Authenticity Anxiety and Counterfeit Confidence

Outsourcing Souvenirs, Changing Money, and Narrating Value in Reform-Era China

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This article focuses on a group of Bai minority market women in Dali, Yunnan: while expressing anxiety over "fakes" in China’s reform era, they have, when selling souvenirs to transnational travelers, simultaneously created them, engaging in authenticating and outsourcing techniques that imitate larger global economic processes. The author argues that concern over authenticity does not arise only in a European-style modernity in which individualism is key. Instead, such anxiety proliferates during periods of increased commodification and intensified circulation of unfamiliar people and objects, when the prestige or profits to be gained from impersonation, falsification, and imitation are worth the risk. Moreover, the same people who express anxiety over authenticity as consumers may “counterfeit” as producers and distributors.

**Keywords:** authenticity; market women; money; outsourcing; Yunnan

For the past few years, Natalie, a souvenir shop owner from the ski resort town of Chamonix, had been coming to China to employ local artists to paint landscapes of France’s famous Mont Blanc. Natalie explained to me, “I...”

**Author’s Note:** My most heartfelt thanks go to the people of Dali, who have offered me their hospitality, insights, and humor for years. For teaching me much about Yunnan ethnology and history, I must thank He Shaoying, Ma Yao, Wang Shuwu, Yang Guocai, and Zhao Xiaou of the Yunnan Nationalities University; Lin Chaomin of Yunnan University; Yang Zhengye of the Dali Culture Bureau; Shi Lizhuo, former editor of *Dali Wenhua*; and Zhang Xilu of the Dali Museum. Yingyue Li Boretz, Huan Youming, and Yang Zhaoyun patiently taught me Bai. Funding for research has been provided by the Committee for Scholarly Communication with China, a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship, a National Science Foundation Summer Research Grant, and a Trinity College Three-Year Faculty Research Grant. I have received invaluable critiques from my advisers Norma Diamond, Erik Mueggler, and Jennifer Robertson. Colleagues at Trinity—Janet Bauer, Carol Clark, Frederick Errington, Ann Lambright, Sonia Lee, Jane Nadel-Klein, King-Fai Tam, and Tom Thornton—provided insightful comments on an earlier version. Coralynn...
take these paintings back to Chamonix where I sell them as highly priced ‘French’ souvenirs to Japanese tourists.” She took a sip of her Yunnan coffee and smiled. We were sitting in Frank’s, one of the most popular backpacker cafés on Dali’s “Foreigner Street” (yangren jie, the townspeople’s nickname; literally, “ocean people street”). Since the publication of the first edition of Lonely Planet’s guide to China in 1984 (Samagalski, 1984), tens of thousands of North and South American, Australian, European, Japanese, and Israeli backpackers had been trekking to the old frontier town of Dali, Yunnan, located in the Himalayan foothills of southwest China. What some called an “invasion” and others a “bonanza” of backpackers has led to the creation of this street full of cafés, guesthouses, and souvenir sellers.

Natalie’s production and marketing process illustrates in miniature the strange flows of people and products that are characteristic of the global economy: a European entrepreneur orders products from one part of Asia, exports them back to Europe, and then sells them to consumers from another part of Asia who believe they are European products. Anthropologists have long observed these kinds of flows (Mintz, 1985; Sahlins, 1988; Wolf, 1982) and have continued to chart their intensification in the age of “globalization” (e.g., Appadurai, [1990] 1994; Bestor, 2001; Miller, 1995a, 1995b; Rees and Smart, 2001; Wilk, 1995, 1999). Natalie has not been alone in turning to cheaper Chinese labor: European and American corporations increasingly rely on low-wage Chinese workers to produce their name brands (Kahn, 2003; Pun, 2003, 2005). Yet this “outsourcing” of production, as it has come to be called, somehow seems more surprising in the case of souvenirs, which one expects to be made in the place where they are purchased. In fact, the value of a souvenir lies in “its material relation to that location[;] . . . this is the disappointment we feel in receiving a postcard from the sender’s home rather than from the depicted sight” (Stewart, [1984] 1993: 135). A gift, Marcel Mauss famously declared, carries the spirit of its giver (Mauss, 1990); similarly, a souvenir should carry the spirit of the place where it was purchased (or found, or taken). Natalie’s description of her production process confounds the idea of “authentic” souvenirs being tied to a particular place.

Scholars have tended to associate the quest for authenticity with the rise of European modernity and individualism (Baudrillard, 1983; Handler, 1986;
Trilling, [1971] 1972). In the classic formulation, a “civilized man,” “modern man,” or “Westerner,” alienated in his own existence, searches for an authentic self among the imagined nonmodern, “authentic” cultures and objects of “savage” or “exotic Others” (MacCannell, 1976; Spooner, [1986] 1990; Trilling, [1971] 1972; see N. Wang, 1999). Presumably, exotic Others were not interested in issues of authenticity because they did not need to be. They were imagined to be leading nonmodern, unalienated, authentic lives. In this article, I challenge the association of a quest for authenticity with modernity, the “West,” and individualism, demonstrating that Dali townspeople and villagers as well as transnational travelers expressed what I term “authenticity anxiety” in their roles as consumers.

In this discussion, it is important to keep in mind Edward Bruner’s comment that authenticity is “a struggle, a social process” (Bruner, 1994: 408; see also DeLyser, 1999). Furthermore, as Kevin Meethan has argued, “to look for single origins, to be overly concerned about issues of provenance and authenticity is to miss the point. . . . The questions of importance then are to whom is the authentic of interest and to what uses it is put?” (Meethan, 2001: 111). I suggest that we must also consider when someone is worried about authenticity—focusing particularly on processes of exchange, for “exchange is always, in the first instance, a political process” (Thomas, 1991: 7).

As I will show below, both transnational travelers and Dali locals experienced authenticity anxiety as consumers. Transnational travelers expected the souvenirs they bought in Dali to be “real”—that is, really from Dali (although in the mall at home, the question of commodities’ origins might never cross their minds). Dali townspeople and villagers, in their roles as consumers, expected something or someone to be what it proclaimed to be and worried about the strange commodities, currencies, and persons that began to proliferate in China’s growing market economy. As sellers, however, both transnationals and locals began to employ “inauthentic” production techniques that mirrored larger global patterns of production.

Minority market women in particular began to employ aggressive marketing, authenticating, “counterfeiting,” and outsourcing techniques in selling and producing souvenirs. In this way, the women’s practices followed a parallel shift in Chinese national political rhetoric from the mid-1980s’ slogan dui wai kaifang (opening to the outside) to the more active zou xiang shijie (going into the world) of the late 1990s. However, these women increasingly faced state challenges to their presence in public spaces. While much important research recently has been conducted on the ways in which minority women in reform-era China have been marketed and consumed as objects of desire (Gladney, 1994, 1995; Harrell, 1995b, 1995c; Hyde, 2001; Schein,
1994, 2000; Swain, 1990, 1994; Walsh, 2001), little attention has been paid to the roles of minority women as consumers and marketers in their own right.3

The Place of Dali

The name “Dali” comes from a Buddhist kingdom that once ruled over parts of Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Vietnam, and most of what is present-day Yunnan province. Yunnan is the most multicultural or, in Chinese terms, most “multinational” (duominzu) of China’s provinces, inhabited by 25 of the officially recognized “minority nationalities” (shaoshu minzu). These minority nationality groups live spread across a landscape that ranges from nearly 7,000-meter Himalayan peaks in the north to tropical rainforests in the south. Silver snakes of rivers—the upper reaches of what downstream become three of the world’s great rivers, the Yangzi (Changjiang), Mekong, and Salween—wind between ridged mountains.

