# Fieldwork in Tourism

Methods, issues and reflections

# Edited by C. Michael Hall

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# 15   Know yourself

## Making the visual work in tourism research

*Jenny Chio*

### Introduction

Tourism can begin anywhere, at any time, and in any place. Research by Graburn (1977), Bruner (2005), and especially Harrison (2003) on tourists pre- and post-tour, their motivations, and their ways of being tourists, shows how tourism can be deeply significant to everyday lives in the form of stories, anticipation, and future expectations. But, of course, tourism is not just about the tourist. Recent works on the impact of tourism in host communities provide critical perspectives on the experience of living in tourism and of depending upon tourism for everyday economic survival (e.g. Abram, Walden and Macleod 1997; Oakes 1998; Walsh 2001).

Both aspects of tourism research are important. Nevertheless, if tourism research continues to be perceived as a two-sided endeavour, concerned with *either* the host *or* the guest, our understanding of tourism as a total phenomenon may stagnate into a false dualism that neither reflects nor explores the mobile reality of the world today. Tourism is shaped by images, influences, and ideas drawn from national and global media networks (television and film especially, e.g. Ruoff 2006), international projects and their agencies (e.g. UNESCO, the World Bank), and memories recounted by those who return from travels. Hosts can be guests, and sometimes guests are hosts – the line between the tourist and the toured is increasingly blurred and indistinct.

My research explored how tourism is experienced by residents of rural tourist villages in contemporary China. The sites of my research included two rural villages in Guizhou Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, both of which are signed and marked as tourist destinations by provincial tourism boards, national travel guidebooks, and international promotions. I collected and analysed stories of travel from rural villagers, many of whom have travelled as migrant workers or as tourists (and for some, I learned, leaving the village as a migrant was also motivated by a touristic desire to 'see the world').

An additional component of my research was a study of the Chinese mediascape (Appadurai 1996) in which migration, tourism, and travel are represented as significant aspects of contemporary Chinese life experience in

television programmes, advertisements, and print publications. The key research problem I sought to understand was: What happens when village residents see themselves in the mass media while depending on 'being seen' for economic revenue from tourism? I was interested in how media represent-ations of tourism influenced and shaped tourist village residents' opinions and ideas about tourism development. At the beginning of field research, I expected to seek answers to this question through discussions with residents about television travel programmes. I also planned to use a mini-digital video camera to shoot footage for a documentary film on the experience of being a tourism destination in rural China. Little did I know that my camera, and my footage, would become more than just tools for documenting my research.

## (1)

Seeing is not just believing; in tourism, seeing is understanding and knowing, as exemplified in the Chinese phrase 体验 (*tiyan*), which means 'to learn through personal experience'. The first step in *tiyan* is to see it for oneself, and while the importance of sightseeing in tourism has been well established (e.g. van den Abbeele 1980; Adler 1989; MacCannell 1990), more often than not the first place where a potential tourist sees a tourist experience is in the mass media, whether in television travel shows, in films, or in magazines and newspapers. Previous studies of the relationship between media and travel narratives demonstrate the efficacy of television and films to both stimulate and saturate audiences with a perceived desire to be somewhere else (Ruoff 2002; see also Ruoff 2006).

Prior to field research, I studied critical approaches to media studies and the privileging of the visible prevalent in touristic discourses. The concept of the tourist gaze (Urry 2002) seemed useful, but we should not forget that often-times the spectacle of observation may become the spectacle itself (Foucault 1994: 13–14). I wanted to build an ethnographic account of com-peting interpretations and meanings of tourism as postulated by those whose image it is (tourist village residents) and those who produce the images (media workers). Advertisements for tourism to each of my field sites capital-ize on the ethnic minority cultural traditions of the residents – who belong to China's state-recognized Zhuang and Miao minority groups – and emphasize features of the visible, built environment of each village. Research on audi-ences (e.g. Ang 1991; Abu-Lughod 2005; Friedman 2006) demonstrates that consumers produce wide-ranging interpretations of media products that may coincide with or contradict the producer's intents.

A fundamental premise of this research is that tourism and the visual eco-nomy of tourism are intricately linked phenomena which should be studied together in order to determine what tourism means to those whose lives are wound up in it. From Poole (1997: 10), I take visual economy to mean the cultural systems of technologies, manufacture and circulation 'through which graphic images are appraised, interpreted and assigned historical, scientific

and aesthetic worth'. The close study of the relationship between visual images and tourism in China sheds new light on how identity categories such as 'ethnic minority' and 'rural' are woven into the fabric of the contemporary Chinese nation through the promotion and representation of tourism.

