, building upon the contemporary development perspective which challenges often the implicit conceptualisation of locals as passive victims of an expanded political economy of tourism. In this context, we provide an overview of tourism development in Yunnan Province and the corresponding development of backpacker enclave in the tourist town of Dali. Following this, we outline our methods and the research process, and then present four examples of individual entrepreneurs who have been instrumental in shaping the thematic elements of the enclave. Through their relationships with backpackers we reveal the dialectical nature of tourism in which producers and consumers embody their identities through acts of performance.
Backpacker Travel and the Search for the ‘Exotic Other’

The contemporary study of the backpacker phenomenon has its roots in early work of Cohen (1972, 1973, 1974) who observed a culture of ‘drifters’ whose travel patterns articulated a rejection of western values and an obsession with the ‘exotic other’. His conceptualisations should be seen in the context of Said’s (1991) broader arguments of Orientalism and cultural imperialism. Over time Cohen’s counter-culture connotations diminished as the phenomenon assumed distinctly middle-class mainstream characteristics (see for example, Pearce, 1990; Riley, 1988). Over the last decade the backpack has become symbolic of the nomadic metaphor of mobility and has in the contemporary context become representative of a travel lifestyle, an expression of identity, as well as a coherent cultural form and industrial complex.

The search for ‘otherness’ remains significant driving force in a global expansion of this ‘culture of consumption’ (Doorne et al., 2003) which is increasingly viewed in terms of economic development at the local level (Scheyvens, 2002). Desforges (1998) with explicit reference to Said’s Orientalism explores the notion of identity through the practice of ‘collecting places’ as a way in which travelers relate to the ‘other’. With respect to perceived ‘authenticity’ he identifies its markers as the absence of the travel industry and other tourists. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept (1984), he discusses travel as a form of cultural capital, which serves as a sign of distinction and enables the traveller to gain access to a social class and its privileges. Munt (1994: 108) similarly discusses the relationship of class and the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’ who are ‘best conceived as ego-tourists who search for a style of travel which is both reflective of an alternative lifestyle and which is capable of maintaining and enhancing their cultural capital’ (see also Mowforth & Munt, 1998). Desforges (2000) explores these issues further in a later paper where he refers to Giddens (1991) notion of self-identity and a ‘fateful moment’ of life in which travel is drawn upon to reimagine the self. Elsrud (2001) also uses Giddens notion that identity is left to individuals to conceive through the means they are offered by society, and where western travellers undertake ‘risky’ travel because they come from a society that demands from them the ability to cope successfully with risk. A sense of difference (differentiation) is usually based on the ‘primitive other’ and this provides the context in which Elsrud (2001) discusses risk associated with certain places, as well as the practice of telling stories about risks associated with the physical self (e.g. illnesses, dangerous foods, malaria).

Throughout the backpacker literature it is increasingly apparent that wherever the backpacker culture takes place it assumes heterogeneous characteristics (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2001; Hottola, 1999; Sorensen, 2003; Uriely et al., 2002). For example, Hottola (1999: 79) observes that ‘backpackers may be an identifiable tribe, but this tribe is a heterogeneous one’, characterised such groupings as students, ‘globerailers’, professionals, specialists, outcasts, freaks, root-diggers and army-discharges. Uriely et al. (2002) recognised the spectrum related to an individuals’ quest for pleasure through to the search for a meaningful experience of the ‘other’. Ateljevic and Doorne (2001) take the concept of heterogeneity further by identifying a social hierarchy within
the various groups which polarises ‘mainstream’ tourist behaviours with ‘traditional’ backpackers whose ‘othering’ practices are drawn to ‘exotic otherness’ whilst simultaneously rejecting the mainstreaming of the backpacker complex.

The obsession with the periphery is often bound to the collection and appropriation of identities of the ‘exotic other’, either through touristic commodities, experiences, and stories that collectively lead to the reconstitution of embodied identity. The internal transformation of self is normally accompanied by its projected expression through the construction of visual identity (Galani-Moutafi, 1999). Ateljevic and Doorne (2003) similarly observe the construction of visual identities amongst backpackers but argue that this process is fundamentally intertwined with the production of a consumable culture by local entrepreneurs. Doorne et al. (2003) argue that far from ethnic identities being commodified to satisfy consumer demands for ‘othering’, locals are proactive in identifying market segments and producing differentiated products to enhance their local and personal economies. In other words, it is the locals who commodify consumer culture by reproducing their identity to meet the western preoccupation with ‘primitive otherness’.

