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Commodification and the selling of ethnic music to tourists

by

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Abstract
In recent years, the commodification of culture has received much attention in social and cultural geography. Basing on empirical research in Lijiang, a World Heritage site in China, this paper contributes to an understanding of commodification through a focus on selling ethnic music to tourists. Drawing upon a theoretical framework of tourism commodification and the cultural politics of music, I argue that commodification of music is central to the processes of place making and identity building in varied localities. This paper generates three major findings: (1) Commodification is sustained though discourses of identity building and cultural revival that act to justify the pursuit of profit; (2) Due to commodification, ethnic music in Lijiang succumbs to the capitalist logic of profit making; and (3) Some musicians use the opportunities brought by commodification to develop local narratives of ethnic music and to mediate the global forces of cultural homogenization. By demonstrating the commodification of ethnic music and the cultural politics of musical space in Lijiang, this paper calls for an interconnection of economy and culture in understanding music, identity, and place.

Keywords: Commodification, music, tourism development, cultural politics, Lijiang
1. Introduction

In recent years, the commodification of culture has received much attention in social and cultural geography. Academic research reveals that the processes of commodification and marketization convert cultural elements into saleable commodities for economic return, place making, and identity building (Wilson and Dissanayake, 1996; Mitchell, 2000; Thrift, 2000). This process is also embedded in tourism development. Tourism commodification, whereby “local customs, rituals, festivals and ethnic arts become tourist attractions, performed for tourist consumption and produced for market-based instrumental activities” (Gotham, 2002: p. 1737), is widely regarded as an ongoing, albeit uneven, process between the global tourism industry and local contexts. However, insufficient effort has been made to analyze the process of tourism commodification and how contestation occur in this process and with what effects. Addressing this lacuna, this paper contributes to an understanding of commodification through a focus on selling ethnic music to tourists. The main aim of the paper is to examine the ways in which music is commodified for economic returns and identity building. I draw upon a theoretical framework based on tourism commodification and the cultural politics of music in order to offer the analytic tool for an empirical case study focusing on the commodification of ethnic music in Lijiang Ancient Town, a World Heritage Site in Yunnan Province, China.

This focus on commodification sheds light on the interconnection of culture and economy in music. Connell and Gibson (2003) argue that musical space locally is commodified for economic return and profit making, but also is rightly bound up with
political ends and identity politics (see also Hudson, 2006; Kong, 2006). Economic aspects of musical activities are always “socially and culturally embedded, relying on aesthetic judgments, and particularly networks of actors that are not always obviously economic” (Connell and Gibson, 2003: p. 9). This observation is particularly true within the field of tourism. Britton (1991), for instance, argues that tourism plays a critical role in “creating the materiality and social meaning of places” through the commodification of tangible cultural elements such as built heritage and ethnic music, and intangible labor services. The empirical material in this paper suggests that selling ethnic music to tourists involves musical performance, costume, show stage, and equally important, performers’ labor and bodily presence. Moreover, the commodification of ethnic music involves varied processes and socio-spatial consequences.

I argue that the commodification of music is central to the processes of place making and identity building in varied localities. In this paper, I elaborate the argument by examining how state institutions and private forces use ethnic music to enhance local competitiveness in the tourism market and commodify ethnic music for economic return. Case studies of the commodification of ethnic music in Lijiang offer several interesting findings. First, commodification is sustained though discourses of identity building and cultural revival that serve to justify the pursuit of profit. Second, due to commodification, ethnic music in Lijiang succumbs to the capitalist logic of profit making, a process that “masks and fetishises, achieves growth through creative destruction, creates new wants and needs, exploits the capacity for human labour and desire, transforms spaces, and speeds up the pace of life” (Harvey, 1989: p. 343). Third, some musicians use the opportunities brought by commodification to develop local narratives of ethnic music and
to mediate the global forces of cultural homogenization. A broader theoretical contribution of this paper is a critical examination of the role of commodification in transforming musical spaces and the extent to which commercial music reconfigures local identity.

The rest of the paper is structured into five major sections. The first section conceptualizes music and illustrates a conceptual framework in relation to cultural politics and tourism commodification. The second section contextualizes ethnic music in Lijiang to unravel who defines it, how, and for what purposes. The third section examines how commodification is justified through cultural revival in Lijiang. The final two sections present two case studies. One case study reveals how the commodification of ethnic music has evolved in terms of Lijiang’s tourism market and how the political elites deploy the booming music business to reshape ethnic identity. The other case study examines some local musicians’ efforts to construct a local narrative of ethnic music to strike a balance between authenticity and modernity and to develop their niche market in the tourism industry. This paper concludes with a call for an interconnection of economy and culture in understanding music, identity, and place.

2. Music, cultural politics, and commodification

This section conceptualizes music and synthesizes cultural politics and commodification into a framework to develop ideas about music in the course of tourism development. The impetus behind a sustained interest in the geography of music arises from literature on music as a commercial commodity (Gibson and Connell, 2003), its role in place making (Leyshon, et al., 1998; Hudson, 2006; Thompson, 2006; Connell and Gibson, 2004;
Krims, 2007), ideological hegemony and resistance in musical space (Kong, 1995, 1997, 2006; Smith, 1997), and methodology (Wood, et al., 2007).

The conceptualization of music draws on Connell and Gibson’s (2004) claim that music as a particular cultural commodity should be analyzed in relation to deterritorialization, commodification, and identity politics. They argue that the fetishization of authentic culture or unspoiled musical performance treats music in non-Western contexts as intact and exotic in order to perpetrate an aura of inferiority that reflects “an essentialist identification of cultural practices in developing countries” (2004: p. 354). Similarly, Kong (1997) argues against the fundamentally untenable notion that Anglo-American commercial music homogenizes indigenous music. In a world characterized by mobility and deterritorialization, all cultures, according to Said (1994: p. 15), are interrelated; “none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic.” Following Said, Connell and Gibson (2004) call for a rethinking of “musical identities” to articulate the transient process in which the production of music is involved in conjunction with global trends and local contexts.