The visual economy of tourism circulates not only amongst potential tour-ists but also those who work in tourism. My methodological intervention, initially conceived of as interviews and joint viewing of television travel shows, developed into an interactive process of thinking through tourism and travel by using video-production and the consumption of visual footage as ways to talk about these topics. Because I frequently was seen by villagers while filming things of interest to myself, many began expressing interest in viewing what I recorded. Their interest suggested to me a direction for research I had not yet considered – asking for residents' opinions on my own footage, and not just that from the media. I bore in mind Jackson's (2004) notion of 'visual-izing the anthropologist' through video-recording which suggests that, with a camera in hand, the anthropologist can render her- or himself even more visible and create a situation to openly discuss the anthropologist–informant relationship. Furthermore, Jackson points out the theoretical, ethical and methodological imperatives of giving video materials as gifts to informants, which reinscribes the 'use-value' of the videos with a deeply symbolic 'exchange-value' between the anthropologist and the informant.

In this way, sharing my video *did* more than using mass media images. The visual was being put to work. While watching my footage, residents became not only consumers of images but also potential producers as they offered me suggestions and ideas. Through their responses, I began to unravel how tourism is made meaningful to the village residents and how they situated the growth of tourism industries in their home villages within narratives of personal life experiences.

## (2)

My research took place in two villages – Ping'an village in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Upper Jidao village in Guizhou province. I was interested in building a comparative study of tourism development conditions in each of these places.

A brief description of circumstances in each village can help situate the project and research conditions. Ping'an village in Guangxi is about 90 kilo-metres north of the city of Guilin, a famous tourist destination in China. Ping'an is one of thirteen villages within a designated tourism scenic area called the Longji Terraces Scenic Region, which currently is managed and operated by a private company under contract to the local county govern-ment, based in the nearby town of Longsheng. Ping'an has just under 200 households with a total population of around 800. The steeply terraced fields surrounding Ping'an are the most heavily advertised and well-known tourist feature in the entire scenic area.

Tourism to Ping'an began before the entry of the local county government and the management company; villagers told me that the earliest 'tourists' arrived in the mid- to late 1970s (some say as early as the late 1960s). Villagers said that it was the photographs taken by early tourists, which won international competitions across Asia and the world, that initially attracted more and more visitors to the village. The first villager-run guesthouse opened in 1991, and the village government organized the sale of entry tickets to tourists starting in 1992. The number of homestay guesthouses exploded in the 1990s up to today, with the introduction of large hotels in 2003/4 (following data from Wen 2002). During my research stay in 2006–7, I found that most of the villagers' daily activities and livelihoods revolved around tourism in the form of running guesthouses, restaurants and small-scale souvenir shops, and guiding.

In Guizhou province, I conducted research in Upper Jidao village, which was selected to be part of a provincial-level tourism development for a poverty alleviation program begun in 2002, funded in large part by the World Bank. Upper Jidao village is separated from Lower Jidao by a few hundred metres of road, but tourism plans have focused on Upper Jidao (although administratively Upper Jidao and Lower share the same village government). I only conducted fieldwork in Upper Jidao, which has about 100 households and an official population of about 424, though villagers told me there were usually about 250–300 people actually living in the village – many residents migrated to cities for employment.

In Upper Jidao, their efforts at creating a viable tourism industry for the village have proceeded in fits and starts. 2007 and 2008 were hopeful years for the village, with a surge in tourist arrivals. Village residents performed Miao songs and dances for groups on request, and funds from prefectural and provincial government bureaus were used to construct a larger performance space and a cultural centre. The built environment of the village was promoted as an architecturally and traditionally Miao ethnic minority village, by naming and signing the village's paths, houses, trees, and barns as '100-year-old'. However, even as recently as 2010, there were no souvenir stalls, plans to build a village hotel were still uncertain, and tourist arrivals had slowed dramatically due to a massive road construction project, restricting the amount and type of vehicles that could access the village.

My research in Upper Jidao was motivated by the study of tourism as anticipation and expectation – Upper Jidao is located near two established Miao tourism villages, Nanhua and Langde, which are well known and generally considered successful (Chio 2009). Because tourism to Upper Jidao was in its early stages of planning and growth through government efforts from above (unlike tourism in Ping'an, which began more locally), I was interested in how villagers of Upper Jidao prepared themselves and their homes for tourism as a part of a larger programme.