With respect to tourism entrepreneurship, the work of Dahles (1997) and Dahles and Bras (1999) in south-east Asia reveals the extent to which the indigenous cultural fabric is woven into the economic life. Their case studies of individual entrepreneurs illustrate ‘alternative’ value systems, which shape dynamics of their personal economies. Similarly, Gartner’s (1999) study of small-scale tourism enterprises in Ghana looks at the influence of culture on economic dynamics of local entrepreneurship. Identifying socio-cultural obligations rather than economic factors as prime drivers behind business decisions, Gartner (1999) effectively reveals the limitations of the overtly economic reductionist approach of ‘Western development models’, whereas ‘interjecting cultural conditions into the equation’ (p. 171) helps more fully to understand local development issues. Hitchcock’s (2000) case study of ethnicity and entrepreneurship in Java and Bali, for example, identifies the value of what he terms the ‘situational approach’ that ‘rejects simplistic conceptions of culture as bounded entities, and instead places emphasis on ethnicity as a set of social relationships and processes by which cultural differences are communicated’ (Hitchcock, 1999: 21). In the following discussion we build upon these arguments to reveal how these processes are bound within the dialectical acts of tourism performance and are central to entrepreneurial constitution of cultures of ‘exotic otherness’.

Study Methods and Approach

The previously discussed theoretical shift in tourism studies has been accompanied by significant progress in the methodological sophistication of research. In particular, the role of the researcher and the multiplicity of research methods has elevated qualitative research to the strategic realm (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Riley & Love, 2000). It follows that this more complex research approach necessarily reveals a more complex world. In the process, the reflexivity of the researcher is a critical dimension of the whole research process that involves the evolution of research from its conceptual foundation through
trust-building to the interpretation and analysis of ‘data’ (Denzin, 1997; Evans, 1988; Harding & Hintikka, 1983; Smith, 1988).

Together with the collection of empirical data identifying the dynamic nature of tourism in China and the cultural tourism in Yunnan Province, our research approach drew on an emerging paradigm in tourism and travel research characterised by ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973), through which the context and dynamics of lived ethnicity can be learned (see for example, Abram et al., 1997; Clifford, 1992; Strasberg, 1994). Harell’s (1995), discussion of China, for example, uses ethnography to expose the richness of the cultural context within which ethnicity and its representation (through, for example, clothing) exhibits an almost playful dimension. In the process, he observes the disparity between ‘the discourse about the causes and consequences of ethnic conflict, [and] the apparent innocuousness of all this’ (Harell, 1995: 750). Blum (2000: 149) talks specifically of Yunnan province and exposes the extent to which ‘the category of ethnicity … has a number of puzzling and interesting features’, characterised by ‘high’ theoretical approaches yet questions these analyses for their lack of ‘groundedness in experience’.

This research project ran over two years between 2000–2002 and was conducted in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at Yunnan University. During the study period we employed primarily qualitative methods based on an ethnographic approach, consisting of conversations, in-depth interviews, and observation amongst local entrepreneurs and backpacker travellers in Dali and its environs. In all, we interviewed over 50 entrepreneurs in the Dali area, and held formal and informal conversations and interviews with over 50 backpackers during two field visits lasting a total of six weeks. The observation and informal conversations involved tracing everyday interactions and making visible issues surrounding the performance of both backpackers and entrepreneurs and their constructed identities. Interviews were conducted in English, Mandarin, Bai and Yi dialect, using research assistants and translators from the Anthropology Department. Identities of the research team were clearly communicated to all involved in the project. The research team compiled a series of diaries to record observations, conversations, and contextual information. We also used photography extensively to interpret performances and record observational material. Initially, we used random sampling of key informants which extended to snowballing techniques to follow particular themes and identify social and cultural networks.