“Dali” refers to an administrative region, an alpine basin, and a town. Since 1956, the administrative region has officially been called the Dali Bai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture (Dali Bai zu zizhizhou), after its predominant minority group: the Bai nationality (Bai zu), population 1,081,167 according to the 2000 census (Yunnan sheng renkou pucha bangongshi, 2002: 105), who call themselves “speakers of Bar” (suar Bair ni ge). Although the Bai have officially been classified as speakers of a Sino-Tibetan language (see Dell, 1981; Wiersma, 1990), researchers have argued at length about their origins, disagreeing over whether the Bai people are descendants of Shan/Tai, Burmese, the contemporary Yi minority nationality, or Han Chinese and whether their ancestors ruled the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms. These debates often assume the “purity” of groups over time, overlooking the possibilities of intermarriage and cultural diffusion (Notar, 1992). Clearly, the Dali region has long been a crossroads between what is now China, Tibet, Myanmar, and Vietnam, whose religious, cultural, and material influences have flowed into it.

The Dali basin, where I conducted ethnographic research with villagers, townspeople, travelers, and tourists between February 1994 and June 1995, from May to July 1999, and again in May 2005, is shaped by low mountains to the east and high mountains to the west (the Mount Cang range) that rise more than 4,000 meters around a large inland lake, Lake Er. During the dry season (December to April), the snow-capped mountains shine over people working in fields of broad beans and wheat. During the rainy season (May to November), as low clouds obscure all but the mountains’ feet, farmers plant,
transplant, and harvest rice amid a chorus of frogs. This spectacular scenery helps explain Dali’s frequent representation in national and transnational guidebooks, films, novels, and television programs.

Dali is also the name of an old town located in the basin that had long served as the region’s administrative, economic, and cultural center. Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, the town (on or near the present-day site) was the capital of several kingdoms, the Nanzhao, Houli, and Dali. After the defeat of the Dali kingdom by the armies of Kublai Khan in 1253, Dali lost political primacy of place to what is now the provincial capital, Kunming (then called Yunnan fu) (Armijo-Hussein, 1997). Yet, owing to its trade route location, Dali remained the economic center of Yunnan through the nineteenth century (Prasertkul, 1989). From 1856 to 1873, Dali competed politically with Kunming again: it became the administrative center of a Muslim-led independent state, the Pingnan kingdom, which was brutally suppressed by the Qing state. After the “pacification” of Dali in 1873, the earthquake in 1925, and the construction of the Burma Road in the late 1930s (Fitzgerald, 1941; Bradley, 1945), a city at the southern end of Lake Er, Xiaguan (“south- ern gate” or “pass” in Mandarin), gradually surpassed Dali as an administrative and trade center.

Xiaguan, now called “new Dali,” is the official administrative center of the region, but the town of old Dali remains its cultural heart and has been the primary destination for tens of thousands of transnational travelers since the mid-1980s. It has also become a major tourist destination for millions of Chinese tourists (as I discuss in more detail elsewhere; see Notar, forthcoming) as China, like other “postrevolutionary” states, seeks revenue from tourism (see Babb, 2004, 2005). This article focuses on townspeople, transnational travelers, and village market women in the old town of Dali.

Strange Flows and Fake Goods

Over the past two decades, as travelers and tourists have flowed into the region, laid-off workers from coastal cities, hardscrabble farmers from Sichuan province, and high school graduates without jobs have flocked to Dali in search of opportunity in the booming tourism industry. They have found work in hotels, as pedicab drivers, or sometimes in the (often illicit) cross-border trade in cars, clothes, drugs, and jade from or to Myanmar and Laos. As new people streamed into the Dali basin in the mid-1990s, authenticity anxiety began to spread among townspeople and villagers. In the religious revival that has accompanied China’s “reform and opening,” traveling monks and nuns began making their rounds and asking for alms. At first, Dali
townsfolk and villagers made contributions, but they soon grew suspicious about some of the mendicants. Hadn’t someone seen that “monk” just last week dancing at a nightclub? That “Tibetan” medicine merchant spoke Beijing Mandarin, and he wore a brand-new robe. That jade seller did not seem like others from Myanmar, and her jade looked like glass.

Stores in Dali started to carry strange new products: snacks, shampoos, lotions, liquors, medicinal pills, and potions. Dali townspeople and villagers were interested in trying out these novel commodities, but they did so warily. A package that brightly declared itself to be imported French dried cherries, I discovered to my surprise, had lemon-flavored candies inside. A pale plastic bottle that advertised itself as rose-scented lotion, my host sister found, smelled distinctly unroselike. A glass bottle labeled as high-quality sorghum liquor that a relative of my host father bought contained water. Dali was not the only place to be inundated with commodities that were different than what they appeared to be. The nightly national television news that I watched with my host families started to warn consumers about the dangers of “fake goods” (jiahuo)—and showed public security officials confiscating stacks of inauthentic liquors and medicines.

In Beijing, fake goods were colloquially called shuihuo, “water goods” (adulterated, like wine with water). In Shanghai, people referred to this proliferation of fakes as da xing, after the name of a street that had sold imitation gold and silver goods in the 1940s, and in the reform era sold imitations of “world famous brand names” (Li, 1997: 35-36). In Dali, Bai speakers used the Mandarin term jiahuo for fake goods or, more generally, attached the Mandarin jia as a prefix on Bai words: for example, jia ni ge (a fake person) and jia de bo (a fake monk). For true, the opposite of fake, they used not the Mandarin term zhen but the Bai term zi, as in zi ni ge (a true person). Thus, the false was associated with Mandarin, Han Chinese, and outsider things and people (a not uncommon association in Yunnan; see Blum, 2000: 154) and the true with local Bai—an idealized distinction, as I came to realize.

In addition to “fake people” and “fake goods,” Dali residents started to worry about “fake money” (pronounced jiaqian in Beijing, jiaqie in Dali). As part of a symbolic move away from old Communist revolutionary ideals of labor and class, in 1987, the Chinese government had begun to circulate a new issue of “people’s money” (renminbi, or RMB), one that featured minority nationalities instead of workers and peasants on the smaller denomination notes. The change coincided with plans to lay off millions of workers from state-run factories and to market minority peoples for the purposes of national and transnational tourist consumption. As the gap between haves and have-nots continued to grow in the reform era (Yang and Zhang, 2003: 288-
89), state symbolism shifted away from class-based to culturally based representations (see Schein, 2000: 150).

The last bill in the series to enter circulation in Dali in 1994 was a 100 yuan note picturing busts of the old Communist revolutionary guard: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhu De. The grouping symbolically reconciled radical Communist ideals (as represented by Mao Zedong) with more moderate market practices (as represented by Liu Shaoqi, formerly purged by Mao). The two leaders together represented “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the market economy that the Communist Party was trying to fashion in the reform era.

The circulation of these new notes led to confusion in Dali. Uncertain as to whether they were real money, people at first refused to accept them. If someone offered one of the crisp bills, storekeepers would ask for payment in the older money. Often, this increasingly worn currency deteriorated into barely taped together scraps or crumpled balls, and the price of an item might be renegotiated depending on the type and condition of the purchaser’s money.

Even as people became more familiar with the new notes, they worried that the particular bills they received might be counterfeit. The new 100 yuan notes contained two extra security features: an embedded metal strip and a “100 yuan” that glowed mysteriously when the bill was exposed to ultraviolet light. At first, only the People’s Bank of China used these ultraviolet lights, but soon even small shops in Dali were employing them. If a customer paid with a 100 yuan note, a shopkeeper would first hold it up to the light to examine the watermark, then snap it to test the paper quality, and finally check it again with a security machine. Such machines have since developed elaborately, and they are used on new commemorative currency issues featuring only the figure of Mao Zedong.

Stories started to circulate in the media about shopkeepers who ran currency scams on their customers—for example, clandestinely replacing a real 100 yuan note that the customer had given them with a counterfeit while claiming that they could not make change (“Shenzhen Dongmen zai xian jiachao pianju,” 2003). Cartoons joked that consumers could now use “fake money” to purchase “fake goods” (Renmin ribao, January 9, 1994, 8; reprinted in Li, 1997: 37). Both sides of the economic exchange had become false.