(3)

The video work in my research method took up the question of how tourism develops senses of oneself through the seeing/being seen that is a part of the tourism experience for guests and hosts. The concurrent history of photography and tourism to Ping'an arguably changed local perceptions of nature and the built landscape, leading many residents to acknowledge that the terraces are 'beautiful' and not merely functional (see Xu 2005). For Upper Jidao, an ethnic Miao village, visual images of the Miao are widely circulated in Guizhou and nationally, and I found residents were well aware of how 'the Miao' are supposed to look to tourists. Both villages also promote the 'ruralness' of each place as a desirable aspect of visiting. Thus, tourism to Ping'an and to Upper Jidao is very much about looking – as a physical and psychological act. My video work tried to turn looking into a way for villagers to share and discuss their own opinions about tourism.

The process of this visual research method was as follows. During field research stays in each village, I shot video footage of what I considered to be the most interesting or simply 'good-looking' aspects of tourism (or potential tourism) in both Ping'an and Upper Jidao. When I returned to my computer in between field stays, I edited the footage into short segments on each village – the first video compilation I created had about 15 minutes of footage from Ping'an and about 12 minutes from Upper Jidao. I made multiple copies of the edited footage onto video compact discs (VCD, the most common type of video playback machine in both villages). When I returned to the villages, I asked residents if they were willing to watch and respond to the footage. I made a point of seeking out those residents who featured in the VCD. During showings, I video-recorded reactions to the footage as well as our discussions. After each showing, I left a copy of the VCD with the household, and later I also gave copies of any previous showings (featuring our conversations).

The latter recordings of our viewing sessions provided an additional layer of visual material to consider, thickening the reflexive potential of my research. Over multiple showings, conversations with villagers changed to not only revolve around the footage of the villages, but also turned to past comments made and differences of opinion. This created a dynamic atmosphere for conversations, in that we were all able to 'change our minds' and rethink our perspectives in light of external circumstances (whether it be encounters with tourists, news reports, or developments in village affairs). Additionally, because I am not conversant in Miao or Zhuang minority languages, which are spoken widely in Upper Jidao and Ping'an respectively, I had to ask for help with translations of certain conversations. This made video-recording our viewings of my footage even more important for the later translation work.

Because I was following the visual side of tourism development and living in tourism, showing and sharing my own video recordings had the effect of creating a useful distance for reflecting upon one's own situation and for

thinking about concurrent circumstances in other parts of China. The project grew in complexity and reflexivity – from the first disc, which was entirely my own footage and edited by my own choosing, to later discs, which were informed by villager comments on what they wanted to see and what they thought looked good. Some villagers would offer to let me film them when they did an activity that they thought was worth being recorded, such as embroidery, harvesting rice, or shucking corn, and I complied. This constant process of thinking about, and thinking through, the visual in turn influenced my conversations and interviews with village residents on tourism, its development, and its role in their futures.

## (4)

Before going into the methodological issues that emerged through the process of sharing videos, a short summary of some of the reactions and responses to my footage will help frame the circumstances in which this visual material was received.

In Ping'an, most residents assumed I wanted to produce a promotional video aimed at publicizing the merits of visiting the village, and many people offered me advice about what to include, when the terraces are best looking, and how to structure the voice-over. One man suggested I purchase a VCD produced by the local government tourism board in order to get ideas about how such a video ought to look. Others suggested I include some songs and footage of 'special' events in the village, such as dance performances (usually only performed for tourists now) and interior shots of hotels. The latter, one man said, was important so that people would realize that in Ping'an the accommodation facilities are large enough for tour groups.

Reactions by Ping'an villagers to footage of Upper Jidao were varied. With one family, I talked about language differences and how difficult it would be for the villagers to participate in tourism industries if they did not speak standard Mandarin more fluently. Many Ping'an residents were intrigued by how poor Upper Jidao appeared – they likened the look of the wooden houses to how Ping'an used to be, before tourism became such big business. Opinions about this 'look' varied – for one couple, the wife said that the village ought to preserve the wooden houses, whereas her husband said decisively that Upper Jidao looked *luan* (乱) – chaotic, disorderly, and undesirable.

