

Nothing to See Here:
Developmental Frames and Discontent in Chinese Glacier Tourism

By
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Abstract

Hailuoguo National Glacier Forest Park in western Sichuan Province has undergone heavy commercial tourism development since the 1980s, yet its main natural and cultural attractions frequently elicit indifferent or even negative responses among visitors. A contributing factor is that the focal point of the park, Hailuoguo Glacier, is retreating as result of anthropogenic climate change. Its shrinking and graying appearance fails to match popular tourism imaginaries of a pure snowy landscape, just as local culture does not adhere to the romanticized image of a Tibetan dreamland. In response to these discontents, tourism administrators seek to improve Hailuoguo with more or better development, while tourists recuperate their disappointing experiences by retreating into virtual spaces of play. Spanning the initial outbreak of COVID-19, this dissertation addresses touristic placemaking and tourist experiences in an age of advanced capitalist development, ecological ruins, and a smartphone-based culture of potentially constant photographic mediation. I move beyond evolutionary frameworks of tourism modernity and tourist typology frameworks to interrogate a diffuse developmentalism I argue puts us fundamentally out of touch with the realities of our warming world. I consider a number of cultural, political, and visual frames that simultaneously add and subtract value to place, reproduce the boundaries of moral geography, and limit the possibilities of perception against the backdrop of a rapidly changing Chinese society.

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Tables

Table 1. Periods of Chinese history referenced

Period	Dates
Ancient Shu Culture	????–316 BCE
Shang Dynasty	c. 1600–1050 BCE
Qin Dynasty	221–206 BCE
Han Dynasty	206 BCE–220 CE
Tang Dynasty	618–906 CE
Song Dynasty	960–1279 CE
Yuan Dynasty	1279–1368 CE
Ming Dynasty	1368–1644 CE
Qing Dynasty	1644–1911 CE
Republican period	1912–1949 CE
Mao period	1949–1978 CE
Reform period	1978–present

Table 2. Study participants named in the dissertation

All names are pseudonyms. Certain pseudonyms are nicknames or surnames only. Two participants are not given surnames because their precise familial relationship to two other participants is not known. “HLG” is shorthand for Hailuogou.

Name	Role	Chapter	Interlude
Mr. Bai	白先生	tourism expert	2
“Fei”	“菲”	Chengdu resident	4
Mr. Fei	斐先生	tourism expert	2
Mr. Gao	高先生	tourism expert	2
Guo Xinyi	郭欣怡	HLG tourist	5
Hao Liangjie	浩亮杰	HLG tourist	4
Officer Hong	洪警察	HLG tourism worker	3
Professor Ji	纪教授	tourism expert	2
Jia Jianxiong	贾健雄	HLG tourist	2
Ke Ya	柯雅	HLG tour guide	5
Kong Shiyin	孔世银	HLG tour guide	1
Lan Ruoqin	蓝若芹	HLG tourist	5
Lang Bicheng	郎碧程	HLG tourist	6
Li Liangxiang	李良湘	outside tour guide	5
Liu Yiling (Teacher Liu)	刘依玲 (刘老师)	tourism industry trainer	1
Lu Ziyi	陆子毅	HLG tourist	4
— Mandong	— 曼冬	HLG tourist	3
“Mu”	“木”	HLG tourism worker	3
Nian Zha	念扎	HLG tourism/govt worker	3
Pan Rui	潘瑞	Biluo Yazhai worker	2, 3

Name		Role	Chapter	Interlude
Pang Yuebin	庞越彬	HLG tourist		4
“Qi”	“七”	HLG tourism/govt worker	4	
Qiu Shaohui	秋绍辉	HLG tourist		4
Headmaster Rong	戎校长	Moxi resident	2	
Ruan Yaojie	阮耀杰	HLG tourist	5	4
Shen Zhizhuo (Old Shen)	沈志灼 (老沈)	Biluo Yazhai boss	1, 2, 3, 6	
Shu Cen	舒岑	HLG tour guide		4
Mr. Song	宋先生	HLG tourist		1
Tan Qingqing	谭晴晴	HLG tourist	4	
Tao Xueqi	陶学启	HLG tourist		2, 3
Wan Zihan	万子涵	HLG tourist		4
Wang Fangmei	王芳梅	HLG tourism/govt worker	2	
Wang Yige	王弋歌	HLG tourist		2, 3
Mr. Wei	韦先生	Chengdu tourist	4	
— Wenhao	— 文昊	HLG tourist		3
Wu Zhimeng	吴芷梦	HLG tourist		3
Xia Xian	夏娴	HLG tourist		3
Xiang Zixuan	项子轩	HLG tourist		3
Xing Zhongle	兴忠乐	Chengdu resident	4	
Xiong Hongwen	熊弘文	HLG tourist		2
Xu Yuze (Teacher Xu)	徐雨泽 (徐老师)	HLG tourist		5
Yang Lili	杨丽丽	HLG tourism/govt worker	4	
Mr. Yu	余先生	tourism expert	2	
Yuan Sheng (Teacher Yuan)	袁升 (袁老师)	tourism expert	2, 5	
Zhang Lei	张雷	HLG tourist	4	
Zhang Yifang (“Fangfang”)	张仪芳 (“芳芳”)	HLG tourist		3
Zhao Zhen	赵珍	HLG tourist	4	
Zhen Mengzhu	甄梦竹	HLG tourist	4	
Zhong Qingyu	钟晴钰	HLG tourist		4
Ms. Zhou	周姐	Biluo Yazhai volunteer	1	
Zou Wenxian	邹雯娴	HLG tourism/govt worker	1, 3, 4	

Chapter 1. Introduction

Developmental frames

Liu Yiling from Chengdu is a trainer in the tourism sector. For one week in November 2019, the Ganzi Hailuoguo Scenic Area Administration has booked Teacher Liu's services, along with those of several other industry experts, to improve levels of worker professionalism. The training series is mandatory and unpaid for all public-facing administration employees such as tour guides, guards (保安, *bao'an*), park police officers, and receptionists. Today's afternoon class has covered the proper and gender-specific etiquette for giving handshakes, standing, walking, navigating stairs and elevators, and smiling. My back aches from standing rigidly in place during the training exercises.

As I hang back after class to chat with Teacher Liu, she tells me she is about to get a tour of the new hot springs hotel before dining with other tourism experts. She asks if I'd like to join.

Moxi Town (磨西镇, *Moxi zhen*) is the seat of the Ganzi Hailuoguo Scenic Area Administration (hereafter "Hailuoguo Administration"), and the entry point to Hailuoguo Scenic Area/National Park. Moxi's new hot springs hotel—the first hot springs hotel to open right there in town—is just across the street from us, perched at the edge of the tableland's precipitous sides.

Inside, the guest rooms we tour are stylishly decorated and offer every luxury. I am naturally curious to step foot in a hotel room I could not realistically afford, but more than anything, my eyes are drawn to the large windows. These face steep green mountains across the narrow valley, nothing in the way to obstruct the line of sight or mar the suggestion of immersion in nature. Teacher Liu comments: "If the view were a bit more open, it'd be better."

"That's true," agrees the hotel employee guiding us. "Here isn't like Kangding, or other places where you get that expansive overlook."

Teacher Liu and I finish looking around, then begin walking uphill, to dinner.

“Moxi has changed so much since the last time I was here,” she observes. “That was fifteen years ago. At that time there was just one road... There was nothing, really.”

“What do you think about the buildings’ remodeled exteriors?” I ask. Up and down the streets of Moxi Town, building facades exhibit a uniform wooden facing. This was a major project undertaken in recent years, under the current administration leader.

“I don’t really like this sort. It’s formalistic (形式主义, *xingshizhuyi*). They’ve made these changes to the outside appearance, but to me, there’s no *spirit*,” she says, using the English word *spirit*. “It’s an imitation, made to look old without really being old at all. A lot of places in China are doing this now.”

At the restaurant, I listen as the trainers and administration workers lament Hailuogou’s deficient standing among Western Sichuan’s other highly-rated scenic areas—mainly Daocheng Yading and Jiuzhaigou—as well as its prospects for further development. Similar to what Teacher Liu commented on at the hot springs hotel, everyone at the table agrees that Hailuogou’s views are the big problem. Even inside the park, there’s no panoramic visual of the surroundings because even its highest point is still relatively low. Rather than looking down or across at mountain peaks, one can only look up at them; looking down, one sees only the glacial valley. In fact, the park layout was designed this way—to prioritize views of the glacier—but now that design has become the problem. What goes unsaid in this conversation, because it simply goes without saying, is that the glacier does not constitute attractive scenery.

Zou Wenxian, a worker in the marketing department, emphasizes that there isn’t really anything Hailuogou *can* do to develop any further because of its status as a protected ecological zone. She explains that’s why the current strategy is to make it into a *vacation* spot, a place to relax and recuperate—hence the recent high-end developments in Moxi Town, including that luxurious new hot springs hotel. In order to work around conservation regulations in and around the national park, natural hot springs water has been piped two kilometers away from its source, transplanting the resource to somewhere more developable. Meanwhile, a newly opened highway has shortened the driving time between Chengdu and Moxi Town

from six to just over four hours, making it one of the most feasible Tibetan-area or Long March driving destinations for urban residents short on vacation time or companies organizing patriotic work trips. More than ever, Hailuoguo is positioned as the “backyard” of Chengdu—otherwise, its tourists are only ever passing through out of necessity, on the way somewhere further west.

Sitting in on these insider discussions, I learned a particular perspective on the kind of place-in-process that Hailuoguo is—a highly developed tourism site where administrators and experts constantly create, yet simultaneously struggle to perceive value and beauty (and perhaps professionalism), either built or natural. And by accompanying experts like Teacher Liu as well as recreational travelers on walks, I found Hailuoguo is a place where Han Chinese visitors struggle to feel something like “spirit.” Objective “authenticity” is rightfully a dead end in anthropological and sociological studies, but it is worth investigating as an imaginary in and of itself (Knox et al. 2014, 264). Structural factors and changes precede and follow from the superficial debates of “authentic” beauty, places, experiences or self-realizations. In particular for sites in China’s less industrialized west that rely so heavily on tourism, we should seek to understand the hegemonically framed processes by which such diverse places are made developable—and interrogate what exceeds or is purposefully put out of the frame.

This dissertation is the product of field research conducted in Sichuan Province, southwest China, from December 2018 to July 2021. For approximately seven months of this period, in 2019, I conducted participant observation as a volunteer tour guide at Hailuoguo Glacier Forest Park (Hailuoguo Scenic Area) and pianist at the guesthouse Biluo Yazhai in Moxi Town.¹ While Hailuoguo is primarily a nature tourism site, Moxi Town is a cultural heritage site along the former Sino-Tibetan borderland, Ancient Tea Horse Road, and Long March route. During the COVID-19 lockdowns of early 2020, I resided at Biluo Yazhai

¹ Biluo Yazhai 碧落雅宅 (*lit.* “Blue Skies Villa”) is a pseudonym.

for another two months. When not in Hailuogou/Moxi volunteering—and following the 2020 lockdown—I resided in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province.²

The result is a study of touristic placemaking at Hailuogou/Moxi as a process of framing, and the illegible objects that disrupt that work. Influential theories from anthropologists, sociologists and geographers have converged on a processual, relational concept of place—to assert that places are made rather than given, that they happen in encounter rather than existing, absolute, independently of the observer. However, to speak of place as “event” still suggests a problematic ideological neutrality; it underplays the interjection of perspective and the immediate entanglements of value in the basic sensory experience of spatial or emplaced being. It smooths the uneven grounds and scales of experience. I argue that perceptions of place are always framed, and that places at large abstract scales also *become* frames—what I call “moral geography,” which is then embodied as part of the perceptual habitus (Bourdieu 1977).

Following Butler (2010), I assert that frames are not innocent; they bring their own arguments. At the same time, frames conceal their very interventions, convincing us that we are having a fully personal encounter, or grasping a fully objective truth. And the most persuasive frames of all are the ones that align with the order of global capital and developmental “structure of feeling” (Williams 1961). In this dissertation I will consider intertwined frames of moral geography, the nation, science, tourism commercialization, and the smartphone as frames that direct experience but cloak their own direction, persuading us that what we see is all there is. Underlying all of these is a developmental structure of feeling, which makes them “developmental frames.”

² I try to use “Moxi Town” when referring specifically to the town (excluding its surrounding villages), “Moxi Tableland” when referring to the geological formation, just “Moxi” when referring to the general valley or the wider administrative area (which would include Hailuogou), and “Hailuogou/Moxi” when I specifically want to emphasize the tourism destination encompassing both Moxi Town and Hailuogou Scenic Area. When not drawing attention to Hailuogou’s status as a scenic area, I use “the park” as a shorthand reference, as Hailuogou is a national park in addition to a scenic area, and “the area” is confusingly vague.

In the course of this argument, I also attempt to show a bit “more” of what there is to Hailuogou/Moxi, as I was privileged to spend much more time there than most tourists ever could. Still, in many places I can only point in frustration to the limitations of knowledge.

Lurking in the background (or rather, at the center) of this whole thing is Hailuogou Glacier. It is the primary reason that Hailuogou became the place that it is today—that is, a tourism site. And yet the glacier is, year by year, becoming less and less encounterable as an object of beauty, wonder, or even as a verifiable object at all. At first I was surprised by how often tourists could not find it or recognize the icy formations, but in the end, I found tourists’ imperceptions both reasonable and revealing. Hailuogou Glacier is, after all, disappearing. In the wake of its retreat and the trail of rubble left behind, it shows an ugly truth. With only its absence developing, the glacier is at odds with the modalities, temporality, spirit, and expectations of tourism and development. I want readers to keep Hailuogou Glacier in mind—ephemeral, vital, dangerous, and endangered—to constantly trouble the frames by which we are accustomed to encounter and relate to a tourism site, or any place, that assume and depend upon accelerating growth, innovation, and progress.

I find that Hailuogou Glacier is “good to think with,” though the context and my focus are quite different than those of Julie Cruikshank, who gives voice to oral histories revealing human-glacier entanglements in the Yukon (2012). Indigenous knowledge of the glacial environment at Hailuogou has been peripheralized beyond likely encounter. Neither can I assert that Hailuogou Glacier’s source, Mt. Gongga, is alive like the earth beings in the work of Marisol de la Cadena (2011) or inhabited by a specified deity like Mt. Kawagebo in Yunnan Province (Kolås 2004). In the stories of encountered locals and tourists, Mt. Gongga is ascribed agency and moral sensibility on the basis of state territorialization, a presumed and generic Tibetanness, and moral geography—the ideas about the quality of place and people who visit it. Although I cannot present an alternative ontology of Hailuogou Glacier rooted in deep traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), I nevertheless address the “subjective interpretations, including emotional, spiritual, and

psychological, that people ascribe to changing conditions” in an age of destructive and accelerating global warming (Allison 2015).

As I will describe in this chapter’s “Fieldwork” section, Hailuoguo Glacier is joined by COVID-19 as another illegible “hyperobject” intruding upon the study. Philosopher Timothy Morton defines hyperobjects as those we cannot fully know because they are “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (2013, 1). Their presence affects us intimately, however, and even trying to comprehend them in part forces new revelations. Both the glacier and the virus are framed as material objects of science, to be held at an impersonal distance, yet are ascribed value according to our moral maps of reality. Ungraspable in their immensity, gaps in our ability to perceive are filled out by our expectations. These expectations are unconsciously driven by power—in its drive to assert clear boundaries and control the circulation of people, values, and ideas. When we try to perceive the objects as a whole, what we see instead is the effect of their social and political framings. Ordinary consumers and citizens become allied with the top tiers of power through the contagion of hegemonic perceptive frames. In this study, both an ugly glacier and epidemic case numbers actually come to “look like” the failures of local government or a devalued cultural essence, closing off the perception of other possibilities.

Touristic placemaking: deconstructing destinations and tourists

Following Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991) and humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), scholars have attuned to the socio-politically and experientially creative aspects of spatiality, respectively. In particular, globalization theories and the multi-disciplinary spatial and ontological turns of the late twentieth century critiqued the masculinist traditions of geography (Rose 1993) and “gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581), a purportedly Malinowskian fetishization of the “field” or “local” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997),³ and

³ Gupta and Ferguson’s introduction to *Anthropological Locations* has been highly influential, but its critique of early anthropology, epitomized by Malinowski’s work in the Trobriand Islands, is unfair in two regards. First, it suggests Malinowski’s work reifies a naturalistic ideal of [primitive] others needing to be studied in their natural, circumscribed “field” as opposed to the mobile, denaturalized ethnographer; second, it conflates the “the field” with “the local,” stating that “translocal phenomena of various kinds evade classical methods of participant observation” (1997, 15).

essentialist theories of places as containers or as points on a map, static and enduring, either given by nature or deliberately built. Many now espouse a networked or processual approach to places as relational, open-ended, mobile, and dynamic “events” (Casey 1996; Pink 2011b), “paths” (Pred 1984), or “entanglements” (Ingold 2008). Ecological anthropologist Tim Ingold has been particularly prolific in making a case for the ultimate inseparability of human and environment. In his view, it makes no sense to talk about being “in place” as though it were distinguishable from the basic conditions of human sensory experience; place *occurs*, says Ingold, immanent in encounters and movement. Processual and phenomenological approaches have provided refreshment from the modernist, common-sense notions of place as bounded, particular destinations overlaying an empty grid of space.⁴

Still, after decades of debate, consensus is elusive on the meaning(s) or ontology of place, and if or how it is to be differentiated from space. On the one hand, it has been difficult to leave behind modernist categories, such as abstract mathematical “space,” which undeniably continue to organize everyday life. On the other hand, grappling with the “Anthropocene” has reilluminated the importance of politics in human-nature relations and the weakness of value-free or posthuman approaches (Latour 2014), as well as the need to address scales of place beyond the directly perceptible locality (Clark 2018). Even Ingold has admitted the difficulty in reconciling his phenomenological approach with an analysis of power (*as cited in* Howes 2022, 450). David Howes argues that perception of the environment is mediated (rather than “direct”). Even the subjective experience of place is not reducible to immediate sensation in a moment of ecological encounter. Drawing inspiration from Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus and grappling with the scalar implications of an Anthropocene and digital age alike, I argue that the way that “places” are mapped and valued in a political or cultural economy comes to have a bearing on sensory perception of the environment. With tourism places in particular, one must consider the extent to which state and corporate-

Such characterizations ignore Malinowski’s translocal study of the Kula in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) as well as ethnographers’ ongoing and productive grappling with the arbitrary boundedness of places as they are imagined within and beyond the academy (Candea 2007).

⁴ This “common sense” primarily characterizes an English-language distinction between place and space; though multiple languages differentiate between specific, named location and an abstract model of locatedness, spatial categories are not universal (Levinson 1996).

led placemaking projects are implemented *for* (and also often *by*) outsiders to the community. This emplaces not only particular subjects, but perspectives, making certain place-occurrences more likely, privileged, or resilient than others.

The study site, Hailuoguo/Moxi, is a historically complex multiethnic borderland, a palimpsest marked by the traces of different ethnic and religious groups that have passed through, if not called its valleys home. It has nurtured hybrid persons and practices that do not fit the ethnic, linguistic, and religious categories by which outsiders have named them. It is a place made through mobilities—for centuries a post on the “Ancient Tea Horse Road,” an important trade route; it is now a key stop along the famous driving tourism route, China National Highway 318. I therefore draw inspiration from the mobilities paradigm animating recent theory on placemaking in tourism studies (Sheller and Urry 2006; 2016). The mobilities paradigm is a reminder to distrust and to trouble any static or enduring notion of a place. It also provides a corrective to tourism research that has the tendency (an unintentional outcome of foundational work by the Turners (1978), Graburn (1989) and MacCannell (1999)) to conceptualize tourism rather rigidly as “the antithesis of the everyday” (Duncan 2012, 113), or fails to attend to diverse, uneven and entangled mobilities, rather than just the temporary “there and back” movement of an obvious (and typically elite) tourist. Although in this study I mostly stay “in place” at a single tourism destination, I am catching people on the move—mostly affluent Han tourists from China’s provincial capitals, or comfortably middle-class tourists from cities across Sichuan and Chongqing—and I am also on the move with them, walking, sometimes for the entire duration of their time in Hailuoguo. Through their movements and commentaries, I get a different perspective of place every time, while still recognizing major patterns and striking absences.

The mobilities paradigm, along with the rise of the “non-Western” tourist (Cohen 2008; Winter et al. 2009), challenges us to de-objectify tourism places and actors. If tourism movements are not strictly separable from the everyday circulation of humans, non-humans, materials, data, emotions, and imaginaries, it makes little sense to theorize an identity or category of persons based on tourism alone—especially one that suggests the non-tourists (locals) are immobile (Bloch 2020). Since the beginning of social scientific

engagement with tourism, the case has been made against a universal model of the tourist (e.g. Cohen 1979; Crick 1989); nevertheless, certain concepts—such as “the tourist gaze” (Urry 1990)—reinforce, perhaps despite their authors’ intentions, the validity of a fundamental touristic quality or archetypical tourist. I do not find that the gazes or frames of perception mobilized at Hailuoguo arise inherently from the tourism context itself. Although “tourist” remains a convenient way to reference study participants’ social roles at the time of our encounter, I question the strict delineation of tourist roles and behaviors from other everyday leisure and consumer contexts. I also demonstrate the blurring of virtual and real spaces, breaking down the dichotomy of physical bodily movement across a landscape and the movement of representations via smartphone and social media.

Therefore, this dissertation is not about tourists in Sichuan Province inasmuch as it is a small glimpse into the mobile, urban Chinese middle-to-upper class—western Sichuan simply being where we happened to cross paths. The people in this study have lives rooted in cities all across China, hold a variety of attitudes toward travel, and are “tourists” anywhere from a couple of days to several months out of a year. Tourist is a transient identity that overlaps with one’s roles as family member, friend, worker, etc. When I use the word “touristic” in this study, I am referring more to a commercial ordering, leisure mindset, or aspirational lifestyle aesthetic than the qualities of a defined social group. To the extent that the tourist mentality is itself an effect of privilege, the anthropological study “of tourists” may even be unwittingly reproducing assumptions about the sacred elevation of travel. Rather than seeking to make a profound claim about tourism or tourists, I approach tourism as a nebulous sphere of activity for understanding how China’s leisure class navigates place within abstract moral geographies and against a backdrop of rapid technological and societal change.

Tourism in China: origins and ethnographic approaches

Contemporary Chinese tourism should not be considered a Euro-American transplant: in various respects it hearkens back to imperial traditions of pilgrimage, literati wanderings, and the journeys of officials to distant temporary posts. However, leisure travel in a more quotidian, middle-class, commercial

form first emerged during the Republican period around Shanghai, and in tandem with the popularization of hobby photography (Gross 2011; Mo 2021; Strassberg 1994). During the Mao period, only select forms of patriotic tourism were permitted (Oakes and Sutton 2010; Rioux 2010), while all other forms were denigrated as bourgeois excess. Tourism started again in the reform period, but it wasn't until the government began actively promoting tourism in the late 1990s—for example, instituting three annual week-long holidays—that a significant portion of Chinese population was able and willing to engage in leisure travel (Wah 2009). Initially, the industry was dominated by companies leading group tours to strictly delineated scenic areas, but since around 2000, the proportion of independent tourists has risen sharply. The change coincides with China's swift transition from walking and bicycle culture to car culture (Notar 2016), the proliferation of online travel communities (Zhang 2008), the opening of numerous new highways, and neoliberal state-guided campaigns to make consumers out of producers (Ngai 2003).

The anthropology and cultural geography of Chinese tourism has emphasized the impact of development in designated ethnic minority areas (this topic is especially significant among Chinese ethnologists; *see* Zhu et al. 2017), gendered and/or ethnic performance and representations (Schein 2000; Walsh 2005; Tenzin 2014; Chen 2014), the politics of heritage (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013; Chu 2015; Nitzky 2012; Shepherd 2013; Su and Wall 2014; Zhu 2018), and civilizing or modernizing projects (Chio 2010; Nyíri 2009). Studies based in Xinjiang and Tibetan areas have also engaged extensively with religious or sacred landscapes (Makley 2003; Kang 2009; Smyer Yü 2015; Yeh and Coggins 2014) and tourism development as a form of territorialization or domestication (Brown and O'Brien 2022; Murakami 2011; Szadziwski, Mostafanezhad, and Murton 2022; Yeh 2013). The large focus on the tension between ethnic minorities' agency (or development) and state projects both underscores the importance of tourism for so many ethnic minority communities in China and points to gaps in the literature. For example, ethnographic studies focusing on Chinese tourists' perception of the environment (especially in terms other than the "tourist gaze") and tourist media practices have lagged behind, with Jenny Chio's work being one notable exception (2009; 2014).

Meanwhile, studies of (typically Han) Chinese tourists have gone in two general directions, either mirroring or negating studies of the Western tourist. Notar (2006; 2007) and Walsh and Swain (2004) apply the trope of imperialist/colonial nostalgia and a secular desire for authenticity to explain the motivation and “internal orientalism” (Schein 1997) of Chinese tourists. Meanwhile, others claim that theories crafted according to the Euro-American tourist are inadequate or fundamentally flawed when transplanted to the Chinese context (Bruner 2005; Özkan 2013; Ryan et al. 2009). Chan (2006) finds that the “authenticity” which outbound Chinese tourists search for is modernity itself. Some argue that Chinese tourists are *not* in pursuit of an imagined pre-modern “authenticity,” but happily expect to participate in the constructed reality (or “hyper-reality”) of organized travel as an active affirmation of their place in the modern leisure class (Oakes 1998; Wah 2009), demonstrating a lack of concern for content which Li (2017) argues makes them particularly postmodern. Nyíri (2006) does not believe the Chinese are “post-tourists,” but nevertheless argues that the revival of scenic spots as tourist destinations in China has in fact been made possible by the *absence* of the romantic, exploratory, self-bettering Western-Enlightenment discourses of tourism. This absence, he argues, has allowed both state and local actors to maintain a nationalist reading of each attraction, perpetuating centralized cultural authority and hegemonic narratives of place. While there are valuable observations to draw from all of these studies, the study of domestic Chinese tourists seems prone to a simplistic evolutionary discourse where tourists either are or aren’t reflections of Euro-American tourists (a serious oversimplification in itself) and have either lagged behind them or surpassed them in some race to the future.

Moral geography

I define moral geography as a spatialized and hierarchical ideology about the relationship between a people and a place. It is about who belongs where and what qualities are associated with or imbued upon a place by certain people’s being *of* it, or upon certain people by their association with a place. A moral geography is made and maintained through a collection of techniques which are both cartographic and discursive, as in Thongchai Winichakul’s concept of the “geo-body” (1997). Bordering practices are one

such set of techniques. Generally threatening and exclusionary, these may range from building a physical wall, to stopping a person on the street and asking to see ID (Achtnich 2021), to printing the image of a disputed territory in a national passport (Rowen 2014). Material and immaterial borders reinforce claims of a rational (even purified) socio-spatial order, making bordering an inherently moralizing practice. Whether a socio-spatial order is organic or planned and enforced, learned associations between environmental aesthetics and certain social groups further naturalize particular constructions of belonging. For example, Cooke, Grimwood, and Caton (2016) show how tourism imagery and discourse of Canadian ski resorts perpetuate claims of white stewardship and rights to leisure, (incompletely) supplanting an indigenous moral geography with one in the image of settler colonialism and capitalist desire. While sometimes proscriptive, moral geography is often implicit, affective and embodied. Philip Thomas (2002) draws on Raymond Williams to explore moral geography as a “structure of feeling” in a Madagascar town. He finds that postcolonial reworkings of a colonial legacy superimpose value distinctions—for example, rural/traditional against urban/modern—over a region and community to become “a part of people’s senses of themselves and their place in the world” (384).

In China, moral geography and socioeconomic class are conflated in the everyday discourse of *suzhi* (素质, “quality”). Anagnost (2004) and Kipnis (2007) describe how *suzhi* anxiety emerged in association with the large rural population during state-structured birth control policy and reforms in the 1980s. It later became a general and difficult-to-define term, standing in for more explicit class discourse inappropriate for post/socialist society. Evaluation of a person’s *suzhi* takes reference from their spatial histories and place affiliations—what province a person is from, whether they are rural or urban residents, where they have previously lived, and where they are actually registered to live. Sun Wanning (2009) describes how Beijing and Shanghai employers of domestic workers degrade the *suzhi* of migrant applicants from certain provinces because those places are considered dirty and poor; at the same time, they hesitate to hire high-*suzhi* local workers whose status may come too close to the employers’. *Suzhi* discourse, explains Sun, is a form of “boundary maintenance” reliant on reading “corporeal evidence” such as

complexion and accent (618-9). In this way, places, and their associated values, are inscribed onto persons' bodies, especially those deemed out of place (Liu 2000). "Low suzhi" becomes a lens and framework for interpreting difference and a rationale for devaluing labor. It is deindividuating—used to dismiss bad behavior among the rural, uneducated and working class, while higher-class aberrant behavior is instead individually pathologized. The etiquette training sessions mentioned at the opening of this chapter, meant to improve low-level (often ethnic or rural) workers' suzhi, offers an example. After two days of being taught how to smile, stand, and walk by an urban professional, did the Hailuogou employees really improve their suzhi? More likely, their (low) social standing was reinforced.

Although suzhi discourse is relatively new, it did not invent place values and spatial privileges out of nothing. I will briefly draw attention to the symbolic and structural continuities of two additional divides comprising China's moral geography—urban-rural and center-periphery. First, in imperial China, although urban and rural activities (e.g., commerce and agriculture) were heavily integrated and populations mingled, cities had symbolic priority as the centers of civilization and residencies of the monarchy (Wong, Tang, and Liu 2022). They were also spiritually elevated as physical "replicas of the cosmos" (Wheatley 1975, 232). Cities were defined by their outer walls, within which inner walls separated the imperial elite from the common people, a separation that was particularly rigid during the Qing Dynasty. City walls were not only strategic from a security standpoint; they spatially materialized and reinforced the social hierarchy. Although said hierarchy and class structure both dissolved over the first half of the 20th century, socialist policies continued to favor the urban resident (Chan and Zhang 1999, 821). Despite Maoist rhetoric of equality and liberation, and valorization of the peasant, the *hukou* (户口, household registration) system of the 1950s effectively enacted what sociologist Martin Whyte (2014) calls a feudalistic "caste system." By rigidly categorizing all citizens as either rural or urban, then strictly limiting mobility, peasants who were once freely mobile became bound to the land. The hukou system is still in effect today; it has been reformed multiple times but continues, in combination with other factors, to restrict the rights of migrant workers and suppress social mobility (Sun 2009; Zavoretti 2017; Zhang 2001). Meanwhile, the gated community model

has overtaken Chinese cities in the reform period, creating exclusive communities and reintroducing walls to mark and separate class (Zhang 2011).

A second defining divide is simultaneously spatial and temporal: that between China's Han-majority center and its internal ethnic peripheries (Litzinger 2000). China's ethnic peripheries are large territories that are, or were until recently, primarily populated by non-Han peoples. This includes Inner Mongolia, Ethnographic Tibet, Xinjiang, and much of south and southwest China—over half of the PRC's land area.⁵ Stevan Harrell (1999) argues that these areas present a conundrum of legitimacy for the modern Chinese nation-state, underscoring the fact that China's borders are the culturally arbitrary inheritance of an occupying empire, and not based in shared history, language, and culture. The official claim is that all ethnic groups in China *are* Chinese, as members of the overarching Zhonghua Minzu meta-ethnicity. While an inclusive move, this simultaneously devalues and displaces many indigenous communities' own notions of their place in the world; it is a process of peripheralization, creating a singular social imaginary of hierarchical belonging that is reflected in the national map. At the same time, ethnic distinction carries the temporal connotations of the social-evolutionary hierarchy legitimized in the Ethnic Classification Project (民族识别, *Minzu Shibie*) (Thoraval 1999, 52). This was when, in the early years of the PRC, state ethnologists utilized Marxist-Leninist criteria to identify, describe and categorize the different peoples living in Chinese territory. The project solidified a set number of Chinese ethnicities—fifty-six—and their levels of sociocultural development, with the socialist Han leading the way forward. Mullaney and Anderson (2010) point out the project does not necessarily reflect that a governmentalist agenda was present at that time; however, it ultimately became a tool to that end. The official ethnic layout, including explicit or implicit connotations of Han superiority, has been naturalized through decades of nation-building and bordering practices.

⁵ Ethnographic Tibet refers to the 2.5 million square-mile span of all Tibetan cultural regions (Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo); in terms of Chinese administrative areas, this means not only the Tibet Autonomous Region but portions of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces as well.

Prior to the large-scale tourability of China's ethnic peripheral areas beginning in the late 1990s, it seems most Han people had little concept of those lands and their inhabitants other than harsh, barbaric, and poor. These attitudes have not entirely vanished, but explosive growth of the domestic tourism industry has remade China's peripheries as desirably exotic places that are first and foremost "places to play" (Sheller and Urry 2004). That the ones playing are primarily urban Han creates new exclusionary imaginaries that resonate with preexisting ethnic and class hierarchies. Tourism does not simply supplant or reproduce past hierarchies but creates a new layer on the existing moral geographies. I find that bordering practices that occur through tourism simultaneously value and devalue—what I will call "invalue"—the ethnic other or landscape. Altogether, class (i.e., *suzhi*) and ethnic differences in China are inseparable from the geographic imagination and experience of place. There is an assumed relation between the qualities and value of a place and the qualities and value of its people, which can fuel expectations or desire for that level of legibility and order in the actual encounter of different peoples and places. As a full sensory experience, tourism is a key area for learning and embodying the moral geography. In the next section, I take a closer look at that sensory experience, with particular attention to the visual.

Touristic visibility

Adapting Foucault's medical gaze to a different context, John Urry (1990) argues that tourism is fundamentally visual in nature, organized around the "tourist gaze." This gaze is motivated by expectations of the extraordinary and a compulsion to make the invisible visible. In this characterization, tourism visibility is an epistemic field and site of power negotiation between tourists and locals (or tourists and landscapes)—the gazers and the gazed upon. Since the concept's emergence, Urry's critics and interlocutors (e.g. Holloway, Green, and Holloway 2011; Larsen 2005; MacCannell 2001; Maoz 2006; Perkins and Thorns 2001; Pritchard and Morgan 2000; Sheller 2012) have pushed for a more multidimensional and phenomenological approach; still, the concept itself remains at the center of conversation, so catchy that it has inspired nearly uncountable subtypes—the "Chinese female tourist gaze" (Zhang and Hitchcock 2017) and the "tourist celebrity gaze" (Canavan 2020) to share a couple recent examples. In *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*,

Urry and Larsen suggest that the tourist gaze has multiplied in practice, not just theory (2011, 30). The gazes of both public and private spaces, touristic or not, are homogenized by the growing reach of both surveillance and spectacular digital media (Larsen 2014). If the tourist gaze is less and less specific to tourism, it essentially breaks with the concept's roots in Foucault's "medical gaze." I suggest that the Foucauldian model was never adequate for the complexity of visual relations outside of well-defined institutional boundaries and power-backed roles (e.g., those of the clinic or asylum). Compared to Foucault's institutions, tourism is not a particularly ordered or well-demarcated sphere of activity, such that participants would generate a unique and systematized epistemic field. Tourists are *consumers*, as Mimi Sheller (2003) has made abundantly clear. They are generally *not* experts backed by an authoritative institution or bearing particular knowledge about the landscapes they view. In this study, I have found it is more appropriate to associate the Foucauldian gaze, generative and ordering, with that of the state.

Sensory experiences are structured. Tourism developers, marketers and on-site guides work to make certain features of the landscape perceptible, to direct tourists toward certain versions and valuations of place. Tourists may be either receptive or suspicious of such guidance, further qualifying what is attractive and thus worthy of viewing, walking up to, touching, or reproducing as a photograph. However, these behaviors do not arise *ex nihilo* within the tourism context or by individual will. What I wish to call attention to is the large degree to which individuals' perception of the landscape is focused and limited by their embeddedness in an overarching capitalist structure at odds with both historical and environmental complexities. I therefore propose redirecting attention from "gazing" to "framing" in tourism visibility. The gaze overstates the isolation and agency of the gazer, when it is more interesting and consequential to consider the ways that perception is historically produced, socially limited, achieved through interaction, and entangled with the politics of place. First, I will situate the concept of framing in perception.

Not only are the values associated with sensory stimuli culturally affected, but so is the very act of sensory perception—however seemingly passive, or beneath the threshold of ordinary awareness. Csordas

(1993) draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty to rethink perception as a process of object *separation* rather than recognition:

On the level of perception there is not yet a subject-object distinction—we are simply in the world. Merleau-Ponty proposed that analysis begin with the pre-objective act of perception rather than with already constituted objects. He recognized that perception was always embedded in a cultural world, such that the pre-objective in no way implies a “pre-cultural.” (137)

Visual perception of an object is thus a process of identifying culturally-placed (whether explicitly or implicitly) and ingrained borders upon a practically inaccessible precultural world of no inherent distinctions. Buddhist epistemologists following the foundational philosopher Dharmakīrti offer a robust theorization of this cultural structuring of an ultimately non-conceptual reality (Dunne 2011). Because no two objects in the world can be atomically alike or congruent in space and time, our ability to identify objects relies entirely on a learned selectivity of attention, which narrows in on those differences which grant efficacy of action in line with our goals—particularly, survival. Perceiving a unique object in a way that allows us to quickly note its differences from a past “stick” being less different than its differences from a past “snake” has great utility in preserving our well-being. At the same time, this selectivity causes us to overlook most other features of the encountered stick-like phenomena, which is more accurately a unique stream of events causing a certain mental image to form. Through the repetition of categorically framed perception, we come to focus only on those qualities necessary for culturally defined differentiation, and other perceptual input simply doesn’t make it through a full mental processing (which would admittedly overload our capacities). Therefore, the level of perception that we are all accustomed to experiencing is of abbreviated phenomena, which only *seem* to present themselves as complete and unmediated. And when the goal behind differentiation shifts from biological preservation to some sociocultural drive, the inherent value of our particular conceptual mode of perception becomes questionable.

By framing, I refer to a structural aspect of perception that draws focus while delimiting or emphasizing boundaries. If, following Merleau-Ponty phenomenologists and Dharmakīrti epistemologists, even the basic act of object recognition is an act of framing, there are also higher-order structures that have to do with *valuing* rather than simply *identifying*. The perception of beauty, or what we might call “aesthetic

appreciation” would be one example. Though finding a mountain vista beautiful may feel direct, unreflexive, and socially unfiltered to the perceiver, and moreover seem to be an experience shared by many persons and cultures, we cannot dissociate the act of valuation from affective states, goals, and past experiences—countless impressions regarding beauty, geography, scenery, and even sociopolitical affinities that have accumulated over an individual’s lifetime to form a habitus of taste. Historians and literary analysts (e.g., Nicolson 1963; Barton 2016) suggest that mountains were generally considered ugly among Europeans prior to and even into the Romantic period. This argument is supported by early European characterizations of Tibetan landscapes (as well as religion and people) as terrifying and grotesque, quite opposed to mainstream, globalized perceptions of Tibetan landscapes today. Anthropologists and cultural geographers have therefore analyzed the ideological dimensions of landscape embedded in our seemingly straightforward visual observation (Rose 1992; Green 1995). There remains, of course, a certain degree of open-endedness to the perceptual habitus. The novelty of each material object and situation, as well as our exposure to new concepts and phenomena, presents the possibility of change.

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu shows how aesthetic taste, something taken for granted as deeply individual, affective, and subjective—if not spiritual—is actually ordered at a large scale. Taste is the outcome of explicit and implicit (but mostly implicit) social learning, of how to inhabit and embody social class. In other words, one’s appreciation of a painting or piece of music is not only an affirmative expression that the thing is pleasing; it is also a negative and exclusionary statement of who I am not, and who I am not like. Even in the absence of an individual’s conscious will to express class, aesthetic taste is an act of distinction. Since the publication of Bourdieu’s work, many believe class distinctions have become less obvious or been sublimated to other social divides. Sociologist Nick Prior suggests this distortion is a quality of our postmodern times and breakdown of both cultural and spatial boundaries: “the aesthetic and the commercial are increasingly meshed, the boundaries between art and popular culture have withered to such an extent... that museums and department stores have become interchangeable cultural spaces offering spectacular consumer experiences” (2005, 132). In this case, the boundary-crossing, spectacle-seeking

tourist is emblematic of our times. While class-like distinctions still have some utility in understanding tourists' aesthetic appreciation of built and natural environments, there is a more dispersed and hegemonic drive at work, a structure of feeling emergent in the precarious yet seemingly unstoppable capitalistic order of global society.

In short, both “taste” and “framing” offer a metaphor for the cultural and ideological embeddedness of sensory perception (*see also* Stoller and Olkes 2012). It is a reminder that perception is circumscribed in ways that are goal-oriented, and therefore not neutral presentations of an objective world. In particular, advanced neoliberal capitalism and “development” are widely dispersed and deeply ingrained goals, framing sensory experience across many contexts. In the subsequent section “Development,” I explore important cultural and ideological contexts for an understanding of the developmental in China. But I want to elaborate first on the nature of framing, introducing the concept of “invaluation” as well as another aspect of our postmodern condition—a wealth of content, but a dearth of frames.

More content, fewer frames

Framing guides recognition and carries values. The framed painting provides a useful illustration. If we cursorily glance at a framed work of art, our eyes are rarely drawn to the frame itself, not at first—the very purpose of the frame is to direct our attention inward, to complement an artwork without distracting from it. But without a frame, we might not even know that there was an artwork there; we might fail to recognize a boundary, or fail to recognize the edge of a pattern as meaningful. At the very least the unframed canvas appears a little less valuable or attractive than a framed one. Thus, a frame is a rhetorical object in two, albeit related, ways. First, the frame persuades us of the enclosed object's meaningfulness, its artistic or aesthetic value, its worthiness of our attention. Second, the frame simultaneously persuades us to ignore it. While blatantly present, it asks to be taken as a sign only, neither a part of the artwork nor of the background context. It becomes a portal or placeless space that merely separates two fields. Traditionally, a frame has little purpose other than to enshrine *another* work, to direct us away from the work it itself does,

such that we might interpret an uncaptioned exhibit of empty frames as a commentary on emptiness rather than an exhibit of frame craftsmanship (see Spyer and Steedly 2013).

By framing I thus refer to the discursive and visual process of bordering, decontextualization, selective attending, valuation, and persuasion to truth. Taking a photo is a pinpointable act of framing, but more interesting is the framing occurring behind the scenes, the conscious and unconscious structuring of perception leading up to and following from the momentary but repetitive photographic act. In other words, photography is framing work embedded in a larger culture of framing. Robinson and Picard (2009) discuss framing in tourist photography as “a performance which in itself has become part of the wider ‘doing’ of tourism” (14). They consider the values and emotions that are added to photography by the context of tourism culture (e.g., spontaneity, fun, modernness) as well as the values and emotions perpetuated in tourism culture through the medium of photography (e.g., ephemerality, objectivity, authority). But if this may seem trivial in the context of tourism, Judith Butler’s work thoroughly demonstrates why attention to “framing” is so important.

In *Frames of War* (2010), Butler asks what makes some lives grievable, and others not. What persuades us to *not* recognize the presence of a fully human life, that in turn would make its end tragic and meaningful? For if we do not recognize a life, we can accept its violent annihilation—underscoring how visual-epistemological frames have ontological consequences. Butler reveals how specific political constraints, media representations and secular ideologies regulate the visual field to selectively limit the recognition of humanity and obscure the violent reproduction of power. For example, the US government strictly limited journalists engaged in “embedded reporting”:

The phenomenon of embedded reporting came to the fore with the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, when it seemed to be defined as an arrangement whereby journalists agreed to report only from the perspective established by military and governmental authorities. “Embedded” journalists traveled only on certain transports, looked only at certain scenes, and relayed home images and narratives of only certain kinds of action. Embedded reporting implies that reporters working under such conditions agree not to make the mandating of perspective *itself* into a topic to be reported and discussed; hence these

reporters were offered access to the war only on the condition that their gaze remain restricted to the established parameters of designated action. (64, emphasis in original)

Thus, framing works in part to mask the frame itself. Reporters on the ground have the closest access to the war, but the audience does not see the context or hear about the selective process of their embedding. Besides its proximity to the action, the reporting feels credible because it adheres to already-pervasive norms found across media genres. Attention to framing reveals how perspective, and not only content, is a target for visual regulation. The trajectory of our networked post/modernity is toward a proliferation of content—especially visual content—but striking uniformity of frames.⁶ When being an informed citizen consists of scrolling through social media feeds or online search results, we consume war and entertainment content alike as they vie for our attention in the same ways. Meanwhile, we are less able to distinguish “reality” through these frames.

To return to tourism, Urry and Larsen explain how the early co-development of photography and tourism entrenched hegemonic perspectives. The “framed and distanced picture” became a structure for visual experience in the moment, replacing active, open-ended and imaginative perceptions of geography with ordered views of a certain type (2011, 160). Tourism advertising and professional photographers consciously stylize and edit place images to manipulate desire, luring their audiences into symbolic, semi-fictitious image worlds. Become tourists, visual consumers then work hard to reproduce the aesthetics of the unrealistic image to paradoxically claim having been to the “real” place. As I will cover in chapter 4, contemporary digital photography is again changing tourism motivations and experiences; “reality” is less and less the aim.

Development

The Chinese people I talked to throughout this study spoke about development as an objective fact, based in quantitative indicators, of a given region’s economy. But the degree to which they organized other judgments around those facts of economic development disclosed the association of many other qualities,

⁶ For a similar argument, one can consider Richard Wilk’s “systems of common difference” (1995), which I return to in chapter 5.

only sometimes stopping short of morality. For example, when comparing China and the US, they started from an assumption that America, by virtue of its GDP, must be more technologically advanced, and its life more objectively comfortable than China in virtually every respect. “America is on top, at the top level, and China, we’re in the middle, and then there’s other countries on the bottom, you know, like, lots of African countries,” one tourist told me. “Those places are backwards, with really poor conditions; their lifestyles and work are all very low-level.” When I asked if he was referring only to economic development, he said no, that culture was also included—comprising education, religion, history, and more. He, like many others, stressed that China was, as a developing country, on its way up, and the only thing hindering its development was unfair attacks on its economy from the United States. This sense of suppressed development builds on the colonial history of Western occupations of China, robbery of artifacts, weaponization of trade, and extraterritoriality rights—that continued through World War 2 (Fredman 2022). The Trump administration’s trade war (continued by the Biden administration) and penalization of Chinese passport holders during the COVID-19 pandemic are but the most recent grievances in a narrative of abuse that sets the stage for China’s salvation by an empowered Communist Party. That China’s modern history is to be understood primarily as the overcoming of economic oppression is evident, for example, in the permanent exhibit “Road to Rejuvenation,” which opened in the National Museum in Beijing in 2011. In this official presentation of history from the Opium Wars to the beginning of Xi Jinping’s presidency, the more crucial turning point is the reform period, not the Communist Revolution. In a 2012 speech at the exhibit, President Xi reiterated that rejuvenation hinged upon continued (capitalist) development (Bhattacharya 2019, 248).

Building analysis on research participants’ own views, I use “development” to refer to an ideal based on perceived improvements in quality of life accompanying economic growth and modernization—especially increases in prestige, comfort and convenience, as well as further expectations of continued growth, anticipated distinguishment from an underclass, and pleasure as one personally identifies with development at large, abstract scales.

The pace of economic development in China since the beginning of the reform period is difficult to grasp or summarize. In addition to facts and figures, development is ideology and spirit, structuring people's sense of the wider world and their place within it. In the remainder of this section, I consider the affective aspects of China's development in more detail and attend to some of the negative consequences of its spectacular transformation.

Desire and its discontents

"Desire" is a key word in reform-era China scholarship. The foil to this age of desire is the preceding, desexualized Mao period, during which mobility was strictly controlled, social life centered around the work unit (单位, *danwei*), individualism subdued, and self-sacrifice encouraged for the greater good. China's Reform and Opening, beginning the late 1970s, marks the transition from Maoist collectivism to a more globally integrated, market-based economy and ascendance of China within the global community of nations. Reforms and global integration have sent money, people and values on the move: per capita GDP has soared from less than USD 200 in 1980 to more than USD 10,000 in 2019 (UNICEF n.d.); by 2020 China's internal floating population consisted of over 375 million people (Haugen and Speelman 2022). Meanwhile, joint state-corporate efforts and the media have nurtured a robust consumer culture, prompting a dramatic shift from the denial to the embrace of desire. Anthropologists, sociologists and media scholars have explored the burgeoning and disciplining of Chinese desires not only for wealth and material goods, but education (Howlett 2023; Kipnis 2011), travel (Ngai 2003; Notar 2007), religious participation (Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Palmer 2007), sexual satisfaction (Farquhar 2002; Farrer 2002; Zhang 2015), familial and romantic love (Yan 2003; Yang 2017; Zhang 2022; Zhong 2010). Lisa Rofel (2007) puts the creation of neoliberal "desiring subjects" at the core of China's postsocialist restructuring and Chinese citizens' sense of belonging to a globalized world.