This call widely resonates among geographers whose research falls within the cultural politics of music (Watson, et al., 2009; Smith, 1997; Fraser and Ettlinger, 2008). These authors posit that music is an important force shaping “the typically hybrid identities of people and places, of engendering a sense of place and deep attachment to place” (Hudson, 2006: p. 633). The configuration of musical space is not territorially embedded alone, but is implicated within a global-local nexus through “a two-way
process that both dilutes and streamlines culture, but also provides new opportunities for cultural enrichment” (Wallis and Malm, 1987: p. 128, cited from Kong, 1997).

Regarding the cultural politics of music, Kong (1995) conceptualizes music as a contested terrain which involves ideology, dominance, and resistance. As shown in the case of Singapore, Kong remarks that popular music has been used by the ruling elites for patriotic education and ideological reinforcement so that a cultural hegemony is established via national songs. In addition, the elites engineer moral panics to reconstruct music heritage as “belying the existence of a nation-state with a shared identity, artifact of modernity” (Kong, 2006: p. 110). Nevertheless, this hegemony is contested by local lyricists who express various concerns through parodying these national songs. This contestation has been captured by Mitchell (2000) who uses “cultural wars” to depict the struggles and battles over the meaning and structure of social relations, and the spaces that influence and are influenced by human activities.

Kong’s studies are highly valuable in that they reveal dominance and resistance permeating along the meanings and representation of music. However, economic agenda, or the commodification of music, has been neglected. In many cases, commodification opens various opportunities of dominance, resistance, and negotiation in the arenas of identity politics and benefit distribution. As Attali (1985: pp. 3-4) aptly notes, music now heralds “a society of the sign, of the immaterial up for sale, of the social relation unified in money.” Following this note, I expand Kong’s studies further into the interconnection between culture and economy in order to understand “processes of commodification, social differentiation and the attribution of symbolic value” (Jackson, 2000: p. 13).
Commodification has been aptly captured by Harvey (2005: p. 165) who argues that commodification presumes “the existence of property rights over processes, things, and social relations, that a price can be put on them” for sale in the market. In an era of neoliberalism, the commodification of everything, in line with privatization, inevitably leads to processes running amok and producing “social incoherence” (Harvey 2005: p. 80). Drawing on Harvey’s argument, this paper conceptualizes commodification as both structural and relational. Commodification is structural because various commercial forces and state policies constitute structural power relations to sell things for economic return; it is relational because the processes and outcomes of commodification are constituted by the interactions of social actors with varying degrees of money, cultural, or symbolic capitals. Thus, while commodification is an intrinsic outcome of what Adorno (1991) calls the “culture industry,” it also constitutes spaces of opportunity which entail at least three scenarios on a local scale: (1) Culture is “being destroyed in order to yield entertainment” for a consumer society (Arendt, 1993, p. 207); (2) Culture obtains a new strength to survive in an increasingly commercialized world; and (3) New meanings are infused into local culture to generate hybridized cultural forms. Underlying these scenarios is the reality that commodification is so omnipresent that it penetrates into “every nook and cranny of modern life” when “practically every human activity in Western countries either relies on or has certain commodities associated with it, from births to weddings to funerals, at work or in the home, in peace or in war” (Thrift, 2000: p. 96). Thrift (2000) further observes the penetration of commodification into non-Western societies, causing cultural globalization through the ubiquity of certain commodities and their attached meanings.
One of the forces to facilitate this penetration of commodification is tourism, which has been explored by scholars of differing viewpoints concerning the commodification of music. One viewpoint emphasizes that commodification gives local culture a new strength to survive in a highly globalized world. Commodification can bring about socio-cultural benefits, such as protecting historic buildings, keeping folk traditions alive, and affirming local identity. For instance, through an analysis of cultural programming on Victoria Island in Ottawa, Mason (2004) asserts that aboriginal tourism allows the local community to reclaim the meanings of its musical forms while generating economic opportunities for the local businesses. A similar argument has been made by Oakes (1993) based on his research of tourism development in Guizhou, China. According to Oakes (1993: pp. 58-59), commodification potentially empowers local residents to “effectively maintain a sense of autonomy” by integrating them into the tourism system and reviving their local tradition.

The counter-viewpoint is that commodification denigrates the meanings of built environments and cultural assets. Relph (1976: p. 93) argues that tourism is “a homogenizing influence and its effects everywhere seem to be the same—the destruction of the local and regional landscape that very often initiated the tourism, and its replacement by conventional tourist architecture and synthetic landscapes and pseudo-places.” This argument has exerted great influence on later research of tourism commodification. For instance, Tilley’s (1997) analysis of the commodification of dance on Wala Island, Vanuatu, reveals that cultural performance for tourists in resorts is deprived of any cultural meaning. To Tilley (1997: p. 81), this commodification generates “an empty vessel of tradition” without inherent sentiment.
While scholars with either viewpoint have highlighted the commodification of music in tourism development, and demonstrated its positive or negative impacts, little has been done to conceptualize commodification as a process-based relation with variegated facets across time and space. The assumption that only one kind of commodification exists in one place and sustains itself over time has often entrapped scholars into debating whether commodification is good or bad, a debate that stifles in-depth exploration of the interconnection of culture and economy in music. To avoid this essentialist assumption, this paper conceptualizes commodification as a process-based relation, a conceptualization that generates insight into the social and spatial practices of framing, configuring, and transforming musical space.

The focus on the link between tourism, commodification, and music draws together the cultural politics of space, and builds connections to well-developed ideas from literature on the geography of music. This statement offers two propositions. First, cultural politics involves the endless negotiation of identity and meaning among groups of people as they struggle for dominance (Jackson, 2000). Second, political economy continues to be crucial in cultural politics. I agree with Jackson (1991: p. 225) who states that:

One cannot divorce the “cultural” aspects of reinvestment or preservation from the apparently “political” and “economic” dimensions that produce these chances, but neither can the political economy of urban and regional change be understood without a more fully developed understanding of its cultural politics. 

Rejecting the erosion of authenticity and meaning (Edensor, 2007; Minca, 2007) and engaging with current debates on commodification as a process of reconfiguration and
transformation (Bailey, 2008; Britton, 1991), this paper will identify and reveal important links between “music and the conceptualization and production of places and spaces” (Leyshon, 2004: p. 230) in the case of ethnic music in Lijiang, China. Furthermore, this paper will address the commodification of ethnic music, or localized music with strong territorial attachment and historical context, in order to complement existing geographical literature on world music (Connell and Gibson, 2004) and popular music (Kong, 1995).