Our perspective on local entrepreneurship emphasises key players instrumental to the development of the thematic cultural elements of the Dali backpacker enclave. As such, it should be noted that unsuccessful and marginal entrepreneurs are not represented in this discussion. Instead we focus our attention on four entrepreneurs, each representative of distinct sectors within the local tourism complex. With respect to backpackers, our perspective is not only informed by the fieldwork in Dali but draws extensively on a wider research context which embeds backpacker practices as a global phenomenon. The discussion reveals the entrepreneurial reading of the backpacker sense of the ‘exotic other’ and the dialectical nature of culture in this creative performance of tourism.
Case Study: Tourism and Culture in Yunnan Province, PR China

China is currently ranked amongst top five international tourist destinations (WTO, 2004), yet it is only in the last few decades that tourism in China has been embraced as an agent of development. Since the late 1970s, tourism in China has experienced rapid and dynamic growth to that extent that tourism features as a significant sector in the national economy. In 1978 the number of international tourism arrivals was 1.8 million rising to 37 million in 2003 (WTO, 2004). The visitor population draws on Asian markets, especially expatriates, and a growing European market for which China is reminiscent of Said’s (1991) exotic ‘Oriental’ frontier.

Yunnan Province, in the context of tourism development, achieves two distinctive consumer–producer relationships. For ‘western’ visitors, ethnic tourism, based on 26 minorities, associates China with a traditional frontier articulated through the ‘exclusive’ gaze of authenticity in the global-local context. Yunnan’s marketing slogan ‘Breaking New Frontiers’ (in the west of China), aimed at a growing domestic market, emphasises this traditional frontier as symbolic of an increasingly nostalgic past (Wen & Tisdall, 2001).

Whilst the domestic market for Yunnan Province represents the bulk of tourists visiting Dali, international visitors for the most part confine themselves to an enclave within Dali, known as ‘Foreigner’s Lane’. It is here that our study is centred. The emergence of tourism as commercial activity in Dali began in this area, following the initiative of a few entrepreneurs and their ability to re-interpret their own cultural contexts through the eyes of early travellers visiting the area. Their initiatives followed the first introduction of foreign tourists to Dali in 1985. At this time there were five government-run guesthouses in the town, and only Guest House No. 2 opened its doors to foreign visitors. These visitors were mostly in the guise of Cohen’s early ‘drifter’ travellers during the period when the lane was essentially a ‘normal’ unpaved street open to traffic. In 1995, the local government administration blocked traffic to the street and also the main central thoroughfare of Dali and paved the area, thereby creating the current pedestrian-only precinct. It is during these formative years that the initiatives and activities of early tourism entrepreneurs reveal something of the relationships surrounding culture, identity, and acts of business.

The last few years has seen the dramatic growth of the cultural experience sector, particularly to villages and ‘ethnic markets’. Currently, ‘Foreigner’s Lane’ is a 300 m stretch of paved street, housing 25 cafes/restaurants, four accommodation providers, four internet providers, six travel agencies, six massage parlours, a multitude of clothing retailers featuring traditional fabrics, and a number of shops dealing in hill-tribe crafts and antiques. Over the last decade, some dominant cultural themes have emerged within the enclave, notably the replication of Tibetan themes amongst a mosaic of other cultural groups. Whilst Tibetan culture is represented in cafes and accommodation, other cultures are represented in the world of things, via shops and street vendors selling artefacts and antiques. This clustering of businesses clearly demarcates the enclave as a significantly different cultural space to the rest of Dali, most notably in the presence of western ‘cafe culture’, itself a marker of ubiquitous backpacker enclaves throughout the
world. This contemporary face of Foreigner’s Lane reflects the accumulated experiences of entrepreneurs, travellers, and their dialectical relationships which seeks to articulate travel in the ‘Oriental frontier’. The following section illustrates the dynamics of change through perspective of four entrepreneurs, representative of the range of tourism sectors in the enclave, namely Jim, Michael, Jo and Langer.

**Tourism as Performance in the Backpacker Enclave**

Jim (Jin Ce) is the owner of Jim’s Guesthouse and Jim’s Peace Cafe. He was born in 1963 and brought up at the other side of Dali across Erhai Lake. Dali opened up for foreign tourists in 1985 and Jim was ‘the first one’ in Dali to do business with these early travellers. Jim attributes his entrepreneurial perspective to skills inherited from his grandfather, a Tibetan merchant and regular visitor to Dali at the beginning of this century. Jim’s first venture in 1985 was renting bicycles to travellers, beginning with two secondhand bikes, which within two years had expanded to over 70.

My ideas were very popular but were quickly copied by others, doing the same thing... I had to think of new ways to do business and decided to open a restaurant serving Chinese and Western food. I was the first to do this in Dali.