While the improvement in wealth and transformation of values have been rapid, they have also been uneven and incomplete, creating marked generational divides, widening the urban-rural gap, and leaving an exalted, nostalgic place in the national consciousness for Mao-era socialism, asceticism, and

“family values.” Both social science and popular discourse draw a link between a decline in social trust or loss of morality and China’s rapid social and economic transformation (Su, Ye, and Wang 2019; Yan 2021). Xi Jinping’s administration has been rather successful championing both nationalism and traditional Han culture, but when it comes to capitalist desire, there are more signs of disillusionment. Younger working adults are loathe to shoulder the burdens of an aging society and engage in a relentlessly competitive culture of overwork wherein opportunities nevertheless seem to diminish. This has prompted online social commentaries on a hopeless societal “involution” (内卷, *neijuan*), encouraging people to “touch fish” (摸鱼, *moyu*) or “lie flat” (躺平, *tangping*).⁷ In the course of my research, I encountered many people that voiced similar frustrations with heavy workloads and inadequate opportunities for social mobility, but few were willing or able to opt out of the rat race altogether, and many others still were enthusiastically in pursuit of affluence. At this point, it is difficult to support the claim that reform-nurtured desires are truly and generally on the decline. What’s notable is that those who are discontented with the direction of society are simply choosing to disengage; they see no alternative paths.

The collective trajectory and techno-optimism

One summer day I was chatting and having tea with Shen Zhizhuo, the middle-aged boss, designer, and resident of Biluo Yazhai guesthouse in Moxi Town. In many ways, “Old Shen” was an atypical individual, an enigma to many who crossed his path. First of all, he was highly cosmopolitan. Originally from north China, he’d spent a long time working in Australia, and become quite successful and wealthy. Suddenly he decided to return to China, where he sank his savings into heritage restoration, construction, and a few businesses on Moxi Ancient Street. The land his beautifully crafted guesthouse occupied was on

⁷ “Involution” or *neijuan* (内卷) in Chinese—a term coined by anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser (1936) and further developed by Clifford Geertz (1963)—refers to a turning inward once a cultural form or economic practice has reached a set configuration or ecological limit and can no longer expand outward; it increases in complexity without improving output. Many young people understand involution as an apt description of current Chinese society, particularly its white-collar sectors. “Touching fish” comes from the Chinese idiom *hunshui moyu* (浑水摸鱼) “touching/catching fish in muddy waters”—i.e., gaining advantage by creating a confusing situation; in current slang it refers to appearing busy at work without actually doing anything of substance. “Lying flat” is a movement and lifestyle ideal where one rejects the high-pressure demands of family and work, opting out of the rat race and embracing a minimalist lifestyle (see Bao 2022; J. Tan 2022).

loan and would eventually return to the hands of the local government. Biluo Yazhai wasn't so much an ingenious business plan as a labor of love or sacrifice for posterity. Second, Old Shen was a traditionalist. He read ancient historical and Daoist texts, loathed spending time in the city (Chengdu), and ignored his phone as much as he could get away with. He was a well-traveled, highly observant thinker who liked to discuss the nature of time, space, and humanity—as well as the latest gossip. Yet even among his unconventional wisdoms, he voiced a common idea, a feeling that seemed to simply be in the air that year (2019), in so many ways: China was going up.

Here is how Old Shen put it:

“I think the government, and that is, the party, is very good. I mean in the whole world, no government is better than China. No one. They were able to do this total change over 30 years. It doesn't matter if they pocketed some money or did some things wrong, the thing is, we're going up. Compare this to European governments, for example. Everyone knows the problems in their countries, but nothing changes. Like in Sydney. I call my friends that still live there, or live in suburbs, and ask how it's going, and they say, in the 22 years nothing has changed. They say the pay is going up, but the prices are also going up. So nothing has really changed.

The trouble in China is change is too fast. And in other places, the problem is that change is too slow. Twenty years ago I visited Russia, a place near the border called Vladivostok. And then ten years after that I visited again. Nothing changed. The first time I went people's face were nice. And open. But the second time they were closed.”

“Why do you think so?” I asked.

“That means Russia's coming down.”

Many other people in China are sensing and drawing meaning from this ascendance occurring at the national scale, regardless of their individual setbacks, or even their attitudes toward the direction of development. The evidence seems all around them—on people's faces, in the cityscape. I suggest that in contemporary China, a neoliberal imperative for self-reliance and individualization of blame exists alongside a deep sense of “collective trajectory” in which the individual is small and disoriented, leading to a range of dispositions from carefree (even unaware) optimism to a helpless anxiety. This subjectivity is an effect of political and economic factors or perceptions thereof, in particular: spectacular development (including poverty eradication), rampant commercialization, the wonders of high-tech, and the extent to

which nationalist political rhetoric (that China would not be prosperous, or even exist, without the Chinese Communist Party) has been successful. A key symbol for the collective trajectory, especially in the past few years with China's successful space missions both in real life and on the big screen, is a rocket ship. As the rocket shoots up at a hundred miles a minute, you're just strapped in for the ride with everybody else, your course unified under the pilot's hand. You probably feel like it's going somewhere good, so that's what you're focused on—as long as you're not one of the ones who falls off (it's a big ship; there's bound to be collateral damage). The view from up high is thrilling, but becomes frightening if you have reason to suspect that there might not be enough seats, or escape pods, for everyone on board. Faith in the overall course and power of the technology is thus tempered by a deep distrust in the impersonalized social other looking for personal security at others' expense.

Like the blur outside the rocket window, the pace of change in China is nearly incomprehensible. I talked to many adults in their 40s, 30s and even 20s in China who reminisced about their youth as if those very recent decades had happened in a distant universe. The transformation of their surroundings was experienced as an external, almost magical force. To give just one example, a waitress at a sushi restaurant I frequented on the outskirts of Chengdu told me how she had gone away to work in Shenzhen for just a few years before returning to her Chengdu suburb; she found the entire topography of her hilly village had been literally leveled to accommodate new highways and high rises. The ground was literally swept from beneath her feet. As cities grow upward and outward, farmland continues to be converted for industry and shiny high-rise apartment complexes. The modern remaking of the human environment presents tangible evidence for China's rise. It takes "development" and "the nation" from an abstract idea into an immersive and persuasive structure of feeling. Localized disorientation brought on by rapid urbanization and disintegration of village or workplace communities only strengthens affective attachments at the abstract scales of city, region, and nation. Silvia Lindtner suggests that the Chinese nation itself is imagined as a prototype for an alternative modernity (2020). To the extent that it promises to overcome colonial

indignities and racialization by foreign powers, China's spectacular, high-tech nation-building distracts attention from the internal violence of its making.

Some outsiders have a misguided impression about Chinese censorship casting a shadow over all digital expression. In fact, since the introduction of a public Chinese Internet in the 1990s, the state has been a confident and active promoter of digital technology (Zhou 2006). Today there are over a billion domestic Internet users (SCIO 2022). The digital is not only an engine of economic growth, but something that people feel grateful, warm, and optimistic about. Even a tourist in my study who was adamant about his personal dislike for social media still thought it was a good thing overall, because it allowed people to express themselves. And a group of tourism experts laughed heartily at the mere notion that China did not have “freedom of speech,” as some foreign observers would claim. For casual Chinese Internet users, it would take extraordinary circumstances for them to feel unduly censored. And while under the collective trajectory of heavily state-managed/surveilled capitalism, there may be fewer choices on the one hand, there is high convenience on the other because everyone—individual, business, or governmental department—is cooperating on the same few platforms. Extrapolating from Benedict Anderson's argument (1991), this builds shared experiences to build a sense of community at the national scale.

Even if indifferent towards government policy per se, I found people tended to express pride and optimism about technological development at the specifically national scale. Comparing China to the US, Chinese people often pointed out that China had *Zhifubao* and *Weixin* (Alipay and WeChat) to make a case for China's edge in terms of technical advancement or quality of life. “What I've never understood,” one tourist told me, “is why foreigners don't use Weixin, when it's so powerful.” Truly, these apps are so multi-functional as to have no correlate in the US. It was difficult for me to convince my interlocutors that some Americans might be reluctant to use a single app for all their voice and text messaging, financial transactions and investments, news, transit tickets, travel bookings, health appointment scheduling, medical test results, and so on. By the time I left China in mid-2021, I had witnessed some discontent with pinpointable instances of censorship, but virtually no fear of a techno-dystopian future; instead, visions of a red techno-utopia—

like the art of Fan Wennan (2022), for example—had found resonance. As foreign affairs commentator Kaiser Kuo puts it, China is in its “Star Trek phase,” while America is in its “Black Mirror phase” (2022). I believe that China’s intensive, compressed development and insular national media both distract and buffer affective attention from pan-human threats, if not also the immediate dangers of a surveillance state, by emotionally investing citizens in the nation’s exciting technological ascendance. In any case, there is not much one can do but try to hang on.

The study area

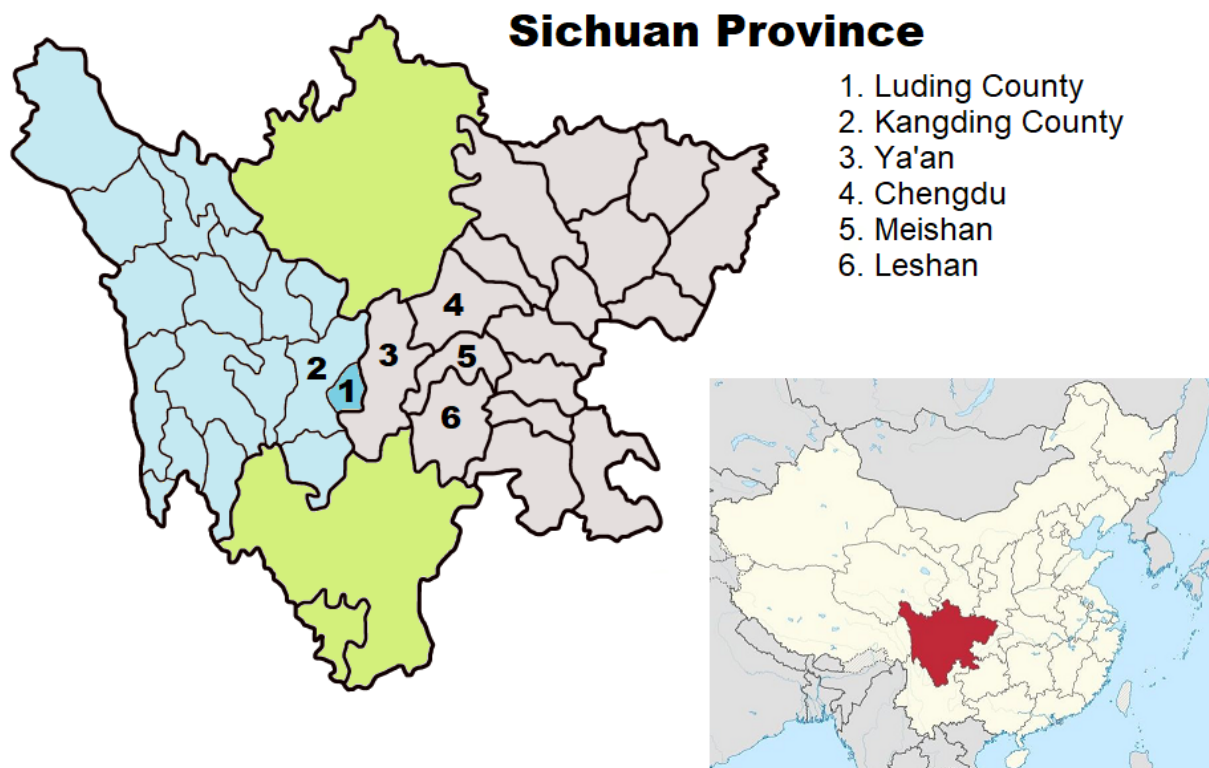


Figure 1: Map of Sichuan Province with relevant areas numbered as indicated. Western Sichuan is in green and blue; Ganzi Prefecture is in blue, within which Luding County—where Hailuoguo is located—is darker blue. Eastern Sichuan is in gray.

Source: Wikipedia

Hailuoguo Scenic Area and Moxi Town

Hailuoguo Scenic Area and Moxi Town, located in Luding County, Ganzi (Tib. Garze) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, western Sichuan Province, constitutes the main field site for this study. Similar to Huanglong in Sichuan’s Aba (Tib. Ngawa) Prefecture (see Kang and Sutton 2016), it is a rich setting for

the anthropological study of tourism due to its multivalence and resistance to simple categorization. Hailuogou/Moxi is simultaneously an ethnic, nature, *guzhen* (古镇, “ancient town”), and red tourism site; it is a national park, conservation area, and biodiversity hotspot; it lies along not only the Long March but an ancient trade route; with tall mountains and hot springs, it could be a destination for convalescence or extreme hiking excursions; it is a Sino-Tibetan-Yi frontier settlement, a former missionary base with an iconic gothic chapel, and a site of marked religious syncretism (Catholic, Daoist, Tibetan Buddhist, and local traditions); it retains historical buildings in both Chinese and foreign styles. With so many potential directions for theming and development, it is interesting to consider which aesthetics and imaginaries are made visible or are elevated through tourism practices—and which are not. In the remainder of this section, I will provide a brief overview of the site and my own sense of place there, while in the following section (“Fieldwork”), I further explain logistical concerns behind selecting Hailuogou as my main field site.

Gongga (贡嘎) is the Chinese name for Minya Konka (མི་ལྷག་གངས་དཀར་), a sacred Tibetan mountain, which at 7,556 meters (24,790 ft) is the tallest mountain in Sichuan Province.⁸ There is a fairly popular mountaineering route that encircles Mt. Gongga, but attempts to scale its main peak are rare, and even more rarely successful; it is considered a significantly more dangerous climb than Mt. Everest. Contrary to some tourists’ expectations, Gongga itself is not accessible to them from Hailuogou Scenic Area, which has an elevation ranging from 1,940 to 3,690 meters, but tourists do get one of the closest—if partial—views of the main peak offered by any commercial tourism site. Hailuogou (海螺沟, literally “Conch Valley”) is the name of one of Mt. Gongga’s eastern valleys and the associated valley glacier.⁹ Hailuogou is the best-known attraction in the Gongga area for three main reasons. First, the glacier is easily accessible, extending to a comfortably low elevation well below the tree line. Second is its impressive size—including a 1,080-meter glacial icefall. Third, the site was developed for tourism relatively early compared to many other

⁸ Minya is a local place/people name. For a complication of Minya’s Tibetanness, see chapter 3.

⁹ I heard different stories to explain the origin of Hailuogou’s name. Most often, *hailuo* is said to refer to the spiral shape of the valley as observed by Gongga mountaineers or to Tibetan Buddhist lore. In Buddhism, the conch shell symbolizes the truth and awakening power of the Dharma (Buddha’s teachings).

Tibetan-district or “ice-and-snow tourism” sites. In addition to Hailuoguo Scenic Area, there are six other attractions that are part of the greater Hailuoguo tourism complex—Yanzigou Scenic Area, Moxi Tableland, Yajiageng (which is the site of Yajia Qinghai), China Red Rocks Park, and two as-of-yet undeveloped scenic areas (Mouzigou and Nanmenguangou).

There is no airport or train station in the vicinity, so all tourists arrive to Moxi Town (elevation 1,580 meters) by bus or car. In addition to the ticket office and tourist bus terminal, Moxi Town is the location of the offices and dormitories of the Ganzi Hailuoguo Scenic Area Administration. The administration manages and promotes tourism in addition to handling all other matters of local governance. The union of scenic area and township governance is not entirely unusual in China, but more typical of rural and ethnic areas, emphasizing the contributions demanded of tourism for local development in these places. However, certain tourism attractions that would otherwise be under the administration’s management are outsourced to private parties. I was told that Yanzigou Scenic Area is run by a Hong Kong-based company; even within Hailuoguo Scenic Area, the cableway and bus service are both owned and operated by outside companies. Thus, of the three main ticketed items at Hailuoguo, the local administration only collects revenue from the entrance ticket, though tourists are generally unaware of this mixed management.

Besides sightseeing, a trip to Hailuoguo/Moxi may also involve soaking at a natural hot springs hotel, shopping along Moxi Ancient Street, and a visit to the Hailuoguo Red Army Memorial Hall or Moxi Catholic Church and “Former Residence of Mao Zedong” (so named because Mao Zedong is said to have spent a night in the church buildings on his way through with the Long March). One may also find Tibetan dining options (though most food in town is more typical Sichuanese fare), Tibetan-themed song and dance performance, or night of drinking and karaoke at one of Moxi Town’s nearly interchangeable and vaguely Tibetan-themed bars. There are some other hiking options, historic towns and village homestays in the vicinity—notably Mogangling, “the northernmost characteristic Yi ethnic village in China.” Most tourists, however, do not stay in the area for more than one night; most are either weekend trippers or are on a long-

distance route and headed further west (to Lhasa, or Daocheng Yading, or at least Kangding). To try and capture more of these regional tourists, and get them to extend their stays, the Hailuoguo Administration is investing in luxury hot springs hotels and *yangsheng* (养生, “nourishing life,” a concept in Daoism and Traditional Chinese Medicine) programming while emphasizing the comfort of its climate and healthful benefits of its clean air. It hopes to transition Hailuoguo/Moxi from a quick sightseeing stop to a health tourism destination that tourists will consume more slowly or over repeat visits.

Despite its marked Tibetan theming, Moxi is an ethnically mixed community, and Tibetans are not the largest ethnic minority in residence today. According to an official 2018 report, the entire Moxi administrative district had a population of nearly 13 thousand (Moxi Town accounts for about half that figure), of which 30.7% was Yi and 5.6% was Tibetan (NEAC 2018). Furthermore, the Gongga area’s longstanding “Tibetan” inhabitants do, or at least did, not necessarily identify as Tibetan—but as “Minya” (the same placename in the abovementioned “Minya Konkang”). Regardless of this obfuscating label, the Tibetan hosts and performers most likely to come into contact with tourists in Moxi are not Minya Tibetans anyway, but migrants from elsewhere in Ganzi Prefecture. Over the next two chapters, it will become clear how Moxi refutes simple geocultural and ethnic categorizations, and how its past is defined by mobility and migration. This trend continues today, but as a tourist site, hybridity, diversity, and ambiguity are challenging for branding legibility. The conflict between generic Tibetan branding or performance and obviously non-Tibetan residents contributes to outsiders’ perception of weak, or lost, local cultural history. Moxi’s touristic framing is meant to communicate qualities and values that will attract more and more tourists, but too much falls outside of its frames to successfully brand and realize the aspired level of growth.

The majority of Hailuoguo tourists are first-time visitors.¹⁰ What draws them to this place? It was my personal sense that most tourists come to Hailuoguo either out of sheer convenience (it’s easily reachable from elsewhere in Sichuan, and it’s something to do) or expecting to be overwhelmed by beautiful

¹⁰ In a 2019 survey of 526 Hailuoguo tourists, 430 were on their first visit; 71 were visiting for the second or third time; 13 were visiting for the fourth time or more (12 declined to respond to this item).

scenery—in particular, a pure-white glacial landscape. Expectations for an experience of visual awe are fueled by the site’s name recognition, its 5A rating (the highest rating for Chinese scenic areas, a system explained in chapter 5), and beautiful images that circulate on travel websites and other social media. However, the glacial landscape is where expectations and reality diverge, resulting in tourist disappointment. In comparison, tourist interest in history, red culture, or Tibetan culture are much less pronounced but still shape expectations and perception of the site. Only once do I recall guiding a tourist who expressed interest in the Yi, a non-Tibetan ethnic minority group. The Yi are a larger population locally but are completely sidelined in Tibetan-centric tourism promotion.

Disclaimers on place attachment and positionality

In this dissertation, I relate many instances where tourists and tourism workers express dissatisfaction with Hailuogou’s aesthetic and entertainment appeal if not with Moxi as a place to live. Yet I do not mean to characterize it as a categorically unloved or unpopular place—the scenic area alone received over 2.85 million visitors in 2019. Naturally, there are many tourists and residents who find great beauty and value in Hailuogou. But I take touristic dissatisfaction seriously because the negativity of commentary was so much more than I expected, was something that did not initially make sense to me and was a key factor shaping tourist-guide interactions. The negativity of casual, in-person commentary also presented a striking contrast to what tourists expressed when asked for commentary in more authoritative situations and to what they presented on social media. For example, whenever I formally interviewed a tourism worker (that is, via prearranged meeting, with a set of guiding questions and audio recording), they tended to only say positive things. Likewise, if the Hailuogou TV station or some other authority was soliciting tourist comments for a story, tourists tended to only say positive things—or, more frequently, ask to be fed lines because they “didn’t know what to say.” My attention to consistent, unscripted negativity reflects a benefit of the ethnographic method, as otherwise I would encounter mostly positive reviews. Additionally, analysis of negativity’s underlying factors leads to larger insights about aesthetic values, moral geography, the presentation of self, and the negotiation of class. In various ethnographic vignettes,

and particularly chapter 4, I will elaborate on the ways that tourists recuperate their disappointing experiences by attending to social relations, virtual worlds, and individual aesthetic capital rather than the “reality” of the surrounding landscape.

Of course, I am not an impartial or rational observer. I hope that readers will allow me to step back from Hailuoguo for a moment to explain. My first long-term stays in China were in the city of Wuhan, between 2009 and 2012. I loved it. It was there that I developed the idea “I love China” and made returning a life priority. In 2016, as I was conducting preliminary dissertation research in northwest China, I was sure to make a detour to Wuhan, the place that had been calling to me and infiltrating my dreams for the past four years. Arriving from chilly, arid Qinghai, the blast of hot, stagnant air upon exiting the airport was immediately familiar. So was the animated way of speaking shared by my taxi driver and the stranger who split the ride with me. But as my stay wore on, I felt increasingly disoriented. Neighborhoods I remembered so well as having bustling street lives, alleys crowded with food carts and tiny plastic stools on which I had crouched to eat delicious stir-fries under the baking sun had disappeared in favor of gargantuan air-conditioned shopping malls that revealed no life to the pedestrians outside, regarding each other blankly across highways, coffee shops of the same few mega-chains lining their first floors. The subway system had been opened, and trips across the city that had once seemed epic aboveground, taking an entire day of walking and planning around bus routes and schedules, could be completed in a quarter of the time without breaking a sweat or really even knowing where you were at any given point. It wasn’t even that these changes were entirely bad, just that they had evaporated my entire grasp on what the city—and perhaps country—meant. Even the *reganmian* (热干面, hot dry noodles) didn’t taste the same as I’d remembered. As if to drive the point home, Wuhan had adopted a new city slogan in the time I’d been away, which was plastered on promotional materials everywhere I went: “Wuhan: Different Every Day.” *What an exhausting place to live*, I thought.

After my love and disillusionment with Wuhan, followed by a longing to return to Qinghai that (as I will describe shortly) was not meant to be, I was ambivalent about Sichuan and Hailuoguo coming into

my research. In addition to not knowing anyone there, I was also unenthused about the level of commercialization I was told I'd encounter at Hailuoguo. But ultimately, I found that for long stretches of the year and most times of the day Moxi feels like a small, quiet town. I found the people I got to know there welcoming, and the climate surprisingly comfortable throughout most of the winter *and* summer. There were other things I knew I loved about it right away, aesthetics that set my imagination romanticizing. The town is nestled in a dramatic green landscape. The surrounding sparsely populated mountains look mysterious at night draped in black with only a few distant and twinkling lights scattered about them. The gothic architecture of the Moxi Catholic Church and its somber grayness fit the mood, and I often meditated upon it as an anchor in the otherwise ungraspable rush of recent history, a way to try imagine what Moxi would have been like a century or even half-century ago.¹¹ Days were often cloudy in the valley, but never in the same way twice—the extent of the frost or snow, the way it would cling to mountaintops, whether the clouds would form a screen or fog would disperse itself sparsely throughout the landscape of layered peaks, could all impart a totally different sense of distance or encapsulation. Then a sunny day would bring an unbelievably clear view of a snow-capped peak, and looking out the window of a hotel, it could feel like you were suddenly right in its presence, forcefully inflicted with a sense of awe. Within the scenic area, I found the aesthetic of the glacial rainforest—twisted roots, deep thicket, pervasive damp, and earthy hues blocking out any horizon—fantastically evoking and pleasantly disturbing. The few times I walked on the glacier's debris-covered surface I was struck by what an inhospitable and alien landscape it presented. The glacier came to fascinate me in a less pleasant way after a child went missing in the park. I began imagining getting trapped under the glacier—one of the possible if unlikely explanations for the disappearance—to the point that I had nightmares about it.

Reflecting on her fieldwork in Haiti, Diane Hoffman (2016) recognizes that her engagement with culture and place challenged her most basic perceptual approaches to reality. To be truthful to Haiti, she had to abandon her normal thoughts, suppress her urge to analyze everything rationally, and “learn to see”

¹¹ I didn't realize at that time that the church had once been brightly colored. See Long March Project (2002).

all over again. My experience in Hailuogou was somewhat different. I learned conventional things to discuss and point out about the landscape but never completely “saw” it that way. I kept much of my own aesthetic experience and place attachment to myself, as few others seemed to appreciate the gothic or to enjoy reflecting on the gloomier aspects of nature. As time went on—especially during my residence during the tourism shutdown of 2020, when I had a lot of time to simply contemplate the views—I came to feel deeply attached to Moxi and Hailuogou. I knew this was inseparable from but also went beyond the meaningful human connections I’d made there and the information I’d discovered through my research. My appreciation for Hailuogou’s mood and geomorphology made me reflect again on what it might mean to really and thoughtfully have “love” for a place. What does it take for a place to appear meaningfully beautiful? But the more I realized I did love Hailuogou, and even felt like home there, the more tragic (and thus deeper) the whole romance became. Because it was a place I could never really belong, never really stay. Theoretically, I could always return as a tourist, but it didn’t seem fair to me that I would need a documentable reason to be there for an extended period of time. At the same time, it was my privilege that allowed me to consume it slowly and therefore develop affective ties in the first place. Bourdieu’s analysis of taste suggests that some of the distinction between classes is simply having time, time to really look. And time, as one tourist explained to me, is much scarcer in China than money.

Fieldwork: methods and contingencies

Field site selection

I took a preliminary research trip to China over the summer of 2016, mostly staying in Gansu and northeastern Qinghai Province. At that time, I was planning to research religious tourism and conversion or the circulation of Tibetan Buddhist *thangka* paintings. However, I wanted to secure a relationship with a Chinese academic institution to begin my research, and I was very fortunate to find sponsorship at a university in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, instead.

Upon my arrival in early December 2018, my sponsoring professor persuaded me not to go to Qinghai over the winter because, they said, there would not be any tourists. Feeling it would be imprudent

to ignore this advice, I began to consider selecting a second tourism site closer to Chengdu that would serve as a comparison to Qinghai Lake. The first site I looked into happened to be Hailuoguo. I scoped it out in late December by participating in a large group tour. My initial hope for conducting research at Hailuoguo was to observe host-guest interactions in the programming of a regional Tibetan NGO, but once again I was dissuaded from that direction. By my sponsor's introduction (which I describe in greater detail in chapter 2), the Hailuoguo Administration welcomed me to intern with them instead. I first interned with the marketing department for one month. This involved alternately sitting in the office and accompanying other workers or interns on their work (and leisure) activities. I reached an agreement with the administration that if I did return to Hailuoguo I would work with the tour guide department instead. After exploring other options and evaluating the feasibility of a multi-sited project spanning Sichuan and Qinghai, I decided Hailuoguo should be my main if not only field site.

Despite changes the project underwent, my original interests in visual culture and the circulation of Tibetan cultural representations continued to guide my attention, while my observations of tourism at Qinghai Lake in 2016 provided a helpful frame of reference. Like Hailuoguo Glacier, Qinghai Lake is a natural wonder threatened by climate change in an ethnic minority area territorialized through state-guided tourism development. These two borderland sites are each the most likely first overnight stops on their province's respective tourist driving routes toward Lhasa. Similarities aside, Hailuoguo/Moxi is more developed in terms of hospitality infrastructure, feels less exotic for its proximity to the longstanding Han city Chengdu, and is less obviously Tibetan (i.e., even more ethnically and religiously ambiguous). Tours from Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, to Qinghai Lake tend to start with a trip to the famed Tibetan Buddhist Ta'er (Tib. Kumbum) Monastery, while those from Chengdu to Hailuoguo tend to start with a trip to the patriotic Luding Bridge, setting different emotional tones and senses of embeddedness in the world of an "other." For these reasons, tourists to Qinghai Lake seem to come away with a greater sense of accomplishment or spiritual fulfillment. However, Hailuoguo's negatives could also be positives for many

tourists. The reasons that a tourist might select Hailuoguo over Qinghai Lake are similar to the reasons I was pressured to choose it as my field site—safety and order, comfort, accessibility, familiarity.

Tour guiding

From June to November of 2019, I worked as a volunteer tour guide at Hailuoguo—a position that didn't formally exist *per se*, but that I proposed and was allowed to fill. I spent a few weeks shadowing other tour guides before working on my own: I'd board one of the many buses that ran each day from Moxi Town up into the national park, introduce myself to the passengers as we set off, and offer to guide any group willing throughout their day in the park in exchange for their participation in my research. I usually had at least one willing group, though the level and nature of tourists' involvement would vary greatly according to their interest and time constraints. Some tourists that I met only briefly—and did not even guide—added me on Weixin and kept in regular contact thereafter. Meanwhile, some tourists who enthusiastically vied for my services were only interested in a short conversation, or were clearly more interested in taking group photos with me than in discussing anything at all. In one rather baffling case, a group that had requested I accompany them took off without me upon exiting the bus. Other participants, however, both had time and were eager to share their views on a wide range of topics; they would talk to me for several hours as we walked throughout the park, then invite me to a meal once we'd returned to Moxi.

Due to the nature of this participant observation, it was difficult to conduct and record formal or even semi-formal interviews; most collection was in the form of conversations while walking around the park, riding the bus, or dining. I took written and audio notes in the moment, and usually wrote a journal entry that evening or the next day. I tried to connect with at least one member of each participating group on Weixin to share photos and research documents. I contacted some tourists for follow-up conversations reflecting on their travel experiences (or, later on, the effect of the pandemic), but most did not keep in active touch after our initial encounter.

Considering only the tourists I specifically guided or co-guided at Hailuogou, there were 31 groups of 158 people total—78 men and 76 women.¹² Group sizes ranged from 1 to 14 (this is excluding overarching groups for those on large-scale tours with 30 or 40-plus members). In most cases, I only conversed extensively with two to three members of a multi-person group. To my knowledge, all domestic tourists I guided were ethnically Han Chinese. Except for one group of ethnically Chinese Malaysians and one exchange student from Rwanda, all were domestic tourists. There are 14 other individual or pairs of tourists that I did not guide through the park, but with whom I recorded significant conversations—for example, Mr. Song, who is featured in interlude 1. Among the total 43 groups of domestic tourists, 17 were from Sichuan or Chongqing, two from elsewhere in southwest China; seven were from south China, six from north China, five from central China, five from east China, and two from northwest China.¹³ None were from northeast China or the Tibet Autonomous Region. After relocating to Chengdu in 2020, I interviewed an additional 10 people there regarding their tourism (and pandemic) experiences; three had specifically been to Moxi or Hailuogou Scenic Area.

Although my main focus at Hailuogou was on tourists, I spent a lot of time with tourism workers, some of whom became both friends and “key informants.” On occasion, I participated with them in promotional events or photo/video shoots for the park or other government-owned attractions. As mentioned earlier, I also volunteered at Biluo Yazhai, a guesthouse in Moxi’s historic district, by playing piano and generally being around for events. I visited other tourism destinations in the vicinity such as Yanzigou, and the region, such as Ya’an and Kangding. Additionally, I accompanied a team of research travel (研学旅游, *yanxue lüyou*) experts on a multi-day inspection tour of relevant tourism resources in Leshan and Meishan. The expert team included two figures that had played prominent roles in opening up and promoting Hailuogou for initial tourism development.

¹² I excluded very young children from this count.

¹³ For one of the groups I co-guided, I did not record where they came from, but two groups I recorded as from multiple regions. If people specified they were originally from somewhere other than where they currently resided, here I went with their current residence.

I had originally intended to do a second year of fieldwork, but at the last moment could not extend my student visa. I therefore arranged to return to Hailuoguo in the new year on a tourist visa. I would stay at least a few more months at Hailuoguo focusing my research more specifically on the glacier, then exit and re-enter China for supplemental multi-sited research along the Sichuan-Tibet travel route (川藏线, *Chuan-Zang xian*) and at other glacier tourism destinations in western China. After visiting family for the winter holidays, I returned to Chengdu on January 17, 2020. I was preparing to return to Hailuoguo after Spring Festival when the seriousness of the novel coronavirus outbreak suddenly became apparent. I will share an account of that outbreak in some detail below, as it shows how a crisis led to hardened borders, and people called upon moral geography to make sense of an unknowable hyperobject.

In Moxi under lockdown

When Wuhan entered a state of lockdown on January 23, so little was known about the virus and the illness, but the heavy-handed response—and stories leaking from the hospitals—suggested there was reason to be afraid. In Chengdu at the time, and possessing only one mask, I largely confined myself to my hotel room, fearing that every hint of a sore throat or sniffly nose was the beginning of the end. If I hadn't gotten the virus already, I feared I *would* get it if I got on a flight out of China, and then I might infect my family back home. It could literally be a decision of life or death, but I didn't know what I needed to in order to make the decision. That inability to know where and what the virus was weighed heavily. But why should we in China have been more afraid just because we were located within those boundaries? The virus wouldn't obey national borders. Yet at the beginning, the world viewed this as a "China problem" and within China it was largely a "Wuhan problem."

In times of crisis, when there is a threat to the social order, bordering practices intensify. We want to put a line between ourselves and danger and believe that line does real work.

Hotels were getting pickier about bookings, and my current reservation was running out. Thankfully, Old Shen welcomed me to return to Moxi and spend the remainder of the lockdown at Biluo

Yazhai. I got a ride with a driver from Moxi and a couple who had just spent the lunar new year in Henan Province and were returning to the woman's home village. They seemed even more nervous than I was, holding hands the entire trip. "We set out from Henan before dawn and haven't eaten all day because we don't dare to take our masks off," the woman explained to our driver. Honestly, I didn't imagine we would make it past the roadblocks along the way, and indeed my ride was stopped for a long time at the border of Luding County, my passport passed among numerous officers engaged in a long discussion that I could not hear from inside the car. But to my surprise, we were finally allowed to pass, just as we were later allowed past the checkpoint at Moxi's perimeter—upon verification with Old Shen and the Hailuoguo Administration.

Without the karaoke music or general tourism revelry, Moxi Ancient Street was completely quiet that night, illuminated only by the soft glow of red lanterns hung for Spring Festival. The lighthearted mood at the Yazhai, where I joined eleven worker/volunteers and family members thereof, was completely contrary to the inner turmoil I'd been experiencing the past week as I had glued myself to the terrible flow of questionable information on foreign and domestic social media. The children especially were delighted with the surprise extension to their Spring Festival holiday. The town's epidemic prevention and control workers were more cautious; they asked that I not leave the grounds of Biluo Yazhai, and they came twice a day to verify my whereabouts and to take and record my temperature. Old Shen was eventually able to talk my way out of those requirements, however. He himself repeatedly stressed that people were overreacting to the epidemic:

"It's okay," Old Shen reassured me. "If people just treated it normally—go to the hospital for treatment if they get sick, otherwise leave it alone—then things would still be fine. But China's system has this quality... because the individual is not given the same importance. So epidemics are controlled strictly. In Europe, like with the Black Death, a fourth of the people died. In China, no epidemic will kill more than 10% of the population. Because the government takes strict measures. It happened in the Ming Dynasty. There was an outbreak of some disease in Shandong and Hebei. And they entirely blocked off that area.

The military came and didn't let anyone out. So maybe half a year later, the survivors were there, and those who had succumbed to the disease, and it had run its course. Eighty percent of the population in that area died. But it didn't spread. Now Wuhan is blocked off. And I know this can be hard to hear. But it works. Also, whenever there was an epidemic, the leader who gave the order would have to step down and would also end up being killed. Or killing himself."

"Really?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because in issuing that order, he'd be killing countless innocents. But there'd be no other way. Today... leaders don't do that. In the past, people would be able to accept their circumstances because they saw the leader do that. If it were still like back then, all those leaders in Wuhan would have to be killed."

Some members of our group would pay more attention to the news (generally through social media) and would catch the others up at mealtimes. To try and get a grasp of the situation, we focused on the case numbers. Of course, the numbers were deeply flawed by a lack of testing and hospital capacity if nothing else. No one would have contested that, but we didn't have anything more objective to go by. These numbers were updated daily, disseminated through official channels, and were the most depersonalized, factitious-feeling handle we had. The numbers were translated into sleek color-coated graphs offering global, national and provincial maps, visual indications of how alarmed we should be by our proximity to a deeper hue. About a week into February, virus-mapping was becoming more sophisticated, and Chengdu residents were able to see infection numbers down to the level of residential community (小区, *xiaoqu*). "Imagine how frightening, to see someone in your community had been infected," said Ms. Zhou, one of the volunteers staying at Biluo Yazhai.

For many days, zero cases were reported for Luding County, but Ganzi Prefecture's numbers began going up because of Daofu, a Tibetan county further north and west. Although the case count never even got close to triple digits, others at the guesthouse regarded the outbreak as something potentially sinister and shameful for the Daofu government. It was making Ganzi look bad overall. At dinner, they spoke darkly

of things they'd heard online. One person said they'd heard when epidemic measures were announced in Daofu, a lot of people had just taken off, scattering to wherever else they could—and not by roads, but by mountain paths.

“Wah! So they could be here, and we wouldn't even know it!” exclaimed Ms. Zhou. It was as if “running” had criminalized them and we should fear being surrounded by others with malicious intent.

Old Shen dismissed her concerns. “They'd be found. They're all Tibetans.” (By this I presume he meant they'd be easily identifiable.)

A few days later, Old Shen and Miss Zhou discussed another story they'd heard. Supposedly, someone who had run away from Daofu, through the mountains, had now reached Kangding. It wasn't clear whether that person had the virus or not, but it was practically assumed that they did—running had made them guilty. The story seemed to unsettle the group. “If it spreads to Kangding,” said Old Shen, “then we're indeed under more of a threat.”

Several days later, Miss Zhou reported that Daofu was totally shut down, with the roads closed between there and Kangding as well as Chengdu. She and Old Shen had a disagreement about what Daofu's problem was—Old Shen insisted it was a governance problem, while Miss Zhou said the most recent increase in cases was from people who had hid their symptoms and infected others. “That wouldn't happen if there weren't a governance problem,” contended Old Shen. Then dinner conversation shifted to the much larger numbers in Wuhan and Hubei. National criteria for counting cases had been changed a couple days ago to include a backlog of qualitative diagnoses in light of a testing shortage but also to *exclude* asymptomatic cases, resulting in a huge and bewildering fluctuation—way up one day, way down the next. At this point I stopped paying so much attention to the numbers. It was emotionally exhausting, and no longer felt connected to anything real. Yet everyone on Twitter seemed to be pushing their own take on whether and how China was doing a “good” or a “bad” job, just like my housemates were debating Daofu, without really knowing a thing. Tight-lipped officials wary of harming personal and place reputations were,

in effect, nurturing rumors and negative views of their governance in the absence of explanatory information. Soon no new cases were reported in Daofu, suggesting the outbreak had been controlled—or the count had been, either way resolving the governance problem.

By mid-February, case numbers were beginning to tick up in other countries, a trend that would only intensify. Day by day, I could feel the perception of the epidemic shifting. As China's numbers went down in relation to the rest of the world, the virus was becoming a foreign threat. Suggestions—even from the most credible expert and national hero, Zhong Nanshan—that the virus did not originate in China were rather widely embraced, or at least entertained. After all, who could really know? Everything had been so unclear, even mysterious, right from the start. The gaps could be filled with almost anything, and US bioweapon—however illogical—*felt* right, fitting with the constant official metanarrative of US aggression and the trajectory of the US government's increasingly hostile approach to China. Meanwhile, images of partying, mask-shunning Americans circulated online.

“The free world,” mused one of the Yazhai workers. “*Too* free.”

Old Shen wanted my insight on the matter. “Mollie, out of the European countries, which people are most likely to, you know, *luan pao* (乱跑, *chaotically run about*) or *daochu pao* (到处跑, *run around everywhere*)?”

It was the same rhetoric that had been applied to the Daofu Tibetans. Good citizens stayed in place. Good governments were able to ensure that they did. But this propensity to either uphold the moral-political order or to “run about” was also imagined as having something to do with an ethnic character or national-cultural essence, something that could be mapped and made sense of. Simple cultural theories could be backed up by national-level case numbers and mortality figures. A difference, however, is that in Daofu there was little more than numbers, rumors, and vague official reports. There were no videos of people explaining themselves in their own words. If people were indeed “running,” they likely had better reasons

than partying Americans had. But the suggestion of rural ethnic others not following orders led people to fill in the blanks.

Although I'd been in China for over a month, local officials were much more unnerved by my presence now than they had been upon my arrival. The police came and explained to Old Shen that my being there was creating a risky situation for them. It wasn't because of a public health issue, but a perception and branding issue. The outbreak in Daofu had already put a lot of pressure on Ganzi to quickly reopen for tourism and recuperate its image. The fanfare of Ganzi tourism's swift reopening was felt necessary to sweep all memory of Daofu under the rug. So Hailuoguo had been forced by prefectural or even provincial-level officials to take down all the roadblocks, though it seemed a little soon. And even though most tourism workers—most crucially, the bus drivers—had yet to return, March 8 was passed around as a reopening date for the scenic area. Hotel operators Old Shen spoke to were nervous about reopening so abruptly—what if one of their guests tested positive? Everyone's nerves were on edge. By then, I was one of just two foreigners in the entire Ganzi Prefecture, and I was in an awkward situation as a known *researcher*. It was the recipe for a scandal. Old Shen kept smoothing things over and buying me time as we tried to figure out whether I could or needed to get a visa extension, to do a border run, or even fly home.

On March 2, online chatter about the virus was overshadowed by discussions of a proposed long-term-residency legislation regarding foreigners in China. Public sentiment seemed firmly against it, and I suspected that the government had no intention of passing such legislation in the first place, but wanted to fan the negative energy toward outsiders. One of the members of the Yazhai group, who occasionally seemed a bit resentful of my presence, repeatedly brought up the debate during our meals; it seemed like they were kind of excited about the anti-foreigner sentiment, and later on when I was asked about my tour guiding in the scenic area, they jumped in to say “she's *not* a tour guide.”

We did accompany some local officials into the scenic area one day as preparations were underway for reopening. The previous date of March 8 had been denounced as a rumor and disappeared from online

media; now we were hearing March 10, but one of the upper-level officials suggested he was skeptical that it could happen that soon. As he began to explain, another official interrupted our discussion on reopening to borrow a few of us for a promotional video he was filming in the scenic area's hotel. They were to put on masks and pose as tourists checking in post-epidemic.

"What, you don't want Mollie?" one of the recruited actors asked.

"No, right now the idea of foreign visitors is rather sensitive," replied the first official.

We all laughed. I had finally exhausted my usefulness as the image of a desired tourist. Though I actually didn't think it was so funny that the world had quickly been divided into two categories (Chinese and not), one looking safe and one looking like a probable disease vector or nefarious foreign agent depending on where you were in the world. At least in China people were up front about conforming their media images to suit people's prejudices and fears rather than it "just so happening" that every coronavirus story in Western newspapers used an image of East Asians as the cover photo.

After everything that has unfolded since 2020, it can be difficult to remember how little we knew back when COVID-19 was the *novel* coronavirus. There is nothing inevitable about how we came to visualize and perceive this directly imperceptible entity that moves between and inhabits us, sometimes fatally. Not yet knowing how to respond logically, people fell back on habits—some of which were beneficial, others not—but also began to look for visual signs and moral maps that would give an objective sense to the epidemic, a narrative that would "feel right," especially as epidemic spiraled into pandemic. They relied on borders and frames—preexisting ideas about places, the people who inhabit them, and their civilizational or moral quality. The virus was retrofitted into human political and geographical categories it would and did not obey. When Wuhan's quarantine was lifted and the central government celebratorily announced the people's victory in the "fight" against the epidemic, it was already too late, and far from the end of the story. As a pandemic, neither Wuhan nor any other place on earth could shield itself from the rippling effects.

In Chengdu during Zero COVID

By mid-March, as the administration was growing unnerved at my continued presence in Moxi, I was growing concerned about the unavailability of flights home (I ended up having three cancelled on me) and potential illegality of my continued stay in China on a tourist visa. I returned to Chengdu, and although hotels were not accepting foreigners at that time, I found a kind Airbnb host and then a Henanese family that allowed me to live with them. In May 2020 I began in a full-time position for a translation company, which I held for the next 13 months. Thanks to that, I was able to support myself and lead a relatively “normal” life as the pandemic continued to spread around the rest of the world. This year also granted me firsthand knowledge of urban Chinese work culture, work-life balance, and even home life. Apart from half a year living with the family from Henan Province, I spent many weekends and holidays in the homes of local friends. Rather than being an impediment or detriment to this study, the pandemic opened up new angles and made new insights possible. Without institutional backing, but also far from a “tourist,” I became much more integrated into Chinese society than I had been before. I was there with friends and colleagues through an unprecedented and frightening historical event. But I also experienced my re-interpolation in light of the virus and the geopolitical tensions mounting around it.

Following the nationwide lockdown, Hailuoguo Scenic Area reopened on March 20, 2020; however, as in many places, tourism was periodically disrupted and overall more challenging throughout the Zero COVID period. “Zero COVID” refers to the strict nationwide policy in place from the Wuhan lockdown until February 16, 2023, aimed at reaching and maintaining case numbers at zero. Realizing this mission relied on smartphone-based contact tracing and health codes, immigration restrictions (such as the suspension of inbound foreign tourism), and quarantine requirements for anyone testing positive or arriving from overseas. The details of restrictions on mobility and rigor of implementation varied widely by city/county and even by hotel and residential community. City and district risk statuses and local policies were also incredibly quick to change, which discouraged interprovincial travel, lest one get quarantined on a trip and end up out of work and/or stuck with a large hotel bill. As merely having been to a high-risk zone

(according to your smartphone) could trigger business/community-wide lockdowns and negative press upon your return home, companies asked their workers and schools asked parents not to travel over any holidays. While the economic impact of Zero COVID was immense across the board, entrepreneurs and small businesses in the tourism industry were some of the hardest hit, even those that catered entirely to the domestic market.

Early upon my return to Chengdu, before the smartphone system was fully established, things were particularly tense. Because of the immense pressure on local officials to maintain zero cases, paranoia resulted in illogical measures, including wasted resources and labor. One friend of mine had to write daily reports listing everyone she had come into contact with for work; another friend told me it was too risky to meet with me (a foreigner) at all. Still, after a while Zero COVID became routinized as the “new normal,” and the absence of major outbreaks, followed by the rollout of vaccines, allowed for some relaxation of policy and nerves. During my stay, the great majority of my Chinese and expat friends in Chengdu remained complimentary of the government’s handling of the epidemic, perhaps apart from initial mistakes made in Wuhan. I ended up leaving China in July 2021, before the more highly transmissible Delta and Omicron variants increased the incidence of outbreaks and severity of government response, including the strict Shanghai and Urumqi lockdowns that ultimately prompted widespread resistance to Zero COVID, followed by its sudden abandonment in February 2023.

While working in Chengdu, I returned to Hailuoguo for two short visits, first in December 2020 and then in July 2021. Over other work holidays and weekends, I visited different sites in Sichuan and Chongqing, widening my knowledge of regional tourism. Even with a time-consuming job unrelated to tourism, it became difficult to separate research from the rest of my life. Friends I had made in Chengdu became participants in my study, while people I had connected with specifically for research at Hailuoguo became friends who met me again in Chengdu.

Chapters outline

There is one feature of the dissertation that is unconventional—it consists of six chapters (including this introduction and a conclusion) and five “interludes.” The latter are interspersed between the chapters, but may be read separately, in order, as a parallel text. Through these interludes, I take readers on a walk through Hailuogou. True to the form of my participant observation at this site, we begin at the tourist bus terminal, ride up into the mountains, then move through the park, from one attraction to another, before returning to Moxi. Along the way we encounter different tourists and tourism workers who tell us what Hailuogou looks and feels like to them. From this collection of encounters, we gather a sense of place. The walk offers intermittent opportunities to look around from the ground of ethnography. I serve as guide along the way, drawing attention to themes and arguments that will be echoed or elaborated upon in the formal chapters.

In chapter 2, I examine historical and cultural heritage in the town of Moxi and unpack the common, though not official, sense or observation that Moxi lacks history. I identify four potential targets of heritagization, corresponding to different scales of place, that receive different weight and attention in contemporary placemaking—the local Minya people, the interregional Ancient Tea Horse Road, international missions’ activity, and events of the Chinese Communist Revolution. The histories of each are made selectively visible and valuable through the dominant, specifically national framing of Moxi. In chapter 3, I develop the concept of moral geography in relation to bordering practices and ethnicity. There are several different ways that Moxi is ethnically framed. Yet both scholarly and common tourist perceptions are caught in a binary frame of Tibetan authenticity on the one hand and Han development on the other.