As these examples show, concerns over authenticity are not explicitly “Western,” as some have maintained (Spooner, [1986] 1990), and certainly fakes are nothing new in China. In his study of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century street culture in the southwestern city of Chengdu in Sichuan province, Di Wang notes that at the night market, ‘‘unscrupulous merchants’ (jiansheng) often took the opportunity to sell fake goods,” and in
"Liars’ Square," magicians promised tricks such as making one’s money spawn “baby money” (D. Wang, 1998: 38, 45-46). And when China’s most famous anthropologist, Fei Hsiao-Tung (Xiaotong), and Chang Chi-I (Zhang Zhiyi) conducted research in another part of Yunnan in the late 1930s, they noted the presence of “Old Lao Tsung (Cong),” who attempted to make a living by “impersonating a monk” until someone exposed him (Fei and Chang, 1945: 59). Nor did Westerners alone use false documents to enhance individual status. For example, in Qian Zhongshu’s 1947 novel Weicheng (Fortress Besieged), the protagonist, Fang Hongqian, attempts to purchase prestige by ordering a phony doctoral degree from an Irishman in New York City (Ch’ien Chung-shu, 1979: 12-15).

Concern over authenticity in European culture has been linked to the decline of feudal society and the rise of individualism and modernity. Once individual identity is no longer tied to rank and both social mobility and the feeling of not fitting in, of alienation from “society,” become possible, the idea of an “authentic self,” as well as of “inauthentic” selves, arises (Trilling, [1971] 1972). The concept of authenticity can then be extended from the individual to the ethnicity or nationality that is thought to harbor an authentic culture and broadened further to cover authentic commodities—leading, as Richard Handler points out, to the advertising of Coca-Cola as “the real thing” (Handler, 1986: 2). Yet in Dali, authenticity was linked to an idea not of an authentic self, viewed as something spiritual or psychological, but of “true” presentation of self and objects in the world.

The European conception draws more on individual essence and being, while that in Dali focuses more on exhibition and knowing, on discernment: something or someone is true and real to others. Although individualism may be growing in China, especially among only children, few would characterize Chinese or Bai culture as “individualistic.” As Hill Gates has emphasized, Chinese have met “the market [not] as artificially individualized selves but as kinfolk from officially defined registered households” (Gates, 1996a: 134). An absence of individualism does not mean an absence of authenticity anxiety about other individuals, however.

Moreover, fakery need not be explicitly tied to markets. Chinese friends have told me that during the Cultural Revolution, when the state banned public markets—although what Gates (1991, 1996a, 1996b) terms “petty capitalism” persisted (see, for example, the autobiography of He Liyi, a Bai man, who describes pressing peach pits to sell their oil; He Liyi, 2003: 161)—people produced fake Red Guard armbands and military uniforms. By appearing to be a real Red Guard or from a real military family, one could gain political prestige.
Yet friends have also insisted to me that the production of fakes was limited during the Maoist era and that there is something different about their proliferation in the reform era, at least as a younger generation experiences it: “everything is faked now.” Comments about falsification appear in contemporary Chinese films as well. For example, one coal miner says to another in Li Yang’s gritty thriller Mang Jing (Blind Shaft, 2003), “Now only a mother’s feelings for her kids aren’t fake.” The explanation of why the two men are willing to falsify kin relations and identity papers to claim compensation for their murdered fellow miners is that “now, only fucking money matters.” In Feng Xiaogang’s farce Da Wan (Big Shot’s Funeral, 2001), down-on-his-luck cameraman YoYo (Ge You) sells Chinese advertising space (including on the casket and corpse) at the funeral of an American director (Donald Sutherland) who dies in Beijing’s imperial palace while trying to remake Bernardo Bertolucci’s The Last Emperor (1987). An underworld entrepreneur tries to place his “Lehaha” mineral water, a knock-off of the popular “Wahaha” brand, at the funeral; when YoYo asks why the name is also a copy, he replies, “You don’t understand capitalism; with enough advertising, the fake becomes real” (guanggao zuode dang, jialei neng cheng zhende). These comments suggest another explanation for authenticity anxiety: not the onset of modernity and individualism per se but increased commodification, the intensified circulation of unfamiliar people and objects, and the profits or prestige to be gained from impersonation, falsification, and imitation.

Two Bai market women, sisters for whom I use the pseudonyms Su Pinghua and Su Pingli, regularly engaged in a discourse of suspicion in this new socioeconomic landscape and continually warned me to be careful of strange people and products in the marketplace. They pointed out people they thought were fake monks or merchants and told me which products to avoid. They showed me how to snap the new banknotes to check their paper quality and how to hold them up to the light to look for a watermark. Yet while the two sisters cautioned me, they simultaneously began to engage in their own “counterfeiting” and “authenticating” techniques that mirrored the larger tricky processes of the global economy. To understand the Su sisters’ role in China’s new market economy, we must first consider the background of Bai women’s participation in Dali’s markets.

**Women in the Marketplace**

To outsiders, one of the most surprising aspects of Dali has been the predominance of women in the marketplace. The British researcher C. P. Fitzgerald, who spent a year in Dali over 1937-1938, was taken aback by the
public presence of Bai women (he refers to the Bai as the “Min Chia,” 
minjia—literally, “civilian families,” their Mandarin name at the time):

Marketing is usually left to the women who carry loads of produce to the city on their backs, settle down for the day to sell it, and return to the villages in the evening with the proceeds. This work is done both by married women and young girls. The Min Chia women are extremely strong, often doing porterage work which in other parts of China would only be done by men. [Fitzgerald, 1941: 39]

As Laurel Bossen has shown (2001), prior to the Communist victory in 1949, impoverished Chinese women in other parts of the province and country also engaged in porterage or public agricultural work, and, of course, many entrepreneurial Han Chinese women have entered the marketplace in the reform era (see Gates, 1991, 1996b, 1999; Zhou, 1996). But participation of women in public labor challenged the Han Chinese cultural ideal of female seclusion, according to which women supposedly belonged to the interior (nei), the domestic domain, and men to the exterior (wai), the public domain. In Dali, only the most elite Bai households had adopted the Chinese practice of binding their daughters’ feet (Hsu, [1948] 1967), and the vast majority of young girls and women participated actively in public labor. Among the Bai, heavy labor and marketing were part of the cultural ideal for women.10 Anthropologist Francis L. K. Hsu, who conducted research in Dali during the 1940s, observed, “There are always more women than men participating in any market. It would be no great exaggeration to say that every West Town woman is connected with some sort of trade.” Hsu further noted that “on the main highway on market day or when there is a temple fair one would probably be able to count three women to one man, all carrying loads on their backs such as baskets full of vegetables, walnuts, sweet potatoes, or large bundles of bamboo poles, or even tables and chests of drawers” (Hsu, [1948] 1967: 71, 73-74).

Whether Bai women’s dominant presence in the marketplace was a long-standing cultural tradition or reflected more recent historical factors is a question that needs further research. Chinese historical gazetteers (difang zhi) of Dali omit any mention of women’s economic activities. Certainly, many men had died fighting during the Panthay Rebellion of 1856-1872, when Dali had been the capital of the independent Pingnan kingdom that was at war with Qing imperial forces, and women may have started to dominate local markets at that time. Perhaps men were absent from markets in the 1930s and 1940s, when Fitzgerald and Hsu conducted research in Dali, because they were drafted into the Nationalist army to fight both the Japanese
and the Communists, conscripted into building the Burma Road, recruited to work in Burmese jade mines, or engaged in long-distance trade (Fitzgerald, 1941: 189; Hsu, [1948] 1967: 26, 72).

From the mid-1950s through the late 1970s, both markets and unplanned labor migration were suppressed by the state. In the early 1980s, with China’s “reform and opening,” women such as the Su sisters started to revive market practices. By the mid-1990s, the prerevolutionary pattern that Fitzgerald (1941) and Hsu ([1948] 1967) describe, in which men work away and women dominate the local markets, had returned, as had Bai women’s reputation: people elsewhere in the province associated Dali with shrewd market women. One day, after I had made photocopies at a university office in Kunming, I figured the cost in my head before the administrative assistant had totaled it on her calculator. She and a professor looked at me in surprise: “Perhaps you have spent too much time in Dali,” they laughed. “You are really becoming like a Bai woman!”