To summarize this section, I would argue that the commodification of culture and the cultural politics of space provide a framework for understanding the complexities of music. Indeed, as Hudson (2006: p. 627) remarks, we must remember that the music industry remains “an important site of commodity production in contemporary capitalism” and that the political economy needs adequate attention, despite the increasing attention to the “cultural turn.” Keeping in mind the theoretical ideas of cultural politics and commodification, I will now examine the process of selling ethnic music to tourists and how music is used to reconfigure place and ethnic identity in Lijiang.

Before proceeding further, I will offer a brief account of data collection. Fieldwork was conducted in Lijiang from 2004 to 2007 to survey Lijiang’s main performance venues. During six visits, I conducted 20 interviews with professional musical performers, armature players, and performance managers. Some of the respondents were veteran players and some had just started to learn how to play. All interviews were recorded. Four respondents were interviewed three times during my visits in order to get updated information about the commodification of ethnic music in Lijiang. Interviews with some key players in Lijiang’s ethnic music industry generated valuable information about how
performances are staged to appeal to tourists. In-depth interviews were complemented by participant observation in different musical venues.

3. Contextualizing ethnic music in Lijiang

This section contextualizes Lijiang’s ethnic music that has undertaken changes from an external cultural element before 1949, to feudal superstition during Mao’s regime (1949-1976), to ethnic folk culture after the economic reform in 1978, and finally, to commercial treasure in the tourism market when tourists rushed to Lijiang after 1997. By examining the historical context in which the music was born, this section has two aims: (1) to reveal how the formation of Lijiang’s ethnic music builds upon a historical crystallization of social and political relations and ushers in opportunities for, and constraints upon, current transformation; and (2) to examine who defines “ethnic music,” how, and for what purposes.

Located in northwest Yunnan Province, a peripheral province in southwest China, Lijiang Ancient Town was established 800 years ago by local indigenous people called Naxi (in comparison with China’s majority ethnic group—Han) (Figure 1). Because of its unique urban form and authentic lived culture, the town was placed on the World Heritage List by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 1997. This title substantially grants Lijiang enormous potential to enter the global tourist industry. In 2008 alone, Lijiang received 466,000 overseas tourists and 5.79 million domestic tourists, with tourist revenues totaling 6.95 billion Chinese yuan and accounting
for over 60% of Lijiang’s gross domestic product (Lijiang Tourism Bureau, 2009).\(^1\) As the most important industry in Lijiang, tourism rests on selling what appear to be unique cultural forms to tourists. One of the cultural forms is Naxi ethnic music.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Naxi ethnic music entails all musical forms that once existed in Lijiang. Among these forms is Dongjing music, which dominated Lijiang’s soundscape before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Dongjing is an abbreviation of the title of a major Taoist scripture called Transcendent Scripture of the Great Grotto of Wenchang (Rees, 2000). Before 1949, Dongjing associations existed in Yunnan’s major towns such as Kunming (the provincial capital) and Lijiang, and their primary aim was to perform Taoist ritual scripture so that players could learn Han culture and appeal for fortune and safety. As Rees (2000: p. 68) describes, “against the Naxi soundscape within which it existed, Lijiang’s Dongjing music loudly proclaimed its Han origins, confirming the evidence offered before 1949 by the quintessential Han-ness of Dongjing scriptures, deities, festivals, and costumes.” Through performing Han-oriented ritual scripture, these participants might experience Han culture and establish an imagined connection between themselves in peripheral Yunnan and their counterparts in the core Han society. Except for the elitist Dongjing associations, secular music groups in Lijiang played Dongjing music and local indigenous music, Baisha Xiyue (literally, refined music from Baisha) with an emphasis on relaxation and fun rather than any religious commitment (Rees, 2000; Zong and Bao, 2005).

\(^1\) US$1 is approximately Chinese yuan 6.837 at rates in July 2009.
After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in 1949, the fate of Dongjing music dramatically changed. Labeling Dongjing music as “feudal superstition,” the socialist state suspended the music and suppressed its participants. During the high season of political campaigns in the early 1960s, Mao called for a nationwide movement to demolish the “four olds”—old thought, old culture, old custom, and old tradition—in order to eradicate old legacies and establish a new socialist China. Accordingly, Lijiang’s local government dismantled Lijiang’s Dongjing associations and forbade any practices of Dongjing music and other religion-related performances (Rees, 2000). The only exception was for accompaniment in funerals because of the music’s melancholy melody and slow pace. The state policies of building a socialist China demonized Dongjing music as a symbol of old society, altered the established social relations in Lijiang, and repressed the local practices of musical performance.

Once Deng Xiaoping implemented economic reform in 1978, Naxi ethnic music got a new life. As the central government in Beijing enacted friendly policies to foster ethnic culture in peripheral regions, Lijiang’s local government actively organized old musicians to practice Naxi ethnic music, mainly Dongjing music. In 1984, the Dayan Music Association (hereafter, the Association) was reestablished to provide ethnic music in the town. At that time, performance was spontaneous for enjoyment and self-amusement, without commercial pursuit. Beyond the Association, Lijiang hosted some other informal troupes for town residents to socialize and enjoy music. As one amateur player in his 40s recalled, “[W]hen I was young, there were lots of musical groups [in the town]. They never asked for payment nor performance stage. They just wanted to play.
Especially during important festivals, someone would volunteer to organize others to play Naxi music. It is a form of entertainment.”

In 1986, the State Council, China’s highest organ of administration, approved Lijiang to open to foreign investors and visitors. As a result, foreigners started to visit Lijiang, and listening to Naxi music became a “must do” during their visit. Xuan Ke, one of the leaders in the Association, actively built a bridge between foreign tourists and Naxi players. Thanks to his command of English, Xuan introduced Naxi music to foreign audiences and explained the connotation of each repertoire. Initially, foreign tourists felt free to attend the irregularly-organized performances; only a donation box on site reminded these tourists that their financial support was appreciated.