Place is inseparable from sensory perception; sensory perception is not only framed by moral geography and a developmental structure of feeling, but by sensory technologies. Chapter four is a reflection on tourism photography at Hailuogou. I situate tourist photography behavior in a larger context of contemporary smartphone usage, social photography, and social media in China. Social media ecology

is embodied as a perceptual habitus that informs how tourists to Hailuogou move through the site, perceiving and evaluating its landscapes in the moment. I draw particular attention to the way that gender modulates leisure and mobility in relation to smartphone-based imaging practices and trends.

In chapter 5, I narrow focus to the central feature of the national park—Hailuogou Glacier. Following Orlove et al. (2019), I take the pervasive everyday *absence* of climate change action or concern as something odd and in need of explanation. I analyze the scientific and commercial frames of the glacial landscape, how they overlap, and how they preclude extensive climate change discourse. I then describe how tourists reject the scientific and commercial frames with which they are presented, but uphold their underlying developmental spirit. In the conclusion I continue to think with glaciers to reflect on the limits of knowledge in an age of virtualities and hyperobjects.

Interlude 1.

The Ascent

The town of Moxi is the tourist's gateway to Hailuoguo Glacier Forest National Park, but the two are not strictly adjacent. In fact, it's a full hour's drive from the ticket office in Moxi Town to Ganheba (干河坝, "Dry River Dike"), the final stop within the park where most tourists will disembark. As private cars are prohibited from park entry, the bus ride is a necessity. I skip the ticket office and sidle through the bus terminal exit, bypassing the passenger turnstiles and any line there may be. After a couple weeks of my routine, all the ticket-checkers and most of the bus drivers recognize me or at least vaguely know what I'm up to, so I don't have to explain myself. I simply show up, make sure I've been seen, and wait for the next bus to fill with passengers. During peak seasons (August, Spring Festival, or National Week), departures can be near-constant, but on a weekday in the off-season, the buses might not even fill up, in which case departures resort to the default spacing of one per hour. While I wait, I pace around the area, looking at the mountains across the gorge. It may be a beautiful sunny day, but from Moxi Town, it's difficult to tell what the weather will be like 1,000 to 1,800 meters higher in Hailuoguo—other than colder. Before long, the bus driver starts the engine and motions for me to board.

Depending on the bus, I'll either be reserved a leftover seat next to a passenger, or I'll sit on a special "interpreter's seat," a flimsy cushion that folds down and hangs over the stairs just inside the bus door. Though probably the least safe seat on the bus, it gives me an amazing front-row view for the entire ride. Even after countless trips up the mountain, I am always excited to sit there. But before taking my place, I give (an impromptu version of) a prepared speech, explaining my research and soliciting participants. I ask for volunteers that will allow me to accompany them in the park for the day. In exchange for my guiding them around the park, I simply ask to converse with them on topics related to my research. Since I can only accompany one group, I encourage other interested persons to add me on Weixin at the end of the bus ride, possibly to meet up with me in Moxi Town that evening. The first time I attempt to give such a speech, not only am I very nervous, but the clip-on microphone and speaker set I've been lent from the tour guide

department isn't working. It keeps cutting out, and whenever I do get my voice to come through, there's horrible feedback. Passengers toward the front of the bus look embarrassed for me and try to assist with the technology, but to no avail. Finally I give up on the borrowed microphone, resolving to buy my own after this. I just speak as loudly as I can. Some of the passengers are taking photos or videos of me on their phones. Some of them begin to laugh as I explain different ways they might participate in the study. On that first day, no one immediately volunteers. But when I finish my speech and thank them for listening, everyone claps.

Though dependent on the particular bus, the reliability of its AV system, and the whims of its driver, an informational video typically plays through the duration of the ascent. (*Most* times, the bus driver will be kind enough to mute the feed during my speech or wait until I'm finished to start it up.) Soporifically sweet music and voicing introduce different features of the park as a slideshow of professional-looking photography advances across the screen. I am never aware of tourists actively paying attention to the video, but my own eyes often wander to it unconsciously, especially if I'm in the back and those around me have drawn the curtains. Some passengers look out the window, but more try to sleep or are playing with their phones. A few are clutching the seats in front of them, fully concentrated on keeping down their breakfast, as certain sections of the drive are nothing but a series of sharp turns.



Figure 2: A section of the road in Hailuoguo. Source: photo by author. November 7, 2019

There is a range of driving styles among the drivers at Hailuoguo, especially when more drivers are brought in for peak season. You'd think there wouldn't be that much room for variation, because of the size of the bus and the strict demands of the road—steep and twisting, with many blind turns as well as spots where the drive must maneuver into the opposite lane to avoid overhanging rock walls—but some drivers make the ascent seem effortless, graceful even; others are overcautious and jolty, slow to the point of frustration; then there are those who seem to take pleasure in making the ride as uncomfortable as possible, never slowing for blind spots but just blaring the horn excessively, exaggerating turns, overtaking other buses, and nearly running over any Tibetan macaques in our path.

The first third of the journey is rather gentle, when we are still outside the confines of the park.

After departing Moxi Tableland via an unnervingly high bridge, we pass through Gonghe Village. It consists of small farms, some new-looking multi-story residences, restaurants, guest houses, and several natural hot springs hotels—some quaint, some large and luxurious. Government investment and tourism

development have obviously invigorated the economy here, but, like other villages nearby, this economic success has pushed youth away in search of even better opportunities. From the bus window I rarely see anyone out in the village but the elderly, quietly sitting and watching the road from their front stoops. Kong Shiyin, one of the tour guides I have shadowed, is from this village—at 24 years old, he is an exception to the rule. Though he grew up and went to school elsewhere, he returned after graduating. He told me he was happy to come back and be an interpreter for Hailuoguo. But he also runs a bar in Moxi Town, and that's where he tends to spend his off-hours, rather than the village.

Leaving Gonghe behind, we are enveloped to our right by bamboo forest and a sheer rock face (where the mountain was cut away for this very road); to our left, the road drops off to a river valley far below, the water churning and twisting around massive boulders. A few turns later, we pass the skeletal frames of a couple massive concrete buildings on our left as well—unfinished construction projects, already abandoned for years, though fencing bearing the construction group's name and logo still encircles the site.

“There's always more to see”

One cloudy day in August, the special seat at the front of the bus is dysfunctional to a dangerous degree, so I look back for other options. Seeing that the least desired middle seat in the very back row of the bus is open, I stumble my way there, bracing myself against the swaying of the bus, and settle in between two strangers. The man sitting to my right, surnamed Song, had been listening to my speech and begins to chat with me politely about tourism in China. He appears to be in his late 30s and is traveling with his daughter of ten or so, who ignores our conversation to look out the window. It turns out Mr. Song is quite the travel enthusiast and takes advantage of his ample vacation time (ten days) to go on a couple trips per year.

Like many people I encountered as tourists, Mr. Song narrates his experience of tourism with reference to a positive trajectory of development:

Even though I've been to western Sichuan many times, there's always more to see. A place that you saw five years ago is already going to be completely different if you go again,

because everywhere is constantly developing. New places are always being opened, and established sites are adding more and more [amenities]. For example, let's say you went to a scenic spot several years ago, but couldn't make it up to the top of the mountain, because it was too high and you were too tired. You might always regret that. But perhaps in the meantime this site has constructed a cableway, so if you were to go again, you'd not only make it to the top, you'd also do so comfortably, with energy left over to walk around the peak. So every time you come out you can have a different kind of experience.

Thus, over time, scenic area infrastructure continues to develop, and experience of the same site becomes more comfortable and enjoyable. Previously inaccessible views are made visible. When I encounter repeat visitors to Hailuoguo whose first visit was many years ago, they are more likely to mention how much it has changed in terms of the level of infrastructure than anything else. Many have told me how upon initial opening, the valley was only accessible and traversable by horseback. Since the road for buses was constructed, and the cableway completed in 2001, it has become possible to reach the uppermost point of the scenic area without even breaking a sweat. It is not surprising that tourists expect this development will only continue, and that well-established sites like Hailuoguo will strive to keep up with newer competitors with flashy facilities and novel attractions. As Mr. Song pointed out, new scenic areas are constantly opening up in western Sichuan. The Tibetan tourscape feels like a largely untapped resource for a diversifying tourism market.

But even as the most valued views—commanding and high—become more accessible to a wider group of tourists, more immersive if quotidian views become improbable, if not off-limits. Hailuoguo scenery once slowly consumed by horseback or foot now blurs past the tour bus window or retreats into the distance from the cableway. Tourists who are interested in open-ended or immersive treks are therefore likely to seek out sites that are less developed than Hailuoguo. Level of development places landscapes into genres that influence who shows up and standardize how the scenery is experienced.

I ask Mr. Song what drew him to Hailuoguo specifically. He says when it comes to travel, he is mostly interested in cultural experiences, but his family and other travel companions are more interested in getting out of the city for some fresh air and mental clarity.

Actually, most people don't come to Hailuoguo to see the glacier. First of all, there are lots of places, even in China, where you can see a glacier. Secondly, glaciers don't really have any direct impact on our lives. They don't have anything to do with us. Whether it is there or not, doesn't make a big impression. No, the reason that tourists come to Hailuoguo is for Gongga. It's the tallest mountain in Sichuan, "King of the Shu Mountains." (*Shu* is an ancient name for the western Sichuan Basin)

I would actually come to meet many tourists stating that they are primarily interested in seeing the glacier, but at Mr. Song's explanation, I begin to wonder what kind of cultural or affective attachment Han people from eastern Sichuan have to Mt. Gongga. Though sometimes visible from the Sichuan Basin, it doesn't exactly lie within the known range of ancient "Shu" territory. But now it is promoted as "King of the Shu Mountains," a symbol of the province. I ask Mr. Song if the appeal of Gongga is primarily its height.

A lot of the appeal is its height. We all know it's 7000-plus meters, and we know that the tallest mountain in the world is 8000-plus meters. But it's also something more. We've heard the name of this mountain since we were young. Back then we didn't know what *Gongga* meant, but just hearing the name, it sounds holy. Besides, mountains aren't just natural. In Chinese thought, there's a lot of cultural connotations to "shan" (山, mountain).

Mr. Song recites different four-character idioms containing *shan*, explaining that mountains are both a metaphor for human life and a reminder of our smallness in comparison to nature. He continues: "Travel is a process of respect. Through travel, we learn to respect natural and cultural worlds. When you haven't seen something for yourself, you don't have any feeling for it. The curiosity that prompts us to travel can ultimately increase our respect." He mentions his perspective on Tibetan culture as an example, piquing my interest. I have actually found it rare that tourists come to Hailuoguo looking for culture, making Mr. Song an outlier in this respect. I ask if he knows any history of the Hailuoguo area in particular. "Hailuoguo, this place... there's not a lot of cultural history," he says. "It's not along a major historical route, not like Kangding. So here there aren't a lot of temples. You can tell the difference."

Mr. Song is not the only person to voice such assessments of Hailuoguo. I had been warned early on by colleagues in Chengdu that there was no longer any Tibetan culture here, that Hailuoguo had become too "Hanified," and that all the nomads had already moved off, further west. I would never see any Tibetan nomadic communities either, but would hear that there were some in the surrounding mountains, out of

sight of tourists. Regardless, not all Tibetans *are* nomads and not all longstanding residents of Hailuogou are Tibetan. Tourist assessments of weak cultural history seem largely based in the absence of visible Tibetan monastic and nomadic communities, or of anyone wearing traditional Tibetan clothing (outside of marked performances). The Han who reside here are therefore taken as an acultural if not culturally destructive force associated with development rather than historical connection to place. And in promoting Hailuogou as a Tibetan place, tourists are all the more likely to categorize it in these binary terms—either thoroughly Tibetan or thoroughly Hanified.

At this point, however, Mr. Song is interrupted. The woman directly to my left cuts in to inform him that he is seriously mistaken. She speaks with a Sichuan dialect that I only partially understand, but I catch the gist. She wonders aloud how he can say there is no history here, considering the Long March, and the important place that Moxi occupies in that saga. Mr. Song tries to defend himself, explaining that he'd been talking about "history" at a much larger scale, and about Tibetan history in particular. "I was just going to say," he adds, "with regards to the Moxi Conference, how this place opened up after Chairman Mao came through, but a hundred years ago, this place was truly very insular—"

The woman cuts him off. "You're prejudiced," she tells him curtly. They go back and forth for a while. "You must not be from Sichuan," she says. "We Sichuan people..."

"I'm from Chengdu," the younger man protests, though his voice is as polite and calm as ever.

"You understand too little," she says.

Looking down, he humbly concedes that point: "True."

She lectures him a little longer, then turns her ire in my direction. "And why are you telling all this to an American, considering what they're doing in Hong Kong?" (There are major protests going on in Hong Kong at this time, which Chinese media attributes to American-backed separatists.) Now she speaks to me directly, saying, "Well, what do you have to say? America has taken Hong Kong, one of our great places, and brought it to chaos."

I mumble denials as nonconfrontationally as possible until the “conversation” dies out. Mr. Song and I join his daughter in looking out the window, silently. It is telling, I think, that despite their argument, Mr. Song and the woman to my left expressed agreement that there was nothing of note going on around Hailuoguo until The Long March came to Moxi in 1935. This passing event—reportedly, the soldiers took a week to pass through the town, and Mao Zedong only stayed one night—is regarded as History with a capital H, constituting a turning point for Hailuoguo. Mao’s arrival set a purportedly insular, unremarkable place on a path toward both economic and spiritual development. Prior to that was nothing—neither a trajectory of “development” or the timeless culture that would be suggested by an extant Tibetan monastery. The imperative of a patriotic metanarrative makes it difficult for tourists to perceive the evidence of Moxi’s cosmopolitanism and strategic importance far predating the Long March, a point which I cover in chapter 2. The disagreement, then, is not about the “facts” of history but about its scale. Mr. Song’s generalizing about a long regional history struck the other passenger as inappropriate because it was not contextualized subserviently to the scale of the nation.

Camps 1 and 2, the hot springs

The naming convention a callback to Gongga’s mountaineering history, “Camp 1” isn’t actually a campsite, but marks the official entrance to the scenic area. Here we pull to a stop so a park officer may board the bus and check everyone’s ticket. Nothing amiss, the officer returns to the guardhouse, the traffic gate is lifted, and we move forward.

Although the informational video will soon announce that we are arriving at Camp 2, there is no stopping here. Passengers on the right side of the bus will glimpse a picturesque cluster of quaint wooden buildings and small outdoor pools lined with stone. Camp 2, the park’s natural hot springs, has been closed for well over a year at this point. Officials in the administration tell me it’s because water quality and sustainability tests are ongoing. One intern tells me that a rockslide had compounded concerns that something unsafe might be in the water. Everyone in the local administration seems frustrated with the ongoing tests, finding the protective measures overly stringent, the process painfully prolonged, but the

site's reopening is out of their hands. As the Hailuoguo scenic area falls within the bounds of the Mt. Gongga Nature Reserve, there are restrictions on development. These restrictions and the frustration around them are what prompted the new high-end hot springs hotel mentioned in the introduction to be built directly on Moxi Tableland. And I visit a second hot springs hotel planning to open in Moxi Town the following year. When I first hear of the first plan, I find it hard to believe. Even after the new hotel opens, there is some skepticism among tourists who question if the water really is from a natural spring, or if they're being deceived by artificially heated pool water. "You can tell the water is not as natural," one of the tourism workers tells me, comparing the Moxi Town hot springs to the ones in Gonghe, "but the service is excellent." Indeed, the new hot springs hotel has many luxurious conveniences and a highly attentive staff. Again, the "development" (high-class, high comfort) feel of tourist experience overshadows the potential degradation of natural resources. This stretching of the hot springs beyond conservation boundaries is a strange, dislocating compromise between the need to maintain the park's "original" (原始, *yuanshi*), purportedly untouched nature and drive to further develop Hailuoguo's tourism resources.

On the bus, we begin to ascend sharper inclines and cross the path of some Tibetan macaques. The bus driver issues several short blasts of the horn, encouraging them to clear the road. They run and disappear into thick green foliage just as passengers begin to notice them, struggling to open their camera apps in time. There are bus stops at Caohaizi (草海子, "Grass Lake"), Dongga Temple, and then Camp 3, which the video feed announces in turn.¹⁴ Unlike Camps 1 and 2, these are open, explorable attractions; inbound tourists may elect to disembark at Caohaizi or Camp 3 and hike their way upwards, or out to Chengmendong (城门洞, "City Gate Cave"), the site of Hailuoguo Glacier's terminus. Nevertheless, the majority of bus drivers pass straight through without advertising the hiking options—especially during peak season, when customer choice falls victim to the need to maintain order. In any case, most tourists assume that staying

¹⁴ I never visited Dongga Temple (洞嘎寺, *Dongga Si*) when guiding tourists. Other workers had told me it was disappointing, and my tourist groups never expressed an interest. I finally visited the "temple" on a return visit in July 2021. It is in fact a natural cave-like space rather than built architecture.

on until the last stop will get them to the best views more efficiently. Like them, we'll revisit these lower-elevation sites later in our journey.

Outside the window, the flora has transitioned gradually from bamboo forest to taller, more ancient-looking trees. Interspersed among the spruce, hemlock and fir are magnolia and rhododendron, undeniably eye-catching in the flowering season with magnificent blooms in varied shades of white, pink, red, purple, and yellow. According to the scientific guidebook by Zhang Wenjing, there are at least 68 species of rhododendron found around Mt. Gongga, 24 of which are only found in this area (2010, 57). Some varieties grow upwards of 9 meters, or about 30 feet, creating a floral canopy.

Chapter 2. Historical Frame: Making National Space

Two perspectives on a view

The following is a description of Moxi Tableland by Edward Colborne Baber, a British ambassador to China from the 1860s to 1880s and highly regarded travel writer:

The Mo-si-mien valley, or plateau—either term is applicable—is so singular a formation that a digression thither will be pardoned. I came down upon it from the pass north of Wantung, on the summit of which—8000 feet above sea level... Descending from this, we struck a milk-white river, which guided us to Mo-si-mien; but instead of lying in the bosom of a glen, as we expected would be the case, the village is perched on the end of a long mound which rises from the floor of a narrow valley between two unfordable torrents. The end of the mound, beneath which the milk-white stream and the two torrents unite, looks like the bows of some immense ship, ready for launching into the foaming waters which wash its forefoot. The deck, so to speak, is level, and the village occupies the forecastle. The sides seem vertical, at any rate from the route by which we approached, but the appearance is illusory, and we easily ascended by a steep zigzag path... The mound in question turned out to be more than three miles long, by a quarter of a mile or so in average breadth, and some 250 feet, or more, high.

(Baber 1882 in Chang 2009, 26)

Approaching from the ancient footpath at Mogangling, Baber has a commanding view of Moxi Tableland, in which the uniqueness of its geomorphology is observed with quantitative estimation and emotional distance, in line with what Gillian Rose calls the “masculine gaze” of geography (1992). Once I began interning with the Hailuoguo Administration, however, I received a different reading of the same view. A marketing department official proudly showed me a series of landscape photographs he had recently taken from the same vantage point in Mogangling. He pointed out how the shape of Moxi Tableland resembles a *long* (龍, dragon) swimming between the streams of waters below, its winding body suggesting movement and vitality. The most common explanation I was offered for the name “Moxi,” in fact, is that this word means “dragon” in an otherwise long-forgotten local language, said to be a dialect of Qiang—an idea I will revisit in chapter 3.

From the description of Baber to that of the marketing official, there is a vitalizing shift from Moxi Tableland as like an unlaunched ship to like a swimming dragon. This is fitting, considering the great extent

to which Moxi is a place made by mobilities, as this chapter will demonstrate. The “dragon” reading also moves us from a detached analytical description to one that contextualizes Moxi’s material landforms in terms of a rich Chinese symbology, inscribing the town with significance at the mythological level.



Figure 3: Two photographs of Moxi Tableland taken from Mogangling.

Sources: <https://www.youduo.com/forum/thread-44578-1-1.html>, photograph by Arnold Heim, 1930 (left); photo by author, 2020 (right).

I wish, however, to trouble these views of Moxi in two ways by drawing attention to how the town is typically experienced as a tourist destination. First, it is impossible to appreciate the dragon shape from within the town itself, and very few tourists journey to surrounding villages such as Mogangling to get the kind of expansive view which Baber enjoyed firsthand. I would say most tourists are not even aware that they are residing on a “singular formation” that is simultaneously valley and plateau, unless they wander over to the edges of the town and wonder at the sudden and steep drop-off. The seamlessness of tourism infrastructure, insularity of programming, frenetic pace of most travel (whether organized and with a group or spontaneous and independent), and general tourist attitudes make even this casual and short-range exploration unlikely. (I am reminded of an unhappy tourist complaining to their tour guide when told their hotel was a few minutes’ walk from the nearest fruit stand.) It is therefore the role of the Hailuogou

Administration to promote this interesting perspective of Moxi, alongside all other place-propagandizing which tourists tend to regard with cynicism.

It is not that places have a limited set of “real” or “authentic” qualities which people must know or be able to perceive. To the contrary—places are multiple and dynamic; they engage human imagination and subjectivities to be continuously made and remade through cultural-historical processes. As Sheller and Urry’s introduction to *Tourism Mobilities* (2004) asserts, tourism places in particular are “places on the move” (1), “like ships moving around and not necessarily staying in one location” (6). What makes a place a tourism destination far exceeds the locality itself, extending through material flows as well as the fantasies, memories, and dreams of all its visitors past, present, and potential. But the unlikelihood of knowing Moxi in its striking local juxtaposition—whether as ship or dragon—not knowing the shape of the ground one walks on serves as a handy metaphor for various dimensions of the imperceptible and unseen, the moving qualities of place that are made to elude us when even as we are immersed in them.

The second way I wish to trouble the commanding, authoritative views of Moxi Tableland is by questioning how official discourses of heritage—of, for example, Moxi as a Chinese dragon—close off other cosmologies and histories that are still resonant and potentially perceptible in the same landscape. Behind the seemingly innocent explanation of Moxi’s meaning is a politics of place and exclusionary moral geography. The stories that are repeatedly told about Moxi through the tourism industry and tourism-focused governance are arguments about value, told from positions of power, given and consumed through developmental frames.

This chapter is about framing Moxi through time and space. Following Wolf (1982) and Trouillot (2015), I approach history as a continuous and selective process that requires contextualization in the politics of the present. I argue that Moxi’s histories of mobility, its complex multiculturalism, and its transregional and international entanglements are silenced in a diffuse project of state territorialization and [de]bordering. As a result, Moxi is experienced more as “space” than “place.” I also add to scholarship that recognizes borderlands as zones of multiplicity (Spicer 1962), hybridity (*as in* Bhabha 1985), and

possibility (Tenzin 2014) by pointing out that this creative and disruptive potential of borderlands requires a certain degree of bordering—or framing—itsself to have utility and force, especially when the site in question is tourism-dependent. But the framings of nature and culture must be subservient to state anxieties that the borderland amplifies or represents. Moxi is part of a multicultural borderland that has, under the People’s Republic of China, been politically bordered *and* debordered, and in the process “lost its teeth.” Its political bordering places it firmly within the Chinese province of Sichuan, creating a symbolic order where Han Chinese mythology and geography supersedes and remakes that of the Tibetan. Furthermore, non-Han non-Tibetans become tertiary citizens with severely limited room for political maneuverability. This ordering which disempowers ambivalence is the problem, say Adelman and Aron, when borderlands become *bordered lands* (1999, 816). Moxi is simultaneously *de*-bordered because it is not located along any political border. It is seamlessly integrated with the Chinese center; there is no longer an “in between” or “liminal” space, only contradictions that confuse and frustrate the tourism worker and tourist without challenging them to rethink the frames of their moral geography. As heterogeneity is silenced and devalued, the Sino-Tibetan borderland is weakening in its capacity to subvert the center(s).

The chapter has eight main sections and a conclusion. In the next section, I situate Moxi’s framing in the developmental time-space of the nation by providing theoretical background on “place” versus “space.” In the third section, I observe how tourists and tourism experts alike experienced Moxi as a space in need of intervention. In sections four through seven, I attempt to re-center the borderlands in which Moxi lies by relaying aspects of history that are silenced in its touristic presentations. Finally, in the eighth section I contemplate the meanings of nationalized heritage through an account of theatrical performance in Meishan, Sichuan Province.

From place to space

In line with “place” theorists including Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Basso (1996), Ingold (1993) and Harvey (1993), I approach place as an imaginative historical process rather than as a backdrop to cultural activity, or as something that can be effectively bordered to correspond to some geographical or

ethnocultural essence. Place unfolds and is ultimately inseparable from the people who have mobilized, and continue to mobilize, the different boundaries and dimensions of a site. This processual perspective of “place-making” is common to most anthropologists, sociologists and geographers over the past several decades in the traditions of Tuan (1975; 1977), De Certeau (1984), and Lefebvre (1991), though their terminologies differ. Those following Tuan tend to pose and discuss a culturally constructed and meaningful “place” in contrast to an underlying or acultural “space”: geographer Agnew (1987, *as cited in* Cartier 2017, 4) says that “place is differentiated space,” Altman and Low (1992, 5) that “place is space given meaning.” In contrast, De Certeau identifies *space* as the dynamic and open-ended element of the dyad; Lefebvre, meanwhile, theorizes a space *triad* that covers conceived, perceived and lived space—with lived space close to the more colloquial notion of “place,” *or*, all three of which may be distinguished from “place,” according to Merrifield’s reading (1993). Tuan’s dichotomy is not absolute and objective, but shifts depending on subjective experience—a once unfamiliar location is transformed from “space” into “place” as one learns the features of the built environment and endows them with value (1977, 6–7). The space-place dichotomy becomes even clearer in the work of postmodern theorists who argue that in globalized capitalist [super]modernity, historically rooted, personal places are overtaken by disembedded, impersonal spaces—Augé’s “non-places” (1995)—or by “placelessness” (Relph 1976). Some may see this break with the traditional fixity of place as liberating, even find comfort in the predictability and anonymity of a non-place like the airport or shopping mall. Others look back upon the lost possibility of “place” with nostalgic pain. Thus, if place is a structure of feeling (Pred 1983; Williams 1961), we can think of “space” as producing a feeling somehow in opposition to that of being in place or in time. It is the feeling of open-endedness, prerequisite to a plan or an invention.

I feel it is necessary to engage with the space-place dichotomy because it is so deeply intuitive based on everyday usage of the terms. It seems we need a way to think about “undifferentiated place,” to talk about place separately from a field in which it occurs. Yet however ingrained in our perception of reality, the dichotomy is ultimately false. As Tuan points out, space-place distinction is changeable and

perspectival; thus, it is cultural. Meanwhile, “space” as we know it is made through practice just as “place” is. Abstract “space” is actually the more derivative of the two because it is dependent upon materiality and phenomenological encounters therewith. Even physicists’ mathematical descriptions of space rely on culturally situated systems and material processes—just as “cyberspaces” rely on real-world materials, infrastructure, energy and labor. To make space is to carve a new compartment for targeted place-making as though there is no history or identity preceding it, like moving into a new house that’s been built on an “empty” lot without a second thought for what was there before.

This begins to get at the subtle perniciousness of “space” logics. “Space” in the discovery narratives of colonial exploration and contact casts the landscape as passive, inert background to be mapped and remade according to an outsider’s vision. Baber’s on-high view of the Mo-si-mien valley, reproduced at the beginning of this chapter, contextualizes within the immediate scenery but it is culturally decontextualizing, identifying and categorizing an alien shape in a living landscape and penning that view with an authoritative air. Geographer Doreen Massey describes this violence in our seemingly straightforward histories of Cortés conquering Tenochtitlán: the concept of space as a surface to be voyaged across and ultimately conquered “makes it more difficult to see in our mind’s eye the histories the Aztecs too have been living and producing” (2005, 4). It is all the more pernicious because it seems so innocently neutral to consider spatiality in this way. “Space” guides us to imagine satisfyingly frictionless, mechanistic and neutral processes, like painting over a blank canvas. Hidden is the destructiveness of the paint act and the violence that had made that perception of “blankness” into common sense. Therefore, for the end to which it has been wielded, there is danger in treating “space” as the neutral field of “place” practices. “Space” is also *created* in colonial and capitalistic expansion.

Lefebvre rightly points out that “space is never empty” (1991, 154), but what then makes us feel that it is? What makes people feel an absence of meaning in a long-inhabited place, and believe that the proper solution to this lack is more “development”? In this chapter I argue that the spatial, temporal, and ultimately developmental frame of the Chinese nation-state, employed to give Moxi meaning, instead

participates in its transformation from a central place at the peripheries of kingdoms and empires to a peripheral space in the center of a Chinese province. In the next section I attempt to locate Moxi geographically, a process that has just as much to do with ideologies as it does with maps, and I question if it is possible to think of the borderland places of Kham, Minya, or even Moxi as centers in their own right. I begin with a more detailed account of how I came to do my research here at Hailuogou and my initial impressions of Moxi Town.

Moxi as a place without history?

On an initial trip to Hailuogou with a tour group in December 2018, various delays added up to effectively eliminate the hour and a half of free time originally scheduled for exploring Moxi Town. The lack of commentary or concern regarding this loss, both from the tour guide and other tourists, reinforced the unimportance of cultural heritage on this sightseeing trip. Any significance that Moxi Town might have had as a tourist attraction in itself was overshadowed by its utility as a place to eat, sleep and park before and after visiting Hailuogou Scenic Area. I never walked down the historic Moxi Ancient Street (磨西老街, *Moxi Laojie*),¹⁵ thus never glimpsed the church or museum. My impression of the town was limited to a few hotels, a noodle shop, and the courtyard where we enjoyed a “Tibetan feast,” which I describe in chapter 3. I had no sense of anything that made Moxi Town specific, other than its proximity to Hailuogou and its location vaguely within a Tibetan area. I remember the town feeling lifeless, most shops closed for business during the off season—some looking more permanently abandoned—with few people out and about in the cold. It seemed like Moxi Town was a place that existed solely and tenuously *for* tourism: a grand walkway lined with restaurants and souvenir or supply shops leading to the Hailuogou ticket sales office. The often-empty streets and closed businesses give the impression that assets are already stretched thin, waiting for more visitors so the town could have purpose.

¹⁵ The more technically accurate translation is “Moxi Old Street,” but I have chosen “ancient street” because “old street” has a strange feel in English. Furthermore, tourists and tourism workers commonly referred to the street as a *guzhen*—“ancient town.”

I believe my initial impression is a common one. Outside of some mid and upper-level local officials, most people with knowledge or experience of Hailuogou tried to dissuade me from making it my main research site. They told me it wasn't "really" Tibetan, that it was too "Hanified," that it was both underdeveloped and overcommercialized: *there's nothing there; there's nothing to see; there's nothing to do*. I was getting the impression that most people approached Moxi as a contrived and rather unremarkable tourist town, on par with completely fabricated, Disney-esque "ancient towns" popping up all around China. Still, I had been intrigued enough by the non-profit's Tibetan feast to want to know more. I asked my sponsoring professor in Chengdu—Professor Ji—if they thought the non-profit in Hailuogou would be a feasible research focus or partnership. (Professor Ji, I should mention, is not only an anthropologically-trained professor of tourism studies, but also deeply involved with a public company engaging in tourism development.) "What do you think about interning with the Hailuogou Administration instead?" they asked me in a Weixin message. "That would be safer."

While I was still trying to figure out what that meant (safer how? safer than what?) and how to reply, the professor requested a copy of my CV to send to the Hailuogou Administration. Soon after, Professor Ji got back to me: "I've already contacted them, and they welcome you to come intern. This way is better."

And so, I arranged to do a one-month internship with the local government, and then go from there. But the Hailuogou Administration director requested that I wait to begin after the *Lianghui* (两会, China's major annual parliamentary meetings) in March. In the meantime, I met in person with Professor Ji to try and gain more insights into Hailuogou, a place where they had previously done research looking at the effect of tourism on local ethnic minority communities.

In describing Hailuogou, Professor Ji's immediate frame of reference was Jiuzhaigou National Park, similar to the multitude of tourists I would later guide during my fieldwork. Hailuogou, they told me, had opened up around the same time as Jiuzhaigou, but it had not been as successful with brand recognition and

there had been disputes over the ownership of infrastructure projects, causing delays, so it remained underdeveloped in comparison.

“So, is Hailuogou considered developed compared to most tourism sites in Sichuan, or is it really lagging behind?” I asked, trying to get a clearer picture.

“It’s mid-level,” they told me. “They receive half a million visitors a year. That puts them on par with other sites that are just starting out. In China, because there are so many people, a site needs to receive a million visitors a year to be considered to have really made it.” After asking a few questions about the local culture, I asked Professor Ji if they had conducted any other surveys in Hailuogou since the one they’d shared with me from the early 2000s. “No,” they said, “but there hasn’t been such a big change, because the number of visitors has hardly changed since then.”

I later found official data, as published in Luo (2021), indicating that Hailuogou’s annual visit count did surpass the 1 million threshold in 2015, then surpassed 2 million in 2018. In 2019, visits increased to a new record high of over 2.85 million (Haiguanju 2020). Regardless of the accuracy of their figures, Professor Ji was clearly using visitor count as a shorthand for economic development and using economic development as an index for all sociocultural change worth mentioning. In this view, it seemed that so long as Hailuogou hadn’t leapt up to Jiuzhaigou levels, the place was in a kind of sociohistorical stasis, immobilized or at least paused in its upward trajectory.¹⁶ But rather than a personal bias, I understand this “developmentalism” as an ordered and ordering frame, pervasive because it harmonizes with the sentiments of collective trajectory and national rejuvenation as well as a number of state goals such as the making legible of place and populace for targeted policies. However, the developmental framing of place at the national or provincial scales redefines value, silences history, and places limits on affective experience. And it is not only powerful academics and developers in the tourism industry who identify a lack in

¹⁶ According to official media, Jiuzhaigou received over 7 million visitors in 2016 (CGTN 2018). In 2017, a major earthquake forced closure for reconstruction projects; the scenic area fully reopened in September 2021. The closure of Jiuzhaigou is likely to have increased visitor numbers at Hailuogou in the years preceding the pandemic.

Hailuogou or Moxi that only began to be corrected with the arrival of “development,” and still has further to go. This sense is also common among tourists and entry-level tourism worker-scholars, people who are otherwise passionate about history and have a tendency for the “romantic consumption” of place (Zhu 2018)—for example, Mr. Song in interlude 1, or Wang Fangmei, the Hailuogou intern I will introduce next.

By May of 2019 I had completed my one-month internship with the local government and was leaning towards making Hailuogou my main field site. But for the moment I was back in Chengdu, and arranged to meet up with Wang Fangmei, a master’s student who had recently interned at Hailuogou for half a year. I tried to treat her to lunch at a Western restaurant, but she declined to order a meal, citing a diet. (Later that day she’d insist on treating me to all kinds of local snacks even after I, threatening to burst, tried my best to refuse—a typical case of Chengdu hospitality.)

Fangmei was planning on making her career in the tourism industry. She wanted to start her own business that catered to Chinese clients looking for high-end travel experiences to Europe or Africa. “Because people are interested in that, traveling with high-level services, but they wouldn’t be able to find those places on their own, and they don’t want to travel in a group, either.” She hadn’t yet been abroad herself, however, and was still attending university in Chengdu. When I told her I’d like to ask some questions about Hailuogou, she was dismissive. “There’s nothing really to say about it,” she told me, but then proceeded to talk about it at great length:

Hailuogou is simply an awkward place. There’s a little bit of everything, but only a little bit. If you’re looking for a distinctive style, you won’t find it. And although the tourism industry emphasizes Tibetan culture, what’s there is more Yi culture. There’s a little bit of red culture, but it’s just one of many places the Red Army passed through, and nothing momentous happened there, not like at Luding Bridge.¹⁷ Most of the Tibetans and Yi don’t live in Moxi anymore, and there’s no religious culture per se. At the same time, it’s not really a Han settlement, either, because the locals do tend to be ethnic minorities. It has mountains and water, but nothing iconic. It’s not like Jiuzhaigou, where you would go to see waters, and sightseeing is reliable no matter the weather. In Hailuogou, if it’s rainy or foggy, then you can’t see anything. There’s the highest mountain in Sichuan, but you can rarely see it from the observation decks. When you can see it, it only looks a little taller

¹⁷ Luding Bridge—see “The Red Army in Moxi,” this chapter, page 91.

than the other mountains from your perspective. Hailuogou has hot springs, but Camp 2 is closed.

Then she said, “What’s most lamentable is that Hailuogou doesn’t have any history.” In contrast, Fangmei encouraged me to visit two other sites that she said did have history and had left her with deep, almost indescribable emotional impressions—the first was Langzhong, an ancient city in northeastern Sichuan Province renowned for its fengshui culture and well-preserved architectural layout; the second was Yajia Qinghai (雅家情海, “Yajia Love Lake”), a scenic lake which is actually part of the greater Hailuogou tourism complex. The latter resonated with Fangmei because it is the site where Tsangyang Gyatso, the unconventional Sixth Dalai Lama, is reported to have resided when he wrote his renowned love poems, some of which have become immensely popular across China in recent years.

Fangmei had suggestions for improving tourist experience at Hailuogou, however. She suggested that at least some of the traditional cable cars could be replaced with glass-bottom ones, or a different kind of contraption where one is buckled in but open to the air. “It wouldn’t cost that much,” she said. “And it wouldn’t have to be every car. Because not every tourist is going to want to do something so thrilling like that. They could also set up a place for bungee jumping without much effort.” She also thought that Hailuogou should install some LED screens around the park that said the name of the location, the elevation, the weather and so on. It would give people something to photograph themselves with that would distinguish their images of Hailuogou from *just another* mountain or forest picture—because Hailuogou doesn’t have anything iconic about it. Fangmei compared it to a corporate logo, like Adidas: “When you see the symbol on someone’s clothing, you instantly know what it is. Hailuogou doesn’t have anything like that.”

A little bit of everything, but only a little bit. Moxi’s eclecticism, its refusal to fit convincingly and impressively into a certain place “type,” was most often seen as a weakness through the eyes of top-down tourism development, entrepreneurs trying to forge a place-based brand, or via the “tourist gaze” which looks for “signs” and anticipates the extraordinary (Urry 1990). Ambiguity contributes to a sense of

placelessness or ahistoricity, casting Moxi as a site that *must* be made through great efforts of tourism governance because its inherent historicity is weak or uninteresting.

Moxi's historicity is not actually lacking but has been silenced by bordering practices that demand clear boundaries inconsistent with the realities of the borderland, and national mythologies that demand a moral success story in alignment with development. Furthermore, because Moxi Town is a tourism and governance center (immediately surrounded by the rural and agricultural/pastoral),¹⁸ the majority of its resident population consists of outsiders drawn specifically for tourism and government work; therefore, the power to define history is concentrated in the hands of outsiders. I found that most of the government/tourism workers I interacted with, not unlike leisure tourists, approached Moxi as a way station en route to somewhere else in their career or life trajectory, someplace more highly valued. Among longstanding locals, the wealthiest were also the most absent, choosing to rent out their properties and live somewhere more urban themselves. Just as with Hailuoguo Scenic Area, the frenetic pace of life among the Chinese middle class, the moral imperatives of the nation, the persuasions of commercialization, Moxi's highly planned structure, and its categorization into various touristic genres—ancient town, Tibetan district, revolutionary base, etc.—formed “frames” that guided and limited outsiders' perception of value, yet it was also outsiders who wielded power to tell or perform the authoritative versions of place.

¹⁸ Tourism management and local government are the same body—the Ganzi Hailuoguo Scenic Area Administration (甘孜海螺沟景区管理局). While Hailuoguo is neither its county's nor its prefecture's seat (which are Luding and Kangding, respectively), it has an oversized standing and level of responsibility in these districts by virtue of its oversized tourism economy. The Hailuoguo Administration answers directly to the Ganzi prefectural government rather than the government of Luding County. The prefectural government answers to the provincial government, which answers to the central state. On certain matters, the Hailuoguo Administration deals directly with provincial officials.

In Spring 2019, construction officially began on a fully planned community (see Scott 2008, Chapter 2) “Ganzi New Area” in Xinxing Village. Villagers were relocated to create a blank slate for construction. The new area is to house a number of prefectural governmental offices/functions that will be relocated from Kangding—as Kangding is more remote (from the provincial capital Chengdu) and its climate and altitude less comfortable than Moxi's. The area will feature new schools, apartments, and shops. Therefore, it can be expected that Moxi's political importance will only increase in the future.

As for agriculture, Moxi is temperate enough for fruit trees, corn, peppers, and leafy vegetables, even while areas in the immediate vicinity have a harsher climate and primarily grow wheat, barley, buckwheat, and potato. Some of the local products sold in Moxi Town's shops include flower tea, yak jerky, yak horn combs, and dried mushrooms.

I want to emphasize that I do not believe Moxi is particularly unique in imparting this sense to, or thus being framed by, its visitors and residents. Sites across west China are susceptible to historical silencing and devaluation. As I was preparing to do preliminary research in Qinghai Province in 2016, I had started out in Beijing. There I was surprised by how many Chinese claimed they had never heard of Qinghai, thought I must be mispronouncing the coastal city of Qingdao instead, or, if they did know Qinghai, confidently assured me that there would be “nothing there.” During imperial and into Maoist times, such places at the western periphery were non-places in the political center’s imagination; they were where disgraced officials or counterrevolutionaries were sent as punishment. Now, over the past few decades, tourism has drawn domestic visitors west en masse and substantially improved western China economies, while interest in high-altitude landscapes, outdoor recreation and Tibetan culture in particular are burgeoning. Nevertheless, there remain deep lingering perceptions of these expansive territories as lacking history, civilizational quality, or other values that would put them on par with Chinese cities. Andrew Grant writes about the effect of this hegemonic moral geography even where there is extensive Chinese-style urban development—in Xining, the capital city of Qinghai Province (2022).

In an even broader sense, this issue is not specifically Chinese. As argued by Wolf (1982), Trouillot (1991), and Cobb (2005), mainstream academic approaches have often depicted premodern or “traditional” societies as static in contrast to contemporary, Westernized society; while such imagination may reify the past as a way to critique modernity, it does harm by collapsing time and emptying place of historical value—a move that is ultimately counterproductive to the actual understanding humanity *or* modernity’s unique ills. On the other hand, political pressures specific to the Chinese context inform touristic placemaking to further encourage perceptions of ahistoricity. In Xinjiang, Brown and O’Brien (2022) refer to this as the “weaponization” of tourism: aspects of history that would challenge a claim of the Xinjiang region’s longstanding belonging to China are downplayed. Heritage sites are remade to convince tourists of the place’s beauty, safety, and its residents’ happiness, telling a feel-good story about Chinese-led development rather than imparting knowledge of border-defying Islamic cultural heritage.

Over the next several sections I present four diffuse historic assemblages that have contributed to Moxi's place-making. Together they suggest a rich cosmopolitanism, call marginality into question, and bring attention to mobility (as well as its limitations). First is the rise of the Chala Kingdom, an amorphous yet critical Kham polity which is not remembered in contemporary, touristic accounts of place. Second is the Ancient Tea Horse Road, which is mentioned in passing around Moxi, but has not been a priority for official tourism development or theming. Third is the Missions, foreign activities that shaped Moxi both materially and culturally, and fourth is the Red Army's history in Moxi, from the Long March to Liberation. Missions left a somewhat awkward legacy in Moxi that is only made more so through repurposing: the Moxi Catholic Church's tenuous association with Mao Zedong has led to an oversimplified framing of Moxi's past, such that it now fails to impart a sense of place or of history.

In the borderlands

When viewed from either China or Central Tibet, frontier regions in Kham and Amdo were looked down upon as wild if not dangerous, but inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. These outside moral geographies are evidenced in the contemporary (lack of) Kham histories by both Tibetologists and Sinologists. However, in the introduction to *Lamas, Princes, and Brigands*, Aris observes that those who are native to Kham do not feel marginalized or alienated: "so often one meets instead with a confident and ancient sense of centrality" (1992, 13). Borderlands may be peripheral when viewed at the grand scales of colonial or Cold War geography, but they are not marginal so much as liminal, as described by Wittekind in the case of the Thai-Burmese borderland (2016). The people who live along the border circumstantially choose an identity or "manipulate dichotomies to circumvent categorization" all together (181). These are transitional places, in flux, accommodating multiple and hybrid lifestyles and imaginaries.

Is it possible to rethink Kham as a dynamic place in its own right rather than either-or the Chinese/Tibetan margin? While such a task lies beyond the scope of this study, I will contextualize Moxi's location, first in relation to Kham and the Chala Kingdom, to give some sense of the area's importance and centrality leading up and through the late Qing Dynasty. I will then describe contemporary Sichuan in terms

of bordering practices that have undermined and devalued the borderland's liminality. However, despite their differences, Sichuanese and Kham senses of place exhibit a parallel as fiercely central even when national-level geographies or histories would not characterize them that way.

Where is Moxi located? Taking a historical view, it becomes a complicated question. On a series of scales, Moxi always seems to be right at, or in, the border. At the regional scale, we might say Moxi is between China and Tibet, at the eastern margins of the Tibetan region of Kham—itsself a “vague stretch of country,” to use Coales’ oft-cited phrase (1919, 228). Zooming in, we can situate Moxi in the Minya area surrounding Mt. Gongga, lying between the Sichuanese frontier city of Ya’an (formerly Yazhou) and the Kham frontier city of Kangding (formerly Dartsedo, Tachienlu, or variations thereof) on an ancient trade and courier route.¹⁹ But Dartsedo was not only an economic hub; it was the seat of the former Chala Kingdom, which surrounded if not incorporated Moxi.²⁰ Although Chala is typically regarded as one of the four great kingdoms of Kham, I find that it is only sometimes included fully within the imagined borders of Kham.²¹ However, it is even more difficult to make the case that Minya has a deep historical and cultural affinity with Sichuan. If it is neither Kham nor Sichuan, then it truly exists in-between, within the interstices of realms.

¹⁹ I hereafter use “Dartsedo,” which is one transliteration of the Tibetan name དར་སྤེལ་རྫོང་, to refer to the city in imperial times and throughout the Republican period, and “Kangding,” the Chinese name, to refer to the city during the current (People’s Republic) period. The name “Kangding” (康定) means “the pacification of *Kang*.” Although it began to be used from 1701, throughout the Republican period, even non-Tibetans continued to favor the Tibetan name (in unofficial contexts).

²⁰ As Teichman observed, “the boundaries of these old States were most intricate, the jurisdiction of the Chiefs being over families rather than fixed territories” (1922, 64-5). The households under Chala rule also fluctuated over the centuries (Tsomu 2009). It would require further research to ascertain Moxi’s exact relationship to the chieftaincy of Chala, though territorially it is in the probable range, as part of Luding (Chaksam) County. Wilson describes Chala covering a wide area that extended east all the way to the Dadu River (1971, 232).

²¹ That is to say, sometimes the Sino-Tibetan (Sichuan-Kham) border—as experienced/conceptualized by travelers, or proclaimed through Sino-Tibetan negotiation—was right at, or just west of, Dartsedo, thereby excluding Minya (and Moxi). At other times, this border was at the eastern reaches of the Chala Kingdom instead, marked by the Dadu River, thereby including Minya (and Moxi), which lie immediately west of the Dadu. Firm statements about the Sino-Tibetan border existing both at the Dadu and at/near Dartsedo underscore the flexibility and uncertainty of the borderland in which Moxi was made.

If these places—Tibet, Kham, Chala, and Minya—cannot be reliably mapped or definitively bordered, perhaps it is problematic to situate Moxi at or within their borders. Yet here at least, immediately east of Moxi, is a geographical barrier of longstanding practical significance: the notoriously impassable Dadu River. It may be conceived as one of the major geographical and cultural dividing lines between China and Tibet as far back as it would make sense to talk of borders at all.²² But present-day Moxi is not near any “real” geopolitical, territorial border or citizenship divide. It lies far from the borders of Sichuan Province, let alone of the nation-state. The bordering practices that made China’s imperial frontiers into modern, interconnected provinces or provincial-level territories simultaneously de-border, obscuring the dividing line and smoothing the topography between China and Tibet. The current layout of China’s provinces belies immense historical frontier zones whose subordination to Qing and Republican rule was complex and incomplete (Lin 2011; Lorge 2006). What was once Minya is but one example of a border place where cultural distinction from central China is still evident today—but most of it falls outside of the frames. Kham and Minya do not appear on maps anymore, encouraging the perception of place through the rather novel and awkward frame of contemporary Sichuan Province instead.