People in Dali themselves had gendered interpretations of why women dominated local markets. A high school teacher in Dali, Mr. Zhao, explained the presence of Bai women at market to me:

Women have more economic power because they can bargain best, and can choose the best items. Women are more miserly. Women are much better at business than men. Bai women are also very strong. We used to say, “Buy a wife from Jianchuan as a mule, she can eat the most bitterness” (mai ge Jianchuang po dang luozituo zui neng chi ku).

Mr. Zhao’s justification relied on presumably “natural” female traits: women are better at business because they are “more miserly” and can endure (“eat bitterness”) more than men. Conversely, one of my village host mothers, Ah Niang, and her daughter Jinghua explained women’s dominant presence at market by pointing to male characteristics: “men are lazy. They prefer to drink tea and smoke cigarettes. They can’t be trusted with money; they’ll gamble it all away on mahjong or drink it all away on alcohol.” This naturalization of the sexual division of labor is found in other settings where the roles of strong and entrepreneurial women must be explained (e.g., Babb, 1989: 96; Chiñas, 1973; Gates, 1991: 22; Walsh, 2001; Werner, 2003: 119; White, 1997).

**Touring the Market**

The village of Shaping, Su Pinghua and Su Pingli’s natal village, held one of the largest periodic markets in the Dali basin. In the reform era, the mar-
Market has become a prominent sight for transnational travelers, in part because of the overwhelming presence of strikingly attired women. In 1995, women sellers at Shaping market outnumbered men sellers two to one, and the shoppers at market were primarily women.  

On May 1, 2005, among the hundreds of vendors, I counted only 46 men, concentrated in butchery (20) but also selling clothing and shoes (11), tobacco and cigarettes (5), antiques (3), watch repair (2), European-style medicine (2), rat poison (2), and dentistry (1).

The dominant presence of women at the Shaping village market made the site particularly appealing to transnational travelers, who visually consumed their colorful costumes through camera lenses. The Lonely Planet’s *China— A Travel Survival Kit* highlighted the market: “Every Monday the town of Shaping, about 30 km north of Dali, is host to a colourful market. It’s a good place to take some snaps. . . . Expect to be quoted ridiculously high prices on anything you set your eyes on, get into a bargaining frame of mind, and you should have a good time” (Storey, Taylor, and Lindenmayer, 1994: 878). It emphasized both the visual—the local “color” and available photo opportunities (a good place for “snaps”)—and the need to be vigilant about local price hikes. The guide prepared transnational backpackers for a double consumption, both visual (photographs) and material (souvenirs). Another guidebook offered a catchy rhyme to encourage transnational travelers to visit the market: “Go shoppin’ in Shapin, buy from [the] Bai” (Kaplan, Sobin, and de Keijzer, 1991: 383).

At the market, the travelers engaged in “a frenzy of photo-mania” (Crick, 1990, qtd. in Hutnyk, 1996: 146). Through their camera lenses, they could happily take in market sights: flat bamboo baskets overflowing with dried crimson chilies; plump, sunlit persimmons; pink piglets trying to run off in different directions; Bai village women with their layered headdresses, carrying loads of market goods on their backs.

Most of the other markets in the Dali basin were scheduled according to the lunar calendar, but the Shaping market followed the Gregorian calendar and was held every Monday. This adherence to the Western norm facilitated the visits of transnational travelers, who were largely unaware that people in Dali usually operated on a different cycle. Every Monday, entrepreneurs with minivans would shuttle transnational travelers the 30 kilometers north along the lake from the town of Dali to the Shaping market. Guesthouses in Dali also organized chartered buses (*baoche*) to the market for the travelers’ convenience, charging 15 yuan per person (in 2005, the regular roundtrip fare was 4-6 yuan).

Village women had started selling “cultural relics” (*wenwu*)—jewelry, embroidery, old books—to transnational tourists in 1986, two years after Dali’s official opening to the outside. Mr. Jin, the market’s manager in the
mid-1990s, told me that he had been criticized by higher level officials in 1986 for allowing people to sell souvenirs. “But,” he said, “my openness has proved to be correct in the long run.”

Across China, village women were on the cutting edge of national market reform in the mid-1980s (Zhou, 1996). In Dali, Bai women were among the first to supplement collective work points with market income from souvenir selling, even before the communes had been disbanded and land distributed to individual farm households. Market women from Shaping, such as the Su sisters, and others quickly learned to cater to tourist demands for souvenirs. They learned key phrases in two additional languages, English and Japanese, so that they could bargain more effectively with the moneyed transnational travelers.

The number of women selling souvenirs in the 1990s fluctuated by season over the course of the year. During agricultural busy times—spring, when beans were harvested and rice planted, and fall, when rice was harvested and beans planted—or during the ritually busy twelfth to second lunar months, when the weather was fine for weddings, a minimum of 40 women would set up tables. In the agricultural slack season, their numbers would double. For example, on a clear Monday in late October 1994, after the bean planting, 85 souvenir sellers set up tables: 60 women from Shaping, 20 women from Zhoucheng, and 5 men from Shaping. (Unfortunately for the sellers, only 20 foreign tourists came to the market that day.)

Initially, Shaping market women who sold souvenirs to transnational travelers waited for the travelers to come to the Monday market. After Su Pinghua and Su Pingli married into villages near the town of Dali, they started going to Foreigner Street directly.

One day in 1995, while we were chatting on the steps in front of the No. 2 Guesthouse in Dali (demolished in 2005), where most transnational travelers stayed, Su Pinghua told me how she began selling souvenirs on Foreigner Street. She started our conversation by counseling me to forget about studying and think more about doing business. “You can speak English, Chinese, and now some Bai. You could do import-export,” she encouraged me.

“I have no business experience,” I replied.

“Don’t worry, I felt the same way when I first started selling here,” she said reassuringly.

I was married in 1982 and came from my village of Shaping to a village near Dali. I had my first child the following year and my second two years after that. When that child was not even one year old, I came to Dali with my sister, Pingli, to sell souvenirs. I had my second child strapped to my back and was coming to Dali every day to sell things. There were a lot of foreigners who came that year.
Most could not speak any Chinese, but some could. One American guy asked me why I came to do business every day with a baby strapped to my back. I said, “For my family.” There weren’t any shops at that time, and no restaurants. There was nowhere for me to buy something to eat. You could buy meat at the market, but you had to have money. We could eat meat only once a month or once every month and a half. Those years were very bitter (ku). I didn’t know any English back then. It was so difficult! After five days, I said, “Forget it, that’s it.” But my sister Pingli encouraged me. “Keep trying,” she said. So I did, and look, now it is so much easier.

As microentrepreneurs jumping into the opening of the market economy, the sisters were far ahead of most of the café and shop owners of the town. Although an American in Dali was surprised to see Su Pinghua selling souvenirs with a baby strapped to her back, Bai market women, like the Ashante market women in Ghana with whom Gracia Clark (2001) has worked, envisioned their market activities as part of their gendered contribution to family finance. Being a mother and being a market woman were not activities in distinct spheres, as traveling Americans imagined.

Following the two sisters, other Shaping women—first kinswomen, and then neighbors—realized that instead of waiting for the tourists to come to them at the Shaping Monday market, they could bring the market to the tourists and make every day market day. The market women began daily to commute the 30 kilometers to Dali (it was the agricultural slack season, and there were no ritual events to attend, such as weddings, funerals, baby-naming parties, or temple festivals). Soon Zhoucheng women, famous for their indigo tie-dyed cloth, also began to commute the 22 kilometers from their village to Dali. The women would catch the new privately run minivans from their villages in the morning, stay on Foreigner Street selling souvenirs all day, and then make the two-hour commute home again in the evening.

**Authenticating Narratives**

When transnational travelers first started appearing at the Shaping market in the mid-1980s, the Su sisters and another market woman for whom I use the pseudonym Zhao Jie had sold them old silver bracelets and hair clasps. “There used to be many beautiful old things around, but not anymore,” Zhao Jie sighed. “Now they’ve all been bought up. I regret selling some of those old silver bracelets.” A Dutch merchant who came to Dali each year to purchase old silver jewelry to sell to antique stores in Amsterdam echoed Zhao Jie’s sentiment: “This is the last time I will come to Dali,” he told me in 1999. “There is no more real old silver left here.”
Nevertheless, Zhao Jie and the other souvenir sellers had no lack of “old silver” to sell to transnational travelers. They would buy quantities of inexpensive nickel-plated bracelets from a middlewoman who bought them from a factory in Tonghai, south of Kunming. In order to give these newly mass-produced goods the appearance of antiques, the women would hold the bracelets and hair clasps over candle flames until the smoke darkened them. The women would then polish the jewelry so the raised parts shone but the indented places remained dark, giving the pieces the appearance of worn and somewhat tarnished antique silver.