To better sell Naxi ethnic music to tourists, Xuan Ke synthesized all musical forms (mainly Dongjing music and Baisha refined music) in Lijiang into a single category called “Naxi guyue” or “Naxi ancient music,” no matter how different these forms are in terms of connotation and function. This new name was accepted by the local government. The purpose of renaming, according to a source available from Lijiang CCP’s Department of Publicity (16 January 2009), was to integrate Dongjing music into the legacy of Naxi society so that in tourists’ minds, Naxi guyue became a cultural property belonging to the Naxi people.

The renaming has raised disputes among scholars concerning the belongingness of Naxi guyue. For instance, Wu Xueyuan, a Han scholar based in Kunming, argues that “the so-called Naxi guyue is culturally originated from Han society and it is improper to regard it as a property of Naxi ethnic group” (2003: p. 26). As Wu published his essay in a Beijing-based journal and thus publicized the dispute in 2003, Xuan Ke became
enraged, pointing out that “they defame; they even defame the city of Lijiang. I cannot tolerate it. They argue that I use Naxi guyue to make a profit and that the name of Naxi guyue is a culturally improper concept. I cannot buy their argument” (personal interview in 2004). Similarly, the director of the Lijiang Bureau of Culture contends that the questions raised about Naxi guyue jeopardizes Naxi ethnic dignity so that the Naxi people cannot tolerate it (Lijiang Daily, 14 April 2004). Such metaphors of place image and ethnic dignity, combined with the potential loss of Lijiang’s competitiveness in the tourism market, turned anger into action. In 2004, Xuan sued Wu for slander in Lijiang’s court. The final decree regulated that Wu should apologize to Xuan Ke for his unjustified language, and Wu and the journal should compensate Xuan Ke for emotional distress (Xinhua News Agency, 15 November 2005).

Naxi music by nature is a form of cultural heritage, and a critical question arises concerning its ownership. Writing about the question of whose heritage, Tunbridge (1984: p. 178) argues that political dominance has penetrated into the local authority’s exclusive claim on heritage ownership, a claim that naturally leads to “a reluctance to share control of a community and the wider society.” The underlying rational for such an exclusive claim is to strengthen local uniqueness in the global tourism industry. What happened in Lijiang supports Tunbridge’s argument. The dispute over renaming and ownership highlighted the tension in defining whose heritage, when an increasing awareness of local uniqueness embodies local efforts to “enhance the locational advantages and productive capacities of their territorial jurisdictions as maximally competitive nodes in the world economy” (Brenner, 1999: p. 440). Indeed, Lijiang’s involvement in the global economy is largely activated through the tourism industry, where the priority is to secure place-
specific heritage sources as selling points in the tourism market. Once this place-specific uniqueness is questioned and belittled, Lijiang’s tourism industry loses its tourist appeal. Hence, the local authority has mobilized the machinery of propaganda and legislature to defend their ownership of “Naxi guyue.”

The whole dispute over ownership emanates from what Mitchell (2000: 11, original emphasis) calls culture wars about identity building and how to reinforce and manipulate “the power to shape, determine, and, literally, emplace those identities.” Further the dispute draws on the apparatus of the state’s coercive power to legally and forcefully punish “those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively” (Gramsci, 1971: p. 12). As a result, Lijiang’s local institutional forces and business elites define Naxi ethnic music and quell disputes over the ownership of music heritage for the purpose of maintaining the cultural identity of Naxi ethnicity. More importantly, the powerful forces reap economic return through selling Naxi ethnic music in the tourism market. The next section turns to reveal how culture and economy are interconnected in the process of selling Naxi ethnic music to tourists.

4. Justification of commodification in Lijiang’s musical space

On July 22, 1988, three years after Lijiang was opened to foreigners, Xuan Ke led the Association to make their commercial debut, offering musical performances in a residential house. Foreign tourists were the only audiences, and the admission fee was 4

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2 In the rest of this paper, I will use “Naxi ethnic music” as a neutral concept to denote all ethnic music and dance in Lijiang so as to avoid confusion. Specific musical forms (Dongjing music or Baisha refined music) will be used only if necessary to clarify the connotation of musical performance.
yuan. At the end of the show, the audiences generously gave tips to Xuan Ke, a generosity that immediately inspired Xuan and his team members to believe in the commercial potential of Naxi ethnic music realized through the tourism industry. Due to limited tourist attendance and revenues, however, this inspiration did not immediately result in a booming business. Most players had full-time jobs in other sectors, and performance for tourists was their pastime. In addition, regarding music as local high culture, many players felt shameful at the commercial performance organized by Xuan Ke, and deliberately distanced themselves from money exchange with tourists, though they welcomed tourists as their audience. For instance, one musician said that “my father disliked Xuan Ke very much and thought that the players were begging money from tourists” (Wei, professional player in his mid-30s). This lofty disdain for commercial Naxi music reflected an insidious struggle concerning commodification within the local community.

This disdain, however, did not prevent the selling of Naxi music to tourists. Gradually, players adopted a pragmatic attitude toward the juxtaposition of commercial performance with self-entertaining play. As one player commented:

Lun (professional player in his early 20s): I never thought about earning money. Of course now I participate in commercial performance. I learned Naxi ethnic music, partly because of a personal interest in music and partly because of my intention of inheriting our ethnic legacy. When the old generation of players passes away and young people refuse to learn it, this cultural tradition will disappear. Now it is also good to be in a commercial show.
This respondent describes his own experience of learning Naxi ethnic music, an experience marked by a strong sentiment for Naxi culture which, in his mind, should be maintained and inherited by younger generations. But equally important to him is the inevitable trend of selling Naxi ethnic music to tourists so that he can earn money. Like this respondent, the performance managers and musicians in Lijiang believe that the incorporation of Naxi ethnic music into a tourism economy is necessary. Utterances from other informants further assert this point: “Without tourism, Naxi music has no chance to survive. . . . Naxi music, played only for funerals and treated as trash in the past, now becomes known worldwide” (Ziqiang, amateur player in his 60s). Another respondent says: “Undeniably, Naxi music is commodified in Lijiang. But we need to see the benefit. Because of commodification, Naxi music can reap a profit. Thus, the profit inspires people to willingly learn and play it. It doesn’t die out. . . . Without economic return, Naxi music surely disappears” (Guoqun, professional player in his 30s). For these informants, the logic that Naxi music would die out without tourism justifies the commodification of music in Lijiang.