As borderlands are liminal spaces, not quite in one place or another, it is appropriate, then, that frontier border[land] studies is a highly interdisciplinary field. The paradigmatic case for border studies is the Mexico-US border. First, historian Herbert Bolton (1933) and anthropologist Edward Spicer (1962) helped shift the narrative from a triumphant Anglo-centric conquest of the North American frontier (*as in* Turner 1920) to one of multiple colonial convergences resulting in a wide and varied border zone of mixing and accommodation, focusing on the southwestern United States and along the Rio Grande. Second, as US

²² From the Song Dynasty on, the western edge of the Sichuan Basin was also the western edge of Han administrative territory (Entenmann 1982, 111). Before that period, the question of any such territory or border becomes less sensical. According to Zhaoguang Ge, prior to the Song Dynasty there is little evidence for conceptualization of “foreign lands” or an “international order”—in other words, that there could be something akin in type and status to the Chinese empire that would require bordering (2018, 4). The most explicit borders set in Kham to divide the lands under Tibetan and Chinese political control came much later: 1) in 1727, a stele erected in the Ningjing (Mangcang) Mountains; 2) at the Jinsha River (Tib. Dri chu), proposed at the Simla Conference of 1913, though the Chinese never signed the agreement; 3) for Xikang, the short-lived Republican-period province situated between Sichuan and Tibet, the eastern border was at the Dadu River, and the western border at Gyamda (Relyea 2015). See figure 4.

politicians have weaponized fear of the US-Mexico border, ethnographers have responded with humanistic storytelling of border crossings both literal (e.g., De León 2015) and metaphorical (e.g., Behar 1993). Over the past few decades, border studies have diversified to consider the more diffuse techno-socio-political processes, or “bordering practices,” contributing to the experiential qualities of borders, such as the perception of distance or “remoteness.”²³ Meanwhile, the line dividing studies of territorial borders and symbolic boundaries has further broken down (Fassin 2011), aligning ever more closely with Mary Douglas’ foundational work on boundaries as sites of anxiety, dangerous for the transgressions which occur there and threaten to overthrow an entire “structure of ideas” (2001, 122). Agier, for example, focuses on “border situations,” experiences which have the potential to decenter and transform, to disturb identitarian thinking and the normative order (2016).

There is a humanistic, political project to be nurtured in ethnography of borderlands. Borders are ambivalent and liminal not only as physical spaces, but as an unsettling and unsettled structure in epistemology and human encounters. When attending to the margins, we often find the center does not hold. Life as lived in the borderlands stands against narratives claiming a neatly definable or dangerous alterity. However, what happens when a deep-established borderland is subsumed within the nation-state? A variety of outcomes are possible.

Like the Minya, the Gyarong (Chinese “Jiarong”) are a group residing in Ganzi Prefecture that is officially classified as Tibetan, but has a distinct language and way of life, and would not have identified as Tibetan prior to the Ethnic Classification Project. Jinba Tenzin (2014) describes how a Gyarong community leveraged their borderland marginality as a resource, forging an “Eastern Queendom” identity and tourism brand that are simultaneously in-between and distinct from a Chinese or Tibetan (*or* Kham Tibetan) identity. Unlike this Gyarong community, however, the Minya people seem to be completely powerless and absent from identity performances and touristic place-making in the Moxi-Kangding region.

²³ For example, *Social Anthropology* dedicated a special issue to the topic of remoteness in 2019 (Vol 27, Issue 2).

Instead, their ambivalent character and marginality in Chinese (and Tibetan) moral geographies has been deemed, consciously or unconsciously, as unbrandable, and thus a detriment to touristic placemaking goals. This reaffirms Tina Harris' "minor qualm" about border and mobility studies as too quick to celebrate "unlimited fluidity" in "exceptional or liminal" border zones (2013, 105). Harris explains that exceptionalism of border areas is itself perspectival. The contradictions that emerge there are often the result of unrealistically strict rules or expectations set by the state.

Kham and Chala

In the history and ethnography of Tibetan areas, there is a tendency to refer to vast areas (if not all of) Amdo and Kham as the "Tibetan borderlands." This has become the major geographical lens for an area that is diverse and vast, comparable if not a little larger in area than Central Tibet. In many cases "Tibetan" itself is a misleading label, considering the ethnic diversity and complex history of independent kingdoms or chiefdoms in the regions.

Kham, and Chala within it, was a dual frontier or middle ground bridging, standing between, and standing against both Central Tibet and China over many centuries. Scholars of the region characterize Kham as a liminal and contested space (Relyea 2015, 964; Tenzin 2014, 9) with no unified historical narrative and "no clearly defined boundaries" (Gros 2016, 4), or "a collection of places held together by a vision" (Tan 2022, 57). Kham was never an administrative region, though it generally correlates to the province of "Xikang" ("Kham in the west"), whose largely nominal existence lasted little more than a decade (1939-1950) under China's Republican government. Its immense cultural diversity, and fact that its alliances were not necessarily based in geographic proximity, means that Kham not only troubles mainstream histories in its capacity as a borderland; it also troubles "Tibetan borderlands" histories with its underexplored plurality. Some Kham scholars have attempted to center Kham or its kingdoms in their recent work (e.g., Epstein 2002; Gros 2019b; Van Spengen and Jabb, 2009). Some have focused on the brief movement for Kham independence, when the more inclusive place name for Kham was taken up: *chushi*

gangdruk, which means “four rivers, six ranges” (Gros 2019a, 46)—the four rivers referring to the Nyak (Yalong), Dri (Jinsha), Dza (Lancang, or Mekong), and Ngül (Nu, or Salween).



Figure 4: Mountain ranges comprising the Hengduan Mountains (gold text), with the river systems between Lhasa and Chengdu (blue text).

Mountain ranges and sub-ranges, all oriented north-south, are lettered by the gold boxes. Their Chinese names are as follows: A) the Boshula and Gaoligong Mountains; B) the Tiantaweng and Nu Mountains; C) the Mangkang and the Yun Mountains (between which lie the Ningjing Mountains); D) the Shaluli Mountains; E) the Daxue Mountains; F) the Qionglai Mountains; G) the Min Mountains. The Qionglai and Min ranges are not always considered part of the Hengduan Mountains, and not part of *chushi gangdruk*.

Rivers are numbered by the blue boxes. Their Chinese names are as follows: 1) the Yalu Cangbu River; 2) the Nu River; 3) the Lancang River; 4) the Jinsha River; 5) the Yalong River; 6) the Dadu River; 7) the Min River. Rivers 2–5 are the “four rivers” of *chushi gangdruk*. The Min River (7) is the westernmost of Sichuan’s north-south running “four rivers.” Moxi lies along tributary streams just west of the Dadu River (6)—just north of its eastward bend (at a similar latitude to Leshan)—in the Daxue Mountains (E).

Source:

<https://wapbaike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=9e811c1417e49f312b92e5c8>

(modified by author)

The Chala (or “Chakla”) Kingdom seated at Dartsedo was a dynamic agent in the Kham frontier. Record of the lineage appears by the Yuan Dynasty, the founders possibly descendants of the Tangut Empire.²⁴ The Kingdom was established in the Ming Dynasty (Tan 2022, 60). Dartsedo was a small settlement of just 30 households in the Ming, but in the Qing Dynasty it rose to become one of the most important Sino-Tibetan trade centers and “straddled Sichuan and Kham in many ways” (Ren 1933 *as cited in* Liu 2020, 72; Wang 2011, 48). Lucrative and high-volume trade conducted in Dartsedo gave rise to a bilingual class of Tibetan middlemen and made the city a more hospitable entry point into the Tibetan realm for Han Chinese and other outsiders (Tsomu 2016).²⁵ In contrast to the other major Kham kingdoms of Litang, Batang, and Dege, Chala’s “multiethnic trade and longstanding collaboration produced a cosmopolitan political economy that overshadowed its relatively small monastic establishment” (Wang 2011, 48). Although highly fragmented, the kingdom was generally cooperative with the Qing state, whose primary interest in the region was, like that of local chieftains, protecting valuable economic activity.

At the close of the 17th century, the King of Chala officially submitted to Qing rule. Rather than understanding this “submission” as the victory of Beijing over Lhasa played out in a passive margin, Yudru Tsomu (2009) argues it was one of many strategies the Chala house actively pursued of its own interests—in this case, it decided to play one outside power against another to evade encroaching taxation from Lhasa. After the Qing intervention, there was an increased Chinese military presence in Dartsedo, but the Chala King and his successors continued to rule over indigenous subjects without interference, even gaining

²⁴ The Tangut Empire (1038-1227 CE) is also known as the “Western Xia Dynasty” to the Chinese and as “*Minya*” to the Tibetans and Tanguts (who are considered to be a Qiang group—the Dangxiang Qiang, specifically). The main link between Chala and the Tangut is that following the fall of the empire, this same name, *Minya*, is used to refer to both place and people in Chala (Tsomu 2009, 62). Dai Gang (1993) also attributes the non-Tibetanized Minya practices to the Dangxiang Qiang, but not all scholars agree on the validity of this origin story (Li and Li 2015).

²⁵ Resistance to the missionaries’ presence in Kham was not always from Tibetan Buddhists as one might expect. For example, British missionaries Cecil and Eleanor Polhill were violently attacked in Songpan by a Chinese mob in 1892 when searching for a place to spread the gospel at the Tibetan border. After the incident they settled in Dartsedo (Van Spengen 2009, 141).

territory and strength in the later Qing. With the largely peaceful flow of goods, Chala enjoyed more power and prestige through its cooperation with the Qing than it had before, and often acted as an intermediary between Qing representatives and the other Kham chieftains (Tsomu 2009, 79). The comparative weakness of monastic power and variety of livelihoods (as opposed to “pure nomadism”) in the Moxi region therefore go back to imperial-era trends. Some today identify these phenomena as “Hanification” of a formerly “Tibetan” site, but uncovering the history of an agentive kingdom, founded by migrants neither strictly Tibetan nor Chinese, along with the absence of anything resembling borders as we know them today, all complicate the historical narrative.

Sichuan, east and west

Today Moxi is rather centrally located in Sichuan Province, and more of its tourism workers and tourists come from there than anywhere else. Hailuoguo is one of the closest Tibetan-area driving destinations whether setting out from Chengdu or Chongqing, making it a possible weekend trip. Pandemic-period travel restrictions only intensified the trend of within-province travel, as regulations changed quickly based on emerging high- or medium-risk areas, and it became risky to journey too far. Tourism development has therefore been and continues to be the driving force behind migration and infrastructural development integrating Hailuoguo more fluidly into Sichuan Province. While contemporary borders encourage Hailuoguo’s Sichuanese-ness to be taken for granted, not so long ago, “Sichuan” did not extend that far west.

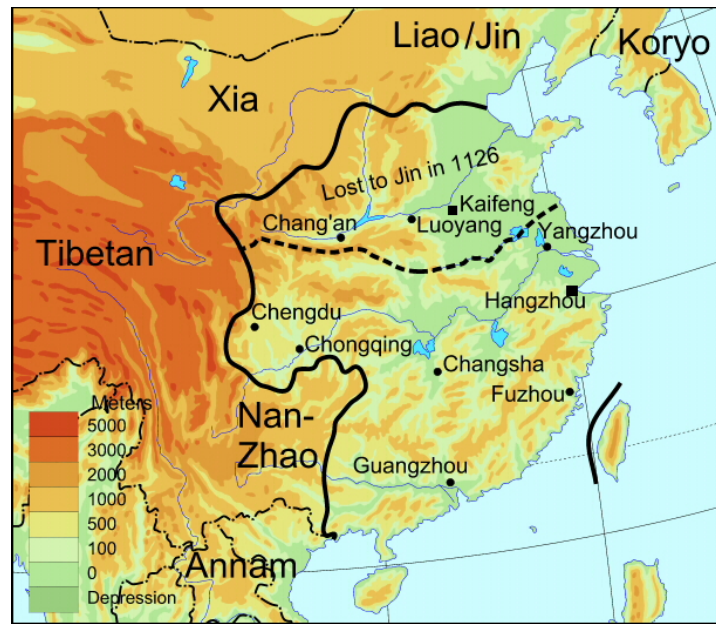


Figure 5. An elevation map showing China in the Song Dynasty. Note the Sichuan Basin that encompasses Chengdu and Chongqing. The Gongga area can be identified by the dark red column just west of the imperial border.

Source: <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/1xarsong.htm>

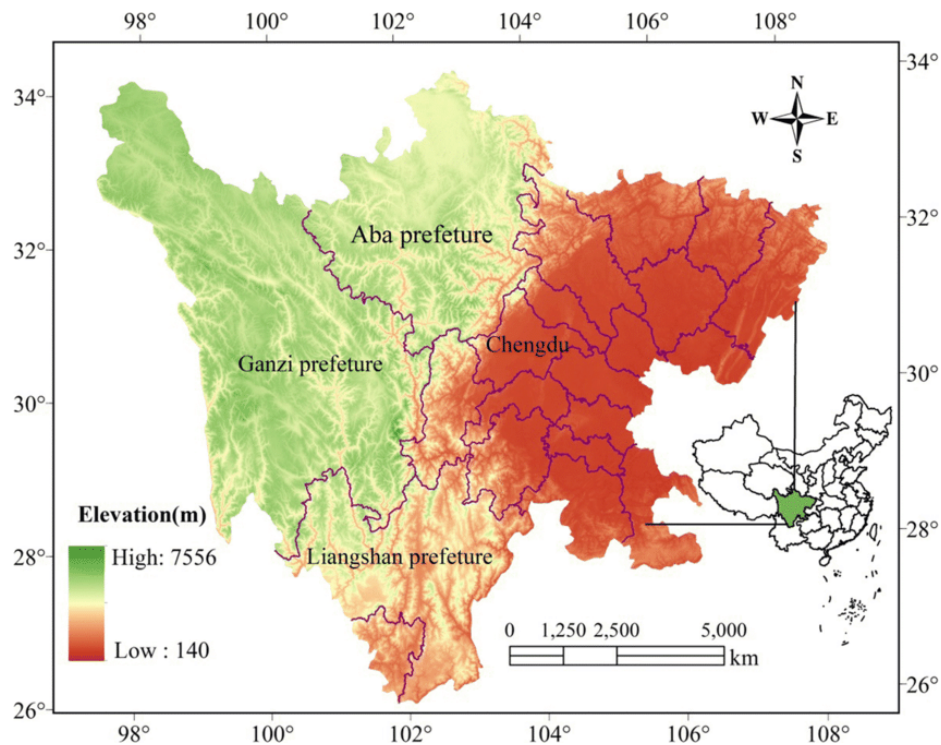


Figure 6. An elevation map showing present-day Sichuan. The Gongga area can be identified by the darkest green shading, in southeastern Ganzi Prefecture.

Source: Zhao and Chen (2020, 4).

Sichuan is simultaneously an ancient and a novel place. From the incorporation of the Bronze-Age Shu state into the Qin state in 316 BCE, Chengdu and the low-lying, agriculturally productive Sichuan Basin were integrated places within the Chinese civilizational sphere; both city and province have retained these same names over the dynasties, creating a strong sense of continuity. Today, many casual references to “Sichuanese”—history, food, culture, dialect, etc.—are really *only* referring to the Sichuan Basin area. After all, Sichuan Province’s current western border was only set in 1950 with the dissolution of Xikang; its eastern border was set in 1997 when Chongqing was separated and made a provincial-level municipality. This is what I mean by Sichuan as a novel place and awkward frame for its western addition. Discrepancies in the everyday imagination of “Sichuan” perpetuate a sense of aculturalism or ahistoricity in the western half of the province. That is, sometimes “Sichuan” is mobilized in an inclusive way meant to match the contemporary borders of the province, but more often I find it is exclusive, only referring to the longstanding Chinese half of the province. Moreover, the inclusive cases tend to be territorially oriented—about policy, or branding western tourism sites like Jiuzhaigou at the provincial level.

Perhaps more than any other Chinese province, Sichuan joins half-and-half what were previously regarded as distinct civilizational realms. Some scholars consider the name “Sichuan” (四川) to be a reference to four rivers: the Min, Tuo, Jialing, and Wu (eastern Jinsha) (Flad and Chen 2013, 26-7). Thus, eastern Sichuan and western Sichuan (i.e., *chushi gangdruk*) are both lands of four rivers—but a somewhat different four. Even when “Sichuan” is employed in an inclusive sense, it is still inclusive from a distinctively Chinese perspective.

Today, tourism and cultural media characterize the differences between eastern and western halves of the province as curious internal features, building Sichuan’s image as a place that simply has it all. Surprisingly, several people brought up the nominal Republican province of Xikang to me during my research—*Did you know this place used to be a different province?*—its lasting memory an exclamation point on the stark cultural, linguistic, and geological divide separating present-day eastern and western Sichuan. This underscores the importance of having a name written on a map (even a historical one), as I

never noted Kham itself as the object of interest among tourists or tourism workers (other than vicariously through the oft-mentioned *Kangba Hanzi* (康巴汉子), a regionalized masculine ideal promoted through tourism). Scholars may have begun to center Kham, but popular and tourism histories have not.

Meanwhile, the only popular legacy of Minya is as part of Mt. Gongga's Tibetan name—Minya Konka.²⁶ Knowing there must be more to learn about the region, I was still shocked at the wealth of history I discovered when I returned home from fieldwork and began researching Moxi from afar. Although Chala was a crucial intermediary facilitating pivotal cultural and economic relations, it has been silenced in favor of a touristic notion of cultural heritage in western China that values places on scales of more or less “real [nomadic/monastic] Tibetan” as opposed to more or less “Hanified”—or even worse, an obsession with development that stands in for and overshadows all other qualities of place. Even Moxi's dramatic recent history, its witness of wartime upheavals in the 20th century, has been silenced out of memory by a selective, nationalist-triumphalist account of History with a capital “H.” In what follows I provide additional evidence for Moxi as a place of cosmopolitan transregional and international mobilities, considering its roles in the tea trade and importance in missions activity.

The Ancient Tea Horse Road, 1700-1950

Like Dartsedo, Moxi came to life with the tea trade. There were likely settlements on the tableland going back many thousands of years, considering its natural moat presents great defensive advantage, and some sources mention a trade or courier route there going back to the Qin or Han Dynasties, but Moxi as we know it today owes its existence to the tea trade, as a market town and courier post on the “Ancient Tea Horse Road” (茶马古道, *Chama Gudao*).²⁷ Rather than a single route, it was in truth a sprawling network passing through Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces into Tibet and Southeast Asia. The name “Tea Horse Road”

²⁶ I have, however, seen “Muya” appear in (a couple) promotional tourism materials. To my limited knowledge, no other toponyms in the vicinity are of Minya origin.

²⁷ Historian Patrick Booz more precisely dates use of the Yajiageng route connecting Ya'an to Dartsedo via Moxi back to 500 CE. He describes it as a “natural route” relying on the paths of river valleys and taking advantage of the easiest mountain passes (2016, 34). Some scholars translate *Chama Gudao* more directly as “Tea Horse Ancient Road.”

wasn't even in use until scholars from Yunnan coined the term in the 1990s; since then, the routes have become an overall successful target for romantic tourism branding and development (Zhou 2013, 253).

The easternmost segment of the main Sichuan route connected Ya'an—China's major growing and processing center for export-only "Tibetan tea" or "frontier tea"—to Dartsedo, whence it was sold for distribution throughout Tibet. Compared to tea produced for Chinese consumers, Tibetan tea was lower quality, with a strongly bitter taste, to be balanced by the salt and butter with which Tibetans prepared it for drinking. Tibetan tea came in three grades, but the lowest and most common grade contained virtually no leaves, only stems and branches (Liu 2020, 68). The plant material was dried, fermented, and formed into dense, rock-hard bricks for more economical transport.

Tibetan demand for tea was seemingly insignificant until the Tang Dynasty, when it first gained popularity as a luxury item. The tea-horse trade was institutionalized in the Song Dynasty (Smith 1991, 31); by the Ming Dynasty, tea had become a staple for all Tibetan households; in the Qing Dynasty, the Tibetan tea trade came to its height and expanded to involve a large variety of imports and exports (Tsomu 2016, 305). Tea bricks were even used as currency in Tibetan areas up until 1950 (Bertsch 2009, 53). The tea trade and associated infrastructure was both a reason and a means for the Qing to manage the Kham frontier. As a stop on this route, Moxi was therefore at no remove from a dynasty-spanning trade that defined the economic side of Sino-Tibetan relations.

In September 2019 I participated in a research travel (研学旅游, *yanxue lüyou*) conference and inspection tour across Leshan and Meishan with a group of leading tourism experts of different specializations. It was my great fortune to meet Yuan Sheng, or "Teacher Yuan," through this event. As the former mayor of Ya'an, he was instrumental both in developing Ya'an tourism and opening up Hailuoguo for initial organized tourism in the 1980s.²⁸ Teacher Yuan emphasized that a major misconception about the Ancient Tea Horse Road had undermined its most awe-inspiring aspect. The use of mules or packhorses

²⁸ In China, sub-provincial municipalities are prefectural-level administrative areas, higher than a county.

on many parts of the tea-horse network, especially in Yunnan, he told me, has confused people into thinking the “horse” In “Tea Horse Road” refers to the means of transporting the tea. But this name only references that the initial purpose of the tea trade was to finance China’s purchase of Tibetan horses for cavalry (Liu 2020, 67; Smith 1991, 30).²⁹ Instead, the Ya’an to Dartsedo segment on which Moxi Town lies was traversed by foot (the Tibetan horses came to China via a different route). Narrow roads cling to rocky mountainsides over dramatic changes in altitude, and horses were easily exhausted, lost, or injured on these roads.³⁰ Instead, porters, or *beifu* (背负), walked the entire way, each carrying a load of tea bricks that could be a hundred or even two hundred kilograms on his or her back. The journey of approximately 150 miles took them 17 or 18 days, according to US diplomat William Rockhill (1891, 299). Even for these professional porters, the roads were extremely dangerous, with frequent rockslides and harrowing crossings over flimsy bridges or hanging from cables. Porters shared these roads with anyone else traveling to Tibet via Sichuan, and old travel accounts are rife with sightings or evidence of disasters along these roads.

Historian Patrick Booz argues that the use of human labor instead of horses was not due to topography, however, but a crude matter of cost. Human porters were slower, but they could actually carry more weight than horses, and they were far more plentiful and inexpensive (Booz 2014, 259). It was grueling work taken on by the impoverished, the lowest level of Chinese society; by the late Qing, many of them suffered from opium addiction.

Moxi was a place made by mobilities. Particularly from the beginning of the 18th to the mid-20th century, these were largely desperate, precarious mobilities. Nevertheless, it challenges a persistent notion that there was some authentic, insular local essence to Moxi—whether barbarous or virtuous—later destroyed by Han travelers or commercial activity in and of itself. Moxi Town was a lively hub for outsiders’

²⁹ With Qing expansion, the Chinese acquired a supply of horses by control of Mongolia and was less reliant on Tibetan horses, but continued to desire other Tibetan products such as gold, medicinal materials, musk, wool and furs.

³⁰ As described by Kangding-based missionary Floyd W. Johnson: “...in all my life I have never been over roads that horses were expected to travel that could compare with the roads we traveled on during our recent three weeks’ itinerary. Two of the horses actually fell over backwards, the road was so steep. That may sound like an exaggeration, but if I told you the whole story of that road you would not believe it at all. And that was a road that we were told was a ‘big road.’” (1938)

rest and relaxation (however inadequate) long before its contemporary commercial development. We can get a certain sense of the towns along this stretch of the trade route by the descriptions of turn-of-the-century explorers:

“Some idea of the number of these porters on the road between Ta-chien-lu and Ya-chou may be formed from the fact that between Wa-ssu-k’ou and Lu-ting ch’iao (about fifteen miles) I counted 481 carrying tea, and there were perhaps 40 or 50 more loaded with sundry other goods, flour, wines, etc.; and along the whole route they were quite as numerous. I was told that at nearly any time of the year the road was as crowded as when I traveled it.” (Rockhill 1891, 301)

“On the road we stopped and had some refreshment at a tea-house by the roadside. The tea-houses on this road are innumerable, it being a great trade route; they are open to the streets, and have forms and tables arranged in rows, and various sorts of eatables are supplied at very moderate rates to suit the purses of the patrons, who are mostly coolies in the tea trade. For four cash one gets a little dry tea in a cup, and hot water *ad lib.*” (Bower 1894, 247)

“The river is so closely shut in by the mighty rock walls on either hand that there is scarcely room for more than the narrow trail. There were a good many walnut trees and willows, and I occasionally saw a meagre patch of barley or Indian corn, but even the Chinese would be hard put to wring a living here were it not for the coolie trade. In fact, every other house seemed to be a restaurant or tea-house.” (Kendall 1913, 120-1)

Dartsedo reached new heights of prosperity during the Qing, when its population swelled and Han inhabitants came to outnumber Tibetans. At the close of the nineteenth century, the British began to flood Tibet with Indian teas, and the Sichuan trade slowed—increasingly after the 1911 nationalist revolution and subsequent political unrest (Liu 2020, 68), at which point the Chinese lost any military or political command over Kham and Central Tibet as well (Tsomu 2012, 323). Nevertheless, Dartsedo was already established as a cosmopolitan center, to the extent that it was called “Tibet’s Shanghai” or “Little Shanghai.” By the account of mountaineer Bursdall (1935), the city was electrified in the 1930s, and according to French diplomat Guibaut, in 1940 even showed silent films three times a week, drawing such crowds that it was “quite impossible to read the titles” (1947, 15). Compared to elsewhere in Tibet, Europeans were a common sight. For these explorers, diplomats, scientists and missionaries, Dartsedo was the point of departure, the last lightpost of “civilization.” As Guibault romanticizes:

“Many Frenchmen have passed through this little town, and some of them have never returned, but have perished in the solitudes of the West. For the traveller, Tatsienlou is to Tibet what Tongourt or El-Golea were to the Sahara: a starting-point for those whom faith or the spirit of adventure have driven out into the unknown like caravels across the ocean. For more than fifty years there have been Frenchmen in Tatsienlou... men who have undertaken the bold and ungrateful task of preaching the gospel in Tibet.” (1947, 7-8)

Moxi, too, remained a known market town and travelers’ waypoint even as other paths opened and the tea trade slowed its pace.³¹ To reiterate, Moxi was not in Guibault’s so-called “solitudes of the West,” but lay a short distance in the other direction of Dartsedo—back toward, though not in, China. It was a place fairly known to the close-knit network of foreigners traveling through or residing in Tibet during the decades of China’s imperial disintegration and national formation. Like the countless porters who trod the familiar but perilous paths, but with a different sense of autonomy, foreign outsiders mobilized their own understandings of place, attempted to flatten difference into a vast field in need of their conquering, and came to leave lasting marks on the cultural and material landscape.

The missions, c.1850-1950

In the late Qing Dynasty and Republican period, Moxi was also a satellite settlement for Dartsedo’s various foreign missions (which provided a network for other foreign activities—scientific research and collection, adventure travel, ethnography, and political dealings). Catholic missionaries had been active in Tibet as early as the sixteenth century but continuously failed to gain a foothold. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the Paris Foreign Missions (Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris, or MEP) had successfully established a presence in Sichuan, encouraging the Vatican to set up a parish at Lhasa in 1846 and delegate the “Tibet Mission” to the MEP (Lim 2009, 81). In 1858, the Treaty of Tianjin formally granted foreign missionaries the right to travel and preach throughout China, allowing the MEP to operate more openly.³² But getting into Lhasa remained near impossible, so as missionaries came to settle primarily

³¹ When the Luding Bridge was completed in 1706, it opened up a more direct path from Ya’an to Dartsedo, but the old route through Moxi continued to see heavy use. The tea trade began to decline in the late 19th century, even as the foreign explorers quoted in this chapter were marveling at the scale of it.

³² This treaty actually prompted the MEP to argue that Tibet was a Chinese territory, reversing their previous stance (Bray 2019, 161-2).

in Kham, the Tibet Mission was renamed the Dartsedo or “Dajianlu Mission” (Gros 2019, 25). Protestant missionaries from the China Inland Mission (CIM), a British organization, established a station in Dartsedo in 1897, and American Protestants became active there the following decade (Zhao 2016, 115-6). The city’s focus on business and trade nurtured a greater tolerance for foreign presence than elsewhere in Tibet where the Dalai Lama’s hold was strong, and the king of Chala was on familiar terms with many missionaries.³³ With this base established, foreign missionaries expanded outward across Kham, often cooperating with one another across nationalities and denominations. And while saving the souls of the “pagans” of Tibet may have been their ultimate goal, mission stations provided a wide array of medical and social services which they found to be otherwise lacking.

It is unclear exactly when missionaries first got to work in Moxi, but a letter from missionary Léonard-Louis Dejan (1882) suggests Christian settlers were well-established by 1881. An 1893 report from MEP missionary Félix Biet suggests many converts good prospects for expansion: “with the grace of God, Mosymien will soon be one of our best christendoms;” though “the real hope... lies in the large villages surrounding Mosymien which now present a favorable movement for Christianity” (*in* MEP 1894, 119). This letter also laments the “quality” of the converts, in particular an old man who has been converted for 20 years but yet failed to learn the catechism. Two years later, however, a letter from Pierre Giraudeau painfully recounts that the station at Mosymien, along with the Christian communities of several surrounding villages (including “Hay-lo-keou”) has been destroyed in a wave of targeted anti-imperialist and anti-Christian attacks. The local converts were “stripped of absolutely everything, even the clothes on their backs... All the houses were looted, and several demolished” (*in* Bureaux de Missions Catholiques

³³ By foreigners’ accounts alone, it is impossible to know if it is the same person they reference over so many decades, as they always use the title and not personal names. Rockhill (1891) describes the King of Chala as one of the most powerful chiefs of Kham, commanding all the lamas in his area and levying taxes. Several accounts also describe how the King of Chala had a “palace” a short distance from Dartsedo; Kendall says missionaries from Chengdu liked to camp on the adjoining pastures in the summertime, to escape the basin’s heat (1913, 133). Wilson describes the king in 1908 as “a slimly built, intelligent man, about forty odd years of age,” who “took considerable interest in our [botanical] collecting work around Tachienlu... and paid us many unofficial visits” (1971, 231). According to Guibaut, in 1940 the “King of Tatsienlou” had recently been dispossessed of his lands per a “frontier fluctuation” and become “resigned to being a person of no consequence” (1947, 13). Rock writes of the “former” Chala Kingdom and king (1930, 399).

1895, 458). These documents indicate there had actually been extensive conversions and constructions by the time another report states Moxi had been established as a mission station in 1905 (Polhill 1907, 337). Judging from that report's characterization of well-attended services and group baptisms, things seemed to have been going smoothly this second time round as well. In contrast, the missions at Batang, another Kham town, faced repeated waves of destruction and violence (Coleman 2013, 93). All in all, missionaries in Tibet had a rough time, suffering many losses, but their tight network and treaty-based protections granted certain privileges and resources that indigenous Christians did not have, many of whom suffered tragically rather than renounce their new faiths.



Figure 7: Moxi Catholic Church. Source: photo by author. 2019

Moxi Catholic Church was built between 1918 and 1926. In addition to church services, the missionaries ran an orphanage, hospital, school, and provided shelter for otherwise homeless elderly. From 1930 to 1934 (though additions were ongoing), the MEP built a large leprosarium called “St. Joseph’s

Home” a few kilometers from Moxi Town, at a place called “Otangtse.”³⁴ The resident Friar Rachelli (1956) recalled how prior to this institution’s establishment, victims of the disease had nowhere else to go; they were turned out of their family homes and went to live in caves; some took their lives or came to otherwise violent ends. He reported thirty-some patients in 1930, but by 1949, records indicate 200 patients lived there—more than four times the number of patients in Chengdu’s foreign-run leprosarium (“News” 1949, 469). By the accounts of Goullart, it seems the large leprosarium had gained Moxi a frightful reputation:

“I ambled lazily... to the vast leprosarium situated farther up this beautiful but accursed valley, avoided like the plague by all outside Chinese and Tibetans. Almost every family here had one leper in their midst.” (1959, 199)

Although (what I believe to be) some mission buildings now lay in ruins—hidden among overgrowth a short distance from contemporary Moxi Town, their purpose forgotten—several of the mission’s stone buildings still stand today. Church services, I was told, are still held in the chapel on Moxi Ancient Street, contributing to a rich local religious syncretism suggested by this Catholic community’s close proximity to a Daoist temple that reverses the local “Jinhua Spirit” (Long March Project 2002), a small Tibetan Buddhist temple (and stories a lamasery formerly located at Yanzigou), as well as ritual traditions distinct to the Yi (and perhaps the Minya) communities.³⁵ In practice, however, the church serves more as an aesthetic calling card for Moxi’s tourism than a place of worship. In my time at Moxi, I never met any local Christians. I found the doors of the church were usually closed, the belltower silent; I never observed any sight or sound of a service or ceremony there, though I was often nearby. (There did appear to be ongoing interior renovations, which might explain a lack of other activity.) A couple times the resident priest (originally from elsewhere in Sichuan) was identified to me from a distance. Tourists are constantly ambling by and posing for pictures in front of the chapel’s closed doors. Old Shen, whose team renovated the church, also

³⁴ I did not find mention of “Otangtse” other than in missions’/missionaries’ documentation, so I am unsure what kind of place name it is. It was likely so close as to have been incorporated into Moxi township’s current boundaries.

³⁵ One may also consider the religious syncretism found at Camp 4 within Hailuoguo (see interlude 3)—with its Tibetan Buddhist stupa, more Chinese-style Four-Faced Guanyin statue, and Thai Buddhist Phra Phrom. Without knowing the details of their origin stories, I understand these statues to be tourist-oriented: catering to tourists’ sense of awe or profundity at the site, and perhaps inspiring visits from foreign Buddhists.

operates a Tibetan restaurant that abuts the churchyard. On the opposite side of the chapel is a towering statue of Mao Zedong. The church is at the heart of Moxi's tourism area that springs to life every evening. The sound of karaoke backtracks, rather than hymns, reverberates across its grounds.

The Red Army in Moxi: 1935 and 1950

During the Chinese Civil War, the Nationalists (Guomindang) and Communists occupied Moxi in turn. Even amid the Japanese invasion, Nationalist forces had been trying desperately to obliterate their domestic opposition, flushing the Communists out of their Central Soviet base in Jiangxi Province on a long flight west—what would become known as the Long March (October 1934–October 1936). By May 24, 1935, the main constituent of Long Marchers had reached the west bank of the Dadu River and acquired the ferry at Anshunchang.³⁶ However, it was going to take too long for the entire army to cross there by the few boats available, so the separated troops marched up opposite banks of the Dadu River. Vanguard regiments on either side were ordered to run ahead and capture the iron-chain bridge at Luding. Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and other leaders followed along the western bank. Without a prompt victory and seizure of Luding Bridge, the main Communist force would be trapped along the banks of the Dadu River, cut off from the route north and easily encircled by the Nationalists. Thus, one of the most pivotal and celebrated moments of the entire Long March is the storming of Luding Bridge on May 29, 1935. After marching through the night, the vanguard on the western bank arrived first, and a volunteering company crossed the naked chains of the bridge, as the Nationalists who presently held Luding Town had removed most of the wooden planks. During the harrowing crossing, the Red Army soldiers were under fire from the Nationalists and fought back by throwing grenades. The Nationalists even set the far end of the bridge on fire, but the attacking soldiers pressed through; the result was a complete Communist victory.³⁷ That

³⁶ According to Xu Zhanquan (2017), among other historians, it was the Nationalists' explicit aim to trap and obliterate the Communists as they attempted to cross the Dadu River. The Taiping Rebellion had met its own end in this context, right at Anshunchang, some 70 years prior.

³⁷ Edgar Snow's (1968) description of the Battle of Luding Bridge, based on interviews with Mao Zedong, has been regarded as canonical. But there are discrepancies between different accounts regarding the dramatic details, and even the dates of events (*see, for example*, Yang 1963). Some suggest the battle has been drastically exaggerated, or claim to have tracked down alternate accounts (*for example*, Gernant 1986). Regardless of the details about this crossing, I would argue the greater distortion lies in the characterization of the Long March as a straightforwardly morally good,

same night, Mao and the other leaders were just arriving in Moxi. The Nationalists had been camped there previously, but were gone by the time Mao's group arrived. The top leaders would stay only one night, but over the next several days some 20,000 soldiers would pass through the town, heading for the crossing at Luding Town.³⁸

According to public accounts (offered in the Hailuoguo Red Army Memorial Hall, for example), the Long March leadership stayed overnight in the Catholic church and held an important meeting there known as the "Moxi Conference" (磨西会议, *Moxi Huiyi*) to decide next-phase strategy.³⁹ Beyond that, various anecdotes, reminiscences and artistic memorials of Mao's visit suggest he discussed religious issues with the priests, enjoyed a meal of Western cuisine, and was excited to find books in the church, where he read deep into the night.

masculine-militarist movement bound for success rather than an extended tragedy—for both the participants (men *and* women), and the communities they raided for survival—in a period of deep uncertainties, complex intrigues, and violent unrest.

³⁸ This figure of 20,000 soldiers comes from an exhibit in the Former Residence of Mao Zedong in Moxi, and I could not find any figure for comparison in other sources.

³⁹ Not all accounts mention a meeting in Moxi. Even Xu Zhanquan, historian for the People's Liberation Army, attributes the strategy that is elsewhere purportedly decided in Moxi—i.e., heading directly north over the mountains instead of passing through Kangding, and sending Chen Yun to Shanghai—as determined at a meeting in Luding's Temple of the City God on May 31 instead (2017, 146).



Figure 8: “Mao Zedong was talking about religious issues with priests” (“毛泽东与神甫谈宗教问题”). Source: oil painting hanging in Moxi’s Red Army Memorial Hall, artist unknown, photo by author. 2019

In this history, Moxi’s cosmopolitanism (and this limited to a condensed image of the missions) is only a tool or a mirror to reflect the openness and intelligence of Mao himself. Today, the church buildings in Moxi Town adjoining the chapel, formerly the priest’s residence, are specifically called “The Former Residence of Mao Zedong” (毛泽东旧住地, *Mao Zedong Jiu Zhudi*) for the single night he stayed there. Visitors can go inside and see the rooms furnished as they supposedly were when Red Army leadership slept there and held the Moxi Conference. This Reddening of the church’s purpose grants it simplistic and positive connotations in the context of touristic placemaking, transforming it from a site that may be sacred to a select few—or stand as an awkward sign of a more painful history involving illness, poverty and foreign

intrusion during a period of national upheaval—to a sacred site of national myth-making that was preserved by patriotic locals in memory of the Long March alone.



Figure 9: "Mao Zedong arrives at Moxi on the Long March." Source: painting appearing in Moxi's Red Army Memorial Hall, photo by author. 2019

There is some evidence that the Red Army's first passage through Moxi was not entirely peaceful. The recollections of Mao's bodyguard Chen Changfeng (1972) as well as outside reports indicate that the Red Army took two to four missionaries captive from Moxi who were then held for an exorbitant ransom. An older missionary was injured and left behind, and buildings were damaged. Missions work struggled to recover for years afterward.⁴⁰ The Red Army filled the town for a week, inhabiting every inn and household,

⁴⁰ The *Catholic Herald* reported in 1937: "The two Franciscan missionaries, Fr. Epiphanius Pegoraro and Bro. Pasquale, taken captive over two years ago when Reds destroyed the Catholic mission and leper asylum at Mosimien, in Sechwan Province are still alive in the hands of the Reds... [and] being held in Northern Shensi." (15)

even the leprosarium. They took food and clothing for their journey ahead. While the museums recount tales of hospitable locals welcoming the soldiers into their homes, some seemed to have received an unfavorable impression of the Red Army, as Friar Rachelli of St. Joseph's Home describes a pervasive atmosphere of fear in 1950 at the prospect of the Red Army's return. People would go running into the mountains at any warning of their approach.

By that point, Nationalist troops had once again occupied Moxi. Friar Rachelli describes the turbulence of the political transition in a detailed account. While the PRC had been officially founded the previous year, their control was limited in the western borderlands, the fate of which remained uncertain. In Moxi, allegiances and fortunes changed swiftly and violently. Local fighters were quick to take up a cause when it seemed promising (or literally trapped into service) but just as quick to flee—though deserters would be killed by their Nationalist commanders if caught. Rachelli describes being “helpless” watching the public executions—up to ten per month (1952, 6). Finally, when defeat seemed inevitable and the Nationalists abandoned the town with hostages in tow, they were pursued and killed by local Yi leaders.

The arriving PLA seemed to set a new mood in the valley at first:

They were all from the province of Shensi... They spoke freely to everybody, helped the farmers in the fields and tried to explain to them the so-called ‘social problems,’ of which they had never heard before. More or less everybody was a small landowner in Mosimien. (1952, 11)

The Communists were particularly attentive to the principal chieftains of the valley. They questioned them on how the conditions of the population might be improved; they sought their advice on this or that matter, even bestowing upon them offices and honorary titles. (1952, 13)

But as the weeks and months passed, Rachelli says that the soldiers intensified propagation of their revolutionary message with nightly hours-long lecture sessions; they banned religions, imprisoned several top chieftains (some were driven to commit suicide out of fear of further torture), strictly controlled travel and redistributed first personal valuables, then land. The friar estimates that, with the sudden reduction to poverty, approximately 20 valley residents committed suicide within a few months' time (1952, 28). PLA soldiers took over the mission's church and orphanage for use as offices. According to Rachelli, the soldiers

were initially wary of the ill, but eventually requisitioned the leprosarium as well, turning the missionaries' patients against them, soon after which all foreigners were deported.⁴¹

I interviewed Headmaster Rong of Moxi middle school, who had grown up in the heart of Moxi Town, "not 200 meters from the Catholic Church." When I asked about any local stories or legends, the only one he mentioned his elders telling repeatedly is when Mao Zedong came through and stayed at the Catholic Church. I asked how local people had reacted at the time. "Back then, people didn't understand. They were afraid and ran into the mountains." He explained that, with a place like this out in the middle of nowhere, of course people would be afraid of an outside army coming through. But after a process of familiarization, they realized there was nothing to fear.

In Moxi Town, there is little description of the PLA's activities circa 1950. There is even less memory of any part that the Nationalists, those pressed into service by the Nationalists, local chieftains, small landowners, or anyone else may have played in the events of Liberation. More deeply enshrined is the one night that Mao Zedong and other top leaders spent there in 1935. The headmaster's statement connecting locals' fear to Mao staying in the church suggests a condensation or conflation of the entire mid-20th century into a single night: Mao stayed in the church; people were afraid; back then they didn't know any better. The Red Army's arrival in Moxi is not only presented as a key moment in the saga of the Long March, but a watershed moment for Moxi itself. It is really the only piece of Moxi history that matters in national mythology, for in order that Mao Zedong's arrival works as the teleological turning point ending Moxi's insularity and remoteness, bringing it onto a path of progress and openness to the world, the nuanced

⁴¹ The broad strokes of this history (requisition of property, deportation of foreigners) are also given in the Moxi museums, but without any mention of violence or any reference to the leprosarium. It is unclear what happened to the patients after PLA takeover. According to a WeChat article published by Guangzhou Medical Health Media Information Technology Co. Ltd. (广州市医康传媒信息技术有限公司 (医联传媒)), the "Catholic Church of Kangding Leprosarium at Moxi" (天主教康定教压磨西麻风院) built in 1928 underwent various name changes but continued to serve as a leprosarium after 1950 and remains in use today. It eventually became a multi-purpose outpatient clinic, leprosy and dermatology institute, and emergency medical center associated with the Hailuoguo Scenic Area.

concerns of local agents and overall cosmopolitan dynamism of mid-20th-century Moxi must be downplayed, even silenced, in comparison.

Based on its passive role in the Long March, Moxi Town has become a site for red tourism. Many companies based in Sichuan and Chongqing organize patriotic tours for their workers to come to red sites like Luding and Moxi Town, where beautiful mountain vistas and quaint, novel nightlife options are only added bonuses alongside the moral instruction offered by this pilgrimage. In 2020, after tourism had reopened, a local government worker told me that this sort of organized red tourism provided the steadiest source of business for the town, keeping the economy going outside of peak season. The Long March is an interesting and important history, but when it becomes the organizing frame for a town's historical significance, other histories must be subservient, and will be lost once elders stop passing them down. State territorialization has made a static periphery out of a dynamic center, flattening a historically rich and cosmopolitan locality. Even the details of the Long March itself are muted in the act of mythologization. When tourists had basic questions or voiced confusion—for example, over the harmonious juxtaposition of Mao and the church (*Wasn't Mao antireligious?*) or even the appearance of the Dadu River on the way to Luding (*It doesn't look that difficult to cross*)—their confusion went unanswered by the locals or tourism workers they addressed. The expression of place knowledge and historical context has been limited all-around. It doesn't matter how the events unfolded, only that they have the form of the right History.

To continue grappling with these themes, I now leave Moxi for brief sojourn at a sacred-mountain city on the other side of the Sino-Tibetan borderland—Meishan, Sichuan Province. This also brings me back to beifu heritage. While not part of the Ancient Tea Horse Road per se, Meishan is known for its beifu; however, unlike in Moxi, this heritage has been dramatized in a high-profile theatrical work. Upon viewing this performance, I felt a resonance with certain themes emphasized in Moxi's placemaking. Only a few tourism workers or scholars ever spoke to me about Tea Horse Road heritage, but those who did were quite fixated on the physical labor of it. For example, Pan Rui, a professional from Beijing in her late 20s who worked temporarily for Biluo Yazhai, said that the Ancient Tea Horse Road was different than the Silk

Road because it wasn't carrying "treasures" and famous people, but rather everyday necessities for common use. Instead, the extraordinary thing about this trade route was simply that the beifu were *able to do* what they did. Pan Rui was also quite explicit that she saw the potential appeal of Moxi in a masculine ruggedness and independence, and she encouraged Old Shen to develop Biluo Yazhai's branding in this direction.

I also share the following vignette because it provides a case of heritage consumption among experts in the tourism field. Just as with the tourist commentaries at Hailuoguo, I was surprised by the expressions of, and reasons for, audience distaste and disappointment.

Right Histories in "Only Mount Emei"

Accompanying Teacher Yuan and a wide-ranging group of experts on the September 2019 Leshan/Meishan research travel inspection tour, we had received tickets to one of the first performances of "Only Mount Emei" (只有峨眉山, *Zhi you Emeishan*). Directed by the renowned Wang Chaoge, it had premiered only a few days earlier. I didn't know about the director coming in and was expecting a much more traditional song-and-dance performance. So I was immediately stunned when I set my eyes on the brand-new 800-million-yuan investment. Not only the show itself, but the immense multi-stage theater hall and carefully landscaped grounds had been designed and built specifically for this show, which was intended to be *the* flagship performance of place for Meishan tourism. In addition to performing arts students, Wang had employed nonprofessional villagers from the area, most middle-aged or elderly, as actors in the show, lending credibility to emotional scenes meant to tell local stories.⁴² Another unexpected innovation was the breakdown of the fourth wall. Actors never "came out of" their performance; rather, the audience was invited in. After the opening act, the entire audience was called down from our auditorium seats, ushered onto and then beyond the stage, thereafter moving from set to set for each new phase of the performance. Even the transitions we walked through were artistic and interactive mini-scenes, making the

⁴² Wang Chaoge is a long-time collaborator of Zhang Yimou, on projects such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and the outdoor musical "Impression Lijiang: Snow Mountain" described by Chen and Hung (2019), which also featured local nonprofessionals as performers.

whole experience seamlessly immersive—even disorienting, as it felt I had stepped into a dreamy space where the “stage” might keep transforming and extending forever.

Meishan is a Sichuanese city south of Chengdu; its Mount Emei is one of China’s most sacred mountains, the site of China’s first Buddhist temple, and the birthplace of Emei martial arts. While not an ethnic minority area, Meishan shares heritage with Moxi in the memory of its mountain porters, the *beifu* (背夫). Teacher Yuan explained, however, that the *beifu* of Meishan were never carried as much weight as the tea porters between Ya’an and Dartsedo. Still, it was interesting to observe the segment of “Only Mount Emei” devoted to this lost profession.

We stood looking up at a long, dark stage extending across one edge of the room and wrapping slightly around two corners. Cave-like recesses above the main floor of the stage were illuminated one at a time, each featuring a historical figure who had famously lived at Emei. Three were poets, each from different dynasties. Once all illuminated, they began a dialogue, the third one gloating about being from the *Ming* Dynasty. Then a fourth area lit up to reveal an actor portraying Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, who had had a residence at Mount Emei. Dr. Sun told the poets that he was from the future and knew more than all of them. “What dynasty are you from?” asked the poets. “I’m *not*,” he said. “I’m from the Republic.”

The scene then switched over to illuminate an older man, a *beifu*, on the main stage. He proclaimed that he was two thousand years old. “Everyone believes it,” he said, “except *you*.” He turned accusatorially toward a young male actor portraying his son. The son brushed off his father’s ridiculous claim, while the old man continued to boast. To show off his strength, the *beifu* took off his shirt and flexed, but his body was not particularly muscular. In response and striking contrast, his son ripped his own shirt off and flexed back. The audience laughed delightedly as the young man stood intimidatingly over his father, making his sculpted pectoral muscles dance up and down.

“Ah, you sit all day in an office,” dismissed his father. As if to say: what do you really know about strength?