This process of souvenir production in Dali follows a pattern that has existed in Thailand since the 1970s. Erik Cohen has identified three phases of souvenir production there: first, villagers sell their own products; second, villagers sell products of other villagers; and third, villagers sell mass-produced goods (Cohen, [1979] 1996: 127). Meo (Miao) minority women in the northern borderlands of Thailand started “selling the handicrafts of other highland tribes, such as the Yao and Lahu” and “even objects imported from Taiwan and Hong Kong.” Finally, the “stage of outright falsification was eventually reached” as imitations of local items, such as tobacco pipes, were mass-produced (Cohen, [1979] 1996: 126, 127).

A similar process has appeared in nascent form in the northern Vietnamese borderland town of Sapa, where transnational travelers purchase souvenirs from Hmong (Miao) and Yao minority women. Claire Burkert has observed how some Hmong women in Sapa will buy embroidered skirts from Hmong women in other villages and then redye, recut, and resew them to suit visitors’ tastes (Burkert, 2003: 142, 144). Like the Bai minority market women who sell souvenirs in Dali, Hmong women in Sapa have learned some English and French to better communicate with their transnational customers (Burkert, 2003: 142).

“Silver! Silver!” Zhao Jie and the other women would shout to transnational travelers. Sometimes, a traveler, seeing that I was spending time talking with the women, would ask me, “Are these really silver?” Not wanting to undermine the Bai women’s source of income, I would usually answer vaguely, “It is difficult to tell, isn’t it?” Sometimes, a traveler, after purchasing a bracelet in the belief that it was antique silver (despite its low price), would discover that it was “fake.” She (usually a she) would run back to the market woman from whom she purchased it, shouting, “This is not silver!” The market woman would smile and nod, “Silver, silver.” (The jewelry was indeed silver colored.) I would make myself scarce as a translator on such occasions.

In addition to skillfully giving new objects authentic “old” appearances, the souvenir sellers became adept at providing authenticating narratives.
Women whose English or Japanese was relatively fluent could tell these narratives themselves, but sometimes I would translate for them. For example, Zhao Jie once asked me to translate the following narrative to an American woman: “This silver bracelet was my great-grandmother’s. During the Cultural Revolution, when old things were being destroyed, my family buried it in the backyard. Luckily, it was not discovered. Yet later we could not remember where we had buried it. Last week we found the hiding place by accident.” In fact, last week Zhao Jie had purchased the bracelet from a factory supplier. However, she had come to realize that part of what transnational travelers sought to take home from Dali were stories of suffering and survival. The American woman happily purchased the bracelet.

The Bai women’s authenticating narratives and performances added value to the souvenirs in the eyes of the travelers. Other scholars of market women have described similar phenomena: for example, the importance of convincing oratory (Kapchan, 1996, 2001) and the performance of expected indigenous identities for urban consumers (Sikkink, 2001). Stephen Doorne, Irena Ateljevic, and Zhihong Bai (2003: 6-7) have also portrayed the ways in which Tibetan medicine vendors in Dali, by their attire, perform a “Tibetan” identity for male Chinese tourists to whom they sell rare animal parts believed to improve male sexual potency. (I have observed, however, that some of these so-called Tibetan merchants are actually Han Chinese in disguise, using “Tibetan-ness” to market their wares and knowledge as “authentic.”)

Regarding minority Ainu in Japan who market handicrafts to Japanese tourists, Jonathan Friedman has noted, “One might suspect that placing that identity [Ainu] on the market would have a de-authenticating effect, but ... commodification is encompassed by the larger authenticating project [of Ainu tradition]” (Friedman, 1990: 321). In contrast, I suggest that commodification does not “de-authenticate” but rather produces a desire to authenticate. Instead of following Friedman’s approach and placing commodification within a process that authenticates culture, we should place authentication within the larger global process of commodification.

Transnationals in Dali wanted to believe that the souvenirs they bought were real. Because they sought to surround their souvenirs with an aura of authenticity, they sometimes provided their own authenticating narratives. One evening I went to Shirley’s Café, already buzzing with travelers and their tales. I sat at a table with a Dutch couple, a Dane, and an Australian. The Dutchman and the Dane were having a debate about whether the coins the Bai market women had sold them were real. The Dutchman was certain that they were: “They must have been carried on the backs of mules along the southern silk route centuries ago.” “Perhaps . . .” mused the Dane. The coins
were clearly marked in Chinese characters “Year 10 of the Republic” (i.e., 1921). I did not tell the group at the table this, nor did they ask me or Shirley to translate the characters for them. Part of the mystique of the coins seemed to lie in their illegibility. The coins, which bore the image of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), second president of the Republic of China (1912) who declared himself monarch in 1915, were copies. Like the “silver” bracelets, Bai market women purchased these imitation Yuan tou (Yuan head) coins from a factory supplier. This practice of selling copies of old coins to foreigners long predates China’s market-reform era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese entrepreneurs in the treaty ports sold replicas of ancient coins to American and European colonials who believed they were real. Many prominent museum coin collections now contain these replicas (see Thierry, 2002). In one sense, the coins the Bai women sold were not counterfeit, for the real versions of these coins were no longer being minted, but they were a kind of counterfeit souvenir.

Yet, as John Hutnyk has pointed out, “perhaps it does not matter where the souvenir comes from, nor if the narrative which authorizes it has the ring of truth or merely a structure—a narrative structure—which lends authenticity” (Hutnyk, 1996: 161). The authenticating narratives that the Bai market women provided and that the transnational travelers sometimes told themselves can be considered part of an “economy of storytelling” (Hutnyk, 1996: 161)—the stories that travelers need to carry back to authenticate their own journeys both to themselves and to those at home. The narratives that the transnational travelers told themselves resemble the “recontextualization” and “reauthorhip” of indigenous objects that, according to Nicholas Thomas, nineteenth-century colonial travelers in the Pacific practiced. Thomas notes that “indigenous artifacts virtually became trophies which reflected the broader experience and mastery of a passage around the world on the part of a traveler” (Thomas, 1991: 5, 143).

For the transnational travelers, the value of the Dali souvenirs as “trophies” lay primarily in their narrative value, not their exchange value, for the travelers’ authenticating narratives themselves had an exchange value. As Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz have pointed out, independent travelers in Papua New Guinea engage in competitions over who has had the most intrepid (authentic) experience or who has purchased the most authentic souvenir (Errington and Gewertz, 1989: 39). By following one tourist and her tie-dyed cloth souvenirs from Dali home to Auckland, Irena Ateljevic and Stephen Doorne (2003) discovered that the New Zealander presented authenticating photographs and stories along with her souvenir gifts (although the recipients did not necessarily appreciate the gifts in the ways that she wanted them to).
What is strange about this phenomenon of authenticating narratives is that a fake object, accompanied by a false narrative, could become truer, more authentic, than an actual antique. Two wrongs could make a right. A souvenir without a narrative or a narrative without a souvenir would be incomplete, like a one-sided coin.