Nowadays, Naxi music has been widely integrated into Lijiang’s tourism industry. It becomes a necessary entertainment in bars, guesthouses, and hotels in Lijiang Ancient Town, generating hundreds of job opportunities and enticing young people to learn how to play. Table 1 lists six key venues of selling Naxi ethnic music in Lijiang and indicates a tendency that more and more external investors show their interest in Lijiang’s ethnic music.

(Insert Table 1 about here)
The booming business of Naxi ethnic music generates a sense of cultural revival which further justifies commodification. Many of my informants acknowledged that Naxi music becomes a metaphor for local cultural revival. For example, one amateur player in his sixties talked about his regular practice of Naxi music and the wide transformation caused by commodification:

Zhao (amateur player in his 60s): We have our own associations, and our purpose [in playing Naxi music] is for fun and relaxation. We gather together several times every month to practice and exchange our thoughts. This sort of gathering has become one of my social networks. Now we can see a widespread revival of ethnic culture in China. In Lijiang, due to the booming tourism industry, Xuan Ke’s music association and Dongba Gong have entered into the market. They seize the chance to make money through musical performances. Therefore, more and more local people are interested in learning Naxi music. They will develop a sense of pride in their ethnicity.

What Zhao notes here is the fact that he, like many other amateur players, enjoys practicing Naxi music not only for fun and enrichment, but to build a social network in order to establish and consolidate community ties which have been diluted by the copious inflows of tourists. In particular he attributes this personal hobby to the booming tourism development in Lijiang, and this hobby, as emphasized by Zhao, translates into a sense of pride and rootedness that emanates from using a common music language embedded in Lijiang and his everyday life. Thus, Naxi music constitutes one of the effective links to construct what Anderson (1983) calls “imagined community” when everyday face-to-face interaction, once popular in Lijiang, has become impossible in an era of tourism.
development. For my respondents, the imagined community is implicated in their cultural roots as a Naxi ethnic group; specifically, Naxi music links them together and invokes pride in their ethnicity.

The revival of Naxi music in the course of tourism development has also been recognized by other informants. For instance, a professional player in his thirties remarked how tourism changes the fate of Naxi ethnic music:

Wei: Nowadays we know it could be very bad if Naxi music didn’t enter into the [tourism] market. In other words, without tourism, no one would like to learn Naxi music several years later. [Because of tourism], young people are eager to learn it. They can earn some money once they can play it. We need to recognize the importance of the tourism market. Can you guess how many people are relying on Naxi music for a living? At least hundreds!

For this informant, as well as for many other who have witnessed the evolving of Naxi music in different periods, the revival of Naxi music in Lijiang demonstrates the magnetic forces of tourism commodification. There is no doubt that Xuan Ke is proud of the effect of his efforts:

Many people really want to learn Naxi music. Why? They can earn money from playing Naxi music. They come to my office and ask for jobs. So naturally, Naxi music has been revived and retained. It is useless for the government to organize all kinds of classes to encourage Naxi people to learn the music. It doesn’t work. So what I am doing actually preserves our music.
In Lijiang, local institutions, private investors, and musician widely regard tourism commodification as a driving force that ties Lijiang and its ethnic culture to the global tourism industry. How music is maneuvered in Lijiang depends on the power of money capital; the outcomes illustrated so far indicate that the discourse of tourism commodification is hegemonic. For my informants, the justification of commodification is unquestionable. Furthermore, I argue that Naxi ethnic music, despite commodification, is not completely homogenized as a commodity product designed to cater to tourists, but serves as performance splinters for niche markets and identity building as well.

To substantiate my arguments, qualitative analysis from two specific case studies (Xuan Ke’s musical business and Dongba Gong) are presented. This analysis does not aim to prove or generalize a “truth” about commodification, but to unravel variegated commodification in a special locality. The two cases presented below were selected partly because they succeeded in selling Naxi ethnic music for tourist consumption, and partly because they played an influential role in interpreting the meaning of Naxi ethnic music and entailed two typical (and contrasting) forms of commodification in Lijiang’s music industry.

5. From authenticity to visual spectacle: The case of Xuan Ke’s music business

Xuan Ke’s ways of selling music have evolved to meet the demands of the tourism market. To entertain foreign audiences before 1999, musical performances took place in a picturesque courtyard house with dim lighting, beautiful flowers, and ritual symbols (Rees, 2000). Xuan Ke stood on the stage and addressed the audiences in fluent English. His commentary ran through the whole show, starting with a brief history of Dongjing
music and its value as Naxi heritage. At the end, Xuan invited an audience member, usually a native English speaker, to read aloud how Peter Goullart (1955: pp. 216-217), a Russian citizen living in Lijiang from 1941 to 1949, described Naxi music:

[Naxi music] was majestic and inspiring and proceeded in rising and falling cadences. Then, as a climax, the great gong was struck. I have never heard in China such a deep and sonorous gong: the whole house seemed to vibrate with its velvety waves. . . . It [the music] was the music of the gods and of a place where there is serenity, eternal peace, and harmony.

The description timely invoked an impressive nostalgia for tradition which has been lost in the modern era. Through Goullart’s words and tourists’ onsite experience of music, Xuan Ke and his troupe convinced the audiences that the musical performance still maintained its authenticity, albeit packaged for tourist consumption. As Rees (2000) observed, Xuan Ke was a charismatic speaker and adept at catering to foreign tourists’ aspiration for tradition, primitiveness, and exotic culture. Throughout the performances, Xuan Ke skillfully “enhanced the atmosphere of romantic timelessness by his emphasis on history, on the remoteness of Lijiang and its Naxi inhabitants, and on the unbroken transmission of the music from the mists of time” (Rees, 2000: p. 153).