Jim notes that serving cold beer as well as western food reproduced something of the visitors’ culture in the town while at the same time retaining the exotic appeal of the region. Central to the attractiveness of the café was, and remains, Jim’s use of his Tibetan ancestry as a core branding theme. Tibetan culture is displayed not only in the décor of the café but also in the food and drink. ‘Tibetan feasts’ have been popular evenings throughout the life of the café, as have Jim’s homemade medicinal/alcoholic brews such as the mysteriously labelled ‘Jim’s No. 5’.

Me being from Tibet is something travelers are interested in. They like the pictures of wild open spaces and [nomadic people]. It’s strong part of my business and I’m allowed to be Tibetan in a time when my home country has been going through [turmoil].

Jim describes how ‘Tibetanness’ is both a brand for the business but has also allowed him to re-engage with his own culture through a turbulent era of political and social upheavals in Tibet. Many of the neighbouring business owners, however, are sceptical of the integrity of his Tibetan roots and regard his activities as ‘an act’. Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s Tibetan culture in the Foreigner’s Lane precinct became a ubiquitous theme replicated widely throughout the business community, and represented in art such as photographs of tribesmen and painting of landscapes and distinctive Tibetan architecture, and touristic commodities such as locally made prayer wheels (‘aged’ over a kerosene stove), jewellery, and trinkets.

Jim’s café effectively forms the set upon which he acts his role as a gregarious Tibetan host projecting through his ‘big personality’ a sense of boisterousness and raucous hospitality. Jim’s primary role is centred on storytelling and the reproduction of ‘exoticness’ and Buddhist spirituality far removed from
western civilization. Within this performance lies an inherent irony, which remains unchallenged by all the actors upon the stage (the backpackers are themselves actors in the play). The town of Dali is clearly not Tibet, despite their historical trading relationships in which Dali acts as a gateway to what is contemporarily perceived as an ‘exotic frontier’ yet is sufficiently developed and westernised to provide the familiar comforts around visitor can engage safely with remote ‘frontierness’. Within the café visitors themselves assume roles within the play where their props and costumes define their identities (‘seasoned traveller’, ‘intellectual’, ‘environmentalist’, ‘global citizen’). Rather than the scene being composed of a performer and his audience, the café becomes an environment in which the audience’s compliance and readiness to engage with their roles authenticates the ‘mythical exoticness’ collectively enacted by all involved.

Jim is really cool... He is a hard man. You can tell all the other cafes around here are trading on Tibet but they are all just fakes. Jim was the first one here. I heard about this place from other travelers and I knew as soon as I walked in it felt like just what I was looking for. (Richard, 26, the UK).

The food here is really great. Jim is a bit of laugh. He tells the same stories to everybody who walks in... probably the most of it is a bullshit... but it looks like he know’s some real off the beaten track place not like these other market tours you see about the place. (Claire, 33, Australia)

In 1997 Jim opened a guesthouse next to the café and shortly after began running daytrips to remote communities in the region as ‘cultural minority tours’. Trips include visits to markets and also to villages depicted as ‘non-tourist and unspoilt’. An itinerary on his website describes the tours as follows: ‘First we go to Xizhou to see the busy and lively market with the Bai people doing their daily shopping. Xizhou is also known as “small old Dali” because it looks like Dali 15 years ago’ (China Minority Travel, 2003). Jim’s domestic circumstances have in recent years furthered the effectiveness of the business to tap new markets. Jim’s wife, from Holland, has been instrumental in facilitating the design of marketing and products meeting the aspirations of Dutch visitors, such as the multilingual website, as well as tour design for an increasing diversity of visitor markets from backpackers to institutionalised group tours similarly constructed around exotic ‘cultural frontier’ imagery. As the Tibetan theme has been reproduced locally Jim’s market edge demands he stays ‘one step ahead of the pack’ in the introduction of tourism to peripheral cultural environments.

Over the study period Jim dramatically diversified his cultural tours, from one in 2000 focusing on Yi market, to offering a range of cultural tour experiences featuring more than a half of a dozen minority groups in the region (see Figure 1).

As such Jim has assumed the role of ‘cultural broker’ who has the power to authenticate the ‘exotic otherness’. His power is derived from his status as a ‘Tibetan’, a culture and place that has become an icon of remoteness and the frontier of civilisation within backpacker culture. In this sense, places and
cultures are clearly conceived within a hierarchy constructed around elements of remoteness; the traditional aesthetic (‘costume’), and poverty.