In Upper Jidao, I showed footage to a range of residents, from village leaders to those individuals more involved in tourism plans (through participation in the Upper Jidao Tourism Association, which is locally organized), and families who have expressed an interest in being a part of the tourism industry, either through serving meals or fixing up rooms for guests. Teacher Pan, a retired secondary school teacher who is the main contact person in the village for tourism-related events, often watched footage with others. This gave the viewings an added depth because Teacher Pan could explain the

Ping'an footage based upon his own experience visiting there during a 'study tour' organized in 2004 through a training programme funded by the New Zealand International Aid and Development Agency.

Many Upper Jidao residents were interested in how Ping'an *does* tourism – what do they sell? How did they run the guesthouses and restaurants (types of food served, levels of services)? They talked about how modern the village looked with some restaurants having glass doors and neon signs, and whether or not Upper Jidao should attempt this. Because most residents of Upper Jidao had gone to Langde and Nanhua villages before, they had a sense of what tourism is like in those places and some Upper Jidao residents have been tourists themselves in a few of China's more popular destinations, such as tropical Hainan Island in the South China Sea.

I learned early into my fieldwork that in my absence, the VCDs I made were being watched multiple times and shown to other families. On the one hand, this was unsurprising: most people enjoy seeing themselves or their friends and family, and because I left copies of my footage with different families, people played the discs for their relatives. More importantly, I was told during a second field research trip to Upper Jidao that the villagers had decided that they wanted to produce a promotional video. As in Ping'an, my visual materials were seen as potentially useful work that could play a role in the future of their villages – and, as in Ping'an, in Upper Jidao we discussed what sorts of shots of the village would be the best looking and what other content to include in a promotional video. They mentioned certain parts of the village which were more or less attractive (the oldest buildings being preferred over newer ones) and certain activities to film (namely *lusheng* – bamboo reed flute – playing, dancing, and singing).

The villagers in Upper Jidao were aware of their visual attractiveness as Miao, and over the years there has been much media attention poured on this region, from local, private sector videographers to national central television programming. These programmes usually feature Miao songs, clothing, and dance. Residents would often tell me I should record them in their festival clothes and not so much in their everyday work clothes, so as to match the typical images in mass media. My video work, therefore, seemed to slip seamlessly into local understandings of how and why they, the Miao of Guizhou, are supposed to be imaged. The more I was seen filming, the more frequently villagers would offer up their suggestions of where, what, and when I ought to record for the purposes of attracting tourists.

## (5)

Unsurprisingly, in retrospect, I imagined this research quite differently before I actually started. My original intent was to watch television travel shows with some village residents and video-record interviews with individuals in each village, and then perhaps use these taped interviews for discussions with larger groups. But just the first showings of footage set in motion certain

expectations about what my future video work would entail. I found myself and my work relegated within certain local categories of understanding visual media and its usages, and in order to understand these categories and why they existed, I needed to work within them. Processing which aspects of each village best suited its tourism promotion was the first step in exploring what work the visual could do for residents of rural tourism villages in southwest China.

I was interested in the residents' knowledge of their villages as tourism destinations, their concerns, and how they 'saw' media production as a potentially useful activity. By taking up the villagers' initial suggestions for a promotional video, I tapped into the connections between tourism, visual aesthetics, and media that are so crucial for tourism to be successful in these two rural villages. Every year in Ping'an, around May or early June, photographers descend upon the village to photograph the flooding of the terraces, and villagers are often hired as guides and/or porters to lead them around the area. The continued success of tourism in Ping'an relies upon the dissemination and attractiveness of these photographs in national and international media outlets. In Upper Jidao, residents similarly watched my footage with the intent of discovering or deciding for themselves just how the village ought to look in order to best attract tourists. In 2008 I was asked to tape one of their song and dance performances so that they could use the video as a study aid for improving their show. Moreover, when Upper Jidao residents watched footage from Ping'an, they saw how tourism looked in other parts of China.

Following Friedman's study of spectatorship and audience receptions of the feature film *Twin Bracelets* (1990), I believe that video footage also can be considered 'a medium through which viewers reflect on their own lives and relationships with salient others and define a place for themselves in a larger social universe' (Friedman 2006: 606). She points to the methodological efficacy of turning an ethnographic eye to the event of media consumption. As she explains, while first intending to tape-record discussions after showing the film at her research sites, she realized that audiences talked continuously throughout the film. Therefore, she writes (Friedman 2006: 607), 'I decided to tape the entire film screening. My tapes reveal an intriguing palimpsest of viewers' comments and interjections overlaid with film dialogue and background music as well as the sounds of children crying, household members talking on the telephone, and the passing roar of diesel engines.'