The son picked up the father to show off his strength, then put him back down. When the father went to return the gesture and hold the son on his back, the younger man tried to stop him, but finally gave in. The older man was able to hold the much taller and heavier man with absolute ease. The son was shocked at first, then clearly moved. He hugged his father tightly from his shoulders, before finally being set down.

At this point a line of beifu, all elderly men, had lined up on stage. They all had walking canes and props on their back that were made to look like heavy cinder blocks. They took slow but forceful steps forward, one foot at a time, capably bearing their burdens. The father went to join this procession, as though being called away on an otherworldly pilgrimage. But before falling in line, he handed his own cane to his bewildered-looking son, to show that he didn’t even need it. As the beifu marched offstage, the young man looked down at the cane with newfound awe. Then, as if seeing something in the distance, he gained a determined look, rested his weight onto the cane, and hunched over dramatically. As if it were a struggle to move, he trudged forward a single step. Other young, shirtless men had now emerged behind him and they all did this cane-trudge walk in unison. At this point, the audience around me gasped in surprise, and I felt like it could only be at the appearance of so many shirtless men, some of whom were quite muscular, others not.

Their methodical march across the stage was indeed mesmerizing. The music in the background had taken on a militaristic tone and was accompanied by repeated male shouts of a word that I couldn’t decipher—if it was indeed a word and not just a shout. As I seem to recall, the stage lighting also reddened at this point, eliciting a national frame. A sentence illuminated above the stage: “We are all beifu” (我们都是背夫, *Women dou shi beifu*).

The overarching theme of all the skits in “Only Mount Emei” was *xiangchou* (乡愁, “homesickness” or “nostalgia”). Along that emotional structure, two main messages were communicated. One was a general

illustration of the temporal layering of place, establishing Mount Emei's deep roots into the mists of time, inspiring awe for the incomprehensibility of human lives this cloud-shrouded mountain had quietly witnessed come and go. The second message was more explicitly moral: a generational divide has (needlessly) reached a point of mutual misunderstanding—though the show really emphasized the younger, urbanized generation's disrespect and unawareness of the older, self-sacrificing, bitterness-swallowing generation who had been left behind in home villages across China. It felt like a critique of modern values that had disrupted an imagined harmony of the “traditional family.” In the beifu sketch, the “two-thousand-year-old” fathers were replaced by their handsome, white-collar sons. But there seemed to be an anxiety that those whose (superficial) strength had been achieved through gym memberships rather than forged through back-bending labor, foot against mountain path, would be able to fill their fathers' shoes. Centuries of a purer form of masculinity were perched on the brink of extinction, and it was now up to all of us to bear the glorious burden of its continuation. There was still work to do—looking back would help us to look forward.

Ambivalent about the messaging of the show, I was overwhelmingly impressed with the design and execution. The exaggerated emotionality of it also got to me in the end, as someone who was herself far from home. I walked out of the theater feeling that I'd experienced something deeply interesting if not profound, and was looking forward to hearing the reactions of the other experts. One of the men in the group—Mr. Gao—was walking out beside me and asked me for my impression. “It made me a bit homesick,” I admitted. It wasn't until more of the group was clustered up together and I was overhearing their conversation that I found out most people had *not* liked the show. Nobody looked happy beyond the fact we'd all found each other again. “I didn't get it (看不懂, *kan bu dong*),” I heard several times. Then Mr. Gao repeated to everyone what I'd told him. The others regarded me with looks that said *how could you?* “The last portion,” I specified, sensing my opinion was unpopular, but unsure why.

When we got back on the bus, Teacher Yuan suggested that another member of the expert group, who had studied directing, should make some comments about the program. That man—Mr. Bai—agreed

to share his thoughts with us all over the bus loudspeaker. He had three main issues. First of all, he said, it was just copying Zhang Yimou's style; the director had failed to set herself apart. Second, there were some scenes that hadn't adhered to the theme of xiangchou, and that's why so many of us were saying afterward that we "didn't get it." So that was a flaw. Third, and most importantly, there were some serious security issues. The show had required us to move around in the dark, without it ever being clear where we were going. You couldn't keep track of the people you were with. What about the young and elderly? Mr. Bai specifically mentioned how worried he'd been when he had lost track of where *I* was. "We can lose *anybody* else, but we can't lose our American friend," he stressed, and everyone laughed.

Now that the floodgate of criticism had been opened, it didn't stop. The next man to share over the loudspeaker was Mr. Yu, who had worked on a place-themed tourism show in another city. "As far as a tourism product, I give this a score of 20%," he said. Others on the bus laughed at his harshness in seeming agreement. "The director has overstated her personality." Also, he said, the show just hadn't made sense. He invited us all to Xi'An to see the program he'd worked on, without explaining why it was better—the invitation spoke for itself. Mr. Yu received applause as he returned smiling to his seat.

Another expert got up to put his two cents in. "I guess the rest of you just want to be polite and not say it, so okay—I'll say it. This was simply *bad*." He reiterated some of the others' comments but was even more scathing: "The director is self-righteous. Her position was too heavy-handed."

With that, the public criticisms came to an end, but Teacher Yuan, who was seated beside me, asked me what I'd thought. I told him it had been overdramatic at times, but I had found the interactive presentation to be unique and enjoyable. Teacher Yuan listened before launching into his own review. Mostly he agreed with what had already been said by the other men. The one part of the show he *had* actually liked was the beifu, but that was only because of his personal interest in the history. "Do you know how much the ticket costs?" he finally asked me. I didn't. "Normally, it costs *three hundred yuan*. I had heard rave reviews of this show, saying 'You have to see it!', 'Amazing!' But no, I didn't feel that way.

Would *you* pay 300 yuan to see it again?” he asked me. Sensing there was only one correct response, I shook my head no. “Me neither,” said Teacher Yuan, satisfied.

At this point I was both bewildered and disappointed. It wasn’t a matter of the others not liking the performance, but, first of all, how quickly a unanimous opinion had emerged, and second, how discussion had skirted around the actual content of the show—from “I didn’t get it” to attacks on the director that seemed almost personal. I could be wrong, but I wondered if originally some people had enjoyed the show, then quickly been silenced, or changed their mind, once the mood on the bus had made itself clear. I noticed no women had spoken up, except initially to say that they hadn’t understood the show. Maybe they were waiting to hear what a more authoritative (male) voice would say first. In any case, this was by far the most vocal and passionate the group on the whole had been about any of the tourism “products” we’d inspected over the past three days. Was it really because they couldn’t “get” it? It was “simply bad?”

Back at the hotel, I shared an elevator with two of our experts, including the oldest member of the group, Mr. Fei, a scientist in his 80s. He was in the midst of a rant about the show: “—and the worst thing is, they went through all the history, the different poets... and then they stopped with Sun Yat-sen. How can you stop there, and not include our revolutionary history? That’s just *wrong*. That’s really wrong,” he said, visibly agitated.

Honestly, I had been surprised by the prelude to the beifu sketch as well, that it had ended abruptly with the word “Republic” (民国, *Minguo*). But then it came to me, such an abrupt ending may have been the point, quite in keeping with the overarching messages of “Only Mount Emei.” Sun Yat-sen thought he had been better than the poets, with his modern clothes and his “Republic”—but we in the audience all knew how short-lived that period of history had been. It could be a critique of the Republican government; it could be a point about modern hubris in general. But even more to the point, Sun Yat-sen *had* lived at Mount Emei. What if Emei simply wasn’t a major site in China’s second phase of revolutionary history? Is that allowed? Because he had been so intent waiting to perceive the *right* History, Mr. Fei closed off the

possibility of *any* interpretations, even those that could fit with his morals. A highly aestheticized history demands overtness, with no room left for interpretation.

This “Only Mount Emei” experience offers inspiration on the presentation and reception of history at Moxi as well. There is not just one correct quality to perceive in a place, just as there is not only one account of history. There is beauty in the open-endedness of possibilities, the interpretation of events, but there has to be some possibility of *knowing* different perspectives; otherwise, we are caught in regimes of value where we see nothing at all (except “space”). A mythological, teleological frame reduces the significance of everything that has happened in a place that is deemed unrelated to a single historical outcome. In order to cover the peripheries, the nation is stretched thin. We see here also a clash of different scales—national and regional. Most often, it is the local that falls victim and out of memory.

Just like Emei, Moxi (and Minya) is a long-inhabited place, a sacred place. The immensity of life lived there gives it depth—even though much of its history over the past century has been violent and tragic itself. Regardless of their ideals and debatably well-intentioned deeds, the Qing state, the foreign missionaries, and the Communists all came in critiquing and attempting to fix the problems of “quality” they perceived in the valley’s ethnicized inhabitants. They all sought to make place from space in fitting with a moral order, with little regard for the depth of place and time. Is it possible for tourism to be a counterforce to their destructive, devaluing work? Or is it only deepening their errors, increasing the impossibility of knowing a place in its own context, as its own center, in its own people’s terms?

Conclusion

Moxi is a borderland, a liminal zone of cultural exchange, a palimpsest of histories that have left visible and spiritual traces on the land and its cultures. But it is also a place that is continually produced through the circulation of discourses and people. In this process, what realities are left outside of the frame, beyond awareness? Countless sites like Moxi in the Sino-Tibetan borderland have been peripheralized in a larger moral geography, renamed, and targeted for (usually tourism-driven) development to overcome their “remote” and “backwards” qualities. And in elevating one historical event over all others, cultural

heritagization has devalued Moxi even as it intends to enhance its value to tourists. But the result for many visitors—a perception of “no history”—is yet further means and rationale for continued space-making. With each red tourist, a triumphalist-masculinist history is reenacted; the triumph is over a space without time, and it becomes more difficult to imagine who else other than Mao Zedong might have walked that ancient street, or who might have passed a night within the walls of the missions. Beyond right or wrong, good or bad, there is a qualitative, affective loss when we disengage with the content of history.

Interlude 2. *The Glacier Tongue*

The bus pulls to a halt beside a nondescript stone path running alongside an imposing cedar forest. This shaded section of road seems like an anticlimactic ending point, and at first everyone just stays in their seats, looking at one another. After a moment the driver announces that we have arrived at Ganheba and everyone must disembark. Upon doing so, tourists are immediately faced with a decision—left, crossing under the road and toward the cableway ticket office, or straight, past a line of snack and souvenir stands to the start of the “Wayward Pines Glacier Challenge Path”—a 1.5-kilometer trail (mostly wooden-plank stairs) through old-growth forest leading to the “Old Observation Deck.” Although signage indicates this layout in both word and diagram, in practice the options are severely unclear and regularly misunderstood—especially the fact that Camp 4, the only location offering a view of Mt. Gongga and the glacial icefall, is *only* accessible via the cableway, which comes with an additional RMB 150 ticket price. During peak season, a worker is stationed here at the bus drop-off to issue directions through a loudspeaker.

Walking straight ahead toward the snacks and souvenirs, the view opens up. Ganheba (elevation 3,020 meters) is more of a way station than an actual attraction, its center marred by a giant parking lot where the buses wait for their turn to head back down the mountain, but otherwise I find the scenery here just as breathtaking as any observation deck’s. On a clear winter or autumn day, one can see magnificent snow-capped mountains to the north and west. The old-growth forest encircling the site looks particularly magical, impossibly tall, with long strands of light-green lichen (松萝, *songlong*) hanging like streamers from high branches. The entrance to the Challenge Hiking Path beckons like something out of a fairy tale, the stairs disappearing into deep woodsy shadows. There may be snowfall accumulated here, even if there was none at lower altitudes on the ride up. And it is snow unlike any I’ve ever seen, its edges more exaggerated, sharp and pure. I have marveled at the perfect six-sided forms of each snowflake and the strange crystalline chains created as it delicately envelops each branch and strand of lichen. Chipmunks and songbirds flit about the branches, and the calming chime of a small, swift stream is never far out of earshot.



Figure 10: The Challenge Hiking Path. Source: photo by author. December 28, 2018

Porters wearing bright green Hailuoguo-branded jumpsuits cluster around the snack area and the entrance to the Challenge Hiking Path—lean, heavily tanned men of varying ages who hail from villages further into the mountains. The first several times I come to Hailuoguo, before settling on my bus-based recruitment method, I wander around this area trying to strike up conversations. First understanding me to be a tourist, the porters try to solicit my business. “We need to make a living!” one comments angrily when I refuse. But after several visits I gain some recognition as a researcher. A few of the younger porters chat with me and think it’s hilarious that I am studying “humanity,” arguing among each other who is more mentally aberrant and thus worthy of my investigation. One of the porters takes to calling me his girlfriend, though his coworker is quick to inform me the man has a wife and child(ren).

The glacier underfoot

One day in April I am walking the Challenge Hiking Path alone, and I see this flirty porter helping to carry a woman in her 20s, while her two equally youthful companions—one woman and one man—walk behind them. “Come with us to see the glacier,” beckons the porter, and I join their little procession. The three tourists are from Tianjin. The girl who hired the litter declines to sit any longer once we reach the Old Observation Deck, saying she feels ashamed to be so young and making them carry her like that. The porters reassure her that *a lot* of young people hire them, and besides, they are happy for the business.

The Old Observation Deck is so named because it used to be the only one. Challenge Path hikers who have just been enveloped in the old-growth forest suddenly emerge onto the platform and have an open view of the valley below, where lies Hailuoguo Glacier. The curvature of the valley prevents clear sight of either the glacial icefall to the right or the glacial terminus to the left. Sometimes the valley is filled with fog, completely obscuring sight of the glacier. It is still nice to stop and rest here, as there is a concessions area with seating. The hiking path actually continues, downward, beyond the overlook. There, metal stairs bolted into the side of the mountain give way to more wooden-platform walkway; however, before one is halfway down the rocky slope, this path abruptly ends. From there only pieces of what it once was remain: a length of stairs here, a pile of wooden planks there—evidence pointing to a violent rockslide. At the point where the walkway disappears, the young man from Tianjin seems to tire of hiking and elects to stay back while the rest of us continue downslope, then onto the glacier itself.



Figure 11: Porters and tourists on the glacier tongue. Source: photo by author. April 11, 2019

We are standing on part of the “glacier tongue,” the long ablation zone which flows imperceptibly through the curving valley, slowly scraping away at and gathering debris from its sides. This debris consists of rocks of varying size and gray, sandy material. The ice surface itself is uneven, undulating with strange formations, cut across with rivulets of flowing water, and opening up into small holes or narrow cracks. Our porter guides us to a specific spot he knows. Here we can clearly observe a wall of ice and peer beneath the glacier’s earth-covered visage to blue hues beneath. While the pair of women photograph one another, the porter takes my phone to get some photos for me, presumably because he knows the best angles. His photos are all close-ups of the ice. There’s little to no supraglacial debris in the images, but it’s also impossible to get a sense of scale or context. After several minutes wandering around and photographing the glacier, the girls from Tianjin seem anxious to get back, which can only be done by the way we came. On the return journey, their friend is having a rough time, constantly needing to stop and catch his breath.

The porters encourage him to sit in the litter, which has been vacated, but he refuses, his pride not allowing it. “I’m a man, aren’t I?” he protests.

After this excursion in April, I don’t walk on the glacier again, wary of ever attempting it without the experienced guidance of a porter. But soon even the chaperoned option becomes off-limits. One sunny day in July, I discover that this downslope portion of trail has been closed off. The Old Observation Deck now ends with a chained gate and a warning sign. I figure it’s because of the rainy season (roughly mid-July through mid-September), but that section of the path will never reopen in my time at Hailuogou. This diminishes the services that the porters can offer, and I see fewer of them working in Hailuogou as the months pass.

With higher temperatures and greater rainfall (versus snowfall), this already rockslide-prone landscape becomes more volatile. Even though the path could be rebuilt, the glacier is an increasingly dangerous place to walk. One of the major experiential offerings of Hailuogou—interacting with the glacier at “zero distance”—has therefore become untenable. While many tourists, like Mr. Song, would expect the experiences offered at a nature tourism site to improve over time, a climatic shift is instead intensifying hazards and closing off previously accessible areas of the park. A sign quietly goes up, and workers reliant on tourist money are quietly pushed out of their jobs.

But it is not the privileged outsiders who come to Hailuogou as tourism officials, entrepreneurs or scientists who are put out of work by the landscape’s volatility; it is the locals who have the most limited options for participation in the cash economy in the first place. Climate change is a universal human threat on the one hand, that itself has uneven and random manifestations on the other. Yet its human impacts will be neither universally felt nor innocently random, as they unfold across an uneven playing field of life chances. Economic and environmental precarities are intertwined and reinforcing. Thus when “natural” disaster comes, as in the case of Hurricane Katrina, it becomes “double” for those without the resources to move from its path or inspire rescue, as Scheper-Hughes (2005) describes. Dissolution of the porters’ tourism livelihood may be considered trivial in the grand scheme of climate disaster, but it is a harbinger

of the inequalities to be exacerbated in likely future catastrophes—for example, as thawing increases rockslides, or the Hengduan Mountain glaciers’ freshwater stores are depleted.

These porters were the employees with the most intimate knowledge of the glacier and its season-to-season changes, as they were the only employees sanctioned to guide tourists for hikes over the surface of the glacier. Other guides were less likely to stay in their jobs long-term and would only periodically walk on the glacier, either against regulation or with special permission (to take promotional photos, for example). Now the porters’ glacier access is cut off, and whatever observations they might have to tell about the changing environment are removed from Hailuoguo’s tourism-management ecosystem. It is another way that distance and unintelligibility accumulate in the glacier’s retreat.

“I didn’t know what I was looking at”

Back at the Old Observation Deck, I find a few dozen people scattered around the platform and the adjacent snack stand. A short, jolly man in his 60s casually leaning against one of the informational signs (about the glacier) calls out to me in greeting. We get to talking. The man’s name is Jia Jianxiong, and he’s a retiree from Shanxi Province here with his daughter, granddaughter, his childhood friend Xiong Hongwen, and Mr. Xiong’s wife. I ask if I can spend the rest of the day with his group. “Like a tour guide?” Jianxiong asks happily. “You can explain things in the park to us?” I say I will, but warn him that I still have a lot to learn. He insists, “You’ll be more familiar than us!” His lanky friend Hongwen jumps into the conversation, asking me to explain what we are supposed to be looking at from this very observation deck. I’m new to tour guiding so I assume he knows we’re looking at the glacier, that he just wants some details. To the best of my ability, I begin to describe what kind of glacier this is. As I do, it’s like something big finally clicks for him.



Figure 12: View from the Old Observation Deck. Source: photo by author. April 8, 2019

“All this... is the glacier?” Hongwen asks, incredulous, looking down into the valley again.

“Yes,” I explain, “there’s a lot of small rocks on top of it, but if you look and see those big pieces, and underneath, that’s all ice.”

He seems reluctant to accept it. “Underneath is all ice? I thought it was all rocks!”

Jianxiong agrees. “If you hadn’t said so, I would never know that was the glacier.”

Hongwen adds, “Just now, I didn’t know what I was looking at.”

“Do you smoke?” asks Jianxiong, offering me a cigarette as he takes two out for himself and his friend. Right away a park officer notices them lighting up and comes over to explain that smoking is prohibited. Now that they’re in dialogue with another worker, the men from Shanxi eagerly ask him to

confirm that everything down there is the glacier. He does, and once again the two exclaim they'd had no idea.

As I gain more experience in my role, I quickly come to realize that identifying the glacier—even from designated glacial observation decks—is one of the most reoccurring, important and potentially contentious aspects of a Hailuoguo tour guide's job. This leaves me to wonder, does the vast majority of tourists (who do not hire a guide) leave the park without thinking they've seen a glacier, even if they have seen the glacier tongue? It would seem there is an easy explanation: tourists expect a body of pure white, but the glacier tongue is covered in rocks.

The anthropology of tourism literature does not lack examples of the “dissonance” between tourist expectations and reality (Skinner and Theodossopoulos, 2011). Nature tourism is not exempt from failures of the tourist gaze. Site operators' attempts to paradoxically construct an untouched “nature” or “wilderness” in line with tourists' preformulated imaginaries always have materialities and contingencies beyond their control. In Hailuoguo, cloudy weather was the main headache both for the administration and tourists, many of whom will only visit the park once in their life.

However, the failure of signage to convincingly communicate the presence of the glacier on the one hand, and many tourists' casual indifference on the other, continue to strike me as odd. When confronted with an object that looked so contrary to expectations, tourists tended to either express disappointment in the quality of the site overall, or—as in the case of Mr. Jian and Mr. Xiong—express surprise with no follow-up questions. I conclude that, as Mr. Song said, the glacier is not as relevant to tourists as one would expect from it being the focal point of the famed park. It is my sense that most tourists are approaching their trips as low-stakes amusement and socially-oriented enterprises. They are more concerned with personal bonds that can be deepened and established on tour, to the point that they don't seek to learn about the glacier if it is not through a human interaction. Across the following two sections of interlude, I'll describe a similar case where tourists disagree about the existence of the glacier, but the resulting interactions seem to not really be about the glacier at all.

The cableway

From the Old Observation Deck, one can only walk back whence they came. Back at Ganheba they may either descend the mountain by bus, walk to Camp 3, or take the cableway to Camp 4—though most tourists will have skipped the Challenge Hiking Path altogether to go straight for the cableway. Sometimes there is no line for the cableway, but a short wait (up to a half-hour or so) is also common. During peak season or a national holiday, the wait time will exceed two hours—maybe three.



Figure 13: Line for the cableway. (This point is approximately 45 minutes from the front of the line.) Source: photo by author. August 8, 2019

It's August 2, just a day or two before the summer vacation crowds *really* start to descend on Hailuoguo. A light rain is intermittently falling, and I'm accompanying a married couple and their two female friends, whom I all gauge to be in their 50s. They are from Chongzhou (just west of Chengdu), and

right away the fashionably-dressed wife (Tao Xueqi) tells me her husband (Wang Yige) was in the military. This checks out, as he still has the military haircut and an athletic physique. In between loud expletives, Yige is singing and talking loudly, making eye contact and smiling at strangers, drawing everyone in the vicinity into his personal party. Xueqi is more subdued, but just as fun-loving and at ease in her surroundings. She repeatedly invites me (and my parents) to come visit her in Chongzhou, offering to drive me (or us) around “everywhere.” She says that’s, after all, what she usually does. Right now she may be traveling with others, but most of the time she just drives around by herself and has fun. I ask if she’s retired and she just laughs, along with the others in her group. “Unemployed!” she says, at the same time that Yige and one of their friends say, “She does business.” No further explanation is offered. Xueqi shows me some pictures and short videos from her Moments. “My friends all say my Moments page is never-ending (翻不完, *fan bu wan*),” she laughs.

I end up surprised by the end of my fieldwork how many of the tourists I guide are either unemployed, flexibly/self-employed, teachers on summer break, or retirees. (On top of that, some people were hesitant, or simply refused to tell me what they did for a living, despite complete openness on other topics I would have assumed more sensitive.) When I did encounter the full-time regularly employed, they were just as likely to be at Hailuoguo on a work-organized trip than a family vacation. This underscores the extent to which tourism, especially self-planned tourism, remains a privileged activity in China. Visiting a park like Hailuoguo is expensive. As Rupf et al. point out, the average entrance fee to national-level scenic areas or World Heritage Sites in China is nearly 1% of per capita GDP, about ten times more than other countries (2019, 305). What’s more, considering the demands of a typical white-collar job in China, even those who do have the money may never have the time to travel. This affects tourist psychology. Several Chinese people with whom I discussed tourism theories disagreed that work and leisure (or work and tourism) were clearly differentiated or opposed spheres of life in China. To them, most “leisure activities” were just another set of social or business responsibilities, if not demands. Personal and business spheres

blur, such that one is not in a totally different mindset when at work versus on tour. Instead, a “leisure” mindset is the luxury of those who are wealthy enough (in money *and* time) to not work, or to hardly work.

Yige and Xueqi are not interested in tourism theory, however. I get the sense that they are not even interested in having a tour guide—they just want me to join in their fun.

As each cable car seats up to eight adults, we five end up sharing ours with a married couple from Chengdu, who seem a little older than Yige and Xueqi. Through their Sichuan dialect, I am able to discern that the Chengdu man works with national parks, so he is well-versed in geography. He says he’s been to Hailuoguo before, but it was before the cable car was built. Then he begins educating my group about the glacier. Naturally, in the process, he mentions how the large formations in the valley below us are ice.



Figure 14: View from the cableway. Source: photo by author. June 19, 2019

“No, that’s rock,” reply all other tourists in the car, including the man’s own wife.

“It’s ice,” he corrects them. “The rock and sand are on top of it, covering it, but below these small bits, the large forms are all ice.”

“No, that’s ROCK!” protests his wife, echoed by the members of my group, all very confidently, and with surprising passion. Even though the man’s descriptions are quite detailed and scientific-sounding, and the others present no evidence to back up their own claim, there is no persuading them to abandon that position. After any clarification the experienced man offers, the others reiterate, *it’s rock*.

Finally, when we come into view of the glacial icefall, some of the contrarian camp sighs in recognition: *Ahhhh*, there’s *the glacier*. But I later find out the argument didn’t end there.

Unlike the Old Observation Deck, the cable car offers a view of the entire glacier—though not all at once. After soaring through and above the top branches of giant cedars, the view opens up and we catch sight of a rocky red-and-gray river valley with swift-moving water. Following it upslope, the stream disappears under its source—the glacier. We have a birds’ eye view of Chengmendong and “Crescent Moon Lake” (月牙湖, *Yueya Hu*). Already we are so high that it is difficult to make out individual tourists who are gathered on the observation walkway there. We ascend slowly over the length of the glacier tongue and draw close to the mountain on its west flank, thin waterfalls cascading down its steep side. The air feels remarkably quiet and still—especially if white fog envelops the car, obscuring all objects outside and all sense of distance.

Chapter 3. **Ethnic Frame: Making Moxi a Tibetan Place**

In chapter 2, I considered how Moxi's glorified but passive role in revolutionary history overshadows deeper, but also not-far-distant cosmopolitan histories linked to trade, missions, and regional politics. Although this satisfies the imperatives of a triumphalist national teleology, it leaves tourism-place consumers and producers with a sense of historical superficiality that devalues the town. Ethnic framings of Hailuoguo/Moxi reveal a similar process of invaluation. In this chapter I will describe how the selective place-making of Hailuoguo/Moxi as Tibetan over and above other potential ethnic framings has catered to tourist desires yet devalued the site because it is not Tibetan *enough*. This perceived lack results from a combination of longstanding multiethnic presence, contemporary ethnic ambiguity, Han migration and Han-led development ("Hanification") in addition to specifically touristic processes. In the first section of this chapter, I contextualize Tibetan-themed placemaking in a larger Chinese moral geography and in relation to the 20th-century Ethnic Classification Project. In the second section, I introduce "Tibet" as a utopian "tourscape" and Lhasa as the "center out there" (Turner 1973) framing tourists' perceptions and evaluations of Hailuoguo/Moxi. In sections three through six, I evaluate how non-Tibetan ethnic framings are employed for Moxi before returning to Tibetan theming in section seven with the description of a Tibetan feast performed for tourists. Building upon the previous chapter, I argue that when the touristic representation and spaces for leisure don't represent the people who are there, it not only limits economic opportunities but also experiential possibilities. Oversimplistic frames for ethnic identities and pressures to accelerate tourism development create grounds to reengineer culture as though from a void. The question that remains is what does an embrace of highly localized ethnic specificity or broad multiculturalism even look like? There remains in Moxi's multiethnicity a defiance of the frames that outsiders would put upon it, but with nowhere to channel itself.

Chinese moral geography and the Ethnic Classification Project

Long before world systems theory, Chinese rulers and scholars explicitly conceptualized their own kingdom as geo-spiritual center of the universe (天下, *Tianxia*), the point from which order spread outward

in the four directions toward an indistinct and chaotic periphery. Walled cities—the very concept of a city (城, *cheng*) denoting a wall—stood as microcosms of the cosmos, embodying and holding the proper, orthodox order (Farmer 2000). Levels of order within and beyond a city wall corresponded to a larger geographical imaginary, where disorder and danger characterized the imperial periphery. These distant “four directions” were inhabited not only by nomadic and seafaring peoples but also, according to the imaginary of ancient Chinese cartography (not unlike that of medieval Europe), fanciful monsters and human-animal hybrids. Furthermore, many of the Chinese names for peripheral peoples (precursors to today’s minority *minzu*) were written with pictographic components that denoted animals. Dikötter (1992) thus argues that in premodern times, the Chinese employed an ideology comparable to that of “race,” as in a biologically-anchored and hierarchical system of human classification.

At the same time, outsiders to the Chinese “geo-body” (Winichakul 1997) could—to an extent, or over generations—become civilized insiders. This, indeed, was the explicit aim of imperial Chinese expansion. China’s assimilationist model is what Townsend (1992) calls “culturalism” or what Harrell describes as a “civilizing project,” in large part a “literizing project” (2001). The idea is that anyone could “become Chinese”—assimilated not by military force, but by the gentle compulsion of a superior moral-political order. (In reality, military force was still a major factor.) Over millennia, once-peripheral peoples were incorporated into a Chinese identity through the spread of Chinese education, statecraft, agriculture, genealogical accounting, burial practices and other rituals, and above all writing. What began in the Bronze Age as a confederation of clans along the Yellow River—the “Huaxia” (华夏)—ultimately became the world’s largest ethnic group, the Han.⁴³ As the Han realm expanded, those groups that were most resistant to assimilation moved south and west, into less desirable environments. These “barbarians” were classified

⁴³ It should not be taken for granted that some “core” of Han Chinese culture passed down directly from the Huaxia. Many practices and stories that are today considered mainstream and foundational to Han Chinese identity likely originate from minority, peripheral or once-peripheral groups. Xu Jieshun (2012) draws on Fei Xiaotong (1988) to compare the formation of the Han with the metaphor of a constantly accumulating “snowball”—a reminder that the boundaries identifying [Han] Chinese belonging have changed over time.

as “cooked” or “raw” depending on whether they had accepted any Chinese culture (especially literacy) or not.

This center/periphery moral order has not been completely abandoned, only overlaid with modernist notions of ethnicity, race, evolution and the nation-state. *Minzu* (民族) is the Chinese term correlating to “ethnicity,” though it is often translated as “nationality” instead. Shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the central government dispatched social scientists across the country to identify, describe, and categorize its ethnic groups (though the results of the investigation would not be applied until after the Cultural Revolution). This was known as the Ethnic Classification Project (民族识别, *Minzu Shibie*). The theory underlying ethnic classification was based on Marxian historical evolution and Joseph Stalin’s definition of the nation (2021, 7), a categorization that was both descriptive and normative. China’s state-employed ethnologists grouped together non-Han peoples not only according to the criteria of shared language and customs but also their level of “objective” socioeconomic attainment. Tibetans, for example, were categorized as a feudal society, the Yi as a slave society. That the most advanced socioeconomic tier just happened to be occupied by the Han became a legitimized scientific fact rather than a contestable ideology, quietly biologizing millennia-old beliefs of Chinese moral supremacy.

The most obvious result of Ethnic Classification was the delineation of fifty-six Chinese ethnicities.⁴⁴ The project effectively concretized ethnic borders and boundaries (Chio 2014, 32). Even though many have felt, or still feel, that they have been misidentified or overlooked by the project, and have filed petitions to that effect, the categories have hardly changed since the 1950s. Through countless repetitions, the “fifty-six minzu of China” has been enshrined as properly representative of China’s ethnic diversity. As in the past, today a member of an ethnic minority group might be able to shed their “ethnic” look or sound and move easily through the Chinese cultural world, but at the very least their minzu identity will appear printed on their national identification card, and in some cases, deny them a passport. On top of

⁴⁴ To be more precise, Ethnic Classification initially identified fifty-five minzu; just one minority group was added soon afterward.

the hukou system, concretized ethnicity serves to make Chinese citizens legible and governable, and mediates their access to state resources. Alongside the solidification of geographical and administrative borders, I consider the ongoing production of ethnicity to be a key bordering practice.

The overarching and inclusive ethnic boundary for all 56 ethnic groups is that of the *Zhonghua Minzu* (中华民族, “the Chinese nation”). The idea is that despite their differences, all minzu are ultimately one minzu with a shared past and future. *Zhonghua Minzu* is a clear example of an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), but one with some particular and deep tensions. According to Stevan Harrell, the Chinese nation is “a fiction supported by fictions... because the assumptions of nationalism, that a people, a language, a culture, a territory, and a government should fit together perfectly in the natural order of things, simply do not apply to China” (1999, 157). He explains, in the early-to-mid-twentieth century formation of China as a nation-state, it was simply living on one side or the other of once-changeable imperial borders that determined whether or not one was part of the *Zhonghua inzu*. How, otherwise, are ethnic Koreans and Mongolians in the PRC fundamentally Chinese, while those in Korea or Mongolia are not? The historical arbitrariness of China’s boundaries must be obscured by rhetorical, symbolic and disciplinary work on peripheral peoples and places. Yet rather than leaning all the way into Chinese exceptionalism (that to claim sovereignty China need not follow the European modernist model), contemporary China’s “pluralism within unity” (Fei 1988) is still frequently legitimized in terms of grand modernist imaginaries of kinship and ancestral unity with a presumed material verifiability (Dikötter 2013; Leibold 2012).⁴⁵ Ethnic minorities’ origins are traced back to the founding heroes of Chinese mythology; genetic (and physiognomic) studies map the close physical ties between ethnic groups; anthropological studies validate existing historical hypotheses, and political rhetoric emphasizes a singular and inclusive Chinese “family.”

⁴⁵ As cited by *The New York Times*, Li Hui, geneticist and professor of Fudan University expresses an essentialist notion of Chinese national belonging: “The community of Chinese nationhood originally existed as a natural phenomenon, a natural essence, and only then did we give it a name... There was first the community and only then each ethnic group.” (Buckley et al. 2022)

Furthermore, the ultimate goal of ethnic policy in Maoist thought remains, as in the imperial era, a “natural” assimilation toward more complete unity (Zhou Enlai *as cited in* Smith 1994, 72-73).

A general belief in social evolution and validity of the concept of “race” have remained salient in China into the 21st century, supporting the common-sense logic of a minzu hierarchy. Studies have traced the influence of social Darwinism among Chinese intellectuals and pointed out the unproblematized use of race in Chinese biological anthropology (e.g., Cheng 2017; Štrkalj 2007), but little work has been done on popular beliefs about race and evolution in China. During my fieldwork, I frequently encountered essentializing ideas reflecting belief in the inherent essence of a group of people (ethnicity, race or nation) tied to a developmental level. The harmony and equality-espousing Han often served as a foil to violent and inequitable foreigners and ethnic minorities alike. One Han tourist told me, quite out of nowhere, that “We Chinese are really friendly; we like to make friends. Only the Xinjiang and Tibetan people are still barbaric and violent.” Another time I observed a Han Chinese woman ask a Tibetan graduate student if his parents were landlords, doubting that a Tibetan from the countryside could otherwise afford higher education. But success in market-based rather than socialist development was more often the implicit framing for invaluation of ethnic or national quality. As an American, I was often pulled into conversations that revealed a common-sense assumption that national economic ranking can be trusted as an all-determining social fact. Some people approached me with clear expectations that I would be eager to express pride in America’s number-one status and gloat over China’s insufficiencies. Meanwhile, the relative underdevelopment of Ganzi Prefecture was not only attributed to topography and altitude, but the backwardness and ignorant resistance of its ethnic minorities. I will share a brief example.

While staying at Biluo Yazhai guesthouse during the 2020 lockdown, one of the workers asked why the Internet speeds had suddenly slowed down so much. Another answered that it was because we were in a Tibetan district, and it was March. As the conversation continued, it became clear that only one other person of the twelve staying there had any knowledge at all about Tibetan uprising that had occurred across the plateau (including Ganzi) in March 2008. When this person brought it up, even the guesthouse’s

other Sichuan residents expressed surprise. “I thought only central Tibet was disorderly (乱, *luan*) like that,” someone remarked. The one who had brought up the unrest sighed: “If only these [political and religious] problems could be cleaned up, *then* Ganzi could really develop.” The underlying assumption is a singular concept and positive trajectory for “development” (which just happens to align with the vision of the state).

Strikingly, a number of people in my study, including the highly educated, expressed to me their doubts about biological human evolution from an ape-like ancestor, or even the geologic age of Earth. (This would come up when I said I studied anthropology.) Similar to the argument put forward by Shen (2015), it seems to me that social evolutionism strikes a chord in popular thought for its complementarity to traditional Chinese ideologies (as in the “civilizing project”). Instead of a widespread acceptance of biological evolution that is then extended to social settings, society is the higher-order moral-developmental framework within which the natural sciences must somehow fit. This is true of European racial nationalisms as well, which predate publication of the theory of species evolution. I do not mean to suggest this masking of imperialist thought is a particular to China. At the same time, to the extent that the Chinese nation is imagined as a softer, *cultural* “pluralism within unity” rather than a biologically-distinguished collective, it legitimates the social hierarchy and justifies interventions by contrasting the China model favorably to harder, racial stratification in Europe or the United States as well as colonial regimes. Marisol de la Cadena (2000) describes a somewhat similar situation in Peru, where elite intellectuals rejected the European, biological notion of race to define indigeneity in more celebratory cultural terms. However, this redefinition granted the state more latitude to denigrate certain aspects of indigeneity as “inauthentic” or improper and seek to improve them, ultimately creating a case of what Balibar calls “racism without races” (2007, 84).

Similar to the issue of climate change to be discussed in chapter 5, the point is not acceptance/denial of hominin evolution, but how the absence of information, or how misinformation, might be operationalized: in this case, the ethno-cultural stratification of society and promotion of social development narratives exist dangerously alongside a suspicion or misunderstanding of basic scientific facts (e.g. that there are no human

“races”; that humans are Earth animals rather than alien transplants), opening one up to the persuasion of alternate histories that undermine universal humanism as well as multispecies perspectives.

A combination of essentializing discourses therefore confound ethno-biological, moral and capitalist development, with boundaries hardened by the Ethnic Classification Project and reinforced through ongoing targeted policies. There is a strong spatial element to the socioeconomic distinctions within Chinese plurality. A geography of differential development overlays the persistent center-periphery model of traditional Chinese civilization. In a discursive analysis of the state’s Western Development Project (西部大开发), Barabantseva (2009) observes the fusion of economic and ethnic moral geographies. The rationale of the project, which was launched in 1999, was to narrow the disparity in eastern and western China’s economic development and—simultaneously—between the Han and ethnic minorities. Even minority districts not located in the geographic west were targeted through the project. China’s “West” is therefore both geographic and symbolic designation of non-Han economic and moral backwardness. Official rhetoric suggested that targeted economic development of these peripheries, through tourism, the in-migration of eastern migrants, and major infrastructure projects, would naturally improve the quality, civilizational level and unity of ethnic minority peoples, ultimately resolving the entire ethnic question. This is similar to the development rationale Tania Li describes in the case of Indonesia (2007): international or state agencies operationalize a “will to improve” first by identifying deficiencies and second by defining neat technical boundaries around the “deficient” area. In effect, this worsens many of the problems that prompted development projects in the first place, reinscribes social divisions, and renders illegible anything falling outside the newly defined boundaries. As for the Chinese case, Barabantseva points out that the western region and ethnic minorities are not categorically the poorest levels of society, and there are many poor communities that are neither ethnic minorities nor in the west. Nevertheless, development rhetoric constitutes another bordering practice that objectifies ethnic minorities as both economically and morally poor, and furthermore associates them with the western “periphery.”

Different minority communities are ethnicized in different ways, however, and tourism destinations tend to promote ethnic images that are legible and easily capitalizable. As I will explain in the remainder of the chapter, in discourse and practice there are a variety of ethnic framings of Hailuoguo, but one frame is heavier and draws attention much more than the others. Frequently, my own presence or interest in Hailuoguo was also interpreted in relation to this particular ethnic frame, as I will describe shortly.

The Tibetan tourscape

The Tibetan tourscape is the Tibetan landscape constituted in imaginaries, media, and flows of people, as promoted by state-backed tourism developers and as approached by the Chinese tourist (or the international tourist in China). I use the term “tourscape” with reference to Appadurai’s concept of scapes as “imagined worlds” (1990) rather than to Zhang and Xu’s use of “tourscape” to denote the “general atmosphere” of a site as experienced by tourists (2019, 85). I select this term to stress the geographically extended, cartographic dimension of imagination on the one hand, and the immense role of tourism in ordering imagination and encounters with Tibetan places on the other. The Tibetan tourscape is not so much a world imagined for or by Tibetans, though they do participate; it is more organized around tourism routes and destinations backed by the state, regional governments, and private developers. Its layout caters to tourist interests. Maps of the Tibetan tourscape take different forms but many, like Figure 15, depict destinations (evenly spaced to make for a reasonable itinerary) with simple icons or scenic photography that stand in for the entire site. The tourscape has three major points of entry (the provincial capitals of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Qinghai Provinces) and one final destination (Lhasa). Figure 15 shows the Sichuan-Tibet travel route. Tourists visualize geography, locate themselves, and evaluate the places in a rather linear fashion between these two poles (peripheral provincial Han capitals; the central Tibetan capital). They rely on knowledge of the tourscape context to make claims of authority and achieve grounding in an otherwise unfamiliar environment. I will argue that as a site on the Sichuan-Tibet travel route, Hailuoguo is invaluable in relation to tourist expectations of Tibetanness.



Figure 15. A map of the Sichuan-Tibet travel route. Chengdu is on the right (panda icon) and Lhasa on the left (Potala Palace icon). Hailuoguo is represented by the rightmost mountain icon.

Source: http://k.sina.com.cn/article_6821098005_19691b21500100ltcb.html

The siren song of Shangri-la

One day I was in the park, chatting intermittently with one of the tourism workers, a man from Leshan, who was stationed at the four-faced Guanyin statue in Camp 4. My attempts at sparking conversation were falling flat, however, the man instructing me to simply go read the informational signs when I asked any questions. As tourists slowly passed by on the stone stairs, some took notice of our exchange and stopped to remark that I could speak Chinese. A few even spoke to me directly. First I was greeted by a fresh-faced couple walking arm-in-arm. The boy looked especially young, and I had a hard time believing he was out of his teens. Even shorter and thinner than the girl on his arm, he exuded the confidence of a worldly man as he praised my abilities in Chinese to an unwarranted degree. Upon hearing that I was a graduate student, he asked which university.

“Oh, I know Wisconsin!” he exclaimed, and asked what I was studying here. When I began to explain I was studying place and tourism culture, he said, “oh, so, Tibetan culture.”

I hesitated. “No—well, yes, partially. Including Tibetan culture. But primarily Han culture.”

He seemed confused and said, “but here is Tibetan, not Han culture.” I pointed out that I was studying tourism and most tourists were Han. Even the majority of residents here are now Han. He allowed this point, but I could see in his eyes that he was perplexed with all of my choices. Despite being surrounded by Han, we were in the Tibetan tourscape, after all. Just ahead was a little collage of Tibetan prayer flags and other cultural paraphernalia that would seem to prove his point. A little while later when a middle-aged man approached to engage me in a similar conversation, he was even more presumptive. When I said I was studying culture he said, “Oh, Tibetan culture. You foreigners are all interested in that.” He was so sure of himself; I just didn’t correct him.

And he was not entirely wrong. Though my path to researching tourism in Hailuoguo had been long and circuitous, it was due to an interest in Tibet (albeit in relation to an initial and ongoing interest in China). After meeting barriers in my preliminary research in Qinghai Province, and the cryptic warning from Professor Ji about working with the Tibetan NGO in Hailuoguo, I had declined to pursue anything related to Tibetan culture. Whether or not “Tibet” lingered as a rationale for my interest in Hailuoguo, it remained the rationale behind a series of limitations to my research focus, for my movements being watched and guarded, and the reason I made anyone responsible for me nervous. I probably erred too far on the side of caution in 2019, but my apprehension seemed justified again in 2020, when “Tibet” was ultimately the reason I was not allowed to stay. Hailuoguo falling within a Tibetan administrative prefecture, the purported unruliness of the ethnic population means that normal security concerns are automatically amplified. In this context (which I describe in chapter 6), my foreignness presented risky contingencies that were further intensified by the stresses of epidemic prevention and control. Eventually I was told that I needed to leave Hailuoguo.⁴⁶ Despite my actual distance from anything sensitive or dangerous, I had to return to Chengdu.

“Every year twenty foreigners wander off into the mountains, and never return.” Old Shen, the guesthouse boss, was just one person to make such a comment about the peril of Tibet. It was a way to

⁴⁶ Actually, these instructions would come to me second-hand; even when I was present, the officers would only discuss and negotiate the issue of my residence with the guesthouse boss.

explain why the government was so nervous about foreigners in Tibetan areas. It was as if I had a fatal flaw, a compulsion that would one day lead me to run into the mountains in search of a Tibetan mirage, whereafter local authorities would be left with the blame for my disappearance.

A number of works (e.g., Bishop 1989; Dodin and Räther 2001; Harris 2012; Lopez 1998) have analyzed the Orientalizing of Tibet by colonial-era Euro-Americans. Their fantasies and fixations made a real place into the ephemeral utopia of “Shangri-la.” This imagined Tibet, set down by James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon* (1939) and various theosophic writers, was the cure for modernity’s ills, the final frontier that had never been colonized and thus never despoiled, a place in between civilizations variously imagined as home to the Aryan race, lost Christians, or other treasures ultimately amounting to a purer reflection of ourselves, the Western civilization that could have been. But it is not only Westerners who produce and consume a utopian Tibet. Shen Weirong (2010) and Wang Hui (2011) each describe how, in large part through tourism marketing and hype, actors within China also participate in “Orientalizing” Tibet. Domestic media and tourism representations exoticize Tibetans’ religious piety, nomadic lifestyle or connection with nature, and promote desires for the land’s purported spiritual and physical healing (Berry 2019; Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2017; Kolås 2008). Daocheng Yading (and sometimes Tibetan landscapes in general) is referred to as “the last pure land on the blue planet” (蓝色地球上最后一片净土), suggesting a pristine nature that has not been spoilt by industrialization as have polluted urban centers, a land that will stand against the impurities of the outside world.

Yü (2015) argues that even in the absence of Orientalist elaboration, the mountainous, high-elevation landscape of Tibet itself suggests celestialty or transcendence. We can therefore take Tibet’s spiritual “elevation” as a social fact with multiple facets. The landscape stands in just as well, or even better than religious others to impart a sense of profundity because it directly affects the bodies of visitors and is a shocking contrast to the experience of Chinese cities, countryside or lower-elevation mountains. Outsiders do not need to have a “cultural” experience or understand Tibetan cosmology to feel spiritually elevated by the effects of altitude, the closeness of the sky, towering mountains or wide-open grasslands. One former

(independent) tour guide described his love for Tibet as having to do with the feeling of being on the plateau, where the earth and sky came together. He described how amazing it felt to be on a road with no one else in sight, just open land rising up and up (as if to heaven) and stretching into the distance. However, I think it is important to keep Tibetans and Tibetan culture in the frame of discussion, even if it means grappling with the ongoing legacy of Orientalism, lest tourscape reduce historical territory to a generic space for development and a homogenizing national mythos.

Also, the “Orientalizing” drive of Chinese tourists should not be overstated. Among Han tourists I encountered in the Tibetan tourscape, the religiosity or purity of Tibet was less of a draw in itself than it was a general background energy that fueled photographic play or prompted (often one-sided) discussions comparing Tibetan and Han culture, reaffirming values associated with one or the other. In Qinghai, I did observe tourists excited or moved to see monks, pilgrims and monasteries, but Hailuoguo is not near any extant monastic community, and I generally found that tourists seemed more attuned to romantic or sexual imaginaries and masculine aesthetics associated with Tibet (or Kham specifically) than anything purely religious.⁴⁷ Old place names and local lore suggest there used to be a lamasery in Yanzigou, but tourism materials and workers do not mention such a place. Meanwhile, Yajia Qinghai is memorialized as a “love lake” for the romantic content of Tsangyang Gyatso’s verses, joining Kangding Love Song Scenic Area as a Kham tourism site that will forever be remembered in relation to a love song (or perhaps the 2010 romantic movie of the same title).