The construction of cultural hierarchies around the ‘exotic’ aesthetic is not confined to hospitality context as we discussed with reference to Jim, but can be seen to pervade to other sectors of tourism activity in the enclave. Michael, for example, opened a shop in 1985, today known as ‘Michael’s Miao Art’, selling a range of ‘hill tribe’ artifacts and antiques. Michael is himself Miao and started business by buying up all available embroidery, silver, and antiques in his village. He has a University degree and is fluent in English. Sixteen years later, despite competition from other retailers entering this ‘niche’ market, he still maintains his position at the top end of the market stressing ‘authentic’ goods, sold not as craft but as ‘art’.

The values articulated through the goods themselves describe a hierarchy dependent on both the intricacy of the work and the perceived remoteness of the ethnic group from which they emerge. At the top of the hierarchy, items from Miao culture are perceived to be ‘the most authentic’ partly due to the apparent absence of Miao people around the town, but also due to the extremely fine quality of their embroidery. Old items in good condition are clearly ‘limited goods’, which also become positional goods commanding high prices and status. Today Michael sells not only from his shop and through his website, but also internationally via agents he has worked with for many years.

I did my degree at the University in Kunming but didn’t see much opportunity there, but realised that a lot of travellers here are looking
for good quality old craft. Being Miao I saw there was so much in my village that I could sell so I bought it all and started my business. Now real antique pieces are really rare and they are even more in demand.

The position of Miao embroidery within the hierarchy is relatively universal throughout the Mekong region and in this sense Michael is by no means the only entrepreneur to read these demands for ‘exotic otherness’. What is significant in the context of this study is the way in which he creates value to otherwise old and sometimes shabby garments through constructed performance featuring many of the same elements identified above with Jim. Stories are the basis of enriching the context of the commodities and provide the opportunity to invoke the nostalgic references to systems of production bound with spirituality far from western development and civilisation.

Common themes Michael includes in his stories are the time invested in their production and the highly gendered role placed on embroidery in Miao culture. Embroidery assumes particular significance in Miao culture in terms of reflecting a women’s attractiveness for marriage, as well as embodying broader ‘hopes, inspirations and dreams’. In this sense, Michael constructs a carefully ordered emotional context around objects and through his shop provides the opportunity for the backpacker to experience and consume this tangible ‘otherness’. In similar way to Jim, Michael’s stage (the shop) provides a familiar environment and set of relationships through which both parties (producer and consumer) engage in the act of tourism.

I really love this stuff! [embroidery]. It must have taken somebody years to make this. If there is one thing I want to take away with me it’s some of this old embroidery. It is expensive but it’s worth it for something totally authentic. (Fabrice, 28, France)

I love looking at this stuff but I would never buy it. These guys are just sharks ripping off villages, probably swapping an antique artwork for a transistor radio. I think this stuff should really be in a museum. (Annie, 35, New Zealand)

Michael’s stories form the basis for subsequent reconstructions in which they are removed from immediate environment, retold and integrated within broader set of travellers’ experiences in other contexts and other places. In this way, the act of performance initiated by Michael begins to resemble the reproduction of a play performed to different audiences night after night, place after place.

The story of Jo illustrates further dimensions of the entrepreneurial dynamic through the adaptation of the traditional practice of cormorant fishing into a tourism business. Having learned his skills from his father who was himself a cormorant fisherman, Jo started his tour business in 1999 at a time when the stream of backpackers in Dali was well established. Prior to his tourism venture he worked as a shoe repairer in ‘Foreigner’s Lane’, but in the light of increasing competition from other shoe repairers he identified a need for visitors to engage in day trip activities reflecting ‘local culture and traditional ways of living’.
The practice of cormorant fishing uses up to a half of dozen birds whose
necks are tightly tied with string to prevent them swallowing fish. On his
tours Jo casts his birds into the water where they can be seen chasing fish,
later to emerge on the surface where they are taken on board the boat and
the fish removed from their gullets. The practice is repeated continuously
over time for the duration of the tour. The ‘traditional’ nature of the tour is
enhanced as the group returns to Jo’s houseboat where he lives with his
wife at the edge of the lake. The basic (‘primitive’) conditions in which they
live reinforce the ‘authenticity’ of the experience in the eyes of visitors and
give the practice a ‘timeless’ quality (see Figure 2).