**Unofficial Money Markets**

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Bai women not only sold imitation coins as souvenirs, but they also began to sell real money in an unofficial money market. The transnational travelers eagerly engaged in this market but criticized the women. In the comments book in Frank’s Café, one “anonymous traveler” wrote cynically,

Come to China,
Get over the exchange rate,
Get burnt by the change money people,
Shop till you drop
Go home and tell everyone
About the China you saw. (dated January 1993)


“Change money? Change money?” Su Pingli whispered loudly in English to the American in faded blue jeans walking down Foreigner Street.
“What’s your rate?” He sauntered over to where Su Pingli was sitting in the winter sun on the cement steps in front of the Lhasa Café.
“1.5 for FEC [foreign exchange certificates]; nine to one for dollars.”
“Too low.” The American started to walk away.
“All right,” Su Pingli bargained; “1.6 for FEC, ten to one for dollars.”
“OK.” The American sat down next to Su Pingli. He pulled a leather money belt out from under his orange T-shirt and withdrew crisp FEC. Su Pingli reached inside her burgundy wool vest and pulled out a small cotton drawstring purse whose end strings were securely tied to the button on her vest. From inside the purse, she took a wad of faded banknotes, the people’s money. Su Pingli looked around; nodded at me, a few meters away; and then completed the transaction with the American.

Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, this drama of exchange was enacted several times each day on Foreigner Street. During that time, four
main currencies were circulating in China: the old people’s money, with images of workers and peasants; the new people’s money, with images of minorities and Communist leaders; foreign exchange certificates (duihuan-juan); and U.S. dollars (mei yuan). Although co-circulation had not previously occurred in the reform era, the phenomenon was not new in China. In the early twentieth century, thousands of different privately issued currencies had circulated, much as happened in the United States at the time of the Civil War (Notar, 2004). Even after the Republican government attempted to impose a national, unified currency in 1935, five different “dollars” were employed in Dali: the national dollar, the Yunnan silver dollar, the new Yunnan paper dollar, the old Yunnan paper dollar, and the nickel dollar (used as a unit of account) (Fitzgerald, 1941: 32).

The foreign exchange certificates were first issued in 1979 as a currency explicitly intended for tourists. Instead of bearing revolutionary images of workers, the certificates were covered with scenic, depopulated tourist landscapes—the West Lake in Hangzhou (1 yuan note), the misty mountains of Mount Huang (5 yuan note), the Yangzi (Changjiang) Gorges (10 yuan note). When transnational tourists began arriving in China in the 1980s, they were required to exchange their foreign currency for FEC at a fixed government rate. Officials assumed that transnational tourists would travel on tours organized by the government-run China Travel Service and would stay, eat, and shop in government-run “friendship hotels” (youyi binguan) and “friendship stores” (youyi shangdian), where the prices were quoted in FEC. Regular Chinese were not allowed in these hotels and stores—guards kept them out. Only tour guides, overseas Chinese and transnational tourists, or the gaogan zinü, the sons and daughters of high-ranking cadres, passed through their gates.

By forcing transnational tourists to exchange their foreign currency for FEC, which then had to be spent for lodging and souvenirs, the government sought to control the influx of foreign exchange and prevent its leakage into the general population. However, the government did not anticipate that some transnationals, such as exchange students, expatriates, and backpackers, would want to eat at the small noodle shops that were starting to spring up or to buy books and clothes in regular stores instead of the friendship stores. Moreover, the government was not able to stem the desire of regular Chinese people to purchase imported items such as cigarettes and whiskey that were available only for FEC at the hotels and stores intended for transnationals.

These parallel desires—of transnationals to get out of designated “foreigner” areas of consumption and of nationals to purchase foreign import items—led to flourishing unofficial money markets. Like other forms of
unofficial trade, these markets operated “in the spaces left or wrested from state-sponsored economic activity” (Clark, 1988: 11). In Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai, I had observed this market to be dominated by Uighur minority men from Xinjiang. In Dali, it was dominated by the Bai market women.

Transnational travelers in Dali discovered that they could get a much better deal if they used their foreign currency to directly buy people’s money (RMB) on the street from the “change money women” instead exchanging it for FEC at the government’s fixed rate at the People’s Bank of China. Or, the tourists might take the certificates from the bank to the street to exchange them for people’s money.

In Dali, the souvenir sellers were organized into a miniature bank, and one of the women served as its manager. She distributed RMB to the women, collected the FEC from them at the end of the day, and then gave them a cut of the proceeds. The souvenir sellers seemed to resent and fear this woman, and she avoided talking with me. “She will do anything for money,” Su Pingli told me.

It took the market women time to develop a familiarity with the different foreign currencies that travelers tried to exchange with them, and sometimes the women asked me if I recognized the currency. While travelers asked me to be an “authenticator” of silver, the souvenir sellers asked me to be an authenticator of money. Occasionally, travelers passed off counterfeits to the women. Once Zhao Jie showed me a counterfeit $50 bill that a traveler had given her. Just as she and other market women had shown me how to recognize counterfeit Chinese currency, I showed her, by pulling a dollar bill out of my satchel, what the paper quality of a real U.S. note feels like.

In 1994, as part of a step toward entering the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the Chinese government did away with the foreign exchange certificates and allowed foreign currencies to be directly exchanged for the people’s money. At the same time, it set a much better official rate, which that year went from 5.80 FEC per $1.00 to 8.67 RMB per $1.00 (later 8.28). This development undermined much of the drive behind the illegal money market. Some transnationals still took advantage of the slightly better rate on the street, but most just exchanged their foreign currency at the bank. In the meantime, more and more commodities began to be produced in China for export, and their growing availability muted the desire among Chinese consumers to acquire foreign currency or FEC in order to purchase items available only in friendship stores. Chinese consumers found themselves able to buy goods that were similar or better in regular Chinese stores. By 2002, consumers in Beijing told me that whereas five years previously, they had tried to find a connection to someone with a connection to a friend-
ship store, now the friendship store was completely passé—they could buy much better things at the new Beijing malls.

**Competition and Cooperation**

The end of FEC marked the dissolution of the unofficial money market on Foreigner Street. The Su sisters and other women from Shaping complained bitterly to me that it was much more difficult to make money just selling souvenirs. They also complained that more and more women from Shaping, as well as women from Zhoucheng selling tie-dyed goods, were coming to Foreigner Street. Instead of chasing after tourists, the women started to stake out territory along the street, spreading out a cloth or cot on the ground to display their souvenirs. Women from Zhoucheng would also string up a clothesline to display their tie-dye. The prime display territory, in front of the main gate of the No. 2 Guesthouse, became a contested space. Later, when the No. 2 opened another gate on Bo’ai Road, some of the women moved around the corner.

Sometimes, the women would fight over territory. For example, I once asked Zhao Jie why she had moved her cot in front of the No. 1 Guesthouse on Main Street and away from the No. 2 Guesthouse on Foreigner Street, which clearly had more traveler traffic. “Because one of the Su sisters and I had a big fight,” Zhao Jie explained.

You don’t know the women of her family, they are the worst fighters; they’re the most pernicious (恶心). I used to spread my things out in front of the No. 2, you know, like three years ago when you took my photograph there. I got along well with those women then. But one day, I said to them, “You can’t have more than two women spreading out your stuff here; there isn’t enough room.” Well, you know, sometimes there would be two of them there, sometimes three of them, different women every day. Su Pingli started to yell at me: “You dare to talk to me like that even though I am older than you!” She started to push me. I crouched down and at first didn’t do anything. But then I got up and I pushed her face down into the flowerbed. Although there weren’t any flowers in it—just dirt. I pushed her face down and held it there. I wasn’t afraid. After that I didn’t want to be by those women, so I moved over here. I had another fight with Su Pinghua. Once, she said that she would sell a box for me. I gave her the box, and she sold it at a low price. When I asked her to give me the money for the box, she refused.

Since the Su sisters lived in villages close to Dali, they could bicycle up the road and arrive in town earlier than the other women, who were commuting
in from Shaping on minibuses. They could stake out the prime sales territory in front of the No. 2 for themselves and reserve spaces for their kinswomen who would be coming from Shaping later. The other women from Shaping and women from Zhoucheng then had to compete with one another for the remaining space on the street. These other women resented the Su sisters for their territorial control.

Women competed over prices as well as over territory. If a woman overheard her neighbor naming one price to a tourist, she might shout in English, “Look, here!” and offer a similar item for less. Tourists knew that they could bargain hard with the sellers because the women were in competition with one another.17

I suggested, at different times, to Zhao Jie and the Su sisters that they start a cooperative (hezuoshe), as market women have done elsewhere (see Milgram, 2003: 104-6). Sharing the prime sales space and staffing it in shifts would free up time for them to do other things, and setting prices would prevent them from undercutting one another. Each of the women thought this was a hilarious idea: “A co-op! Our country tried that before and it did not work!” The women associated the notion of an economic cooperative with the beginnings of the disastrous Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and thus with memories of suffering. By the late 1990s, however, they came to establish a living cooperative, though not a souvenir sales cooperative.