Qualities ascribed to ethnic inhabitants of a tourism destination are also ascribed to the landscape, asserting a singular moral geography. Walsh and Swain (2004) suggest that discourses about ethnicity and landscapes in Yunnan Province blend and reinforce one another, painting each with “a brush of romantic femininity” and leading to the “sexualization of geography” (3; 7). At the tourism sites I visited in Qinghai

⁴⁷ Even tourist attention to monks could have little to do with an interest in or reverence for religion. A female tourist I accompanied at Ta’er (Tib. Kumbum) Monastery in Qinghai was walking up to any monks that she found attractive enough and asking if she could get a photo with them, as though these were characters at Disney World. Continually rebuffed, she complained about how rude the monks were.

and western Sichuan, Chinese tourists tended to describe the landscape in ways that echoed ideals not of a delicate femininity but a rugged Tibetan masculinity: “grand” or “magnificent” (壮观 *zhuangguan*, 壮美 *zhuangmei*); “mysterious” (神奇 *shenqi*); “wild,” “primitive” or “barbaric” (原始 *yuanshi*, 野蛮 *yeman*); “rough” (粗犷 *cuguang*); “dangerous” (危险 *weixian*, 险恶 *xian’e*), even “frightening” (可怕 *kepa*). Official framings often encourage the reading of such values. In Hailuoguo, there is a rock formation viewable from the first observation deck of Camp 4 which has been named “Wolf Totem” (狼图腾, *Lang Tuteng*) purportedly after a tourist recognized its resemblance to a wolf’s head. When questioned, tourists generally find it easier to see this shape as a stack of turtles rather than a wolf’s head, but the wolf symbolism was seized upon and made the official “reading” of that feature of the landscape.⁴⁸ I believe masculinization of the landscape has much to do with the ideal of the Kangba Hanzi—a trope about Kham Tibetan masculinity which is becoming well-known among Chinese people, especially in Sichuan. Gladney (1994), Tenzin (2014) and Hillman and Hillman and Henfry (2006) have pointed out that in contrast to the feminization of many agriculturalist minorities in southern and southwestern China, nomadic groups such as the Mongols and Tibetans are more often masculinized in popular Chinese discourse. Exoticization of the manly man is particularly pronounced in Kham, where the Kangba Hanzi complements or shifts existing ideals of Khampa masculinity.⁴⁹ At the very least, the touristic framing generates a great deal of attention and discussion around the topic. One may consider, for example, the “Most beautiful Kangba Hanzi Competition” (最美康巴汉子选拔大赛, *Zui mei Kangba Hanzi xuanba bisai*), invented as a tourist draw and now held every year in Litang County, Ganzi Prefecture.

⁴⁸ Not unlike in the United States, the wolf has become a generic symbol in China for an intelligently aggressive, masculine, autochthonous national spirit mediated by imagination of an internal ethnic other’s animal kinship. *Wolf Totem* is a 2004 novel by Jiang Rong set in Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution. Based on true events, it delivers an alternative reading of Chinese history rooted in the ethnic, nomadic margins. Many have taken the work as a call to embrace China’s “wolf nature.” This book was and continues to be highly influential in Chinese political thought.

⁴⁹ Danba County in Ganzi is an exception, renowned instead for its beautiful women (see Tenzin 2014).

At Tibetan sites I visited, Han tourists seemed more interested in embodying positive Tibetan-associated qualities themselves than engaging closely with Tibetan others. Masculinity, freedom, purity or other ideals were more often perceived and consumed through symbolic markers, including landscapes. Embedded in the Tibetan tourscape, yet distanced from actual Tibetan communities, tourists could casually try out another way of being without surrendering control of the space, being subjected to the “returned gaze” (Sheller 2012), or actually challenging the superiority of developed “modernity.” On a tour of Qinghai Lake in 2016, my group remained quite firmly in such a “tourist bubble” (Cohen 1972; Larsen et al. 2021; Weaver 2022). Rather than visiting a Tibetan community, we were brought to a sort of Tibetan-themed playground with different scenarios, props—including a motorcycle, cheaply-made costumes and even animals (one yak and one horse) available specifically for our photographic play. The classier form of this ethnicized “trying on” is to go on a professional photography tour (旅拍, *lǚpāi*) or visit a professional photography studio in Tibet, as one of my Chengdu friends did on a trip to Lhasa, posing with her boyfriend for more sophisticated portraits in authentic-looking Tibetan dress. In either case, ethnicized self-photography displaces actual encounters with a cultural other in favor of safe, fun and self-affirming play in a virtual realm (Brown 2021).

Some tourists had no reason for choosing a Tibetan tour over some other one; they told me they were simply following a popular or highly recommended route, or hitting their next destination on a list—and Tibet is on virtually every traveler’s list. Chinese tourists would usually ask me if I had been to *Xizang* (西藏, which denotes Central Tibet) or specifically Lhasa, and expressed disappointment when I told them I had not. If they hadn’t been there already, they assured me they were definitely going to go someday. At this point I would usually ask if they had any particular interest in Tibetan culture or Tibetan Buddhism. A few said yes, but I found more often than not the answer was *no*. As Zhao Zhen (a tourist who will be introduced in chapter 4) explains, Tibet is *just the place now that every Chinese person has to go once in their lifetime*. It reminds me of the saying “You’re not a proper [Chinese] person until you’ve been to the Great Wall” (不到长城非好汉, *Bu dao Changcheng fei hao Han*), only the Great Wall has been replaced

by the Potala Palace as the mandatory destination and secular-spiritual center of Chinese being. In mainstream Chinese culture, Tibet has become a place that is *for* tourism. The repetition and personal meaning-making of the domestic journey to Tibet contributes to the naturalization of China's borders and ultimate unity.

Rather than simply transplanting or reproducing Western Orientalism, the Tibetan tourscape is a space produced to make grounds for a new imaginary—a vast and dominating masculinist, capitalist, modern China. This imaginary exists alongside and attempts to overcome the more conflicting valuation of the Tibetan as a simultaneously alluring and repellant. Decentering and symbolically consuming the confusing other relieves the tension. In its making of a place for Chinese tourists to play, actual Tibetan ways of life are absent but signified with aesthetics and theming. Centered instead is the (typically Han) consumer's capital in dominating the landscape (with SUVs and drones), ability to access hard-to-reach places (high-altitude mountains, lakes, villages, monasteries), conspicuous consumption of luxury commodities (caterpillar fungus, Tibetan mastiffs, *tangka* paintings, precious stones) and temporary embodiment of Tibetanness (through photography, dress, karaoke and dance). While consumer interest also reifies Tibetanness above other ethnic minority cultures and creates economic opportunities for Tibetan cultural producers and brokers, the making of exclusive tourism spaces encourages perception of oneself *as* the “other” in the landscape without the danger presented by an unstructured encounter or re-interpellation in the unsettling margins.

Knowing Tibet through touring Hailuoguo

Some tourists specifically told me that their current trip to the more accessible western Sichuan was preparation for an eventual trip to Xizang. Their main concern seemed to be altitude—they needed to slowly test how much their bodies could handle. Learning the effects of altitude may be considered a “bodily practice of knowing place” routinized by Chinese tourists' touring the Tibetan Plateau (Klingberg 2014a, 77). Klingberg argues that rather than a singular event, discovery of Daocheng Yading (the site considered Sichuan's Shangri-la) is a repetitive, ongoing practice of placemaking. This placemaking, however, occurs

at multiple scales simultaneously. At Hailuoguo I found that a great deal of place-making, including bodily practices like walking, were oriented toward “Tibet,” especially central Tibet, constantly inscribing and reinscribing a tourism geography that links Moxi to the distant Lhasa.

Thus, there is a structural pilgrimage aspect to the experience of touring Tibet, even if the tourists themselves do not admit any religious sentiments or personal interest in Tibetan culture. Pilgrimages may be characterized as voluntary journeys inspired by legends or visions that attempt to harmonize inner, spiritual movement with movement through an exterior landscape, from a mundane periphery to a sacred center (Turner and Turner 1978). Paradigmatically, a pilgrimage should be slow, physically arduous, emotionally powerful and spiritually transformative. Tourists to Tibet start their journey in places like Qinghai Lake or Hailuoguo, and either continue all the way to Lhasa in one go, or keep coming west to make incremental progress over multiple trips. They come a little further each time until they’re standing in front of the Potala Palace. The physical toll (even if traveling comfortably, there is no escaping the altitude unless one has constant access to supplemental oxygen) and fulfilment of an epic, once-in-a-lifetime journey builds a sense of meaning even in the absence of a religious framing, sometimes provoking highly emotional reactions. A colleague at my sponsoring university in Chengdu, for example, described her experience after flying to Lhasa. As soon as she got off the plane, she had the overwhelming urge to cry. It didn’t make sense to her, as she is not the type of person who is easily moved to tears. “I don’t know why, but that place is totally incomparable to Qinghai Lake or other places like that,” she said. “Once I was there, I could just feel it.”

As the *axis mundi* of the Tibetan tourscape, a power radiates outward from Lhasa, its touch becoming lighter and lighter as it approaches historically Han territory. Tourists and other outsiders approach Moxi Town and Hailuoguo with their relatively low elevation (only 1,580 and up to 3,690 meters, respectively) and seemingly diffuse Tibetan culture as a kind of Tibet Lite, a watered-down version of the real thing, whether they see that as a positive (a tool to aid their ultimate journey) or a negative (a fundamentally Yi, Qiang, Han, or culturally substanceless tourism place masquerading as a Tibetan one).

Thus, when tourism theming celebrates a generic pan-Tibetanness over and above other ethnic framings, it simultaneously reifies *and* denigrates Hailuoguo via its geographic and cultural proximity to central Tibet. Approaching Hailuoguo as a level-one boss in the real-life adventure game of conquering the Tibetan tourscape may also perpetuate a false sense of security, as if travel here, or in the surrounding undeveloped scenic areas, is much safer than travel to more prestigious, less accessible destinations further west. While extrication to a hospital in the case of a medical emergency might be easier here, the topography of the area's deep gorges is in some ways more dangerous than that of the high plateau. Rockslides and mudslides triggered by heavy rains or earthquakes are a prevalent risk in the Daxue Range.

Is the routinization of tourism in western China destroying place—or, as Augé might argue, creating “non-place”? (1995). Bishop (1989) has argued that tourism participates in the erasure of Tibet as a *place*, converting it into an imaginary, an empty landscape onto which outsiders may construct their own fantasies. However, creation and destruction are not exclusive processes, and all conceptions of place involve some degree of mental mapping and imagination. Rather than going so far as to pronounce “Tibet” definitively lost, I agree with Yeh and Coggins that reification of the Tibetan borderlands has undermined their heteroglot reality (2014, 7). It is not so much “Tibet” that is lost, but all the other places within its domain. The complex internal cultural geographies of Kham and Amdo are subsumed into a “tourscape” where all roads lead to Lhasa and culminate in a singular view. Thus, a unified geography is asserted against the historical multi-centeredness of Tibetan places. In the tourscape, the main culture *is* tourism—although no one seems to perceive this as a “culture,” instead taking their experiences as directly Tibetan. This is not simply a case of the Han erasing the Tibetan, because Tibet's reification is a movement in place-making involving actors of many and multiple ethnic identities. However, the constant discursive and visual consumption and production of Tibetanness through Han bodies diminishes the visibility and importance of a living, diverse Tibetan people.

To further complicate the situation, Tibetans are not the only, or even the most populous, ethnic minority inhabiting the Hailuoguo area. Over the next five sections, I consider a series of Hailuoguo/Moxi's ethnic framings, and the variable visibility of its communities from within the tourism sphere.

Moxi as a multiethnic place

Moxi has been a multiethnic settlement since ancient times. Thirteen ethnic groups including the Han, Tibetans, and Yi have thrived here.
(Hailuoguo tour guide script, 2019)

As a multiethnic settlement, Moxi should be a place for the celebration of pluralism and inclusivity. However, modern bordering practices have overlain the nebulous frontier zone and migration corridor in which it lays with hard lines and attempted to simplify and codify a vast multitude of “ways of being ethnic” (Harrell 2001). For centuries, Moxi was enlivened by the regional tea trade while its political allegiance or ethnolinguistic character remained mixed, changeable, and indeterminate. Even the (nominally) agreed-upon boundary between China and Tibet fluctuated to either side of the site. Moxi's enclosure in fixed ethnic and political boundaries is therefore a very recent development at odds with what we might call its “historical character.” Contemporary borders place Moxi in the longstanding Chinese province of Sichuan, while sub-provincial borders subsume it into the Chinese Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Ganzi. Like elsewhere in Kham, it has become a Tibetan place in a greater Chinese place, though Khampas of generations past did not widely regard themselves as belonging to either group.⁵⁰ This ethnic border-making, combined with tourism development and the allure of “Tibet,” has promoted a powerful delocalized (Chinese) version of Tibetanness over and above a locally-rooted multiculturalism.

The ethnolinguistic diversity of eastern Amdo and Kham is a well-known fact. It is the area that Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong named the “Tibetan-Yi Corridor”—a series of (primarily north-south) passageways through tall mountain ranges by which a myriad of groups has migrated over centuries. In

⁵⁰ This is not to assert commensurability between Kham's relationship to Central Tibet—with which it shared deep linguistic, cultural, religious, and institutional ties—and its relationship to China, which was an imperial other (McGranahan 2019). The simple enumeration and listing of ethnic groups in the area, such as in the tour guide script (which even puts the Han first), flattens the depth of historical claims that different communities have to the locality.

particular it is regarded as the meeting and mingling place of the Han, Yi, and Tibetans. In contrast to more static and bounded understandings of people and place, Fei argued that the corridor had no set boundaries or single ethnic character, yet was a place in its own right. The corridor can only begin to be understood by tracing the history of movement. Ethnologists in China have taken great interest in the corridor in recent years. Shuo Shi (2018) describes the significance of the corridor thus: “As the area with the largest number and most complex systems and branches of ethnicities in China, and the best-preserved proto-forms of ethnic cultures, the cultural diversity, uniqueness and complexity of the Tibetan-Yi Corridor are... being increasingly valued by ethnologists” (1).

Narratives and encounters in tourism and government-led place-making tend to quantify the multiculturalism of Moxi with a list or number indicating the officially recognized ethnic groups residing there. According to an official release, 11 of the 56 officially recognized minorities reside in the Moxi area (NEAC, 2018). What should that diversity look like in practice? I found that rather than “multiethnic,” Moxi was actually framed as either a Han place, a Qiang place, an Yi place, or a Tibetan place. Each of these framings led to different valuations of place and suggested various temporalities. I consider each of these ethnic frames in turn below.

Moxi as a Han place

The Han have been in Moxi for centuries, but mostly as outsiders in a strange land, passing through out of perceived necessity, or in some cases, settling as a result of exile. Han migration to eastern Kham was minimal throughout most of China’s imperial history. The Sichuan Basin was incorporated during the Qin Dynasty, putting China right at Kham’s doorstep, but there was little incentive for the fertile basin’s agriculturalists to move westward into terrain largely unsuited to farming and populated by tribes of renowned ferocity. By the Qing Dynasty, the lucrative tea trade was bringing a constant stream of Han porters through the roads between Ya’an and Dartsedo. Still, travelogues of Euro-Americans and Han Chinese sharing roads with these porters suggest that settlement was not on their minds. They traveled as efficiently as possible and returned east as soon as their loads had been delivered (see Liu 2020, 75). Some

regarded the landscape with great fear, saying that it was inhabited by spirits or dragons that caused earthquakes, rockslides and other disasters (Burdall 1935, 37).

In addition to trade migration, Chinese military presence increased during the Qing Dynasty, specifically after the Battle of Dartsedo in 1701 (Booz 2016, 40) and completion of the iron bridge at Luding in 1706. At that point the Sichuan route became the favored path into Tibet. Settler migration, meanwhile, only picked up with the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1735-1796), when population pressure brought a wave of migrants westward to the Sichuan Basin, spreading resources thin and pushing some farmers into the mountainous west. Even as their numbers increased, the migrants were subservient to pre-existing power structures. According to Baber:

One does not see much of the Sifans between Tzu-ta-ti and Ta-chienlu, since the bottom-lands through which the route passes have been rented or bought by Chinese colonists. The immigration is quite recent. I have it on the best authority that the Sifan landlords of Mosimien could not be prevailed upon to allow their Chinese tenants to cultivate rice until 1876. (Baber 1882 *in* Chang 2009, 26)⁵¹

Foreign explorers' and missionaries' accounts give some insight into the mixed ethnic makeup of the Moxi area from the late Qing to the early days of New China. Yet for the most part, they do not speak local languages, so they can only express ethnicity in what terms it is explained to them by their hired guides and interpreters. These guides were typically Han Chinese from Ya'an, Chengdu or even Shanghai, where many foreigners began their journeys. Regarding inhabitants between the Dadu River and Dartsedo, Western accounts mention three main groups: the "Lolo," referring to the Yi; the "Sifan" or "Xifan" (西番 "western barbarians"), which either refers to Tibetans generally (Baber 1882 *in* Chang 2009, 30; Rosthorn 1895, 13) or western and northern (I assume, non-Khampa) Tibetans (Fergusson 1911, 249); and the "Man-tze" (also meaning "barbarians"), referring to Khampa Tibetans or serving as a blanket term for Qiang or Qiangic-speaking peoples who were neither Tibetan nor Yi.⁵² "The Chinese designate the inhabitants of this

⁵¹ Tzu-ta-ti refers to Zidadi (紫打地), which is present-day Anshunchang (安顺场).

⁵² Austrian-American explorer-scientist Joseph Rock (1930, 401), in contrast, refers to the Kham borderlands inhabitants as Xifan, to be distinguished from Tibetans further north, indicating the poor utility of these derogatory,

borderland Mantzu,” explains British explorer-botanist E. H. Wilson, “a contemptuous term signifying Barbarian and of no ethnological value whatsoever” (though he continues to use the term in his book) (1971, 174).

In imperial histories, various terms translating to “barbarian” had long been used for wide swaths of the peripheral population, signaling the superiority of the civilized center. This terminology set a certain frame for frontier encounters. Booz (2014) cites a volume by Wu Fengpei to relate Chinese accounts describing Kham inhabitants in inferior, even animal terms—for example, in this excerpt of a travelogue by Huang Mocai:

Dajianlu is harboured between two rivers and three mountains, ...different barbarian people live and mix here, and their appearance is weird (*xinzhuang* [sic] *guiyi* 形状诡异); they look bird-faced and dark-skinned, and they speak a strange bird-language; they are long-haired, with bare feet, ...they are everywhere on the streets. This is the key road of the southwest to Tibet. (256)

At least some notable evidence, then, suggests that visiting Han did not feel at home in these places, did not particularly appreciate the landscape or inhabitants, and passed on derogatory ethnic classifications to their foreign patrons. Yet there was, according to Baber’s commentary as well as accounts of my study participants, a community of Han agriculturalists who settled Moxi well over a century ago. Another legacy of Chinese influence is an old Daoist temple located on Moxi Town’s central street.⁵³ Unlike the Catholic church, however, it is not a tourist draw.

Intensified Han migration, infrastructure projects and commercial tourism in the postsocialist period have since remade the area. While on the one hand this development has provided many comforts of home for Han residents and tourists, the loss of a clear ethnic character (imagined or real) has simultaneously devalued Hailuoguo’s seeming historic appeal. This is what Hansen calls the “Janus-faced

outsider-ascribed categories that foreign authors nevertheless adopted and reproduced in their popular and scientific reports.

⁵³ No one talked about this temple, and I was not aware of any activity occurring there. But the Long March Project (2002), a mobile and interactive art exhibition and discourse, describes the temple as having “served three different religions” and as a meeting place for the “Setting Sun Red Elderly People’s Club” which got together to sing revolutionary songs, among other activities.

nature of modernization” in ethnic areas: desire for development (and displeasure with any lag therein) is accompanied by a sense of nostalgia or pain in the resulting innocence lost (2006, 230). In a period of rapid transformation, China’s ethnic minorities stand as imagined fixed points, reflecting the religiosity, simplicity and depth of tradition that many Han Chinese feel they themselves have lost. For example, during the first etiquette-heavy tourism worker training with Liu Yiling, she was preparing to teach us how to bow properly, but first asked if anyone there was an ethnic minority—Tibetan perhaps? There was a half-hearted response from an Yi employee instead. Teacher Liu continued, “Ethnic minorities, as well as our Japanese and Korean friends, have actually retained a lot of the customs that we Han people have abandoned. In my opinion, we’ve abandoned too much, and these things need to be built up again. For example, bowing.” The implication is that bowing was a universal (or pan-Asian) practice, for which the modernized Han could look to ethnic minorities to preserve, or reinvigorate traditional culture (though Teacher Liu did not defer to the Yi employees for instruction in bowing).

During my research, I repeatedly heard complaints or concerns that Hailuogou was too “Hanified”—typically from Han Chinese researchers and tourists. To a large extent this impression comes from the majority of hotel, restaurant, and shop proprietors, as well as many officials and tourism workers, being Han Chinese originally from elsewhere in Sichuan Province or even further east. Otherwise, I believe it is the rather modern appearance of the town’s buildings and residents, none of whom wear traditional clothing except during performances. So rigid are expectations of a visible ethnic alterity that tourists have trouble perceiving ethnicity apart from the performance of a distinctively non-modern aesthetic (or they challenge the Han-ness of anyone in local traditional dress, as in Beaud, 2014). To offer a brief example, I was once having dinner in Moxi Town with a Han tourist couple from Guangxi Province and three women from the Hailuogou Administration—two of whom were Tibetan; the third had one Tibetan parent. The visiting couple were friends of one of Hailuogou’s top officials, though he had been too busy to accompany them to dinner that night and assigned the responsibility to a subordinate. Already acquainted with one of

their Tibetan hosts, Wenxian, the couple were quite surprised when the other two women's Tibetan identities were revealed in conversation.

“We would have never guessed,” they marveled.

“You’re thinking of the traditional image of a Tibetan,” Wenxian explained, “with red cheeks and so on.”

The couple didn’t disagree. “It’s probably also the clothing,” said the man. “Without the Tibetan clothing, it’s hard to tell.”

Thus in tourists’ eyes, while Moxi does not qualify as a “Han place” because of its theming and location (within a Tibetan administrative prefecture and on a Tibetan tour route), it also fails to appear as an authentically “Tibetan place” because it has been shaped by centuries of multiethnic coexistence and hybridity followed by intensive Chinese-led development. Some attribute the town’s ambiguity to overcommercialization, others to the influence of other ethnic groups.

Moxi as a Qiang place

I was unaware of ever meeting a Qiang person in Moxi. While Tibetan, Yi, and Han residents were quick to identify themselves or their friends as Tibetan or Yi, no one ever volunteered information to me about themselves, or any particular resident, as being Qiang. Yet the ethnic group kept coming up, often when the categories Tibetan, Yi, or Han couldn’t seem to account for the feel or essence of the locality.

One day in March 2020 I was taking a walk through Moxi Town with a few members of the worker group residing at Biluo Yazhai during the COVID-19 shutdown. The streets were much emptier and quieter than in normal times, but we saw a few small gatherings of locals chatting or playing cards as we walked the boss’ Samoyed up and down the length of the town. One of the youngest employees, who had nevertheless been at the Yazhai the longest among its temporary workers, began casually sharing his knowledge about Moxi’s locals.

“Actually, there’s not many Tibetans here at all,” he said. “More are Yi or Qiang. In fact, most of them are Qiang.” Pan Rui asked the younger worker how he knew.

“You can tell by the language,” he continued. “The Tibetan language is recognizable, and most of the Tibetans here are pretty good in that they speak standard Chinese anyway. But there’s not many of them. That restaurant there—” he gestured to the single Tibetan eatery on Moxi Ancient Street, apart from the one owned by Old Shen—“a few other places, that’s it. All the other locals, though, you can tell they’re speaking the same language. And that’s Qiang. The difficult thing is when it comes to separating Qiang and Yi language.”

Listening to this explanation, I wondered if the young worker had a false impression of Moxi’s ethnic makeup based on an overly narrow view of what “Tibetan language” should sound like, and a long precedent for using “Qiang” as a catch-all for otherwise ethnolinguistically unintelligible others. After all, official statistics state that Yi and then Tibetan are the two most populous minorities in the Hailuoguo administrative area, at 30.7 and 5.6 percent of the population, respectively (NEAC 2018). I also knew there were a lot more Tibetan-run businesses where we were walking than he suggested, if not “local” Tibetan per se. The previous year Nian Zha, a Tibetan official in the local administration, had walked with me down Moxi Ancient Street, calling out greetings to Tibetan business owners—one every few meters—who he explained were all from his own home county of Danba. “We didn’t know each other back in Danba, and we didn’t come here together. It just worked out this way,” he had told me. At the same time, it is quite possible I had no basis to recognize Qiang-ness, that they appeared and sounded to me just like other residents, whose ethnicity I also may or may not have known. I can only say if there is a significant community of Qiang people in Moxi, their culture is subtle to invisible in the tourism sphere. When Hailuoguo tourism officials or workers mentioned the Qiang, it was always in reference to a long-ago, long-gone group who left nothing—except, perhaps, a name.

There seems to be a general consensus in both scholarly summaries and tourism information on Moxi's (pre)history that going far enough back in time, this area was inhabited by the Qiang. Most of the competing explanations for the place name "Moxi" likewise reference the Qiang.⁵⁴ Rather than "dragon," (see chapter 2) some sources (e.g. Mao 2016) claim Moxi instead means "treasure land" (宝地, *baodi*) in Qiang language.⁵⁵ Yet another explanation is that the town is named directly for its former inhabitants—the "Moxi" (磨西族), also appearing as the "Moxie" (磨些蛮) or "Mosha" (摩沙夷) "barbarians" in Chinese historical records. Interpreters of these texts believe the names refer to today's Naxi or specifically the Mosuo, considered a Naxi subgroup (see Warning 2020, 14). A central government webpage states that the Mosha refers to Naxi that inhabited what is now Yanyuan County, Sichuan Province, which is south of and does not border Luding County (gov.cn 2006). Now concentrated in present-day northern Yunnan and southern Sichuan, the Naxi minzu are described as originating from northwest China and migrating down Sichuan's river valleys (Huang and Yang 2003). On the other hand, even if this link could explain the name origin, "Moxi" might not refer to a specific group at all, but have been a general term used by outsiders for yak-herding peoples.⁵⁶ For some perspective on the proliferation of these outsider-ascribed names, Litzinger finds that among those categorized as Yao, another southwest China ethnic group, there are over thirty self-referential group names but over *three hundred* terms in the Chinese language (2000, 9). A place called "Moxi" and a group the Chinese called "Moxi" is not an inconceivable coincidence.

Adding to the confusion is that looking back in time, essentially *all* western Chinese ethnic groups are "Qiangified." The Naxi and the Yi, among other western Chinese groups, are considered descendants

⁵⁴ Two possible exceptions are: 1) The explanation offered in Zhang (2010) that Moxi (full name "Moximian," 磨西面) is merely descriptive in reference to the nearby ridge *Mogangling* (or Han Dynasty trade route of the same name), and means "the plane to the west of Mo"; 2) That "Moxi" means "don't understand" in Tibetan and was mistaken as the place name by Han travelers asking a local man where they currently were.

⁵⁵ These two terms, *long* and *baodi*, are, however, close conceptual relations in the traditional Chinese theory of fengshui. According to traditional geomancy, the first step for identifying a *baodi*, a place valued for exceptional fengshui, is to "search for the dragon" (寻龙, *xunlong*), locating a vein of energy in the earth, which manifesting as a ridge of mountains, will resemble the undulating body of a dragon.

⁵⁶ Multiple explanations available online (including gov.cn 2006) suggest that "Mosha" and its variants mean a people that raise yaks.

of the Ancient Qiang. The Qiang are also an extant group, however. Today's officially recognized Qiang are concentrated along the upper Min River Valley in northwestern Sichuan Province's Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. But these communities often refer to themselves as the Erma (尔玛), and there is no evidence that prior to the 1950s Ethnic Classification Project they thought of or referred to themselves as Qiang (Wang 1999, 55). The Chinese character "Qiang" (羌), meanwhile, goes back as far as the oldest written records in China—the Shang Dynasty oracle bones. It combines the pictograms for "man" and "goat" to reference sheepherding tribes beyond Shang territory. One could thus argue that Qiang predates Han as a proto-ethnic category, but it was an identity continuously ascribed from without, not within. Historian Ming-ke Wang suggests that before the 1950s, "Qiang" was a blanket term widely applied for perceived others, and that the border defining who was Qiang shifted westward with the expansion of Chinese territory. As the Chinese came to perceive some "Qiang" groups as Sinicized, Tibetanized, or members of the "Yi" upon greater familiarity, the Qiang range shrank from the entire western borderland to a narrow stretch of the upper Min River Valley. Thus, Wang concludes, "when we trace the history of the Qiang, we are tracing not the native history of a non-Chinese people but a portion of the history of the Chinese" (1999, 47). In the absence of more detailed information, attributing Moxi's cultural origin to the Qiang does little but naturalize an existing Chinese genealogical-developmental imaginary: going far back enough, everyone is either Qiang or Han, and farther back than that, the two are a single lineage. There are claims from both Qiang and Han scholars that the Qiang are *also* ancestors of the Han, and thus all of China (Zhang 2018).

The Tibetans are no exception, ultimately considered to have emerged from the Ancient Qiang. In fact, the Qiang are sometimes referred to as "Proto-Tibetans" (e.g., Fairbank 1992, 61), or as "evolving into" the Tibetan ethnicity (e.g., Ren Naiqiang, *as cited in* Chang 2009). Although research on the groups' origins points to a history of movement and interrelation, it should be clear that the contemporary categories are teleologically applied oversimplifications. Outsider-ascribed categories, inseparable from a long history of Han centrism, have been legitimized for their appearances in the Chinese historical record and are now

naturalized as legally effective identities or official histories associated with contemporary identities. Contemporary Qiang (the Erma peoples) may now take pride in identifying as China's primordial ethnic group, but in Moxi, "Qiang" pride seemed limited to imagined prehistories rather than living communities. The label functioned as a claim to vague ancient mystique but otherwise indicated a failure to appear as legibly Han, Yi, or Tibetan.

Moxi as an Yi place

Yi is China's sixth-largest ethnic minority by population (*as cited in Lai et al. 2023, 4*). The category comprises diverse communities, some extending beyond national borders into the highlands of Southeast Asia. Yi languages are "closely related to Burmese" (Hu 2010, 3) and some use scripts that are generally similar to one another. Scattered around the vicinity of Moxi Town are a number of Yi villages, including Mogangling, "the northernmost Yi village in China." It is said that they migrated north from Liangshan. Like their neighbors, the Yi here farm or herd sheep and are patrilineal. Yi settlements in Moxi are generally distinguishable from those of the Han by small but noticeable architectural flourishes. Unlike the nearby Tibetan villages I only ever heard of, a number of Yi villages were easily reachable along the routes that tourists would typically follow. According to census statistics, the area Yi population is also six times the size of the Tibetans'. Nevertheless, at the center of the tourism sphere in Moxi Town, there was virtually no framing—especially visual indications—of this as an "Yi place."

While lacking the deep archaic mysticality potentially conjured by the "Qiang," the Yi are considered a more primitive group than the Tibetans according to the "facts" of the Ethnic Classification Project. This "objective" classification project becomes a repeated violence against minority groups whose cultural survival and flourishing now largely depend on the domestic tourism economy, and thus their attractiveness to outside consumers. Even though local Yi communities are actually more accessible to tourists than Tibetan ones, Yi culture is symbolically and visually sidelined in Hailuoguo. There are Yi homestays to be found off the beaten track, but there's no Yi-themed song-and-dance show, karaoke or dinner experience that one might encounter casually in Moxi Town. Furthermore, the Yi are more known

for residing further south in Sichuan (in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture), or in Yunnan Province. So tourists with a specific interest in the Yi are unlikely to seek out Hailuoguo. Meanwhile, there were no Yi people in prominent positions of local government. Because Ganzi is technically designated as a Tibetan and not an Yi administrative district, there are only regulations on how many members of its government must be Tibetan.

I met a handful of local Yi people who worked in tourism and/or came to Moxi Town for its nightlife options. As for said options, there is one Chinese-style KTV (that is literally underground, far from the rest of the nightlife scene) and a series of Tibetan-themed bars (all along Moxi Ancient Street, blasting music every evening and impossible to miss). The décor of each one of these bars is largely indistinguishable from that of the next. At first I had a hard time remembering which ones I'd been to already, and had to pay more attention to their names. At each, one finds a similar jumble of items in a colorful collage across the walls, many of them Tibetan art or artifacts, others contributing to an overall air of nostalgia: prayer wheels to one side of the entrance, an old box TV set to the other. These bars also offer karaoke, but there is only one AV system (so one song at a time) for the entire establishment rather than multiple private rooms as in the Chinese-style KTV. When I was at one of these bars with some Tibetan government workers, they took turns belting out the Tibetan songs (these almost entirely in Chinese) that were available in the karaoke systems, and they'd turn whatever open space they could find into a dance floor, working with their given surroundings to create quite a different atmosphere than when the bars were full of tourist groups (or even local Han workers). The case here is similar to what Hillman (2003) describes in Zhongdian, or "Shangri-la," whose name change epitomizes the push to capitalize off Tibet's image as a utopia. Despite however "inauthentic" the Tibetan culture produced for tourists may have been in the first place, it becomes an important vehicle for the ongoing creation of a modern Tibetan ethnic identity in China. "Inauthentic" tourism culture can be, or become, meaningfully inhabited by the group it aimed to represent.

I am describing Moxi Town's "Tibetan" bars in the "Yi" section because they highlight the absence of similar outlets for Yi cultural expression which could be meaningful channels for ethnic place-making. They also happened to be the sites of my most memorable encounters with Yi people.

One night when I was out at a Moxi Ancient Street bar with some tour guides and their Yi acquaintances, a young woman was asked to sing an Yi song for us. I was surprised when she agreed to, because she seemed rather shy, having hardly said a word the whole hour or so we'd been there already. I was then shocked by the confidence and clarity with which she belted out the melancholy tune. Surrounded by the multicolored lights and thumping disco beats of the Ancient Street's nightlife scene, her powerful voice broke through the noise beautiful and heartfelt. When I looked over, I saw her eyes were closed, and she only opened them when the song was over. At that point, we all toasted. I didn't know what to say, but things quickly went back to a more familiar drinking experience. The bar's co-owner brought over another large case of beer bottles and began opening them for us without asking, as one of the Yi guys at the table elaborated loudly on views of America and Japan that might only be politically correct in China; the girls at the table remained largely silent, flipping through social media on their phones and sipping their beer in tiny increments.

This is just one example of how Yi culture remained hidden and undervalued within the Tibetan tourscape. There is no stage or karaoke backtrack for the Yi singer in Moxi Town, formal or informal.

Moxi as a Tibetan place

As I have alluded to above, the majority of ornamental aesthetics (e.g., prayer flags, mani stones, signage) and cultural programming in Hailuoguo and Moxi Town is meant to be Tibetan. My first time in Hailuoguo, I came with a large tour group, and we attended a Tibetan dinner program run by a regional non-profit organization—an experience I will describe shortly. There is also a long-running Tibetan song and dance performance offered nightly in a theater across from Moxi's most established high-end hotel—the Hailuoguo Long March Hotel. And, if Hailuoguo is one stop on a longer tour itinerary—whether organized by a company or devised by independent tourists—it is most often a "Tibetan" tour leading

toward Lhasa along the Sichuan-Tibet Route (*Chuan-Zang Xian*, 川藏线). Tourism theming and promotion in Moxi Town clearly aims to capitalize on the popularity of Tibet among domestic tourists.⁵⁷

Almost all the Tibetans I came to know in Moxi were not local, but had migrated from elsewhere in Ganzi—Danba, Xinlong, Jiulong, Kangding or Tagong—for work. I did meet some local Tibetans but was not always able to communicate due to a language barrier. I kept hearing that there were Tibetan communities nearby, but I did not have reasonable access to these. At one point I became acquainted with a history student from Chengdu who was interning at Hailuoguo for several days. She initially offered to bring me with her into the Tibetan communities she would be researching, but ultimately did not (I don't know if she forgot, or was not allowed to). I remember having lunch with her in the administration cafeteria after she'd completed her field trips, which had been overall disappointing. "They don't even speak Tibetan," she'd lamented.

Among Tibetans today there is wide variability in Tibetan language abilities. Some I met did not speak a Tibetan language at all but nevertheless possessed a strong Tibetan identity based on family and community upbringing, values and lifestyle. Others said they only spoke a highly localized dialect, so they relied on Chinese to communicate outside of their immediate home communities. It is clear that the concept of "speaking Tibetan" is oversimplistic considering the diversity and complexity of ethnolinguistic communities in the region. A survey by Roche and Suzuki finds evidence of 60 different minority languages (not dialects) spoken in the Tibetan regions of China (2018). The homogenizing category of "Tibetan" masks a worrying trend of language endangerment and loss.

The local group which has inhabited the Mount Gongga area over recent centuries and given the mountain its name ("Minya Konka") is the Minya people.⁵⁸ They speak a Qiangic language that differs significantly from Khampa Tibetan dialects, and have distinct culinary, architectural, marriage, and

⁵⁷ It was never my impression that Hailuoguo was expending much effort to appeal to international tourists; although there were *some*, Hailuoguo is not a popular destination for the general expat or foreign tourist community, and there are no international youth hostels to particularly attract the budget backpacker or non-Chinese speaking tourist.

⁵⁸ Minya (Tib. མི་ལྷ་) is sometimes spelled Minyag or Minyak. The Chinese name is Muya (木雅).

funerary practices (Dai 1993). Despite their unique identity, and cultural and linguistic divergence, the Minya were categorized as Tibetan in the Ethnic Classification Project. Today they identify as Tibetan, generally practice “Tibetan” religion, and speak Kham Tibetan outside of the home. According to Junwei Bai, the number of Minya speakers is diminishing, though it is difficult to get a grasp of the full situation due to a lack of research (2019, 3-5). Judging by the 2015 summary article by Li and Li, Chinese and foreign scholarship on the Minya has primarily focused on the group’s origin and the nature of its relationship to the Tangut Empire and secondarily on its relationship to ancient watchtowers “discovered” in their territory (*see also* Rock 1930, 395; 402). In one study of Kham, Republican-period intellectual Ren Naiqiang only mentions the Minya in passing as “the tamest of the Kham people” who believe in Lamaism but are “considerably contaminated by Han custom” (*as cited in* Li and Li 2015, 24). His disinterest in an already “tamed” group betrays the assimilationist agenda fueling his interest in the Kham borderland (*see* Tsomu 2012). From the scant studies and descriptions that I have been able to access, the Minya are characterized as a people exhibiting a mix of qualities or practices already associated with other groups—Qiang, Yi, [Khampa] Tibetans, or Han. The voices of the Minya people themselves are absent in these articles and travelogues.

Nian Zha, the Tibetan government worker mentioned earlier, was in his mid-30s and had come to work for the Hailuoguo Administration in 2012. He understood some Tibetan but didn’t speak it. Nian Zha has a pleasant and powerful singing voice. A large part of his role in the administration involves receiving and entertaining government officials from other places. Sometimes I would be walking through the town in late evening and hear Nian Zha’s singing voice, distant but unmistakable, resonating through the otherwise quiet streets. Undoubtedly he was serving as the Tibetan host and entertainer receiving some important dinner guests. During my fieldwork, Nian Zha also began co-managing one of the bars on Ancient Street. A sign at the bar’s door began to advertise nightly performances by a Tibetan singer—which was, of course, himself. I asked Nian Zha if he ever felt tired from having to perform his identity. He said he was tired, but the performing didn’t bother him because he kept it all in perspective of his larger goals. This was

him trying to do something a little more with his life. Otherwise, he imagined just doing the same thing day in and day out at the office, never building something of his own. By working at this bar, he could eventually save up and gain experience to open his own.

Even though he was not a local Tibetan, Nian Zha is both used by and is able to use Moxi's glossing as a Tibetan place in his various work roles. As far as I observed, Han workers were highly respectful of Nian Zha and other Tibetans in government who were able to move through two cultural worlds. And tourists were delighted to meet Tibetan men who fit their imagination of Kham masculinity but could converse and sing songs with them in fluent Chinese. I was with Nian Zha once when a male Han tourist referred to him as a "Kangba Hanzi," a title which Nian Zha rejected, explaining he only fit one of the three qualifications (height, but not weight or drinking ability): "When I am in a Han place, of course, everyone might use this term to refer to me, but back where I come from.. I am not Kangba Hanzi." Like Nian Zha, many Tibetan workers I encountered in Moxi Town and Hailuogou were from distant communities. Outside of singing and dancing in the service of the government, their Tibetanness is uprooted and tied to ways of life that are disappearing. Moxi is a place to apply their existing cultural capital rather than Moxi itself being a place that actively nurtures the transmission of Tibetan language and traditions.

Next I will consider the Tibetan dinner program I attended my first time in Hailuogou, when I came with a large, organized tour group. The program was run by Tibetan members of a regional non-profit organization. In addition to a meal of Tibetan food and drink, we also heard songs and cultural explanations, enacted a short skit, purchased souvenir photos, and were forced to join a circle dance. The program had nothing to do with Moxi in particular; it was a performance of delocalized "Tibetan culture" for people on a whirlwind two-day trip. It was fashioned to suit the tastes and anticipate the beliefs of Han Chinese regarding Tibetans, while lightly pushing back against prejudices of what would be seen as the most improper customs. Throughout the experience, gender served as the main point for both exoticization and comedic interaction.

A Tibetan feast

After a full day of sitting in the bus, with intermittent stops for meals and sightseeing, we had only too briefly settled into our hotel rooms before needing to venture back out into the frigid afternoon air. The next item on the tour itinerary was a “Tibetan-style feast.” The entire tour group met up in front of the designated courtyard in Moxi Town, where apart from us, the streets were quiet. Outside the courtyard walls, a young woman with two buns, each positioned above an ear, began distributing *khata* (ceremonial scarves). She took pause when she saw me. “Are you with the group?” she asked. Once I confirmed, she placed the *khata* around my neck. Then she moved on to the next person.

“Tashi delek,” said the Chinese man standing next to me as he received a *khata*. We then entered the gate into a courtyard with a large incense pillar in the center, metallic prayer wheels set up to the right, prayer flags hanging overhead, and an ornamented, taxidermized yak at the doorway directly opposite of us. It was kind of like a Tibetan culture collage. There was another, smaller incense burner at the near entrance where we presently lurked. Another young woman in a traditional robe, her hair in a single braid, was explaining some gesture we were supposed to do over the incense burner and why, but I was towards the back of the group and couldn’t hear her voice. When she was done, everyone crowded around to fan the air over the burning materials, either towards themselves or generally upward. Still unsure of the significance, I felt the air become pleasantly smoky and fragrant as a result.

Next we were lined up in two single-file lines, men on the left and women on the right as we faced the main building. The line of men went first, spinning the prayer wheels, our hostess explaining that in Tibetan society men always went first. At the end of that activity, each person took their turn posing under the prayer flags for a photo, then continued up a flight of stairs to the dining room on the second floor. Here there were two square tables, each with room for three people (or four, if squeezed in tight) on each side. The room had bright yellow walls with Tibetan Buddhist symbols painted on each panel. On the tables, each place setting consisted of two regular-sized bowls and one smaller bowl. Once everyone was seated, the Tibetan woman with the single braid—our main hostess—explained that the larger bowls were for our

food and our butter tea, while the smaller bowl was for highland barley wine (青稞酒, *qingke jiu*). The tea came out first and we passed around the kettle. The women at my table muttered about how salty it was, especially those who had had butter tea before. It did indeed taste saltier than other butter tea I'd had. Next the dishes began to come out, which our hostess identified one by one.

She continued to talk the entire time we ate, and her Chinese was easier for me to understand than any of the tourists' in my group—many of whom were admittedly from Shanghai and Guangdong. (She asked at one point, seemingly in response to our lack of feedback, “Is it that you find my Chinese is difficult to understand?” but everyone reassured her that it was not.) When the barley wine came around, she led us in a “Tibetan toast.” She instructed us to take our “nameless finger” (无名指, the fourth finger, though some of the tour members seemed to have trouble identifying which finger that was, prompting taunts from our hostess) and dip it into the bowl of alcohol, then shout ‘Om cho cho cho’ and flick our wettened fingers and thumb together three times, sprinkling tiny droplets into the air. The phrase, she told us, was a way to express that we were all a family, gathering together. We did the action twice—once for the ancestors, and then for family. After that our hostess paused and asked whom we were going to do it for on the third time.

“Ourselves!” a bunch of people replied in unison.

The Tibetan woman chastised us all for being selfish. “There’s a saying that when you’re at home you rely on your parents, but when you’re out in the world, whom do you rely on?”

“Friends!” came a chorus of replies. That was the right answer. So, in order to show respect to our friends, we were supposed to turn to the person next to us and flick our fingers in front of their face.

“Wow, do you have some aggression there? I could *hear* that,” Our hostess teased the woman sitting closest to her, who had just flicked her husband right in the face. Finally, we drank what was left. Our hostess warned us not to drink any more if we were going to the hot springs later. Otherwise, we were welcome—though I didn’t see the bottle get passed around again. This may have been because the table I was sitting at was all women, save for two husbands who had elected to sit with their wives.

Our hostess then announced that in a little while she was going to sing for us, because “in Tibet, you learn to sing and dance as soon as you can speak and walk.”

The same Han woman who had assaulted her husband’s face began muttering something, and our hostess stopped to address her. Apparently the tourist was asking if they couldn’t fetch a *man* to come and sing for them. “If it’s a woman singing, it will definitely be a soprano (女高音, *nü gaoyin*),” she grumbled. She seemed to be expecting a harsh, high-pitched voice.

Our hostess was unfazed. She saw through the woman’s desire not just to hear a man’s voice, but see a young, attractive face. “Oh, you want a *man* to come sing?” she asked. “Fine. I’ll go get my grandfather. He doesn’t have many teeth, but he can still sing just fine.” As with all her teasing and jokes, our hostess kept a completely dry tone and did not crack a smile even once. This and her quick wit made for an impressive performance. I found myself laughing and smiling many times at her comments.

Not long after, a young and rather handsome Tibetan man we’d briefly glimpsed when first entering the courtyard was ushered into the room by the girl with the buns. He, and not a grandfather, had come to sing for us. The anticipation in the room was palpable. He first sang a Tibetan folk song that nobody seemed to recognize, but his voice was excellent and we clapped appreciatively for him when the song concluded. He tried to get away then, but our hostess had blocked the exit and gave him a glowering look. He resigned himself to his duty. “Okay, what song do you want to hear, then?” he asked us. “Whatever you want.” But when nobody made any suggestions, the young man decided he would sing “*Tianlu*” (天路, “Heavenly Railway,” a 2006 song written about the Qinghai-Tibet Railway), which seems to be every Chinese person’s favorite Tibetan-style song. After this performance, everyone clapped much more wildly than they had after the Tibetan-language song he had sung first. Still barred from exiting the room, next the young man sang the local but widely-known folk song “*Kangding Qingge*,” again to hearty applause.⁵⁹ His fourth and final

⁵⁹ Kangding Qingge (康定情歌, “Kangding Love Song”) is perhaps the most famous folk song from China; it was even one of 10 folk songs selected to represent humanity and be sent out to space on NASA’s Voyager II. Regardless of which Kangding-area community the song actually originates from, and the fact that it is popularized in Chinese,

song was also in Chinese, but I didn't recognize it. Even as he was still holding the last note, he ran out of the door, which had finally been left unguarded, and was free again. Upon his departure, our hostess sang a couple of songs for us, and her voice was also impressive, but it was obvious that no one was as interested. The enthusiasm of the clapping waned dramatically. I also didn't notice anyone with their phones out, recording, as they had for the male singer. Most had turned back to the food.

Next our hostess educated us about the seating arrangement in Tibetan tradition. She asked the three men who were facing, but seated furthest from the door to stand up. She said this is where the three grandfathers would sit, who would be brothers to one another, and all married to one woman. "Don't get any ideas," our hostess admonished the woman sitting near her who had developed a reputation for being naughty, and seemed to be excited by the idea of polyandry. "It's not like that. And now in Tibet it's one husband per wife, just like everywhere else in China, okay?"

The Han woman continued to remark about how she wanted to get a Tibetan man. "Really? Well, I know several unmarried ones I can unload on you, how about it?" our hostess said. She explained how even though the eldest brother technically had the highest status, in reality the third, youngest brother wielded the most influence. She asked where we thought the grandmother would sit. It turned out to be the seat closest to the door, which was currently inhabited by the other man who had eschewed the implied seating arrangement—a man from Shanghai with a shaved head. "*This* is our grandmother," said the hostess. "Ugh, it even had to be a bald guy..." She explained that in the past, because of the prioritization of men and devaluing of women (重男轻女, *zhongnan qingnü*), the woman was expected to wait on the man for everything he could possibly need, and it didn't matter how old she was. That's why the grandmother had to sit closest to the door—so she could move quickly to the kitchen. Our hostess then guided the bald man to act out a little drama where he, shaking his hips to suggest his femininity, should walk over to his

it is at least associated with Tibetan culture or assumed to be Tibetan. Nian Zha told me directly that it was a Tibetan song, and when I asked if the lyrics were originally Tibetan, he said yes, but that he didn't know them. The fame of this love song has had a huge impact on the romantic placemaking of Kangding, most evidently in the "Kangding Qingge Scenic Area." A revolutionary romance movie sharing the song's name was released in 2010 in honor of the 60th anniversary of the Liberation of Tibet; Hailuoguo is also featured in the film.

“husbands,” clasp his hands together, bend down in a gesture of deference, and formally inquire if they needed anything. The husbands should then respond with a grunt. But in the midst of the instructions, the second brother had sat down.

“Who told you to sit down?” our hostess asked him.

“I’m tired,” he complained, but he stood back up until the skit was finally over. The appointed grandmother was more enthusiastic about his role than the three grandfathers were.

After that our hostess explained the rest of the seating configuration. The regulations for the men’s seating area seemed more rigid, whereas the women’s table was glossed over as something like “wives and potential wives.”