As much as this is travel tour this is not one of those you buy through the
tour agent. I prefer to deal with someone face to face. You can tell Jo is a
genuine local guy. I find it fascinating that this has been a traditional form
of fishing for centuries. By doing it I am helping to sustain something
traditional when you can see that the whole of China is going modern
and Western. It is sad to see that really. (Nicky, 32, New Zealand)

Jo’s performance is a valued element of the broader Yunnan cultural tourism
product. The local government subsidises each bird by four Yuan (50 US cents)
to try and sustain the practice. Subsequent to starting his cormorant trips he
also began offering horse rides up a nearby mountain in conjunction with a
family whose horses he uses. To enhance his reading of visitors’ perspective,
he places great emphasis on learning English from his clients on the tours,
always seeking to expand his vocabulary so as to respond to what he perceives
to be subtle shifts in demand.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 2** Jo’s house boat and his cormorant birds
*Source: Dali village, fieldwork, March 2001*
I mainly work on ‘Foreigner’s Lane’ and start talking to western travellers showing them photographs of the trip. Most of the photographs were taken by people on the trip and sent the photos back to me (translated).

His photos commonly depict him and his clients together arms draped over one another in friendship. The images serve to reinforce his credibility and integrity as a competent tour guide, as well as suggest ways in which visitors can immerse themselves into the local cultural context, and in turn, serve to establish the integrity of the visitor as seasoned traveller or ‘real’ backpacker. In this way, Jo’s role closely resembles that of Jim and Michael discussed earlier in the sense that his performance of the traditional cultural practice also provides the stage on which backpackers can perform ‘real travel experiences’. Similarly, within the realm of experiences a hierarchy can be identified based on the level of the commodification and packaging. Jo’s performance is perceived towards the top of the hierarchy for his lack of packaging and overtly commercial orientation. The opportunity for backpackers to engage with the ‘authentic exotic otherness’ is enhanced by its representation as an unmediated social encounter. His encounters with people are constructed as almost ‘chance’, coincidental meetings in which the visitor is required to improvise outside the comfort zones of mainstream commercial activity. These elements of authenticity are reinforced throughout the tour as Jo takes visitors to his houseboat and family. As identified earlier, the roles played by actors are characterised by inherent contradictions. From the backpackers’ perspective Jo’s tour is of course a ‘packaged product’, but the context of ‘authenticity’ is built upon all actors willing to suspend the ‘reality’ of the marketplace, or at least acknowledge carefully constructed degrees of commercial engagement, and immerse themselves in the mythical realm of the touristic experience.

Jo’s ability to perform his traditional practice of cormorant fishing has provided him with other opportunities to reproduce the activity in other cultural performance contexts.

I recently travelled to both Japan and France to demonstrate cormorant fishing as part of a cultural exchange group from China. What I was doing on these trips in front of dozens of people is not too different to what I do every day with travellers here. (translated)

This more overtly performance-oriented role both reveals and confirms the extent to which different audiences demand subtle changes, or in this case disguises (costume, set, characters) for the production process to take place.

The preceding discussion of three entrepreneurs illustrates some of the cultural dynamics characterising the enclave over time. In the contemporary entrepreneurial context, ‘Foreigner’s Lane’ remains a focal point for new entrepreneurial initiatives and the continuous re-invention of place and culture. As noted earlier, the entrepreneurial activities of Jim, Michael and Jo have been replicated by numerous business people seeking to capitalise on the demand for an ‘exotic periphery’. Some of the long time entrepreneurs we met expressed disillusionment with the saturation of particular themes in ‘Foreigner’s Lane’ (particularly ‘Tibetanness’) and were actively seeking to
earn a living elsewhere. These processes were accompanied by associated segmentation of backpacker market where ‘traditional travellers’ were gradually becoming displaced by the ‘mainstream’, and demands that entrepreneurs carefully differentiate their products from others in order to survive.

One such new entrepreneur in this area is Langer who started his ‘adventure tour’ business following tertiary study in Kunming. His business concentrates on tours focusing on cultural themes such as architecture, Yi villages, and cormorant fishing, as well as activities such as hiking, camping in the mountains, and mountain bike rides to remote areas. He reveals a high level of awareness about the travel culture of contemporary backpackers, and a different reading of the consumer perspective to that of the more established tourism operators. Similar to Jo, his approach technique is personalised, built on ‘chance’, and is taken to the client. Langer describes the importance of observation, particularly in cafes, and making an assessment of their consumer identity before attempting to initiate a discussion. He targets potential clients according to his perception of their psychographic disposition and his reading of their travel experience.