The women felt economic pressure not only from the national cancellation of the foreign exchange certificates and the growing competition for sales space but also from local officials who increasingly controlled space in the town. In 1998, to prepare for visits from heads of state, Dali officials began a “cleanup” campaign. Street peddlers such as those selling souvenirs were deemed disorderly and barred from Foreigner Street itself. The market women were allowed to set up their souvenir cots only in narrow alleys, less visible to transnational tourists. In the summer of 1999, Zhao Jie told me that she was upset because the “state” (guojia) had forced them to move. “Who will want to buy things if we are stuck away in the alley?” After she argued with one of the local officials who was trying to get her to move her cot, he fined her 50 yuan. “We have been secretly spreading our things at night, but he came by tonight. I can’t afford to spread my things out; I can’t afford fines like that. I used to make at least 7 to 8 yuan per day, sometimes even 20 to 30 yuan per day. Now. . . .”

The women who had first marketed to foreigners were now removed from the economic space that they had helped to create. This is a familiar pattern, as around the world unofficial traders have often encountered officials who seek to control or “sanitize” public spaces (see Clark, 1988; Lessinger, 2001; A. Smart, 1988; J. Smart, 1988). Market women frequently have been “the
target of attacks by municipal agents and police attempting to collect taxes, raise revenues and relocate or control marketplaces” (Seligmann, 2001a: 11; see also Alexander and Alexander, 2001; Babb, 1989, 2001; Kapchan, 2001). Elsewhere in the province, women entrepreneurs such as taxi drivers, who work in the boundaries between public and private, have also suffered public criticism (Chao, 2003).

As they continued to prepare for the visits of high-ranking officials and to cater to wealthier, comfort-seeking tourists, Dali officials, with the aid of transnational investors (French, Japanese, Taiwanese, Thai), undertook a series of massive construction projects—an airport, a railway, a highway, and a five-star hotel. The construction and subsequent ease of accessibility made Dali less desirable for self-proclaimed adventure seekers, the main customers for the market women’s souvenirs. These transnational travelers began to search for destinations to the north of Dali further off the beaten track, like the Tibetan town of Zhongdian (officially renamed “Shangrila” in 2002, after the mythical paradise in James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon; see Goodman, 2002).

With more women competing for limited space and fewer customers coming to town, the souvenir sellers looked for ways to save money. One method was to stay overnight in Dali rather than commute from their home village of Shaping every day. The fare, 1 or 1.50 yuan in the early 1990s, had risen to 2 or 2.50 yuan and then to 4 yuan by the end of the decade. Staying alone would be too expensive and would invite village gossip—why would a woman rent a room by herself in the town? The women solved this economic and social problem by forming a living cooperative. Twelve women from Shaping (not including the Su sisters, who still biked back and forth every day) rented a single first-floor room on an alley off Foreigner Street. (The women from Zhoucheng, only 22 kilometers from Dali, continued to commute.) The Shaping women paid 30 yuan ($3.62) each per month; as Zhao Jie explained to me, the cost was high because they were living so close to Foreigner Street. “I hate to spend money,” she commented. “Not like all you [foreigners] who come out to travel (chulai liyouchong). I put all my savings into building my house.”18 The women slept on cots, sometimes together with their small children, and prepared collective meals in the alleyway using an aluminum pot for rice, an iron wok, and a small propane burner. Once a week they would return to the village to check on their homes. Women who had husbands working away from the village asked grandparents to feed the pigs and chickens and keep an eye on the village house; those husbands who stayed home did the chores. One Shaping woman besides the Su sisters did not join the living cooperative. She was Li Fei, and she had taken a very different path.
Outsourcing

I was coming out of a photocopy shop on Dali’s main street in 1999 when I heard someone calling my Chinese name, “Na Peisi!” A woman waved to me from across the street. With short, styled hair, in heavy powder and eyebrow pencil, she wore a matching polyester flower print shirt and pants. I did not recognize her at first.

“Remember me? I’m Li Fei.”

“Of course!” When I had last seen Li Fei four years ago, she had been suntanned, without makeup, and wearing the outfit of a middle-aged Bai village woman: an embroidered layered headdress, purple velvet vest, short apron, and pants. She was a market woman who sold souvenirs, commuting back and forth to Shaping. Fei explained to me that since I had been away, she and her husband had moved out of the village and were now renting a souvenir shop in the newly reconstructed section on Dali’s main street for about 1,500 yuan per month.

With an eye toward making an impression on high-ranking officials, Dali officials had wanted the town to have a fresh look. They ordered all the old stone foundation and wooden-shuttered shops along the southern half of Dali’s main street to be demolished; in their place, wooden-shuttered shops were constructed on cement foundations, looking much like the old shops—except they were new. The freshly painted carved doors of the new shops were beautiful but made Dali’s main street feel like one of the “villages” in the minority nationality theme parks that had sprung up in Kunming, Shenzhen, and Beijing (see Anagnost, 1997; Oakes, 1998; Schein, 1994). Like the mass-produced “old” silver bracelets the market women sold as souvenirs, part of the town of Dali had become a new, antiqued reproduction of its former self.

Unlike the other village women, Li Fei had moved her entire family to Dali, and they slept in the back of the shop at night. “It is much easier than putting out a cot on Foreigner Street. That was too much trouble,” she explained. “It is also much better living in Dali than living in the village. If you make money here, you can buy good things to eat. The schools are better. When my kids came they were behind the other students. Schools in the villages aren’t as good as schools in town. I’m trying to convince my husband to sell our house in the village and buy a place here. Do you know those new places by the south gate? We know someone who bought a place there.”

“But wouldn’t you need to get a Dali residence permit?” I asked.

“If you buy a place in Dali, then you get a residence permit. But my husband is worried. ‘What if tourism in Dali declines?’ he says. ‘What if we can’t sell souvenirs anymore? How will we afford to live in Dali?’ I tell him
not to worry, that we’ll find a way. We could stop renting the shop and I could
go back to peddling (bai tanzi) again. We could work for other people or even
wash dishes in a restaurant. But his thinking isn’t very open (bu kaifang). He
thinks we should keep our house and land in the village. But what if we did
keep it and moved back there? We don’t have enough land to make money—
only 8 fen, not even 1 mu [10 fen, or 0.164 acre]. How would we support our-
selves? It is not like there are many jobs there.”

“Couldn’t you just rent out the house and land in the village?”

“Yes, but who wants to rent a house there? If our house were next to the
main road, maybe, but it’s not.”

In addition to Dali tie-dyes, Fei had started selling batiks made by Miao
minority women in Guizhou province that depicted Bai women and Dali
scenes. I asked her why she started selling the Miao-made batiks and how she
acquired them.

“Because of the Kunming Expo this year, it was difficult to get souvenir
goods. Someone gave me the telephone number of someone in Guizhou and
told me that I should call them and they would meet me at the train station. I
was afraid to call them; they’re Miao, you know.”

“What about the Miao?”

“Well, they might try to trick me or something. You know, Guizhou is very
poor. It’s all mountains. There are lots of bandits and thieves there. People
can barely grow anything.” Initially, Fei applied to Guizhou province and the
Miao nationality some of the same stereotypes that outsiders associated with
Yunnan and the Bai; however, her attitude changed somewhat after she met
some of the Miao women producers.

“When I went on the train I put my money in a belt under my pants. I
didn’t want to bring too much money, otherwise you can see it under my
pants. I was careful to sleep on the train with my hand over my money. They
met me at the train station and took me to their house. I stayed overnight
there. They were good to me. I needn’t have been afraid.” Fei continued, “It is
very difficult for them to make the batiks, more difficult than for us to make
the tie-dye. The tie-dye, you tie, then dye, then wash. Their batiks they must
paint, wax, wash; paint, wax, wash; for every color they use. I bought about
2,000 pieces.”