By now everyone had stopped eating, but one last dish came out. It was mutton chop coated with crushed dried pepper. It looked good, but no one made a move for it or passed it around until the hostess told us what it was and encouraged us to eat it. When I tasted it, I agreed it was one of the tastiest dishes of the night, but most of it ended up left on the plates uneaten. The last and perhaps most drawn-out topic of speech that our hostess covered that evening had to do with the photos we had had taken in the courtyard and included a general spiel about the organization she worked for. She explained the significance of the khata, and how that exchange, as well as having our pictures taken, and sharing this time together, meant we were all one family. The photos, she said, would cost 20 yuan, and she apologized that the man who had taken them didn’t have good photography skills. She explained in precise detail where the 20 yuan was going. A small portion was for the meal—she clarified that they employed both a Tibetan cook and a Han cook. The Han cook was because they strove to make the food appetizing to the Han palate. Otherwise, people would be complaining about a lack of salt and flavor in the food, so they hired someone who understood Chinese tastes. But all the food, except for the soft flatbread, had come from their own produce and livestock. Then another small portion went to the actual printing of the photographs, and another small portion to support the organization itself. The remaining majority of the money was for the company’s

charitable work. She said that they have different locations, but the money collected here would be used locally, to help children in Ganzi who didn't have proper clothing, education, housing, or food. As this speech went on, I wondered if some of my fellow tourists might spurn the photograph to avoid paying the 20 yuan, as tacky as that would be, but everyone was accepting without complaint. Well, one girl at my table asked if she could redo her photo, but the hostess said no. "There's no guarantee you'd like the new photo better," she pointed out.

After paying up we were led back down into the courtyard, where we were informed that there was going to be a dance. We removed our khata, hanging them on the taxidermized yak's horn. While the two Tibetan women went to stand near the big incense pillar, most of the rest of us tried to stand as far away from them as possible, hoping that we could just watch the *other*, theoretical participants unnoticed. But non-participation was not really an option. "Come join hands!" Our hostess called sternly, and emphasized the importance of dancing to our experience of Tibetan culture. We all formed a ring around the pillar, hand in hand. Then we were taught the dance. We'd put our right leg over our left leg and sort of shuffle along clockwise for a few steps, then we'd all lift our arms and swoop in towards the incense burner, and then back out again, then in, and out, pause for a moment, and then repeat the whole thing. Music played in the background. We danced for such a short time that nobody (besides our hostesses, of course) could seem to get the hang of it, despite its simplicity. Then we were dismissed, and those of us who wanted to go to the hot springs got on our tour bus and we headed up a winding mountain road.

By the talent of our hostess, it was hard to say how much of the event was strictly scripted and how much was improvised on the spot. Still, the Tibetan feast perpetuated a number of stereotypes about ethnic minorities in general and Tibetans in particular: a natural affinity for singing and dancing, quaint yet intelligible rituals, "backwards" yet tantalizing ideas about sexual and gender relations, and even the economic inferiority (dependence on charity) but ethical superiority of the Tibetans to the Han—who thought of toasting themselves before they thought of their friends. Tibetan culture was explained impersonally (often as tradition that had been relegated to the past), using Chinese idioms, and most of the

songs sung were actually in Chinese. The value expressed most repeatedly through the evening was that of coming together as a family, which mirrors the official rhetoric used to explain the relation of different ethnicities within the *Zhonghua Minzu*. Just as the food itself, Tibetan culture was presented in a safe and palatable manner that the tourists indifferently consumed. The only time it felt like something really special was happening was when the Tibetan man sang. The Han women's preference for the male singer was a palpable fact, but even the men stopped eating and took out their smartphones to record his rendition of *Tianlu*. The young Tibetan man's confident presence and powerful voice did indeed form a stark contrast with the Han men in the room—considering the enthusiastically feminine performance from the bald man, the man who was too “tired” to continue standing for several minutes, and even the other husband who had left the table of men to sit with his wife (his wife who then lusted after the thought of an additional, Tibetan husband).

Again, the presence of this kind of programming on a Hailuoguo tour reinforces a generic Tibetan placemaking disconnected from the locality. (The operating non-profit is admittedly not based in Moxi, but active over a wide region.) Their courtyard was a cultural bubble—a Tibetan place made for tourists within what is actually a more complexly multiethnic locality. Of course, there is no way that we, as members of an organized two-day tour, had time to figure that out, shuffled from one thing to the next as we were, sun-up to sundown. The cultural impression left by Hailuoguo was therefore that of a Tibetan place—and moreover, a Tibetan place that conformed to preconceptions and romantic desire for (or perhaps inspiration to be?) the more masculine other.

Conclusion

A straightforwardly Tibetan aesthetic and cultural programming have already been implemented in Moxi Town and Hailuoguo. Yet among the general population of scholars, workers, and “cultural brokers” managing, living or passing through the town—key placemakers—there remains uncertainty around its actual ethnic identity. While the “multiethnic” is acknowledged in cultural-political rhetoric, nothing in the tourism industry performs multiculturalism or deliberately brings it to the fore. Part of this is because many

groups in this historical borderland never really aligned with the major ethnic categories they now must reflect to be recognized. At the same time, these multi-generational local ethnic residents seem to be much less active in the local tourism industry than Tibetan migrants. Those migrants, like Nian Zha, take on an aura of locality to outsiders whenever they forefront their Tibetan qualities.

Those with any interest in tourism development tend to see Moxi's ambiguous or multiple identity—really, any sign of its non-Tibetanness, whether Yi or Han or any still-existent Qiang—as a detriment to its marketability. Tibetan culture has been latched onto as the most legible and profitable product, just as a national-level Tibet mania conditions outsiders to expect and desire that Moxi is Tibetan. Thus, a cycle of production and consumption has been set in place that will probably continue whether or not any of Hailuoguo's local ethnic communities are involved in tourism or not. Tibetan-themed pockets, like the bars on Moxi Ancient Street, are created for tourists, yet provide certain cultural capital and expressive outlets for Tibetan businesspeople and government workers in the town that other groups do not enjoy. Still, it is in a way that is rather disconnected from Minya Tibetan communities in the Mt. Gongga area.

Returning to the tourist perspective, we see how Moxi is both valued and devalued through its various ethnic framings. In a way, ethnic tourism sites cannot win, because tourists simultaneously desire a wild and pure ethnic other as well as the triumph and clean aesthetic of modernity. But when ethnic minorities are modernized—i.e., not in ethnic dress, not singing and dancing, and not speaking the expected language, they are seen as Hanified; they lose both visibility and perceived value.

Interlude 3. The Glacial Icefall

Upon exiting the cableway station at Camp 4 (elevation approx.. 3,600 meters), tourists step into a colder climate than below. Visually, they may be greeted by anything falling between: 1) a thick, all-encompassing fog; 2) a direct, brilliant view of Mt. Gongga's snow-white peak jutting above the 1,080-meter glacial icefall, enclosed by lesser (but closer) snow and glacier-capped peaks on both sides, majestically overseeing our surrounding conifer-and-rhododendron thicket as well as the expansive glacier tongue unfurling below. And up here, the weather is changeable enough to shift from one extreme of visibility to the other in less than a minute.



Figure 16: Glacial icefall and Mt. Gongga (as seen from Camp 4).
Source: photo by author. July 28, 2019

Camp 4, the highest accessible point of the park, may be divided into two areas. The first area is generally level with the cableway station and consists of three observation decks connected by metal walkways slightly elevated above the ground. Each observation deck offers essentially the same view (Mt. Gongga and the glacial icefall) but from slightly different angles and distances. When my Chongzhou group and I get off at Camp 4, the light rain has stopped and the mist receded enough to give a clear view of the icefall, though Mt. Gongga remains shrouded. After taking photos at the first overlook, we continue to the

second. Here we encounter the couple from the cable car again. It turns out they are still arguing over whether it is ice or rock, and have resolved to settle the matter by questioning the worker stationed at an information booth (I have been overlooked entirely in this debate, indicating my lack of authority). Yige accompanies the couple, a mischievous gleam in his eye. “To instigate,” he explains.

As they are headed over, one of Xueqi’s friends shakes her head at the futility of the argument: “It’s rock; it’s rock,” she repeats. Finally the arguing couple and their instigator return to announce that it “really is all ice under there.” But rather than seeming surprised or going to the railing for another look, the rest of my group accepts defeat without further comment, laughing instead at the older couple for their cute argument.

From what I could observe, this “argument” was not about the existence of the glacier at all. The actual fact of the landscape’s glaciation was not ever that important to the group in the cable car; more important was the question of whether that so-called “expert” sitting across from them was trying to fool everyone (including his own wife). This was the more interesting, social question. While it undermines deeply rooted assumptions about the universality of modern tourism as a quest for “authenticity,” I concur with Jonas Larsen’s claim that tourist behavior (in his study, photography specifically) is more about the production of social relationships than the consumption of place (2005). At Hailuoguo, the glacier is a peripheral resource for social interactions and socially-oriented goals, including photography, that performed and thereby reinforced interpersonal bonds. Tourists could therefore have an excellent time and still be disappointed in the scenery, or indifferent to it.

The Chongzhou group takes some more photos with the icefall in the background. While looking through phone screens, they make a few comments on how it’s pretty here, but there are also some complaints.

“So THIS is Hailuoguo?” says Xueqi, surveying the valley with a disappointed tone.

“It’s really not as magnificent as Qinghai,” says Yige, with whom she quickly agrees.



Figure 17: Four-faced Guanyin statue at Camp 4. Source: photo by author. July 27, 2019

The second area of Camp 4 is not level, ascending upslope via a stone path. Along said path are a series of three religious attractions. From bottom to top, there is: a golden four-faced Phra Phrom statue, where some Buddhist workers sell incense for offerings; a pan-Buddhist four-faced Guanyin statue in a Chinese artistic style,⁶⁰ where a worker sells red ribbons on which one may write wishes and leave tied to a stone railing surrounding the statue; a Tibetan stupa, the monk often found there spontaneously reading the auras or futures of passersby, and giving blessings and more extensive life advice to those who offer a donation. These upper reaches of the park are decorated with many strands of Tibetan prayer flags. Finally, the path

⁶⁰ I say “pan-Buddhist” because according to park signage, each of the four faces represents a different iteration of Guanyin (Avalokitesvara, the Goddess of Mercy), representing the Indian, Tibetan, and Han traditions.

splits, and most tourists continue left to the “red rocks beach,” where the path dead-ends just before it would meet a fast-moving stream. Tourists are not supposed to leave the path and trod on the red rocks surrounding it (which kills the fungus making them “red” in the first place), but they do. Thus the “red rocks” are decreasingly red as each tourism season progresses. The other, less popular fork of the path is a long flight of stairs terminating at the Mountaineering Heroes Monument. Carved stone plaques flanking the monument list the successful ascents of Mt. Gongga, as well as the names of those who gave their life in attempting it. If one moves fairly quickly, it takes about an hour to see all of Camp 4.



Figure 18: Close up of a “red rock.” Source: photo by author. April 8, 2019



Figure 19: Tourists at the red rocks beach. Source: photo by author. August 11, 2019

A deceptive image

On the last day of July, I'm guiding six women (former middle school classmates) and one man (one of their husbands), all between 55 and 60 years old. They've already been in Moxi Town for a week, vacationing to escape the brutal summer heat of their home city (Zigong, Sichuan), but today is their first and only day coming up to the park. I mainly talk to Zhang Yifang ("Fangfang"), a retired music teacher with a short and slight frame (she explains that she was born during the famine in 1960, and never grew tall like the rest of her family). I also have some conversations with Xia Xian, a heavy smoker who seems concerned about my welfare as an unmarried woman. Whenever Xia Xian has something to say to me, she'll take my arm and hold me close, making all her comments feel conspiratorial. "Our Sichuan is better

than your America,” she says in her raspy voice as she grips my elbow. She hasn’t been to the US herself, but she has relatives in San Francisco. “Your salaries are higher, but your life isn’t as good as ours.”

It’s a sunny day, and everyone is excited to get both individual photos and every possible combination of group photo at the first observation deck. I am temporarily torn away from my group by other tourists. One man points an immense wide-lens camera at me and, without preamble, tells me to stand where I am before he begins clicking away. The best I can muster is a blank expression, feeling actively dehumanized by the giant lens aimed at my face. But my candid awkwardness might have been the right vibe, because then another man hands me his iPad and asks me to capture some shots of him in front of the mountains. He goes and stands by the railing, just sort of looking around, bored and listless, as though he were waiting at a bus stop. After a few moments he walks back to me. I ask if he wants to check the photos I’ve taken (because I have no idea what he was going for), but he insists they are fine without looking and goes on his way.

I reunite with Fangfang and the others, and we continue on to the second observation deck. This one is much larger, and sits right upon the edge of the valley wall, with fewer trees obstructing the view. A giant, billboard-sized photo of Mt. Gongga and the icefall stands at one end of the platform. On foggy days when the icefall is impossible to see, I always offer to take tourists’ photos in front of this backdrop instead, as though I am “photoshopping” them into the scene. (When I return in 2021, the photo has been replaced by a patriotic message against a bold red background.) After a few minutes at this outlook, Fangfang comes up to me and critiques the glacier’s appearance. “It doesn’t look like I imagined,” she says. She had been expecting something purely white. “By the way, what are they doing putting this picture of a really white glacier here?” she gestures toward the backdrop, in front of which a member of her group is currently posing for a photo, suggesting that it is a deceptive ploy.

“That must have been taken in winter,” I explain.

“It must be really beautiful here in winter.”

Tourists often express this sentiment, as though they are not seeing the real qualities of the glacier by coming in summer. Ironically, after a winter snowfall is when you *can't* see the glacier, only the overlaying snow (and that only in the absence of fog). It makes me think the true interest is not in seeing the real glacier but in seeing some “glacial ideal,” which amounts to immersion in a pure and otherworldly whiteness. It is understandable that the tourism administration at Hailuoguo promotes a high proportion of images showing the glacier at its snowiest, or of cropped close-ups (like the ones taken by my porter guide) surpassing any debris to focus attention on its blue depths. Clean blues and whites correspond to a desired nature imaginary that contrasts with the dusty grays and browns of China's industrialized landscapes or polluted urban air. However, the disparity between promotional photos and reality can be so great that tourists suspect they have been deceived if not disrespected as consumers, contributing to a negative impression of place.

According to one tourist, the experience offered by Dagu Glacier comes closer to this glacial ideal. Dagu Glacier is also located in western Sichuan, but was only “discovered” in 1992 by Japanese scientists looking at satellite imagery; as I am conducting fieldwork, it has been open to the public for about a decade. Because Dagu's highest observation point is much higher than Hailuoguo's (4,860 vs. 3,600 meters), there's no vegetation there, and snow cover is present the majority of the year. “But it's altitude sickness as soon as you get out of the cable car,” the tourist warns me with a laugh. While altitude sickness keeps some people away from Dagu, it enhances the prestige of tourists who do experience it. They do not only get a higher perspective looking *down* on mountain peaks rather than *up at* them; they can also claim a physical fortitude, even though the site—like Hailuoguo—transports tourists to its highest point via cableway and not hiking path.

“They only think about now”

One day in August, I am guiding a family from Kunming—there's Xiang Zixuan (a well-educated man in his 30s—though he says “it's a secret” when I inquire about his work), his parents, his aunt and uncle, his cousin (Mandong), and her eight-year-old daughter. Xiang Zixuan is friendly but reserved, and I get the sense he is usually overworked, rarely getting sunlight or exercise. Nevertheless, his sincere joy in

traveling and being outdoors now seems to be more for his family members than himself. He is the one who organized the trip, and when I ask him why he chose Hailuogou, his face lights up. “I did it for her,” he says of his mother, Zhimeng. “I take her anywhere she wants to go.” He tells me it was also for his mother that he asked me to join them for the day, although, when we finally get off the bus and all meet each other face-to-face, she shyly declines to engage with me, smiling but also literally cowering behind her son.

“Why don’t you communicate with her?” Zixuan asks Zhimeng.

“I don’t know how to communicate!” Zhimeng protests, hiding her face.

“She actually *really* does want to talk with you,” Zixuan assures me. “On the bus, I asked her if she wanted you to come with us, and she said she did. That’s when I asked you.”

Familiar with Mingyong Glacier in their own Yunnan Province, this group also seems disappointed in the glacier experience at Hailuogou. Zixuan describes in detail the religious significance of Kawagebo (Tib. Khawa Karpo), the mountain where Mingyong Glacier is found, and how its sentient willpower may be one reason it is so impossible to climb (*see* Allison 2015; Kolas 2004). (After many deaths on the mountain, and out of respect for local religious beliefs, Kawagebo is officially closed to mountaineers.)

“Gongga is also a sacred mountain,” I tell Zixuan, but I lack detailed knowledge on its lore, and fail to pique further interest.

“Yeah, it seems like so long as a mountain is a snowy mountain, it’s sacred in Tibetan thought,” he replies, dismissively.

Zixuan also disapproves of the site’s layout. “We’re too far away,” he says, as we tour Camp 4. “At Mingyong Glacier, you can go right up to the glacier and touch it.” His complaints about the structure of the tourist experience are directly followed up with complaints of the glacier’s appearance, blurring the lines between built and natural environment. “And this Hailuogou Glacier is not as clean. The ice here is blackened.” The way he says it sounds like he knows it has deteriorated from a previous pearly state, that

the debris is pollution, if not literally then at least in the sense of “matter out of place” (Douglas 2001). Although its debris is natural, Zixuan is correct that the glacier is, effectively, graying over time: the debris becomes more visible as the ice diminishes. There is an intertwining of natural and human phenomena rather than a strict division.

We move from one Camp 4 attraction to another at a swift pace. While other members of the group are still quite clearly in the process of taking photos, Zhimeng begins to get agitated and urges them to move along. “Let’s go, let’s go,” she says, pacing around until the others give into her anxious directives—although she laughs and wears a jubilant smile the entire time.

As we pass through rhododendron thicket on the way to Camp 4’s cultural attractions, Mandong’s father, Wenhao, raises concerns about the glacier and climate that no other tourist will ever do, unprompted, in my company. He explains that ecotourism development is a double-edged sword, one that is being wielded shortsightedly. “This place is a protected nature reserve, but because of all these people coming in here day after day, it’s only going to raise the temperature. That’s going to change a lot—the glacier will melt faster; the plants may be affected. More people, faster changes. For example, animals that used to roam in this exact spot have already retreated.” He explains that in the 1800s, these places were colder, according to both historical climate data and written accounts. “The challenge facing humanity now,” he says, “is how to take these negative aspects and turn them around to maximize benefit. In China, people’s sense of awareness and preservation are still in the process of development. People only think about themselves, and not others; they only think about now, and not later.”

The rest of Wenhao’s family, especially his daughter and nephew, seem amused that he is airing such grave concerns with me. “You think you know, do you?” they tease him. “My father is silly,” says Mandong. “My uncle is somewhat of an environmentalist,” Zixuan tells me, somewhat apologetically.

Wenhao is undeterred and we continue our conversation. Apart from their rarity, a couple of things stand out to me about Wenhao’s environmental concerns regarding Hailuoguo. First, he does not directly

attribute climatic warming and glacial melt to global processes, instead focusing on hyperlocal causes—the increase in tourist bodies which add heat and, directly or indirectly, chase off animals and alter the entire ecosystem. Second, he seems to believe that the solution to these problems lies in a kind of *social* development: that given time and guidance, Chinese people will change their attitudes, and then their behavior. He suggests that the degradation of the environment can become a beneficial tool, a trigger for change. Thus, in what may appear to be a pessimistic or anti-capitalist mindset, Wenhao bears a certain neoliberal optimism.

I do not entirely disagree with Wenhao. Although its glacial loss is not as rapid or striking as some sites in the Andes or Alps, Hailuoguo Glacier's retreat is still alarming, well-studied, and easily identifiable in year-to-year photographs. It has the potential to raise public awareness and concern for climate loss, which could spur positive change and build support for pro-environmental policies. What's more, the administration does not deny climate or glacial changes. Yet at the same time, it does not put real effort into promoting awareness or a narrative of loss. It emphasizes the glacier's majesty and beauty, not its fragility or degradation. That latter narrative would run counter to the entire mood and motivation of the industry, which is built around tourists having a good time—or at least demonstrating they are having a good time by sharing happy photos and videos on social media—and returning again in the future. Not only tourism revenue, but the entire local economy has a stake in the optimistic narrative according to which Hailuoguo's value will only increase over time.

Wenhao's hyperlocal environmental framework is not entirely unique, as I would soon encounter tourism workers making similar connections between tourist numbers, or moral quality, and changes in the weather or climate.

A rancorous mountain

We arrive at the Phra Phrom. It's not always the same person selling incense here, but there's one man who I often converse with, a local who tells me to call him "Mu." At first it seemed a little odd to find a Thai statue here, donated by the (2010) Thai government no less. Mu tells me it's part of a movement to

unify all the world's Buddhist schools: "Even though this is the realm of Tibetan Buddhism, and Thailand practices Theravada Buddhism, it all goes back to the same original teachings." He says that this is probably the highest-altitude Phra Phrom in the world, and that there are no others like it in China. Every year, Thai people come here to worship, and he's planning on traveling to Thailand himself next month. There seem to be some limits to his compassionate cosmopolitanism, however. "We don't like Japanese tourists," Mu tells me one day in a low voice. "Because of historical reasons. Even though it was ninety-some years ago now, the harm they did to the Chinese people runs deep... In Hailuoguo, people say that every time a Japanese tourist comes here, the weather changes. That is, the weather quickly turns bad. The sky grows really dark, all the sudden."

I'm uncomfortable with the turn in conversation: "Do you believe that?" I ask him.

"I've seen it," he tells me. "I've seen it multiple times."

I had heard another tourism worker make a similar comment, attributing a mountaineering disaster to the fact that the climbers were Japanese, but a quick review of successes and failures on Gongga's slopes reveals indifference to national origin. I find the belief that Mount Gongga's emotional investment and weather-commanding powers would align with Chinese nationalism interesting. Although there are longstanding beliefs in this borderland about mountains as disaster-causing "dragons" (*see, for example*, Rock 1930, 388), the specific beliefs and concerns of the local Minya people who give the mountain its name have been obscured in the making of a national moral geography. The mountain is now an agent that acts on behalf of national memory and affect. This erasure is not inevitable, as shown in the contrast to Kawagebo, Yunnan Province, where tourism development has more faithfully continued or revived local Buddhist culture—for example, reinventing pilgrimage routes for tourist participation.

Camp 3

The cableway exit at Ganheba deposits tourists near a walkway leading down to Camp 3, about a 15-minute journey. The raised path—an eyesore of industrial metal that feels terrible underfoot and was

installed early this summer—splits into two routes (one high, one low) that eventually rejoin before reaching Camp 3. On the same day that I had chatted with Mr. Song on the bus, I find myself here, walking alone. I have to skirt the macaques clustered on the pathway's railings, who are waiting to grab snacks—or the bags that may contain them—from any tourists with their guard down. One follows me for half a minute before giving up and slinking back to the group.

Camp 3 offers another snack stand and indoor seating area, as well as a ticket office for electric shuttle rides to Chengmendong (tourists may also walk to Chengmendong, but have to dodge out of the way of said shuttles). Just down the road from the shuttle ticket office is a full-fledged cafeteria/restaurant and a hotel—just beyond that, a bus stop and the entrance to the Glacial Rainforest Hiking Path.

I am seated in the snack area working on my notes from that morning's conversation. After a while, one of Hailuoguo's park officers (surnamed Hong) comes and sits across from me with a sigh, relishing the opportunity to rest. First he looks at my notes—which are a combination of Chinese characters, pinyin, and English, all hastily scribbled and largely unintelligible, sometimes even to myself. "*Kan bu dong*" he says (看不懂, "I can't understand it"). He asks about my research and agrees to an interview. I begin by asking him about the monkeys.

Unlike other local wildlife, which is becoming ever scarcer as tourism increases, the macaque populations are growing. "And no matter how many times you tell the tourists not to feed them, they still do. This is a real headache," Officer Hong says. "Because the tourists don't know any better, they just want to get a picture, so they'll get up close. But the monkeys do bite people. And all that we can do in return is scare them off. We're not allowed to harm them."



Figure 20: Tourists photographing macaques (on the path between Camp 3 and Chengmendong).

Source: photo by author. September 1, 2019

The most obvious change that's occurred in the 15 years that Officer Hong has been working here, however, is the glacial melting. The change—and its acceleration—are both obvious. He attributes this to the ever-increasing number of tourists. “First of all, the sheer number of tourists means significant added body heat. Especially the ones that go up to the glacier and touch it and break pieces off.

“Most of the tourists are good,” he stresses a few times. “It’s just a few that aren’t, that behave badly.”

I tell him how a tourist I’d talked to earlier that day (Mr. Song) had told me people don’t care about the glacier because it has nothing to do with their lives. Officer Hong doesn’t think that’s quite the issue. “Tourists don’t care about the glacier,” he counters with a bit of scorn, “because it doesn’t look like how they *imagined* it should. This is a maritime glacier, a low-altitude glacier. And if it weren’t covered with a layer of rocks, it simply wouldn’t be there already. The rocks protect it from UV rays. If it weren’t for that, the glacier would be melting even faster, it would be gone even sooner.”

Among tourism workers, this is the standard understanding of Hailuoguo Glacier's debris cover—that it is a common feature of low-altitude monsoon-influenced glaciers, and that it should be valued for protecting the glacier, which could otherwise never be found in such a warm climate as this.⁶¹ It becomes almost personally frustrating for the workers how tourist after tourist regards the debris with disdain, as though it is keeping them from a true sight or experience.

Today, however, it is also a thick fog that prevents seeing anything in the distance. I comment how there are a lot of tourists today, despite the obscuring weather. Officer Hong tells me, well, that's because of Mt. Gongga. "Gongga is like that. When there's a lot of tourists, it doesn't let itself be seen. It could be a sunny day, but if it gets crowded, then, it fogs up." Yet again, a local-moral explanation is applied to changes in the weather around Mt. Gongga.

Anthropologists—for example, Ben Orlove, Paul Sillitoe, and Carla Roncoli—contrast scientific discourses of climate change with indigenous knowledge and spiritual ontologies. Many scholars work on cryosphere-adjacent, small-scale residential communities for whom glaciated peaks or glaciers themselves are agentively engaged with humans in social and moral relations (Allison 2019; Bolin 2009; Cruikshank 2005; Gagné 2019). A key argument emerging from this literature is the need to coordinate policy with local cultures in climate change response (Magistro and Roncoli 2001; Orlove et al. 2019). At Hailuoguo, however, longtime-resident tourism workers like Mu and Officer Hong personify, localize and moralize observations of climate change even in the absence of a well-defined or indigenous cosmology connecting humans and cryosphere. (Although Mu is a Buddhist, his assertion that Mt. Gongga changes the weather based on tourists' national origin seems more like a rumor based in popular belief of Mt. Gongga's magical powers rather than Buddhist metaphysics.) Thus, even in the absence of a fully articulated cosmology, we can observe the *uncompellingness* of a global climate change discourse so disconnected from everyday social-moral relations. Officer Hong is observing unprecedented glacial melting firsthand, *and* a concurrent

⁶¹ There is no direct relationship between monsoon influence and supraglacial degree cover as many seemed to suggest. Both promote the glacier's continued existence, as monsoon precipitation increases accumulation and the supraglacial layer (most likely) decreases ablation.

growth in tourist numbers and badly behaved tourists. The trends seem to match. Environmental degradation fits into this affective worldview, building an overarching explanatory framework for what's going on at Hailuoguo.

Why is global climate change unconvincing as an explanatory framework? Because it is everywhere and nowhere at once; it exceeds and therefore has nothing to do with the boundaries that give a sense of place, home or identity. We cannot comprehend its enormity, let alone feel it. To resonate, the effects have to be localized somewhere—and more often than not, those effects are offshored to more precarious locations to be suffered by *others*. The First World worries, but also fantasizes about the disasters' spread as a form of entertainment. Climate disasters play out on screens like the plot of a Hollywood movie, or literally *as* Hollywood movies. Joseph Masco describes how global warming (swapped in for the Cold-War-era nuclear threat) emerges in American cinema, and popular consciousness, as a *national security* threat (2010). In many ways climate change is incomprehensible because of its scale—and this the result of our species-disjuncture in the basic scale of ecology (Clark 2018). But it is the *experiential grasping* of scales, affectively and imaginatively, that poses a greater obstacle to formulating climate change concern or response than the inability to cognitively grasp the science.

Chapter 4.

Technological Frame: Making a Social Media Ecology

One sunny day in October, I was on my way to Gonghe Village with three other young women—all workers in the Hailuoguo Administration—for a soak in the hot springs. Our transport was a big blocky SUV; the woman driving it, “Qi,” was wearing a stylish faux leather jacket. She took the winding mountain road confidently, usually with just one hand on the wheel. Wenxian, who sat in the front passenger seat, remarked on how cool Qi looked. “You should add a music track and make this a Douyin,” she gushed. On the way back down the mountain, the other passenger made the same comment—*you really need to make a Douyin of this, you look so cool*. The perception of “coolness” was tied to our driver *looking like* a potential Douyin (TikTok) video. The other two women did not say that Qi *was* cool, but recognized that by isolating and aestheticizing these moments of her life, she could be cool on social media.

Our everyday visual technologies are more than just tools. They become guiding frames—a part of the way that we inhabit the world—because they affect our awareness of objects’ qualities, our aesthetic experience, our awareness of self and our underlying goals. Influential works in Western thought have described this as the case for photography (e.g., Barthes 1981; Benjamin 1999; Sontag 2005). But there is an intensification of the framing effect in our current smartphone-based photography practices due to the nature of the medium and the political economy of image circulation.

Without falling into the trap of diametrically opposed “real life” versus the “virtual” (as in fake), in this chapter I make a case for how smartphone-based imaging practices in the social media age create a media ecology. It is a response to the question addressed by Neil Postman: “How does technology affect human perception, feeling, and value?” (2006, 12). Here I am not as interested in the content of the circulating images as in the moving, blurring boundary of the virtual in the experience of photography culture as well as the social roles and emotional entanglements of smartphone-camera. In some ways this new media ecology is a continuation of earlier analogue photography and mobile phone cultures, but in some ways it is new, or at least significantly amplified. Digital photography is more manipulable and

reproducible than analogue photography, supporting a culture of seemingly low-stakes experimentation in self-performance. But such virtual worlding narrows one's perceptual attention when one is, for example, a tourist out and about in a forest, or a "smombie" crossing a city street (Fernández et al. 2020). Muted attention to one's surroundings is by design rather than accident—the devices we use are purposefully addictive, nearly as gamified the Las Vegas slot machines in Natasha Dow Schüll's research (2012). Yet the fetishization and intimate centrality of smartphones in our everyday lives creates a strong positive identification with its technical and aesthetic qualities. We begin to think and feel *with* the smartphone, not simply *through* it (Gertz, Schütz-Bosbach, and Diefenbach 2021). As the technology progresses, we feel increasingly powerful even though in some ways we are less in control than ever. Most importantly, we become complicit in our own emotional and cognitive manipulation by capital and the powerful corporations that create and control social media platforms. Social media has reshaped the reasons and ways that people practice and perceive photography, and although people are using social media in different ways, one cannot easily step outside of an entire ecology. I argue that the effects of the social media ecology reinforce social divisions, and I attend to the ways in which, combined with differential tourism mobilities and symbolic capital, women particularly are restricted.

In this chapter, I argue that social media ecology complements a developmental frame and undermines human agency. I am not considering, however, overt cases of political mobilization, activism, repression or resistance, but a more diffuse everyday sort of agency exercised or curtailed when our guard is down—when we are on tour or otherwise at leisure. Tourism remains my main point of reference, but I expand to consider other areas of leisure; in fact, it becomes difficult to draw a meaningful line between tourism and other leisure in terms of photography activities, due to the vast reach of social media ecology. Recent communication studies that explicitly consider user agency and democratization in relation to social media technologies tend to analyze agency within the given system—a techno-corporate mediascape where users struggle for greater visibility or influence, more gratifying consumption or enhanced productivity (e.g., Huang and Miao 2021; Kang and Lou 2022). Such research does not adequately address the ways that

our emotions and goals' infiltration by a techno-corporate ordering is already a retraction of agency. I would also like to point out that while my study is situated in China, it is impossible to ignore resonance with observations I have made in the United States, leading me to believe this argument has a wider applicability. While I address the ways that Chinese photography, social media and subjects are unique, I reject the idea that Chinese social media is, in the aspects here described, automatically or substantially more restrictive or pernicious because of the authoritarian system of governance.

I apply the concept of media ecology from media theorist Neil Postman, whose claim is that "technological change is not additive or subtractive; it is ecological" (1992, 18). I also draw upon Jennifer Cool's definition of media ecology as including "not only technologies and techniques but also the ways of seeing and saying through which these developed—a vast field of normative rules, cultural assumptions, practices, and discourses" (2014, 174). In other words, it is not just the nature of the medium that matters—but neither is media neutral or interchangeable (McLuhan 1964). The ecological approach underscores the intertwining of the social and technical, biological and cultural. As our media changes, it redraws the limits of what the human can be, for better or worse, and it becomes more difficult to distinguish human and machine. According to Postman, the march of technological development has followed a troubling macrohistorical trend of relinquishing agency from the erstwhile tool-wielders, to where today's society is organized to serve the tools (now more-than-tools) themselves. In the digital age, we are overcome with information to the point of chaos, but the structure of "technopoly" compels a belief that to resolve the problems of information technology, we must simply produce *more* information or more technology. Loss of agency is evident, for example, in recent breakthroughs in artificial intelligence. Even developers and scientists who work on this technology are worried about the ethical implications and security risks of pushing it further, but there is no sign of slowing down. The neoliberal solution that people should simply "opt out" of technology they do not like completely misses the point—that the transformation is ecological.

This chapter consists of five main sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I consider existing work on tourism visibility that has focused on the Foucauldian "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990). I contrast this

with the Lacanian gaze, which I argue is more useful for understanding photographic subjectivity within contemporary social media ecology. In the second section, I offer a brief summary of the history of photography in China and introduce contemporary genres, popular trends, and wanghong culture. I illustrate the centrality of photography in socialization and urban leisure practices with some of my own experiences in Chengdu. In the third section, I return to the tourism setting, recounting part of a tour through Hailuoguo to give a situated narrative of tourist photography practices. This scene provides evidence for the fourth section of the chapter, where I expand upon the chapter's central argument through four facets of the social media ecology—the dissociative thrill of virtual worlding, the temporal and social implications of digital culture, the intimacies of the smartphone, and the conditioned pursuit of aesthetic capital. In the fifth section, I explain how the Lacanian photographic subjectivity and social media ecology reinforce gender stratification.

Tourist gazes

The Foucauldian model

Urry describes tourism as fundamentally visual, with its own mode of perception, the “tourist gaze” (Urry and Larsen 2011). Rather than an innocent looking about, *gazing* is intent and focused, a learned activity embedded in power relations and generating an epistemic field—like Foucault’s “medical gaze.” In particular, the tourist gaze structures experience around imagination of the *extra-ordinary*. And, if there is not anything extraordinary, the gaze effectively *creates* objects worthy of view based on the gazing subject’s conditioning, biases and expectations (often guided by cues and frames in a touristic setting). I will provide an example of the tourist gaze from my tour guiding at Hailuoguo.

It was an overcast day, and I was guiding two groups, including a couple from Fuzhou—Lu Ziyi and Zhen Mengzhu. We were at Camp 4’s first observation deck, and though the view had been completely obscured when we first exited the cable car, I noticed a change in the lighting and saw that some snowy peaks were starting to appear through the mist on one side of the valley. I pointed this out to my groups. Lu Ziyi responded by clasping his hands together, then fully prostrating himself multiple times in the general

direction of the semi-visible peaks. His wife, Mengzhu, was focused on taking pictures instead. When he stood back up, Ziyi lightly chastised her. “You see a sacred mountain and you still don’t worship?” he asked rhetorically. Obviously she did not feel the same spiritual urges as he did, but she had recognized something special enough to photograph. Later in the day Ziyi explained that he was irreligious but had a great respect for all religions. It was his practice to worship wherever he went—whether it was Buddhism, Christianity, whatever. We didn’t see Mt. Gongga that day—the only mountain in view of Hailuoguo that I had ever heard referred to as an actual “sacred mountain” or “Buddhist mountain,” and Ziyi wasn’t drawing on religious beliefs per se, but had a readiness to perceive the spiritual while on tour. Ziyi’s gaze had then elevated the mountains as extraordinary, sacred objects. Such a perception was encouraged by contextual cues: the juxtaposition of observation decks and religious paraphernalia throughout Camp 4, my own direction as a guide. My pointing out the mountains as they became visible through the mist indicated something special was happening. On days with clear visibility, I would never have pointed out *those* mountains to anyone, and it seems less likely that Lu Ziyi would have worshipped them in that case. Thinking with Urry’s tourist gaze, it becomes clear how touristic framings of extraordinariness affect perception in ways that reinforce the subject’s preconceptions and drive to fulfill desire.

Without questioning its descriptive utility in certain situations, I disagree that Urry’s tourist gaze constitutes an ordering, epistemic field—or the *dominant* epistemic field in tourism—similarly to Foucault’s medical gaze in the clinic or asylum. First of all, tourism is too immense and disparate a sphere of activity to have a unified visual paradigm unique unto itself. Indeed, many scholars have found Urry’s tourist gaze unable to account for tourist experiences and therefore suggested their own alternative or supplemental gazes (e.g., Gillespie 2006; Larsen 2005; Maoz 2006; Ong and du Cros 2012; Sheller 2012); Urry himself also classifies tourist-gaze subtypes—for example, the “romantic gaze.” The many typologies suggest that tourist perception is widely variable—dependent upon the subjects’ sociocultural background, mode of travel, and individual motivation, the tourism genre, and the social dynamics of any given visual interaction. Rather than refining the concept, however, it seems that many critiques or iterations of the

tourist gaze are attempts to reallocate agency or push back against power. This brings me to a second point of critique: tourists are not at all like the doctors in Foucault's clinics, backed by the authority of expert knowledge and a powerful institution; the archetypical tourist is in fact one defined by knowing little of what they are given to gaze upon. A Foucauldian tourist gaze attributes too much power to the gazing subject, and is therefore more appropriate to analyze a visual-epistemic ordering at the level of state-led tourism development than in everyday tourist consumption. Third and finally, the binary, immobile Foucauldian gaze is too simplistic to account for the embodied intersubjectivity of visual being, particularly in the highly mobile act of touring.

MacCannell (2001) and Lanfant (2009) each argue that if there *is* a dominant gaze in tourism, it may bear greater resemblance to the Lacanian gaze than the Foucauldian one. I agree that the Lacanian gaze is incidentally more useful for understanding tourists because it offers a more nuanced *general* theory on modern visual subjectivity as intersubjective, photographic in nature, and of limited agentic power (to define or command reality). Tourists at Hailuoguo, for example, often failed to recognize the glacier, and would even argue amongst themselves about whether there was a glacier there or not. On the one hand, this indicates the failure of the governmental/corporate project to induce the tourist gaze in perception of the glacier; on the other hand, it points to visual dispositions formed outside of tourism that have little or nothing to do with the glacier itself. Tourists do not arrive on the scene as blank slates, or adopting a disposition wholly unique to tourism, but are profoundly affected by everyday imaging practices—among which photography is particularly influential. This will be evident in the third section's scene ("Tourist photography at Hailuoguo")—but first I will elaborate on the Lacanian gaze as a theory of photographic subjectivity, then provide background on photography culture and practices in contemporary China.

The Lacanian model

Contrary to Urry (and to the theories of Sartre, on whom he draws), Lacan (1978) situates the origin of the gaze not in the subject, but the object. He explains how we become aware of ourselves as objects early in life, that we have a differentiated body viewable *among* and *to* other bodies, and this becomes the

basic model for understanding one's place in existence. Despite intellectually grasping that the visual field originates in one's eyes/self, it is as though the opposite were true, for our eyes are one thing that can never be directly seen in the field. We are always already "beings who are looked at" (75), trapped in objectification, existing for others (to know) rather than oneself. This results in self-alienation, imparting a deep sense of lack. Any actions to correct this lack are doomed to fail; our desires simply run up against the screen of visual projections, never getting at the "real" material world beyond. Thus, for Lacan when we look, we don't really see; we merely cast our desires into a space where we are already objectified and thus symbolic. Even *if* tourists may be characterized by a greater desire to see reality, we should not assume that this drive offers a basis for seeing the landscape in a similar, generalizable way, as though they are chasing a singular "reality." Rather, it is the framing of smartphone-based photography that is similar across contexts and creates notable patterns in perception.

Iskin (1997) observes that while Lacan himself reputedly disliked photography, his theory of the gaze is inescapably shaped by the medium. Rather than thought serving as the basis for self-knowledge—a la Descartes—Lacan takes vision and the relationship between self and image to be the basis of subjectivity. This relationship is established when an infant sees their "self" in a mirror. Iskin argues that for mature humans, photographs serve the same function as mirrors do for infants. The two-dimensional image becomes a space for mapping the psyche in a form recognizable to some *other*. Because the image is "out there," already illuminated, one is not in control of it. Lacan simply applies this photographic relation to our knowledge of the body itself. This lack of agency and the inability to know ourselves as others do is deeply unsettling, yet our image continues to attract us and define our subjectivity. We become fixated on the illusion that our symbolic image can give way to some deeper reality.

Why would contemporary tourism be more defined by a Lacanian case than a Foucauldian one? In short, it is because tourists are increasingly seeking and persuaded to *be seen* via their visual consumption rather than to *see*. This epistemic field does not inhere in the subject's desire to look upon the authentic or extraordinary, but in the subject's futile attempts to supersede an essentially objectifying photo-visual

existence with one where they are valued and in control. Although the Lacanian gaze is not specific to tourism, it is particularly salient there due to the touristic expectations and norms that intensify image production and consumption, and thus heighten awareness of one's projected, symbolic self. MacCannell (2001) suggests that a Lacanian "second gaze" is a liberating complement to the first, Urry-Foucauldian tourist gaze, because it is disruptive. It is the disruptive stain of the Real that allows the subject to unsee themselves as the center of the universe and get past their obsession with seeing anything in particular at all, opening tourism up to unexpected possibilities. I disagree, however, that this is a faithful characterization of the Lacanian gaze rather than another expansion upon the workings of the original tourist gaze.⁶² Liberation from objectification is not entirely a matter of mindset, an obsession to be overcome; it is also structural. This is evident in how the Lacanian gaze is heavily modulated by racialization, gendering and technology. What I am interested in and will return to later is how Lacanian subjectivity works within our contemporary media ecology of smartphone-based digital photography.

Tourism photography is informed by and overlaps with other photography and social media cultures. In the next section I will briefly introduce official Chinese photography, themed portraiture aesthetics, amateur photography practices, and *wanghong* culture based on observations in Chengdu, before moving onto a case study at Hailuoguo. By "social photography" (Jurgenson 2019), I draw attention to contemporary digital photography as a highly socially oriented, embedded, and networked practice, to a degree that distinguishes it from the professional or analogue photography that informed the theories of earlier eras.

Social photography in China

Photography came to China soon after its invention in 1839. By the 1860s, Chinese visual artists, technicians and experimenters had not only picked up the medium but adapted it to their interests and tastes (Moore 2022). The roles that photography played in Chinese communities over the next century—a

⁶² Dash and Cater (2015, 277) offer a more detailed critique of MacCannell's interpretation.

tumultuous period of colonial intrusion, nation-building, political revolution, migration, modernization and reform—are underappreciated. Sinologists have focused on photography as a Western import (e.g., Bennett 2009), or have, often out of necessity, worked with foreign collections (e.g., Hevia 2009) and thus focused on foreign photographers.⁶³ Thus all too easily is the significance of photography (as naturalistic documentation) taken for granted as universal. In contrast, some scholars have, heeding the call for “photography’s other histories” (Pinney, Peterson, and Thomas 2003), examined early studio and vernacular works in China to emphasize the intersections of literati painting and early photography (c. 1860s–1930s). There are continuities between media regarding composition, subject matter, calligraphic additions, and visual philosophy. Yi Gu (2013) takes a balanced approach, arguing that while turn-of-the-century Chinese embraced photography as a novel means to depict truth beyond what the eyes could see, “truth” was never regarded as exclusive to photography or photorealism. Hence in Chinese photography there is a rich tradition of mixed methods, augmented portraiture, and formalized poses with symbolic objects. During the Mao era, photographers and painters alike were expected to express particular values through symbolic depiction and emotional capture, adhering to a style of realism that featured clean lines and bright colors (Cabos 2017).

Susan Sontag characterizes Mao-era Chinese photo- and videography as markedly distinct from photography in the West. She describes Chinese photography as highly moral (content has to be beautiful and positive), prepared in a ritualistic manner (no impromptu, candid shots), presenting a straightforward model (everything looking its best, neatly centered and well-lit) and affirming the one correct order of things:

We find the Chinese naïve for not perceiving the beauty of the cracked peeling door, the picturesqueness of disorder, the force of the odd angle and the significant detail, the poetry of the turned back... The Chinese don’t want photographs to mean very much or to be very interesting. They do not want to see the world from an unusual angle, to discover new subjects. Photographs are supposed to display what has already been described... For the

⁶³ Karen Strassler’s research in Java, for example, finds that by the 1920s, there were more Chinese-owned photography studios on the island than those of any other ethnic group—though histories have tended to focus on the transfer of photography technology from Europeans to Javanese (2007,1).

Chinese authorities, there are only clichés—which they consider not to be clichés but “correct” views. (2005, 135)

While this is not true today for the camera-phoned Chinese public nor the country’s many professional photographers and videographers, there is still a degree of the photo sensibility Sontag identified observable in more official photography contexts. The production of “work photos” (工作照, *gongzuo zhao*) or “propaganda photos” (宣传照, *xuanchuan zhao*) for example, is a common internal corporate (or governmental) demand either to prove that a task was done or publicize a department/company’s activities. Some work photos might be candid, but in my own experience they are highly directed. Even if the work task has really been accomplished, the photo tends to be of a staged version rather than the actual thing, in order to make it look more orderly and attractive. Or, the event is put on hold until everything is photo-ready. In March 2019, I was included with local government workers to attend a promotional launch event for construction at the Ganzi New Area. We spent more than half an hour being directed into evenly spaced, highly precise columns and rows, all so that it would look good in the official photos. In addition to this conditioning for order, the moral tone of state-affiliated news, education and entertainment in China tends to demand positivity (as in feel-good content with happy endings where the good guys win) and discourage negativity, ambiguous messaging, or darkly fantastical artistic expression. Even without direct censorship, I feel this affective regime casts a shadow (or light, rather?) on social media, including individuals’ image sharing and captioning decisions. With some topical exceptions (e.g., Nancy Pelosi upon her visit to Taiwan), overt crassness and negativity tend to stay within private chat groups or on foreign social media platforms that Mainland users can only access by VPN.

Over the past few decades, photography has exploded from an exclusive or occasional event to a constant hobby and a thriving business sector. Even urban Chinese friends of mine born in the 1990s typically have only one or a few professional pictures from their childhood, but now take hundreds of photos every month. Everyday leisure photography exists alongside extensive professional photography services for kids, families, and adults in a number of established genres or styles. Urban, “private room” (私房摄影,

sifang sheying, like boudoir but usually more conservative), ancient/traditional (in *Hanfu* or ethnic minority dress), school uniform, delicate minimalist (小清新, *xiaoqingxin*), literary, and other highly thematic photography packages are easy to find and book for individuals, romantic couples, or *guimi* (闺蜜, best-girlfriends). Some of these are explicitly *xiezhen* (写真) shoots aimed to capture an individual's "true" essence, an idea that goes back to the beginnings of portraiture photography in China. Thanks to social media, new aesthetic tropes are emerging all the time—for example, "American farm" was a hot trend in autumn 2022 (Zhao 2022). A popular service in the years leading up to my fieldwork was *lupai* (literally "tour photography"); one books a combination travel-and-photography package that will also supply clothing and accessories appropriate to the destination's landscapes. Wedding photos have long been an elaborate process in China involving multiple outfit changes (all clothing loaned by the photography studio) and professional-looking, thematized settings or backdrops. Some couples now take this to a new level, choosing *lupai* for their wedding photo shoots. These commercial styles inform and are imitated by noncommercial amateur photographers, and all circulate on social media platforms like Douyin, Weixin and Xiaohongshu. The industry solidifies associations between particular settings, aesthetics and poses.

I found that among friend groups in urban China, photography is often the main social activity at a leisure site rather than supplement or documentation. Planning a photo shoot with your friends may or may not invoke the abovementioned photography tropes meant to reveal particular lifestyle aesthetics. One time Lili, a former Hailuoguo intern, invited me to hang out with her and one of her friends, "Fei," in Chengdu. Our main destination for the day was a mall bookstore that had become rather renowned in Chengdu for its photography-amenable aesthetics. Once we'd arrived, Fei told the two of us to wander around naturally, but the photo shoot was continuous and impossible to forget. At times she would direct us to make or hold a certain pose, to look engrossed in whatever book was in our hands at the moment. Photography, not book browsing, remained the obvious and primary purpose for our being there. I found that during other social excursions in the city, even when photography was not the primary leisure activity, capturing and then immediately editing or viewing photos became an oversized if not deterministic part of the experience. This

was the case when I accompanied several young adults (both men and women) to an indoor trampoline park. Running around in unselfconscious chaos quickly turned into a directed experience where each person's attempt at a feat (obstacle course, wall-climbing, etc.) had to be isolated, planned, directed and documented. We approached our own play experience with an "aesthetic disposition" (Bourdieu 1984).