I get all my clients from cafes. I spend a long time watching people and looking how they are dressed, what they read, what they are talking about and who they talk to. I am looking for travellers who have been on the road for a while and are looking for something different.

He draws heavily on the traveller’s projected image, their clothing, their stories, and their awareness, to evaluate how he will represent himself to them, the role he will take on and the script he will use. In particular his target market he describes as ‘disillusioned global travellers hungry for “real” experiences’ and jaded by overtly ‘staged authenticity’. His reading of the client character provides the reference against which he positions his products. His tours are constructed to provide opportunities for backpackers to perform the traditional art of Cohen’s ‘drifter’ or Riley’s ‘long-term, budget traveller’ in direct contrast to the erosion of this mythology by the mainstream. In doing so he provides opportunities for travellers to differentiate their identities within the context of a rapidly segmenting backpacker culture. His calling card invites them in the following way:

They all go to the same places, tell the same stories. You, how about you? You need somebody who communicates freely in different languages and cultures; somebody who has experienced various aspects of life; thus somebody who entertains and understands…We do what others can’t, we go where others don’t.

Langer’s card explicitly identifies the activity of tourists as a series of performances and seeks to establish a hierarchy in the ‘authenticity’ of these experiences by emphasising the importance of the frontier edge and the need for ‘genuine cultural’ experiences. Langer’s one-on-one approach allows the opportunity for travellers to enhance their cultural capital by avoiding the ‘beaten track’ experiences and accumulate unique stories for the purposes of performing to others. In this way, Langer’s approach represent subtle but significant shifts in contemporary marketing in that he explicitly promotes
opportunities for travellers to perform the ‘real traveller’ experiences as distinct from promoting the experience itself.

Conclusion

This article has used the metaphor of tourism as performance to explain dynamics of entrepreneurship and its cultural context and illustrates the dialectic of production and consumption. Our discussion of the backpacker enclave in Dali attempts to reveal a series of ‘stages’ constructed by individual entrepreneurs that function as places for both producers and consumers to engage with mythical realities of the ‘exotic other’ and myths of their own identities through the adoption of well defined yet fluid roles. Within this process the boundaries between production and consumption become blurred as producers consume their own cultural contexts and consumers reproduce the touristic performance as an end in itself.

Our discussion of four entrepreneurs operating in different sectors of activity reveals a number of commonalities. As is characteristic of backpacker travel generally, the ‘search for authenticity’ is a key motivational element (Cohen, 1982; Desforges, 1998; Richards & Wilson, 2004). The concept of performance in this context illustrates that both producers and consumers willingly enter a mythical realm in which pure unadulterated authenticity does not exist beyond the constructed tourist stage (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2005; Edensor, 1998, 2000, 2001). This appreciation does not in any way diminish the urgency of the quest for the ‘exotic other’, instead the performance of entrepreneurship reflects cultural hierarchies established on core defining elements of cultural ‘exoticness’ and peripheral places (Doorne et al., 2003). The four examples of entrepreneurship we discuss emphasise social relations over mediated commercialism, and feature entrepreneurs as cultural brokers with the power to authenticate ‘exotic otherness’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, 1998). Our discussion reveals the careful construction of perceptions and cultural values based on the entrepreneurial reading of travellers’ perceptions. In this way the production consumption dialectic is identified as a common ground (stage) within which touristic experiences are articulated. Essential in the entrepreneurs’ power to authenticate is the compliance of the consumer and their willingness to empower them with this role. We should also be reminded of the more established territory in which tourists, in this case backpackers, value their capacity to perform their expected roles and regard the activity as central to their experience. These dialectical relations undermine traditional arguments of cultural producers as passive victims commodified by the globalised tourism complex. Our arguments hoped to emphasise the agency of individuals and illustrate cultural performances as ‘both mutable and negotiable through social interaction between tourists and people who live and work in tourist destinations’ (Hitchcock, 1999: 18). We are reminded here of the extent to which our arguments apply to a particular context and cultural economy. Given the globalised nature of the backpacking phenomena and its serial reproduction in peripheral places we call for further research in other cultural contexts which similarly challenge the structure of power relations surrounding the consumer–producer dialectic.
Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Irena Ateljevic, Associate Professor, Faculty of Business, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand (irena.ateljevic@aut.ac.nz).

References