In 1999, with the support of the local government, Xuan Ke acquired a permanent site at a perfect location in the town, making commercial performance regular and formal. One year later, Xuan Ke registered a company called “Lijiang Xuan Ke Naxi Music Cultural Co., Ltd,” and turned the players in the Association into his employees. Provided that they did a good job, these players could obtain a fixed monthly salary and a year-end bonus. This new concert venue accommodated 600 seats for tourists, with admission fees
ranging from 100 to 160 Chinese yuan, depending on proximity to the performance stage. The performance show has become highly welcomed with nearly full attendance every night.

As domestic tourists have replaced foreign tourists as the main audience since 1999, Xuan Ke has changed performance style. The concert starts regularly at 8:00 pm, and ends at 9:30 pm. During the show, Xuan Ke dramatizes his personal life as a prisoner victimized by Mao’s political campaigns, and comments on current domestic affairs, leaving musical players nearly half an hour to play approximately five selections of Dongjing music. Xuan Ke has replaced English with Mandarin, although English words are occasionally pronounced to amuse his audience. Tourists are not invited to the stage to read Goullart’s words any more, since very few can understand English. To audiences, Xuan Ke himself is the top performer, creating amusement and entertainment, whether it is relevant to Naxi ethnic music or not. Meanwhile, Naxi music and its players take a back seat, functioning as an adornment to Xuan’s facetious performance. Thus, one player explicitly remarks: “It is Xuan Ke’s sole performance. Thus some people joke it is Xuan Ke music. The whole performance is not tightly relevant to Naxi ethnic music and the starring actor is Xuan Ke. Music is just a complement” (Lun, professional player).

In Xuan Ke’s music business, the big selling point is its “old” features: old players, old musical instruments, and old repertoire. In the center of the stage are about ten elderly Naxi male players who display long grey hair and old musical instruments. While these old male players “olden” the performance stage, young female players with colorful clothing dovetail around the stage to lessen the aesthetic fatigue, albeit historically, women were not allowed to practice Dongjing music. This arrangement allows domestic
tourist audiences to capture the “old” features of Naxi music and gaze upon young female bodies touting ethnic character and docile beauty. Thus, the space for musical performance and enjoyment is carefully designed to spotlight specific visual images of Naxi music. The performance’s rhythm, musical instruments, gesture and clothing, and tone echo with what Clifford (1997: p. 199) calls “staging of a cultural spectacle,” catering to tourists’ desire for consuming exotic culture and local tradition.

This visualization of performance stages and the spectacle of ethnic culture is not confined to Lijiang. It also appears in places such as Haiti and Cuba (Daniel, 1996) and in Aberdeenshire (Knox and Ozdins, 2000). According to Daniel (1996: p. 794), the professional arena of performance, through elaborate costumes and designed stage sets, reduces distractions to the tourist experience, and “crystallizes preferred messages in dramatic, poignant presentations” through which performers demonstrate and convey to tourists elegant, exotic, and sometimes mystified images of music and dance. This is exactly what has happened in Xuan Ke’s musical performances. The commodification of Naxi music has altered the meaning of Naxi ethnic music from folk culture for self-enrichment to a tourist commodity for economic return. The emphasis has shifted from cultural authenticity yearned by foreign tourists to Xuan Ke’s talk show and visual spectacle of stage arrangement enjoyed by domestic tourists. By incorporating Dongjing music into his business, Xuan Ke succeeds in inventing a new brand of Naxi ethnic music and becomes a cultural icon to bring tourists to Lijiang, motivate young people to learn Naxi guyue, and generate a huge commercial profit. Therefore, Xuan Ke proudly states that “I believe my job is to preserve Naxi music. Why? It is because we have good economic return and a high reputation” (personal interview).
Xuan Ke’s music business is one among many examples of Naxi ethnic music being sold for tourist consumption, spearheading a booming industry in Lijiang. Unsurprisingly, Lijiang’s local government highly appreciates Xuan Ke’s business, as shown in a speech given by Lijiang’s CCP secretary, He Zixin, at Xuan Ke’s 80th birthday party:

We need to thank Mr. Xuan Ke and other musical players for creating a Xuan Ke brand. This brand sings the high value of ethnic culture in an era of globalization, shows a revival of Naxi ethnic culture in socialist China, and represents Lijiang’s new image as an open and tolerant city. Finally, the successful commercial story of Mr. Xuan Ke is a true picture of how ethnic culture is flourishing under the right leadership of our Party.

Here Lijiang’s local Party leader connects Xuan Ke’s commercial success to the revival of ethnic culture by highlighting the CCP’s leadership in advancing economic development and cultural preservation. Kong (1995) and Anderson et al. (2005) label this political rhetoric as a form of ideologically hegemonic discourse. Through Naxi ethnic music, the Chinese state is constructing its version of cultural revival and ethnic identity. Meanwhile, musical players and domestic tourists are tied into Xuan Ke’s lucrative business, either for salaries or for vicarious entertainment. Accordingly, Naxi people have been portrayed as transformed from a minority group subordinated to Han dominance before 1949 to a self-confident group with entrepreneurial spirit and ethnic culture. The commodification of Naxi music thus provides a mechanism whereby the local state can refashion the discourse of ethnic identity and direct tourist consumption towards a limited range of carefully-crafted interpretations.
Given Xuan Ke’s music business and the state-orchestrated ethnic identity, it is important to note contestation. The official discourses of Naxi music have often been questioned by some musicians who argue that despite a certain degree of revival, commodification in Lijiang does tarnish the music’s essence and make it superficial and meaningless. For example, one musician says:

Wei: Obviously, commodification contributes to the revival of Naxi music. At least you can earn some money if you can play it. But there is something wrong. Because of commodification, Naxi music has been spoiled. For example, Xuan Ke modifies some tunes and makes them acceptable to tourists. Or, some tunes, as my father told me, were for funerals, but they were introduced by Xuan Ke as wedding tunes.