In 1999, Fei was the only village woman who made the jump from being a
street seller to a shop owner (by 2005, three others—two from Shaping and
one from Zhoucheng—had opened shops). Instead of constructing a new
village home, as most of the other market women sought to do, she and
her husband had combined their capital and poured it into the shop. They
decided to take a risk, in the belief that the tourism industry in Dali would
continue to grow and would enable them to create a better future for their
children if they moved to town. Fei’s outsourcing of souvenir production to poorer Miao minority women resembles the actions of European entrepreneurs such as Natalie from Chamonix, whose souvenir paintings are produced in China.

Ateljevic and Doorne have described the case of “Linda,” an entrepreneur from Sichuan province who established a shop in Dali that exports Zhoucheng women’s tie-dyed cloth to the Netherlands and Japan. They attribute her success to her “level of awareness” of her “role within the global economy” (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2003: 137). But economic success requires more than “awareness.” As Hill Gates has demonstrated in her research on women entrepreneurs in Sichuan and Taiwan, women need sufficient start-up capital, either saved or borrowed (Gates, 1991: 28-29); in addition, they often exploit the labor of others, relying especially on unmarried female kin (such as daughters) but also on other young women (Gates, 1996b: 157). Fei and Linda both employed other women at low wages to produce handicrafts, which they could then sell at a profit. While Linda had Bai village women produce for her, Fei outsourced to the even cheaper labor of Miao women in Guizhou.

How do people represent themselves, others, and objects in the marketplace and in the larger market culture (Agnew, 1986)? When are people worried about “fakes,” and when is someone or something a fake?

This article has investigated the anxiety that results when things resemble others too closely but not exactly, as well as the tricks that go into producing these likenesses. In China’s reform-era market economy, fakes have proliferated, both in the form of people (fake monks) and of things (falsified commodities, counterfeit currency). People and things are not what they appear to be, and something supposedly of a certain place (a souvenir) may well be produced elsewhere.

While copies and multiples have proliferated, not all of them have been viewed as equally problematic. State officials have viewed fake medicines and liquors as a public health concern, and they have tried to crack down on counterfeit currency by introducing new issues and new security features (metal strips, pigment that glows under ultraviolet light). A loss of popular trust in state-issued paper currency, as happened in China in the early twentieth century (see Notar, 2002), would signify a loss of trust in the state. Yet state-issued paper currency is itself a kind of replica, an imitation of gold and silver specie; its exchange value relies wholly on the power of the state that stands behind it.31

Although state officials have worried about fake commodities that might be ingested and counterfeit currency that might be circulated, they have
shown little concern over the market women’s sale of fake souvenirs, such as the mass-produced bracelets and coins or the outsourced batiks. Such souvenirs are merely a small part of a much larger process of producing commodities for global consumption. Elsewhere in the world, China is touted as the land of pirates and fakes (e.g., Wilson, 2005), but it is American and European companies that outsource the production of their brand names to cheaper Chinese labor. “No less are we all inauthentic,” Lionel Trilling once suggested (Trilling, [1971] 1972: 102). The problem of the outsourced product out of place is simply more apparent in the case of souvenirs, which we expect to carry the spirit of the place from which they emanate. Both Bai minority market women and transnational travelers attempted to authenticate outsourced souvenirs through narrative, thereby enhancing their value. As others have pointed out, authenticity is not “a property inherent in an object” (Bruner, 1994: 408) but is produced through “the conditions of its acquisition, that is, of the experience it frames” (Harkin, 1995: 660).

Bai market women have engaged in smaller scale outsourcing practices that mirror the methods of transnational corporations, but as micro-entrepreneurs, their ability to compete is circumscribed. The limits they face are socioeconomic (lack of their own capital or of connections to raise capital), self-imposed (unwillingness to take risks), and official, as they do not control public space. By the spring of 2005, only four market women were able to open their own shops. The others, banned from laying out their wares on the main tourist streets, had been relegated to alleyways and corners. The Bai market women, once at the forefront of the economic reforms—selling souvenirs to tourists, providing convenient money exchange—have been displaced, literally and figuratively pushed to the side of the market that they had helped to shape. The original “opening” of the market has become more restricted. Although in part this shift reflects the Chinese state’s historical unease with petty capitalists (Gates, 1991, 1996a, 1996b), it also falls into a global pattern of efforts to limit the success of market women and micro-entrepreneurs even as states promise to alleviate poverty. ¹² We may ask, Which “publics” are served by concern over new “public” spaces, “free” markets, and “real” goods?

Notes

1. Yangren jie is also rendered “Western Lane” (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2003: 132) and “Foreigner Lane” (Doorne, Ateljevic, and Bai, 2003: 8), but “Foreigner Street” is more common among travelers and is the English translation used by town officials.

2. Exceptions are Gillette (2000), who looks at Hui women as consumers in Xi’an; Simon (2003), who interviews three aboriginal women entrepreneurs in Taiwan; and Swain (2001), who examines the Sani in tourism work.
3. The Bai language is transcribed using the pinyin system for Mandarin Chinese. I follow that system here, leaving off tone markers. Although I have used the Bai-Han cidian (Zhao and Xu, 1996) as my guide, some of my transcriptions differ because that dictionary is based on Jianchuan Bai pronunciation and I am transcribing Dali Bai.


6. Wang Ying, conversation with author, June 2003. In Cantonese, shuihuo refers more literally to goods that have come by a “waterly route”—not necessarily fake, but having evaded the customs inspection and import taxes of official channels (King-Fai Tam, e-mail to author, April 2003).

7. Most Dali townspeople speak Dali hua, a version of Mandarin not far removed from the official northern style of putong hua. While older Bai villagers speak Bai, the younger tend to use a combination of Bai and Dali hua.

8. Louisa Schein has noted that minorities are pictured only on the lower denomination notes, figuring their subsumption under the authority of the Han leadership (Schein, 2000: 150).

9. Adding further satirical details, the novelist notes that “one could buy an M.A. diploma for as little as ten U.S. dollars” from institutions such as “Truth University” (Ch’ien Chung-shu, 1979: 14).

10. Bai attitudes toward women in marketing resemble those toward Javanese women, as described by Alexander and Alexander (2001), and toward the women of Banaue, in upland Philippines, as described by Milgram (2001).


12. Shaping market does not neatly fit into the typology devised by Skinner (1964: 9). Although the size of a standard market or even an intermediate market, on nonmarket days, is a sleepy village, not a town. The growth of such a large market in a village might be due to the village’s location just north and outside of Shangguan, which was once the northern stone gate into the Dali basin. The history of the market deserves further research.


14. Before 1949, Shaping market was held on the chou and wei days of the twelve-day market cycle, according to which time was marked by the Chinese characters for the “earthly stems” (Wang Lihua, 1994: 225). For a description of Chinese market schedules, see Skinner (1964: 10-16).

15. Alaina Lemon (1998) describes a similar arrangement of separate stores for transnationals and nationals in the former USSR, which may have been the model for the Chinese system.

16. As Gracia Clark has noted, “Unofficial trading not only fills in gaps and shortcoming in the official economy, but depends on their persistence for its survival” (Clark, 1988: 11).

17. For descriptions of competition between market women in other contexts, see Clark (1994) and Milgram (2001).

18. Zhao Jie said that they have an “old” house they no longer live in that they could probably sell for 20,000 to 30,000 RMB. Their new house cost more than 100,000 RMB to build.

19. Tim Oakes (1999) provides a detailed description of Guizhou Miao women’s craft production. It has been exploitative, he argues, whether done either in “larger-scale factories” or in “putting-out” (piecework) systems.
20. As Toyin Falola has observed, writing of Yoruban market women, “Not every woman grew wealthy or powerful from trade; indeed, for the majority, trade did not translate to wealth or power” (Falola, 1995: 36). See also Babb (1989).

21. According to Derrida, “As long as the monetary specie (espèce) functions, as long as one can reckon with its phenomenality, as long as one can count with and on cash money to produce effects [. . .] as long as money passes for (real) money, it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits” (Derrida, 1992: 153).


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