Similarly, my video-recordings of audiences in Upper Jidao and Ping'an watching my footage revealed the ways in which residents interacted with the material spontaneously, and how their viewing of the material prompted them to discuss issues with me, as both a producer and a consumer of the footage. Sharing my video footage and sharing in the viewing of the footage added ideas and thoughts to our conversations about tourism development, and I found it gave residents and me a foundation on which to discuss issues and concerns involved in tourism.

Media production and consumption have a significant influence on social life throughout China. What is important to understand is how the media, its circulation, and the knowledges it claims to provide offer ways of understanding and looking at oneself and one's place in the world. To be sure, the footage that the residents of Ping'an and Upper Jidao watched was all produced and edited by myself – by no means could I ever claim that the footage showed 'their' (the villagers') views as opposed to 'mine'. This simple fact, however, is what made the research process more dynamic.

That the footage was mine and I presented it as mere footage and not as a finished product became the most important aspect of this method. The critical edge in my visual methodology was my overt presence in the production, consumption, and reproduction of video footage. Not only did residents watch my footage, but my attendance at showings also provided an immediate forum for feedback and questions; furthermore, my long-term residence in the villages allowed residents to offer up suggestions for what to record next, thus influencing my production of further visual recordings. Again, as in Friedman's study, the significance of my presence and role in the showings tied together the methodological and analytical processes of conducting field research; she writes (2006: 604): 'My analysis [built] not only on my viewing of the film but, more importantly, on my participation in their viewing experiences and on comparing those experiences with other ethnographic encounters I have had in the community.' In this way, methodology and analysis are brought to bear upon each other – my method of collecting data (shared viewings of footage) also played a role in how I began to analyse the data collected (as a process of producing ideas about what tourism looks like).

Arguments and debates about the role of the anthropologist as an image-maker have sometimes led to the disavowal of visual materials as a legitimate source of ethnographic enquiry and data. This has created amongst some filmmakers, anthropologists, and others engaged in creating representations of real social lives a desire to 'give the camera back', with the belief that this handover could resolve certain issues of power and politics inherent in the endeavour. In the exhibition catalogue for a 1986 exhibition, 'From site to sight: Anthropology, photography, and the power of imagery' at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, curator Melissa Banta wrote (Banta and Hinsley 1986: 119): 'Many fieldworkers choose not to use the camera because it can create additional distance between researcher and subject. Others are reluctant to employ photography because they want to be regarded in the field as scientists rather than tourists.'

Twenty-five years later, I would argue it is quite useful and important in tourism research to acknowledge, and even embrace, the curious position of the tourism researcher as both a host and a guest in fieldwork situations. Tourism researchers are a host of immense knowledge, ideas, and experience which can be shared to interesting and significant ends with research participants; at the same time, we are guests and must act with respectful awareness

of the needs, curiosities and desires of our host societies. Long-term field-work demands this delicate balance. We, as researchers studying tourism, are not alone in the field, and the research process needs to acknowledge that our very presence in research sites brings (and can bring) much potentially significant and revealing data to the whole of the study and to the lives of those involved. Tourism research, and long-term ethnographic research in particular, demands a participatory approach that can take full advantage of the researcher's presence and the researcher's productions, visual or otherwise. Using a video camera to create opportunities for reflexivity in my project was just one way to begin exploring the possibilities of putting the visual to work.

I am not giving the camera back; I am sitting in the room with the camera and talking and asking questions and watching. To write myself out of the process was impossible – in fact, by sharing footage of one village with residents of the other, I made my project more transparent to my informants. They literally could see where I was when I was not in their village and get a sense of what I was doing. Nevertheless, this was not a navel-gazing video project about me either. Rather than just showing images, we talked about how to produce images and why and what for. Not only did this model the 'sightseeing' experience for my research participants, but it also spurred new ways of thinking about how tourism utilizes and deploys certain socio-cultural expectations about what rural, ethnic minority China ideally ought to look like. In this way, I tried to integrate video-production into the ethnographic flesh of my project, by using video's portability and its visibility as a means of creating data about living in, through, and beyond tourism development in China.

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