What this musician points to here is his unhappiness about Xuan Ke’s unscrupulous revision and reinterpretation of Naxi music. In particular, he disagrees with Xuan Ke’s intention to please tourists, without showing respect for the “original” meaning of Naxi music. Another musical player (Quoqun) complained that “now tourists just want to see Xuan Ke, rather than listen to Naxi ethnic music. There is a misunderstanding that Xuan Ke’s performance is the only original and authentic music. People rush to see him. They willingly pay 160 Chinese yuan for Xuan Ke’s performance, instead 20 yuan for our playing. Therefore, we cannot compete with Mr. Xuan.” In fact, Xuan Ke’s high profile in Lijiang’s tourism market can make his untruthful interpretation appear to be “the natural order of things” (Winchester, et al., 2003: p. 66). When Han scholars’ involvement in academic debate about Naxi guyue has been suppressed, no musicians in Lijiang can overtly challenge Xuan Ke’s interpretation.
Interestingly, while many local musicians I spoke to may contest the hegemonic role played by Xuan Ke in shaping and defining Naxi music, they actually muster the desire to become commercially successful if they ever have chance. As one respondent (Quoqun) stressed, “I am still young. I want to operate a successful enterprise. I hope I can match Mr. Xuan Ke one day.” Among the many musicians I interviewed, even though they showed discontent at Xuan Ke’s unjustified interpretation, they also accepted that Xuan Ke and other successful businesspersons deserve a spotlight in Lijiang’s tourism industry because of their commercial vision and skillful management. Despite this minor contestation, commodification still is significant for Naxi ethnic music. The contestation among local musicians is not whether Naxi ethnic music should be commodified, but how to share the economic benefit brought by a booming business and how to present musical performances to tourists.

6. Local narrative between tradition and modernity: The case of Dongba Gong

On January 16, 1998, a group of retired Lijiang officials and scholars established another performance group, titled Dongba Gong. The initial purpose was to propel Lijiang’s tourism development and display traditional Naxi culture. By incorporating ritual dance and folk songs into the performances to demonstrate the origin and evolution of the Naxi ethnic group in the hour and a half show, Dongba Gong allows tourists to know Naxi cultural components, such as music, costume, songs, religion, and dances.

If Xuan Ke’s musical business draws on a repackaging of Dongjing music for performance, Dongba Gong consciously provides a wide spectrum of authentic Naxi indigenous culture. Its players and performers are mainly recruited from rural villages,
and its selling point, different from Xuan Ke’s charismatic talk show, is to spotlight tradition, authenticity, and rurality. Dongba Gong’s performance and stage arrangement artistically resemble the reality from which they come. As one key organizer in Dongba Gong explained,

Shiwei (performance manager in his 60s): We need to underscore rurality. In fact, we cannot simulate those professional choruses. It is impossible for us to present professional performance with the help of high technology. Therefore we emphasize that our performance originates from rural villages and presents authentic culture which has been reorganized and recompiled for music and dance. What we are doing is adapting rural arts into stage performance, without any big changes.

Here Shiwei makes a connection between a performance stage for tourists’ enjoyment and a cultural milieu of authenticity and rurality. Such a connection, to people in Dongba Gong, differentiates their performances from others that either show fabulous sound effects or play to the galley. Additionally, they believe that musical performance in Dongba Gong highlights Lijiang’s place-specific uniqueness. Unfortunately, this presence of uniqueness has not been widely recognized in the tourism market, as shown by the stark contrast between Xuan Ke’s high popularity and Dongba Gong’s dwindling attendance.

Regarding how to present authentic Naxi culture, the players in Dongba Gong have their own opinions. Their priority is to display traditional Naxi culture through music and dance in a way that satisfies tourists and retains cultural connotation. For instance, one player notes:
Lan (general manager of Dongba Gong in his 70s): We need to integrate some modern techniques into our stage. The society is evolving; old stuff may not be appropriate for show. Of course, we try our best to maintain its rustic charm, its original flavor, and its authentic characters. But on a performance stage in modern society, it is impossible to perform a completely original Naxi music and dance. Tourists cannot accept such a performance. . . . Our bottom line is to not spoil the essence of Naxi culture. In other words, we cannot exclusively cater to some tourists’ desire for exoticism or to some Party cadres’ hunt for novelty. It is improper to let others’ likes and dislikes decide how we should orchestrate our performances. We should respect history and present an authentic form of Naxi culture. We need to retain traditional and authentic material.

Similarly, another key player in Dongba Gong expressed this opinion:

Hong (director in Dongba Gong in his 60s): I tell the audiences that our performance is authentic and original. You know, it is not true, but I have no choice. Now I correct myself, saying that ours is a form of Naxi culture with the least change. Authenticity is quite fashionable and I have to catch the fashion. In order to attract tourists, I have no choice.

The use of “authenticity” and “commodification” in tourism development is well recognized in tourism studies and beyond (Britton, 1991). Here both informants are caught in ambivalence: to maintain cultural authenticity on the one hand, and to cater to commercial fashion on the other.
To the performance managers and musicians in Dongba Gong, incorporation of Naxi ethnic music into a tourism economy is necessary, but results in the corruption of its authenticity and originality. Tourism is presented as a powerful force to commodify Naxi ethnic music, partly through local players’ efforts to modulate authentic but “primitive and traditional” culture towards an acceptable form for tourists living in modernity, and partly through tourists’ ostensible desire for something lost in an era of modernity. Even this desire is unevenly distributed among tourists. International tourists demonstrated relatively more interest in Dongba Gong than domestic visitors. For instance, one manager believed that Dongba Gong has its own niche market in Lijiang’s tourism industry, pointing out that “some tourists are fascinated with dazzling performance. But some tourists, especially those from foreign countries, are fond of authentic performance. That is why nowadays Dongba Gong can attract many foreign tourists.”

What is interesting about Dongba Gong is the fact that under the guise of authenticity, ethnic music is reconstructed by some local musicians. Wang (1999) argues that while a focus on the search for authenticity is to simplify contemporary tourism, authenticity still matters to cultural tourism as far as the representation of the Other is concerned. Dongba Gong attempts to build a sense of constructive authenticity through which Naxi ethnic music is a result of “social construction, not an objectively measureable quality of what is being visited” (Wang, 1999: p. 351). The performance in Dongba Gong appears authentic not because it presents an inherently authentic Naxi music, but because it is deemed authentic in terms of the beliefs and powers conveyed by my informants.
Ultimately the quest for acceptable performance and a sacrifice of “primitive authenticity” has resulted in the creation of a musical montage which integrates modern stage effects, Naxi descendents, traditional clothing, and ancient melody into a commercial show for cultural diffusion and economic profit. Such an arrangement aims not to eulogize “the virtues of isolation, remoteness and nostalgia for a timeless, pleasant and distant past” among performances to display authentic music in non-Western contexts (Connell and Gibson, 2004: p. 354), but to contest the cultural homogenization brought by the global tourism industry and to struggle for a compromise between tradition and modernity in a world of unprecedented tourism mobility and technological advancement. This compromise does not mean that the musicians in Dongba Gong succumb to the global forces brought by the tourism industry to “exaggerate, reify and romanticize” (Connell and Gibson 2004: 354) Naxi music for the tourists’ gaze and curiosity. Instead, these musicians endeavor to produce “local narratives” of Naxi music to mediate with tourism-driven capital and modernity (Dirlik, 1996: p. 25). Therefore, the musical performance in Dongba Gong is situated in the cultural conjunction between the global trend of tourist consumption and cultural production, and local contexts—a conjunction that illustrates how the interconnection of economy and culture has generated different musical spaces even within the same locality.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to further our understanding of commodification through a focus on ethnic music in the tourism market. Drawing on research concerning tourism commodification and the cultural politics of music, this paper shows that music is not
simply a form of soundscape for performance and listening, but can be analyzed as a social and economic relation. As Hudson (2006: p. 627) has noted, while music has the ability to “conjure up powerful images of place, feelings of deep attachment to place,” the commodification of music can become a powerful strategy to highlight place-specific uniqueness and enhance local competitiveness in the race of global economy. In relating Hudson’s argument to tourism development, my primary question has been: How does the commodification of music fold into the process of tourism commodification and place making?

The empirical study has responded to this question in the case of Lijiang. I have explored the process of formulating Naxi ethnic music that was used by Lijiang’s cultural and political elites to highlight local uniqueness, and suggested that the music’s wane and revival is situated in the broader context constituted by national policy and global forces. For instance, Dongjing music which prevailed in Lijiang before 1949 reflected a tenuous cultural connection between peripheral regions and China’s core area. The harsh ban on Dongjing music during Mao’s regime concurred with his efforts to build a new socialist China. The state policy of supporting ethnic music after the economic reform was to revamp minority groups’ cultural presence in the map of China. The commodification of Naxi ethnic music paralleled China’s exposure to the global economy and unprecedented economic growth. Naxi ethnic music becomes an essential component to highlight ethnic identity, turn Lijiang, once a peripheral place, into a hotspot in China’s tourism industry, and incorporate Lijiang into a node in the global network of production and consumption. The seeming revival of Naxi ethnic music and its high commercial value in the tourism market can serve as a subtle yet tremendously effective mechanism of transforming the
music from “feudal superstition” to cultural treasure, and synthesizing culture and economy into place making and identity building.

Furthermore, two case studies have shown the variegated processes and outcomes of commodification in Lijiang. The case of Xuan Ke’s music business shows how musical performance has undertaken a transition from cultural authenticity to visual spectacle and become alienated from local histories and geographies. This finding concurs with Adorno’s (1991: p. 99) argument that “the cultural commodities of the industry are governed . . . by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation.” The case of Dongba Gong, on the other hand, demonstrates that the arduous struggle to present “authentic” Naxi ethnic music mirrors the crippling challenge brought by mass tourism to wipe out meaningful performance. This case resonates with Lefebvre’s (1991: p. 330) eloquent statement that “no space disappears in the course of growth and development: the worldwide does not abolish the local.” Putting these two cases together, this paper supports Finn’s (2009) argument that ethnic music is not only an expression of cultural identity and a cultural asset for place making, but also a commodity for the music industry. Moreover, the paper shows that implicated in the commodification of Naxi ethnic music is the intertwining of the global trend of tourist consumption and cultural production, and local contexts of tradition, an intertwining that “has brought forth the sharp consciousness of culture as an ongoing construction of everyday practice” in different localities (Dirlik, 1996: p. 39) and legitimized the commodification of ethnic culture in China’s peripheral regions such as Lijiang.
Theoretically, this paper has further explicated the cultural politics of music by examining how the commodification of music is tightly tied up with the profit-driven tourism business and the construction of identity. This preposition has two implications. First, commodification as a process-based relation serves as a useful approach to examining the interconnection of economy and culture in music. We must bear in mind that the commodification of music is dynamic over time and variegated across space. Second, there is clearly a cultural politics of music: how economy and culture are played out in the process of making, performing, and consuming music. More specifically, the cultural wars on music are implicated in the tensions about interpretation and representation, and equally important, about who can benefit from the music business and who may be exploited. In Lijiang and in other cases, the state and business elites have the power to redefine the meaning of music to satisfy tourism consumption, generating more economic returns rather than less. These tensions are also implicated in the arduous struggle for local narrative in the global tourism industry. Through an engagement with tourism commodification and the cultural politics of music in the case of Lijiang, this paper adds an empirical case to the geography of music and calls for an interconnection of economy and culture in understanding music, identity, and place.

References


Commodification and the selling of ethnic music to tourists

Xiaobo Su

Abstract

In recent years, the commodification of culture has received much attention in social and cultural geography. Basing on empirical research in Lijiang, a World Heritage site in China, this paper contributes to an understanding of commodification through a focus on selling ethnic music to tourists. Drawing upon a theoretical framework of tourism commodification and the cultural politics of music, I argue that commodification of music is central to the processes of place making and identity building in varied localities. This paper generates three major findings: (1) Commodification is sustained though discourses of identity building and cultural revival that act to justify the pursuit of profit; (2) Due to commodification, ethnic music in Lijiang succumbs to the capitalist logic of profit making; and (3) Some musicians use the opportunities brought by commodification to develop local narratives of ethnic music and to mediate the global forces of cultural homogenization. By demonstrating the commodification of ethnic music and the cultural politics of musical space in Lijiang, this paper calls for an interconnection of economy and culture in understanding music, identity, and place.

Keywords: Commodification, music, tourism development, cultural politics, Lijiang

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