Wanghong culture

In response to this culture of social photography, urban landscapes and interior spaces are now consciously styling themselves as *wanghong* destinations, which essentially means places that are good for photography according to online aesthetic tastes. Wanghong (网红) translates to "net popular," and is similar to the idea of "viral" but does not carry the negative connotations of virality. It also suggests a more permanent and particular status than "trending;" it can even refer to a person and in such cases is nearly synonymous with "[social media] influencer." Wanghong is therefore an occupation and identity, but also a particular (if fluid) set of aesthetics that go hand-in-hand with the culture of social media photography and videography. Certain aesthetic tropes corresponding to high-class, romantic lifestyles of leisure circulate on social media to the point that the appearance of certain people, architecture and businesses are visually identifiable as "wanghong" without needing to actually *be* internet-famous. Sometimes walking around Chengdu with local friend Xing Zhongle, he'd point out a café that "looked like a wanghong business" or a girl that "looked like a wanghong." I believe this is essentially the observation that Teacher Liu made about Moxi Town's "formalism"—it is the privileging of form over content, to the extent that form determines content.

Anywhere from a restaurant to a scenic area to a town might explicitly claim wanghong status. Some pre-Internet-age locations have become wanghong sites for their rare aesthetic of nostalgia or urban decay—for example, Eastern Suburb Memory in Chengdu, a former industrial complex, has become a wanghong hotspot since Klingberg (2014b) described its failed attempt to rebrand as a music park. Other places are explicitly made to be wanghong. Much more so than the Chengdu bookshop I visited with Lili and Fei is another bookstore located in Dujiangyan (near Chengdu), which during my fieldwork period

even went viral on some international social media platforms. In photos and videos, its tall, curved arches and alcoves appeared to be lined with books all the way to the ceiling, but when one goes there in person, it is clear that the upper “shelves” of books are simply painted onto the walls. It would still be an interesting space to read, were it not overflowing with amateur photographers, who are surely also frustrated with how difficult it is to get a photo of the space without a mob of people in it. Even major infrastructural projects in China that would not typically draw droves of tourists are designed to be optically interesting in a way that will lend itself to social media publicity and attract photographers of all skill levels, thereby becoming wanghong sites. Examples include Beijing’s Daxing Airport that opened in 2019, or Chengdu’s Wuchazi Bridge that opened in 2020. And again in Dujiangyan, perhaps nothing is more to the point than the giant statue of a reclining panda taking a selfie, completed in 2021. How to interact with this panda, other than to selfie along with it?

Tourist photography today is a subset of popular photography, an extension of influencer culture and a site for photo-centric socialization supported by the prolific capacities of modern imaging and communications technology. And as everyone now carries a camera everywhere, tourist photography has become less particular than ever. Connection to and participation in the virtual image-world has come to feel like a basic, everyday need. When it is not entirely appealing to just be looking at a statue, walking across a bridge, or browsing a bookshelf, keeping one toe (or more) inside a virtual, creative realm gives one a sense of aestheticized existence, pleasure (but also self-consciousness) in the moment, goal-oriented drive (gaining aesthetic capital), and simply “*something*” to do.

Tourism photography as social performance

Jonas Larsen (2005) argues that those tourism studies following Urry have given insufficient attention to bodily performance and put too much attention on discourse and representation. Nonrepresentational theory, which Crouch (2002) introduced to the study of tourism, approaches “the tourist as an interacting embodied subject and tourist places as interactive spaces that are made meaningful and lively by embodied, social practices” rather than “the tourist destination as an ‘image’ for the tourist

gaze" (Larsen 2005, 420). Larsen aims to build upon Crouch's practice approach by attending to social and material choreographies. Even unrehearsed bodily movements are situated in cultural and historical patterns. There's nothing necessarily deceptive or "inauthentic" in admitting that tourist behavior exists in its choreography, or performance. To complement Urry's tourist gaze of calculated visual consumption, Larsen suggests "the family gaze," which refers to the performance, and thus production, of social relations known as "familyness" (424). During his research at the Danish castle Hammershus, Larsen observed that tourists preferred to take photos with their families, or people they knew, rather than capture the romantic, empty landscapes. In contrast to the male character ascribed to the cold or voyeuristic tourist gaze, the family gaze is warm, feminine, and tactile. The affection of family members' posing produces affection; "[in] other words, photographic performances produce rather than reflect family life" (430).

Like Larsen, I found that Hailuoguo's tourist-photographers were oriented toward social ends, and their posing for photos created, rather than reflected, affect. In their minds, posing with friends was really *the thing to do* on tour. What else? As Sontag observes, photography fulfills a psychological purpose by waylaying uncertainty and redirecting toward fun: "The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel" (2005, 6). One of the complaints about Hailuoguo that often seemed to go along with "nothing to see" was that there was "nothing to do." While some tourists may be thrill-seekers interested in climbing waterfalls, sailing across ziplines, or crossing glass-bottom bridges, most were looking for anything that would give more photographic structure for their play. Especially in warmer seasons when there wasn't snow to throw around or sculpt with, tourists seemed to struggle with finding a unique activity to inspire their photography. Even people who did complain about the scenery and were overall negative about Hailuoguo in their comments to me (or other workers) could have fun in the moment by focusing on their social photography. People took photos with the dulllest signs, markers, even with the disfigured Hailuoguo mascot statues (disfigured as in damaged by the elements, but also unidentifiable as the red pandas they supposedly were in the first place). I only ever saw the glacial rainforest's wooden swings being used for rather momentary photography poses,

rather than committed swinging. Similarly, the oval wooden-branch seats that were installed at Camp 4 and Chengmending after my fieldwork are certainly photography-trope props (that I have seen similar versions of installed in other tourism spots) rather than a place one would sit and comfortably enjoy the scenery for any extended period of time—the seats themselves are also frames, aestheticizing the glacier when photographed sans human.



Figure 21: New bench installed at Camp 4 observation deck.

Source: ctrip user wucandywu, posted August 25, 2022. <https://us.trip.com/travel-guide/attraction/luding/hailuoguo-glacier-forest-park-89792/>

Unlike in Larsen's study, however, I did not find that the *image* has retreated from the production process. It is there in the thick of things, directing social behavior and the traversing of virtual and real space. Social media ecology and smartphone-based photography pull photographers into the logic of the socially networked image, where feelings and actions are ordered accordingly. This will be evident in the next section, as I recount a rather typical tour through the park, including typical photography practices. In

subsequent sections of this chapter, I will refer back to this scene to fully illustrate my argument about the social media ecology and gendered experience in tourism and leisure.

Tourist photography at Hailuogou

In early August, I guided a group of eight. It was really three groups who hadn't known each other beforehand but had hired the same driver, then been joined up solely for the purposes of this trip. Their tour would take them through the major sites along the Sichuan-Tibet Route, from Hailuogou all the way to Lhasa. They had set out from Chengdu yesterday and stayed in Moxi Town last night but were already leaving this afternoon, on towards the next stop. "Xinduqiao, I think," one of the young women told me. They weren't really sure. As long as the driver knows! "That's the advantage of hiring a driver for a long trip," another explained. "The pressure is off to plan everything and drive yourself, but there's still flexibility compared to a tour company. If you want to stop anywhere, to take some photos or whatever, you just stop."

The three subgroups consisted of one couple in their twenties (whom I took to be married, but was never certain), a married couple in their thirties, and a group of four girls who also looked to be young, probably all in their twenties. I mainly talked to the older couple, who were from Changsha. They seemed rather fit and wore new-looking athletic windbreakers. The man also wore athletic pants and had a black backpack, but his wife wore fitting, stylishly torn jeans, a fresh coat of red lipstick, and carried a designer purse. Both were relaxed, even subdued, neither easily impressed nor disappointed. The man, Hao Liangjie, said he did not work. He traveled extensively, including overseas, not so much out of passion as because he didn't have anything else to do. His wife, Zhao Zhen, was similarly ambivalent. at least about this trip. She ended up telling me she wasn't particularly interested in Tibet, and was even nervous about the altitude. She was only going because her husband wanted to. Besides that, she told me, "Tibet is just the place now that every Chinese person has to go once in their life."

The day was overcast and constantly threatening to rain. But as we were now entering peak tourism season, there was nevertheless a significant line for the cableway. After slowly snaking our way forward

around the metal barriers, our group ended up divided between two cable cars. I finally rejoined the couple from Changsha at Camp 4's first observation platform, asking Liangjie what he had thought of the cableway. "Cableway... cableway..." he said, as though he had to jog his memory of the experience he'd just had, of the thing he'd waited in line for nearly an hour to do. Finally he told me it had been all right, not bad, but it wasn't as exciting as one he'd been on in Switzerland, which took you much closer to a glacier. He gestured across the valley to Hailuoguo Glacier's giant icefall. "Sure, you can see it here, but it doesn't get you excited. This position [of Camp 4] doesn't have the feeling of a glacier... we're too far away."

On the observation deck, I took notice of how freely and with unrestrained interest people would watch the photography efforts of strangers, and even offer criticism or advice. As a middle-aged woman was in the process of photographing a man, trying to direct his pose in front of the platform railing, my couple from Changsha as well as a few other strangers milling around gathered behind her device and gave commentary. "It's too dark, too dark," said Zhao Zhen. It didn't seem to bother the photographer, who continued to make adjustments.

Where the path split after the Phra Phrom, the four girls kept hiking, while both of the couples decided to leave Camp 4 without seeing the rest of the religious attractions or (purportedly) red rocks, and I joined the latter group. After descending to Ganheba, the five of us began walking to Camp 3. En route, the couples took advantage of the lush background provided by the lower-elevation foliage for some photography. Lei, the husband in the younger couple, was designated photographer for his wife Qingqing, who would carefully describe to him what kind of "feeling" he needed to capture with each of his shots or short videos before doing an action or striking a pose. The couple from Changsha were slightly more restrained in turning their tour into a full-on photo shoot. But as soon as the foliage crowded around the path, giving some sense of immersion in deep green, Liangjie took out his smartphone and directed it at the trees to our lefthand side. Before we had even moved from the spot where he'd taken said picture, he eagerly showed me the image on his screen, commenting on the beauty of the forest. That is, even though we were still surrounded by the subject of his photo, facing the exact same thing right there in the tree-ish flesh, he

still directed me to his phone to point out its beauty. This is tourist behavior I had observed in Hailuoguo countless times already, and had noticed repeatedly throughout today's tour in particular. Someone in the group would comment on the scenery being beautiful, or physically point out this beauty to me or another group member, and would do so *through* the screen of the camera-phone. (Sometimes there wouldn't even be a picture being taken at the moment, but tourists would still fix their gaze through their device as it presented the glacier, forest, or other surroundings.) It did not seem like they were trying to point out their good photography skills, but to show me that the scenery itself was beautiful *through their "eyes."* The slick framing of the smartphone display made the image of the landscape more aesthetic; it drew our attention to beauty while fading into invisibility itself. And in the tourist's hand, the quality of the smartphone image reflected back on the person's experience more than it did the actual natural environment. I could already "see" the image of the forest as a mobile artifact tied to that person, ready for manipulation and dissemination in a virtual social world.



Figure 22: Hao Liangjie views the forest through his phone.
Source: photo by author. August 2019.

Liangjie was starting to take some photos of his wife Zhao Zhen, when she abruptly asked him if he had turned on *meiyan*. Meiyan (美颜, literally “beautiful facial appearance”) likely refers to the leading beautification app Meiyan Xiangji (BeautyCam), but has become a generalized term such that it could refer to any beautification app or function. This technology can alter human faces in real-time as they are automatically detected, before even taking the shot, thus removing some of the “need” to go back and edit them later. Meiyan goes far beyond basic touch-ups like smoothing over blemishes or reflective patches; its stock beauty filters assume that users want larger eyes, a thinner nose and face, a more pointed chin, whiter skin and some amount of digital lip and eye makeup. Liangjie replied that he hadn’t turned it on, much to Zhen’s dismay. “If you’re not going to turn on meiyan, then I’ll wear sunglasses.” She pulled her sunglasses down to hide her eyes, despite the overcast skies. Overhearing this exchange, Qingqing quickly checked with Lei to make sure that he was using meiyan, and he assured her that he was.

Liangjie also slid on his sunglasses, then he and Zhen took some selfies together with the forest in the background. They asked me to take some photos of them as well. The couple seemed pleased as they immediately viewed the results. “It really does look like we’re in a forest,” Zhen said appreciatively. I suppose the framing of the photo to hide the metal walkway we were on (and any other tourists) from view actually suggested a deeper immersion than our full sensory experience was providing, but we were indeed in a forest.

The younger couple were a little way ahead of us. Both were wearing bright yellow ponchos over their clothes, and Qingqing told Lei that she wanted him to capture “the feeling of floating upward” in the next photo. “Can you do it?” She asked him. “Sure,” he said. Qingqing stepped ahead of him a short distance and then twirled, trying to give him a chance to capture the poncho lifting gracefully around her body-in-motion. But upon viewing the result she immediately exclaimed that she looked like an idiot and pushed the phone out of view, not wanting to examine the image any closer. Still, her pose had captured Zhen’s

attention, who now asked to borrow Qingqing's poncho so she could pose for her own similar photo. By the time she'd put it on, there were a bunch of other tourists paused on the path ahead of us, so Liangjie had to find an angle where they could be blocked by his wife's poncho-clad body.

From Camp 3, we rode the electric shuttle to Chengmendong. I walked in a loop around the walkway with Zhao Zhen while her husband hung back to illegally smoke a cigarette. Qingqing went to play with the water in the glacial stream, continuing to direct Lei's photography. As was often the case when I was guiding a couple, the wife became more talkative once we were alone. Zhen began asking me questions—where all I'd been in China, if I had a boyfriend, and how many siblings I had. "It's good to have siblings," she told me. "Because I'm an only child, my mother never let me leave home. Even if I wanted to go live somewhere else, my mother wouldn't have allowed it." She and Liangjie had just one child, however, who was back at home with Zhen's mother.

We stopped at the highest, farthest end of the walkway and viewed the glacier terminus. I saw a tall shelf of ice, glistening and dripping water in a way that the surrounding gravelly slopes did not, showing glimpses of white beneath its debris cover. However, a group of four young guys standing next to us, though busily photographing the glacier terminus, didn't seem to believe it was ice. "It's rock!" one exclaimed. "We should return our tickets!" he added with all seriousness, as if they'd been scammed. Another wondered aloud "...Could it be ice?" before immediately answering his own question—"No way."

We got on the return shuttle and met up with the rest of the group at Camp 3. As we waited for the next bus to descend to Moxi Town, Zhen was mentally planning ahead for their next stop on the tour. "Xinduqiao is a grassland," she thought aloud. "One should wear a skirt for a grassland." I gathered that she was talking about tourist photography genres, and not practicality.

Elements of social media ecology

How does the smartphone frame experience? In the above scene, how were the two couples' perceptions and behaviors focused and limited by a social media ecology? I explore these questions below

through four interrelated elements of the issue, and furthermore explain how the smartphone compels us to be ever-aware of it, yet ignore its framing effects.

Virtual worlding

Anthropologists have engaged with virtuality as “human reality mediated through multiple digital technologies” (Nardi 2015, 16), paradigmatically with online games such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, where one moves an avatar through socially, sonically and graphically rich worlds. While these virtual game-worlds may be studied as “field sites” in and of themselves, Nardi echoes Boellstorff (2012) in pointing out that the articulation between the virtual and real is also a productive focus for anthropological inquiry. It should not be assumed, however, that “the real world” is automatically the more authentic or preferable alternative to some less meaningful or dystopian virtuality. Instead, Nardi advocates for the virtual as “a genuine site of human activity supported by crafted objects that open possibilities for social and cultural development” (Nardi 2015, 19). Virtual anthropology, then, is less concerned with the digital code than the higher-order imaginative work that continuously builds a world and has repercussions into the real. In this aspect, Nardi’s concept of virtuality overlaps with Bruce Kapferer’s take on ritual virtuality—it is “a self-contained imaginal space... able to realize human constructive agency... in which participants can reimagine (and redirect and reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life” (2004, 47). It is a highly affective realm of transformative potentiality.

I describe tourists’ imaginal space as “virtual” to stress the similarity between smartphone-based imaging practices and the virtualities of gaming and ritual. As with video games, there is a worlding aspect to digital imaging practices and a disjuncture, though porous, between the digital and non-digital. With contemporary photography, the disjuncture is largely a matter of attention, in the phenomenological sense (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 30), as these spaces are indeed inhabited simultaneously; it is not as though Liangjie and Zhen were not standing in the physical forest just because they were attentive to the networked image-world in which their forest photograph consisted. Pointing to similar phenomena, anthropologists Sarah Pink (2011a) and Shireen Walton (2020) analyze digital photographs as “place-events” and “place-objects,”

respectively, acknowledging that digital photographs are inextricably tied to geographical locale but also a distinct class of place/object that can be accessed remotely and change with its movement through contexts.

Thus by “virtual,” I first wish to emphasize the personal and lived-in quality of digital image activities. The smartphone connects users to a virtual world where it is ever easier to build, try on and test out new personas. People may be emotionally invested in their personas, and by viewing them come to know themselves and understand “reality,” but the stakes of such virtual performance are lower than the otherwise everyday presentation of self as described by Goffman (1956). One need not fully commit to any virtual persona, and many cues that would otherwise clarify sincerity are missing online; this vagueness allows for playfulness, daring, experimentality and deniability. For example, in the above scene Qingqing is in pursuit of images of herself that capture a certain feeling or mood. The image she desires may or may not be the representation of her sincere inner state, only of the ideal she wants to communicate to some audience via the smartphone. In the end she may deem the photographic result a failure and delete it. But the pursuit of that ideal has guided her “real” embodied experience in Hailuoguo. Passage back and forth between the real and virtual is vague and subtle; even imagining the imposition of the smartphone’s frame has an effect on perception in the “real” social world, structuring perception and enlivening experiences with a more playful, fantastical feel. When Qi “looked like” a Douyin video to Wenxian, the smartphone frame was effectively transplanted into a supposedly “unmediated” aesthetic experience. Likewise, Zhen was not surfing social media at the moment she conjured an image of wearing skirts in a grassland; she has internalized the aesthetic objects of social media.

Second, by “virtual,” I note the shift in photography culture away from the circulation of printed material photographs. There is a tendency in photography studies to ignore qualities of the medium and analyze the image only in relation to what it represents. In contrast, anthropologists have called attention to social contexts and dynamics of circulation that attach value to photographs as practices (Larsen 2008) or physical objects (Edwards 2012; Edwards and Hart 2004; Geismar 2009; Glass 2009; Harris 2004; McKay 2008; Spyer and Steedly 2013). Deborah Poole (1997), for example, analyzes how in the commercialization

and circulation of photographs, certain specifications of the object—size, portability, reproducibility, etc.—contribute to value, affective force, and how a photograph is “read” beyond what the image is of. Karen Strassler (2020) analyzes the symbolic meanings of photographs carried by their materiality, and to what social effect. In other words, the materiality of an image is a frame in and of itself. Nowadays a miniscule percentage of photographs are actually printed, so it becomes important to consider which values are added by their virtual social and technical contexts, such as appearing on the screen of a smartphone. This is not to say that digital photographs *are* immaterial, only that their materiality is different (Pink, Aredèvol, and Lanzeni 2016). The resources expended to create digital materialities are more hidden, supporting an imagined frictionless virtual space.⁶⁴ That we are more likely to apprehend digital images as immaterial, ephemeral, and low-stakes is part of the meaning, fun, and mystique they carry, and thus worthy of consideration.

Digital culture

Apart from a deeper dive into the virtual, how much of digital photography culture is really new? Much has been written on psychological and cultural ramifications of the global transition from analog to digital photography. Digital photography culture features reorientations to truth, time, and subjectivity. As for truth, Mitchell (1992) stresses that digital images are no longer even “photographs” in the strict sense of the term, no longer indexical interactions with light, but more like paintings, each pixel by nature manipulable. Alongside the virtual worlding of social media-oriented photography, the basic nature of digital images has ushered in an age of post-truth uncertainties, or awareness that realities are constructed. However, this digital image culture has few fundamentally new elements. Rather, it is an intensification of certain tensions that have plagued photography from its beginnings (Fontcuberta 2014). Photographs have always been manipulable; now they are simply more easily manipulable by a wider public. While

⁶⁴ Storing large quantities of images—even if in “the cloud”—while abstaining from printing photographs feels much less burdensome, more convenient and reliable, more eco-friendly. But we ignore the infrastructure and energy that goes into keeping those images there for us to conjure up at a moment’s notice, the degradation of digital data over time (Manovich 2001, 54), as well as the infrastructural and environmental costs of smartphone production, assembly, and planned obsolescence (see Bridle 2018, 61-65; Horst 2021, 71).

intensified wariness of deception does erode the representational nature and taken-for-granted documentary validity of photorealistic images, one should not overstate the “post-truth” nature of digital photography. There is still a deeply ingrained association between photographs and evidence; even if we can ultimately reject an image’s documentary validity, photorealism is a rhetorical quality that persuades us toward acceptance of an existential claim. For example, in her analysis of scandal evidence and authenticity experts, Karen Strassler shows how circulating images may simultaneously suggest authenticity and manipulation (2020). It is also telling that circulated evidence of staged official photography in China is often in the form of more photos—simply taken from different angles.

Perhaps one of the most novel features of digital photography culture concerns temporality. Whereas analog technology heavily oriented photographers toward the present as a future past, or the “future perfect” tense (Crang 1997), digital photography orients toward “nowness” (Fontcuberta 2014, 26-27).⁶⁵ Especially with the smartphone camera, image production and consumption can occur simultaneously and near-continuously. What’s more, capacities for prolific creation and immediate sharing have made photography into a compact, comprehensive social activity, as my excursion with Lili and Fei to the Chengdu bookstore. Taking photos or short videos with a group supplies both activity and discussion topic. Once fleeting events—for example, setting off a firecracker—can be significantly prolonged on the spot by replaying, editing, sharing, captioning and engaging with immediate feedback. “Now” is extended, providing a space for muddled real and virtual social play.

Therefore, the shift in digital culture temporality shapes social interactions. In Mohan Li’s (2017) study of Chinese tourist photography at the Isle of Wight, one of the tourists claims that by sharing their photos of one another in a Weixin group, they were able to get immediate feedback, making for a more

⁶⁵ Barthes (1981), Sontag (2005) and others have written at length on the connection between photography and mortality. On the one hand, photography allows our youth and image to outlive us, offering contrasts to the present moment which remind of loss and ephemerality; on the other hand, the frozen image of the photo is unnaturally immobile, already reminiscent of the dead. The modern urge to document one’s life by photography captures life in a dead way, revealing the relentless march of time. But Jurgenson (2013) suggests that digital images, especially on the new (post-Facebook) generation of social media, are different—more ephemeral themselves, they resist the burden of documentation and death: “temporary photographs feel more like life and less like its collection.”

enjoyable and social experience, as opposed to sending photos to others after the fact. I would add that the rhetorical power of a photographic image encourages us to abstract our social travel experiences *as they are ongoing*. When I joined a small group of strangers (only two of the six knew each other beforehand) for a three-day tour around Qinghai Lake in 2016, one of the first things we did together was pose for some group photos, including some silly ones, at the direction of our driver. These we immediately shared with one another in a Weixin group formed for the purposes of the trip. The momentary photography experience with these near-strangers was immediately followed by viewing images where we *looked like* friends having fun together. It suggested closer relationships than we actually had. (It also might have suggested more fun than we actually had, but the photography itself *was* the fun, so perhaps not.) While what I am describing is the persuasion of the virtual imaginal space toward real, face-to-face social effects—how the online and offline are “entangled and relational” (Hjorth and Pink 2014, 43)—a measure of the digital photo’s social force remains dependent on people reading it, if unconsciously, as a representation of reality. In the case of the Qinghai Lake tour, it seems that a sense of friendship began to form upon viewing the image, rather than the photo representing our sense of friendship in the moment it was taken. It is a small-scale case of what Andrew Hoskins would call “digital network memory” overcoming “living archival memory” (2009, 92).

Low-tech cyborgs

One key context for smartphone-based photography in particular is the deep intertwining of the [socio]biological and technological matrices. The smartphone has become a conduit for affect and cognitive function, an extension of the self. With the device ever-at-hand and ever-easier to identify with, we are what Hess (1995) calls “low-tech cyborgs;” all that is missing is for the machine to be surgically grafted onto our bodies. Similar to Heather Horst’s observations in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica (2016), during my study I became highly aware of how smartphones were always and unproblematically in hand. The hot springs hotels in Moxi Town and Gonghe Village even provide patrons with special transparent baggies so they can carry their smartphones with them while having a soak, rather than leave them safely

in a locker. Smartphones are in sight if not being touched, and often being touched even if not being used; each is bound to a person as if by a rather short invisible string. It is almost to the extent that stretching this invisible string causes pain and distress—like human-daemon bonds in the works of fantasy author Philip Pullman (e.g., 2001). One time in Chengdu I did observe a friend deliberately smash his smartphone on the ground out of frustration with the demands of constant connectivity, but it was ultimately an act self-violence—he immediately had to go to a shop and buy a new phone so he could continue to function in society.

Cyborgian union is considered a practical demand of modern living. It is nearly impossible to get around or get by in China without a working smartphone (this became truer after the rollout of COVID-related QR codes). Even those I visited in small villages around Hailuoguo were more likely to own latest-model smartphones than a computer, or indoor heating. But beyond practicality, human-smartphone interdependence is a highly desired, affective symbiosis. One's smart device is not only a proud symbol of techno-cultural belonging, class status, and individual style (Horst 2016)—if not national pride (Zhang 2022); it is also a probe into the noosphere, used both to feel (connected) and to think (or rather, to not have to think). That is, as long as some piece of information is accessible to me by my phone, I don't need to worry about absorbing it corporeally. One day at Chengdu Museum, for example, I observed a number of visitors in the temporary oil paintings exhibit not only taking pictures of every single item, but moving on from one painting to the next without ever stopping to actually *look* at the art or read captions in the moment. For whatever reason, they wanted the images to be recallable, but they didn't want to invest time up front to internalize the sights more biologically. The technical aspects of their digitally extended selves supported a new means and type of embodiment. As human and smartphone think and feel together, phone upgrades are self-upgrades. This exciting trajectory of progress distracts from the powers that are relinquished—for example, the ability to make decisions based on the reasonable data sets within our own heads (Postman 1992, 121).

Considering the ever-closer affective bonds between human and phone, I believe that Liangjie and other Hailuoguo tourists' preference to view and evaluate immediate landscapes through the smartphone screen does not feel to them like a more mediated or dissociative experience, but a highly involved, more personal encounter. Low-tech cyborg vision (seeing "with" the smartphone) is aesthetically enhanced and carries the positive connotations of the technology. It also easily presents something personal to others, whether far or near. The ability to direct others' gaze to the images on, or taken by, one's personal smartphone screen offers a platform for the "presentation of the self" (Goffman 1956). It seems to overcome the Lacanian uncertainty of not being able to access another's perspectival sensory perception of the world. However, this is to forget that the smartphone-camera's image is no more an accurate reflection of subjective experience than it is an objective reflection of some wider reality.

Intimate communication is streamlined with the smartphone, just as is touring an art gallery. In the early years of the camera phone, Okabe and Ito (2003; 2005) observed how sending a photo that simply shared one's visual viewpoint (rather than communicated something interesting or important) directly from one's phone to another's involved a greater degree of intimacy than sending the same sort of content by text, or than uploading one's photos to an image-sharing website—such that it would be inappropriate to send these "ambient" photos to a casual acquaintance. They found that the romantic couples in their Japan-based study were likely to send one another "very mundane photos that conveyed ambient visual information rather than explicit communication"; this, they argued, built a sense of "co-presence" even when two people were physically apart (2005). As Okabe and Ito foresaw, this form of communication has grown substantially in the nearly two decades since their study. It would now feel incredibly restraining to me if I could no longer send photos to my closest loved ones, but had to type out descriptions—how could I, when exactly what I want to convey is an ambient image? I could, for example, tell my parents that "it snowed today"—but how to succinctly and emotively tell them *how* it snowed without a picture? I can't tell them my point because my entire point is my own visual experience. The question of what one is communicating by ambient imagery becomes even more complicated when sharing ambient photos on a

social media platform for a general audience. Whether or not this use of images over text is ultimately more alienating or more intimately connective, I suggest that this culture of communication, wherein the smartphone facilitates potentially near-constant co-presence with our most treasured human connections, and smoothly indulges our every impulse to send the most trivial of content (even sidestepping the need to decide the meaning of an event and translate our experience into words), has intensified our affective-cognitive melding with the devices themselves.

This techno-biological melding, what media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) refers to as the extension of our central nervous system, is not new. However, as McLuhan also famously points out, the medium is the message—any extension of the human “affects the whole psychic and social complex” (19), redefining the scale and speed of our collective existence. It is therefore worth considering the nature of the digitally extended self in the age of the smartphone. What kind of ecosystem are we extending into? What logics are thriving there, playing with our emotions and redirecting our goals?

Aesthetic capital

A small group of sociological studies (e.g., Anderson et al. 2010; Sarpila et al. 2021) have considered aesthetic capital in terms of facial and bodily appearances deemed attractive offering leverage in career advancement as well as interpersonal relationships. Anthropologist Wen Hua’s research on cosmetic surgery in China reveals that fierce competition on the job and marriage markets is often the explicit rationale for going (or sending one’s child) under the knife (2009). I also had conversations with Chinese women born in the early 1990s who either knew someone who had landed a good job after cosmetic surgery, or were considering it themselves for similar reasons. The easy and incentivized manipulability of digital photography, however, shifts focus away from one’s “actual” physical beauty to the (potentially related) matter of how skillfully one can capitalize upon beautiful images in the virtual realm. Even if images are not of the physical body—or if they are, but are heavily manipulated—I argue that perceived beauty still reflects back upon the user. Aesthetic capital therefore rests on the ability to create and circulate

aesthetically alluring images “about” oneself, not necessarily “of” oneself; it is about catching attention, commanding affect, and establishing implicit associations.

Images of the self need not resemble oneself in real life to have an (affect) effect. The use of beautification apps and filters is widespread in China. Some Chinese friends and acquaintances complained about women who were always using beautification filters; men especially told me that the filters made women look weird. “They can only fool people they don’t know in real life by doing that,” one man pointed out. “Those of us who know them in real life aren’t affected, because we know what they really look like.” But I disagree that the point is to “fool” people, or that there is no effect if one is *not* “fooled.” Scrolling down a feed like Moments in Weixin or flipping through short videos on Douyin are particularly passive forms of consumption. We never know what we are about to see, so we cannot be fully guarded against the affective punch—or “punctum”—of the parade of images (Barthes 1981). Alluringly edited images may stretch the indexicality of photography, but social media still urges an association between the beauty of the image and the qualities of person sharing it.⁶⁶ Besides, as image-altering and image-generating technology grow more sophisticated, it becomes exhausting as a consumer to constantly question whether an image represents the truth or not, to shift our disposition from one ready to view “truth” or “lies.” We are impressed with it all in a mix curated to our attention as we attempt to lightheartedly consume. Choice in social media consumption amounts to which flavor of questionably-real reality one wants to inhabit.

As many people did complain to me about the use of beautification tech in China, there were more people who fully and unselfconsciously embraced the practice. After taking a group picture with girl-friends, it was generally assumed the person whose camera-phone was used would then *pi tu* (P 图; P as in “photoshop”) everyone’s face (or body, if applicable) before sharing or posting. Sometimes I thought the

⁶⁶ I am reminded of a trope in popular science fiction—e.g., *Ready Player One* (2018); *Belle* (2021)—where someone who isn’t widely considered physically attractive in real life finds popularity in a virtual world where their avatar has a powerful aesthetic allure. When other (or those same) characters realize the real-life person is the same as the one in the virtual world, they come to recognize a beauty or [self-]worth in the real-life person that seems deeper than, or irrelevant to, appearances. (But would they have gotten there without inhabiting the unquestioned beauty of their avatar?)

images looked creepy with the filters or edits, but friends applied them uncritically and without asking permission of myself or anyone else in the photos. “Don’t you love me?” asked one of my friends after heavily editing another woman’s face in a group photo. The heavily edited woman didn’t seem insulted, only praised the photographer’s *pi tu* skills. This concurs with Yunchang Yang’s suggestion that in China, enhanced selfies are performative rather than sincere; they are not shared out of narcissism but to communicate group belonging (2021, 276). I also observed that in China it was not unusual or considered deceptive to use a same-gendered model’s photograph as one’s own social media profile picture, which felt strange to me (if not my own photo, I would only feel honest using cartoon character or animal avatars that could obviously *not* be me). I believe self-photography sharing practices on Chinese social media indicate less attachment to the idea that the photo either shows what you really look like or is “deceptive.” The social media portrait is understood to show what you want or feel yourself to be—your idealized self, similar to an avatar in a video game. In general, there is a wider embrace of virtual play. People are well aware of the point of sharing beautiful images beyond just “fooling” someone to think you really look that way.

Although aesthetic capital is most obvious in cases involving the human body, I argue that it also applies in the circulation of leisure and travel photography, including of natural landscapes. A beautiful landscape photo, especially one taken with the smartphone, is a claim of personal experience meant to reflect the inner qualities of the phone’s owner. This is how images are read in a social media ecology and in the age of “selfie” culture. Anthropologist Jesse Weaver Shipley (2015) likewise moves beyond self-photography *per se* to discuss qualities of “selfieness”—spontaneity, self-crafting, pride, reflexivity, authority, and intimacy. Even the popular practice of photographing food about to be eaten has these qualities, he argues, for it “stands in for the protagonist and her or his idealized lifestyle” (407). Furthermore, recalling Okabe and Ito’s study, the less obvious the *meaning* of the photo, the more “ambient” environmental images may conjure a sense of presence and intimacy. Curated images that accumulate on a person’s social media profile, then, create a highly personal visual narrative. We (the audience) see the things that they’ve seen, presumably as they’ve seen them. Yet the major allure (or pain) of these photos is

in the lifestyle we imagine exists beyond the frame—an interesting life of going places we haven’t gone, or seeing places differently than we see them, knowing things we don’t know, somehow living more lively and experiencing more experientially. This is why, even though many people voiced dissatisfaction *in person* regarding Hailuoguo’s landscapes, they still sought to curate a positive experience by capturing alluring images and posting positive sentiments on their personal social media. In short, the socially-networked smartphone frames one’s surroundings and body as resources to be utilized for the sharing of beauty, and for getting others to associate that beauty, and thereby other positive qualities, with oneself, perpetuating an economy of desire.

Who ultimately capitalizes on virtual-realm aesthetic capital? We all stand to make gains, and maybe even improve our own confidence, but it is worth considering four things: first, how online aesthetics may simply reinforce “real-world” disparities and biases; second, how the pursuit of aesthetic capital may enhance self-alienation; third, who else is gaining from our shared data; and fourth, how pursuit of aesthetic capital is unwittingly affecting our values, perception and subjectivity more widely. If sometimes living up to the open potentiality of a ritual-esque virtual realm, social media can easily intensify polarization and biases, amplify the already powerful, and encourage the massive (also environmentally taxing) output of vapid, essentially similar content. And while it would be oversimplistic to blame social media for power disparities according to gender, or conclude that its existence is unequivocally negative for women, the pursuit of aesthetic capital seems to work within existing power structures rather than overturn them, as Xinyuan Wang finds in a study of social media in industrial China: some women could successfully use *sajiao* (撒娇, a deliberate performance of childishness, especially pouting) to get their way at work, and recognizing it as a source of power, also posted *sajiao* images (of themselves or others/avatars) on their social media pages. However, concludes Wang, individual gains come at the cost of strengthening “traditional gender norms of a woman, in which she appears vulnerable and inferior” (2016, 146). In the next section, I draw on my personal experiences and fieldwork observations to explore how women are not

in an empowered position to gain from the social media ecology. On the contrary, gendered photography practices augment the Lacanian sense that one is a visual object whose value is determined from without.

Gender, gaze, and mobility

So far I have argued that new smartphone-based imaging technology allows a virtual realm of unreal potentiality and intimate co-presence to be immediately accessible in a way that the lines between self and phone, reality and virtuality, become increasingly blurred but affectively gripping. Holding the highly personal and highly powerful smart device in hand comes to feel natural. We feel that we are in control of what we're doing, while digitality of the image medium suggests easy, low-stakes fun; knowing that images are easily manipulable data, they can be taken as a creative and freeing outlet for constructing persuasive realities and exerting social influence. "Control," however, is the technology's empty promise, because we are not in control of the social media that now guides so much of our lives, virtual or real. Moreover, the intensification of sharing and performing selfieness intensifies the alienation of a Lacanian subjectivity described earlier in the chapter. This, I argue, is even more true when it comes to women's subjectivities. In the tourism and leisure context, multiple aspects of gender stratification come together. In this section, I share some additional observations from the field, along with my own experiences as an object of "the local gaze" (Maoz 2006) and others' photography, which I acknowledge had an impact on my subjectivity as a researcher. After all, the visual field is a social field, and it is impossible for me to present analysis as though I were outside of it.

Photographic alienation

Although photography has always had the strange quality of revealing much more about the photographer than is intended, new photography is *much more obviously and intentionally* about "us" (the photographer or the willing, directing subject) than it is about an object to be preserved for posterity. In short, it is more performative. In the previous section, I discussed intimacy as a quality of the smartphone and a component of "selfieness." Now I want to interrogate what kind of intimacy—and for whom? Paul Frosh (2015) argues that selfie intimacy is socially rather than self-oriented. He sees selfies as the traces of

performance, rather than an of an object or truth: "It says not only 'see this, here, now,' but also 'see me showing you me'" (1610). The outstretched arm reaching to the edge of the frame invites viewers into the photo. Shipley, however, compares this kind of photography to Lacan's mirror stage: the constant exteriorization and abstraction of self is at once a search for meaning and a form of alienation (2015, 413). If selfieness is a quality of our social media ecology, then not only are we motivated to view our visual surroundings as capitalizable, but also as an expanse of mirrors reflecting qualities of the self, which can then be circulated for personal capital gains. I question whether the selfie's appeal to "see me showing you me" is really an achievement of intimacy and not an intensification of Lacanian anxiety. While the Lacanian gaze objectifies and alienates, it does not mean that we do not want others to see (and thereby know) us. Our anxiety is that we are not in control of their knowing—in fact, we can never really see (know) ourselves as others do. We imagine they know what we don't. Smartphone apps step in with seeming solutions: I am seemingly in control of how I present myself; but at the same time, I am ever objectified in the felt gaze of others, and of myself. And then, what is it like to be on the other side, to be another person's unwitting "object" of social photography, captured only to reflect the qualities of the photographer?

The Lacanian theory of alienation has helped me to make sense of certain experiences where I was photographed by strangers. For example, I remember one time I was sitting next to a middle-aged woman on the crowded Chengdu subway. She kept positioning her arm to take a selfie, surreptitiously (but also, obviously) trying to get the entirety of my face in the picture with her. Feeling awkward and objectified, I kept lowering my head or trying to shrink out of the frame, and she'd retreat, but eventually I let my guard down, and I didn't notice until after she had snapped a photo with me successfully in it. Although she had been acting deceptive to get my photo, now that she had it she didn't make any move to hide the screen of her phone. I watched her sending our photo in a group chat: "On [my] way home," she captioned it. I had been transformed from a stranger on the subway with my own private subjectivity to simply an aspect of this woman's experience, by which sharing she was trying to express, or perform, something personal. She did not want or need her group chatmates to know anything about me, only to recognize me (my appearance)

as reflecting some quality of herself. Perhaps “my life is interesting” is the actual meaning of her message. The smartphone and its photography ethos have encouraged her to claim ownership of my appearance in the visual field, because the smartphone-camera simply is a bionic extension of her eye—and looking is no crime. The ever-handy low-cyborging camera has convinced us that what we see is all up for grabs, just as tourism has convinced us we’re entitled to go “backstage” (Goffman 1956; MacCannell 1973).

In truth, several times during my research I thought, *I am the wrong person to be researching visibility here*. I was thinking about visibility *all the time*—that wasn’t the problem. Or it was? The problem was an oversensitivity to my own objectification in the visual field. Despite the long period I spent embedded in Chinese society, it seemed my positionality blocked me from gaining much of an emic perspective on the visual relations of seeing and being seen. Especially when alone in a tourism setting—which was often—I was constantly aware of others’ gazes (or cameras) on me, left to wonder how they might be mobilizing my image beyond my consent or control. I struggled to understand what it was they saw when they looked at me. Strangers passing me on the street would unabashedly stare, turn their heads and follow me with their gaze, literally point me out to their companions who hadn’t noticed, and label me aloud as a foreigner. On one occasion I was literally chased by camera-phone-wielding teenage girls. Sometimes strangers would say “hello” from some distance—not *to*, but sort of *at* me, and then laugh amongst themselves—not maliciously, but *also* not as if greeting another human being with whom to engage in communication. Sometimes I’d visualize myself as a giant, purple slug monster oozing my way down the street. In this case, people’s stares only made sense, so I couldn’t be upset about it. *It’s right that you stare*, I’d think at them. *I am literally an alien*.

Even for many men and women with whom I passed beyond this sort of purely ocular relationship—but excluding the tourists I guided, with whom my interactions retained a degree of professionalism—my body was often a direct or indirect reference point in conversation. At leisure, groups of women often socialized by discussing the appearance of their own bodies and, if applicable, prospects for marriage, fretting that they were too dark-skinned, overweight or old. I was typically the heaviest and

the oldest women in the room, if not by much. However, I was ultimately dismissed as irrelevant on account of my race—“of course you don’t use facial masks, you’re already so white”; “you’re heavier but you’re built differently; you don’t need to diet.” While not wishing to engage in the body-negative banter, listening from the sidelines both excluded me from a kind of gender solidarity and drew my attention to my own body regardless. I could only wonder *what I possibly looked like to them*. It was also clear to me that I couldn’t see *them* how they seemed to see *themselves*. As for men at leisure, I was repeatedly fetishized and trapped into uncomfortable, belittling and disempowering situations. These experiences simultaneously disposed me to be feel (perhaps unreasonably) attached to anyone who interacted with me outside of these norms to engage in discussions of (extra-bodily) substance *and* overly wary of ever letting my guard down or even being particularly kind to a man lest he get the wrong idea. I constantly struggled with conflicting impulses, knowing that an unkind or even restrained attitude was detrimental both to my research and basic need for human connection. All in all, a vast realm of my emotional and social life during fieldwork was, much against my wishes, a result of the way my body presented itself to others. To be clear, I enjoyed tremendous friendliness and truly unrepayable hospitality in China, and I recognize how being a white woman offered me privilege and advantages, yet this same privilege reduced me at times to little more than a visual projection to be positioned and ascribed value in others’ eyes.

I will convey this point by recounting one of the more benign instances of being caught in a local male gaze from my fieldwork period. It was the first, but not the last time something like this would happen.

A fateful encounter at Jinli Street

It was December 2018, and I had been in Chengdu for about two weeks, so far failing to successfully navigate the bureaucracy needed to submit my residence permit application, develop a plan of action for my fieldwork, or make any friends. I was feeling rather isolated. But on a Thursday morning as I was eating breakfast alone in one of the university cafeterias, a man came over and sat beside me. He might have been about my age (30), but it was hard to tell, as he had the posture and style of a man from an older generation. Desperate though I was for any human connection, I remained guarded when he began

asking me very direct questions and saying nothing about himself. (At the time, I assumed he was associated with the university somehow, but later found out he was only visiting Chengdu for a few days from Shanghai.) He told me he wanted to take me to dinner and KTV that night, and I sensed that agreeing now and perhaps ignoring him later would be the smoothest course of action. I told him I had to meet with a professor soon, but couldn't pretend to not have a cell phone because it was already sitting out on the table. Giving him my number, he called me immediately to verify it was correct and so that I could have his. He also observed that I had Weixin on my phone and added me there as well. Finally he left, promising to call me later.

I did not actually have a meeting, and after breakfast I left campus to check out Jinli Street—a pedestrian area that is one of Chengdu's classic tourism and photography destinations. Surrounding myself with a happy crowd lifted my mood. I was watching two street performers in one of the wide intersections when my phone began to ring. I looked down to see it was the man from breakfast calling me, but at the same time that this fact registered, I heard someone say my name from behind. I turned around and found myself face-to-face with the very same man. This admittedly highly improbable coincidence prompted him—I'll call him "Mr. Wei"—to begin waxing romantically about *yuanfen* (缘分, "fate"). I only resigned myself to the fate of touring Jinli Street with him.

Taking the lead, Mr. Wei guided me through the alleyways as though he were familiar with the place. Sometimes he'd try to lead me physically, reaching for my arm, but I'd shrink away. Although I was hungry, I also declined his continuous offers to buy me beverages or lunch because I didn't want to do anything to further suggest this was a date. Eventually he asked if I'd like to have my picture taken in one of the more scenic stretches that we were passing through, and I acquiesced; at least with photography, we'd have something to do. It quickly turned into a full-on photoshoot, us moving from scene to scene with him directing me so as to capture the best angles. I didn't feel like smiling, but some of the poses he asked me to do felt absolutely ridiculous, and at one point I started to laugh. "Yes, show your teeth!" he encouraged me, but then when I grinned for him he said, "whoa, too many," and explained that people in

customer service and modeling in China are instructed to only show six teeth when they smile. I went back to a blank, unsmiling expression. Another time he had me pose my arm like I was holding something in that hand, but in fact it was he holding a leaf a few inches in front of his camera(phone), trying to line it up so it looked like I was clutching a big leaf umbrella. We ultimately had to give up on this scenario because the leaf wasn't the right size, he said, and it just wasn't working out. I soon found out I couldn't blame these photography decisions on him personally, because as we were leaving that little scenic alcove, we ran into a couple that were trying to do the exact same thing: the man was holding a leaf and trying to line it up so that it looked like the woman standing a few yards away was holding it. Mr. Wei stopped and considered the man's smartphone screen. "That leaf is too big," he advised. He offered then to take the photo for them. The couple declined, but were very polite about it.

We continued walking around, and at one point Mr. Wei actually took my arm and linked it in his. I pushed him away from me just harshly enough that the message should be clear. "What's the problem?" ("没关系嘛?" *Meiguanxi ma?*) he asked me, as though I were the one who had crossed a line. Finally, we sat down to rest and reviewed the photos he'd taken of me so far. He told me which ones were good and which ones hadn't turned out well, then had me select my own favorite and upload it to Moments. He assumed rather than asked me if I even wanted to share a photo. I got the sense he felt responsible for teaching me how to do something culturally important (using Weixin) that I wouldn't otherwise have understood. At least he let me choose the particular photo and write the caption. As for the shots that hadn't turned out, he said it was because the angles had made me look fat. Observing that I wasn't offended by this word, he explained that Chinese girls would be really angry if you called them fat, because they all wanted to look skinny. And how they used software to change their appearance, but that was not right.

None of this was news to me. But later I wondered if he was telling me this because, he really *did* find me to be fat, but figures that in American culture fat is normal. He even asked me the bewildering question: *Would you rather someone called you fat or called you skinny?* "都不需要," ("I don't need either") I said, which I immediately realized did not make any sense, but that's just what came out (I hadn't spoken

much Chinese in the past year). He laughed at me. I don't think he got my meaning, as what I *wanted* to say is 'I don't need a man assessing my physical form to have any relation to my sense of self-worth.'

Finally, Mr. Wei got down to it. He asked if I would consider finding a Chinese boyfriend. I reiterated that I already had a boyfriend (Mr. Wei had asked me this at breakfast), but he said that it didn't matter, because he wasn't here. I just shook my head. "So, what about me? What do you think?" he asked.

"No," I said, perhaps too directly. I was shocked that he thought I might say yes. There was absolutely nothing interesting about him that I had learned (he hadn't even told me his real name, what he did for a living *or* what he did for fun), and there was nothing charming about him other than the mere fact that he had shown up in my life (twice).

"But you'd say yes if you didn't already have a boyfriend," he said. It wasn't even a question, but I shook my head no. He seemed shocked by this. "*Really?*" Then he asked if I would visit him in Shanghai. He started looking up plane tickets for the lunar new year holiday, telling me how long the flight was and how once I arrived in Shanghai he would come pick me up. I was both amused and disturbed. A guy who I just met and who I had *just* rejected thinks I'm going to go spend Spring Festival with him on the other side of the country. How was this really happening?

"I just really have a good feeling about you. You make me feel so comfortable," he told me. *That's nice. I wish that I could have had the same experience*, I thought to myself. Mr. Wei talked about fate some more. Then we sat in silence for a while. I people-watched. There was a cute toddler exploring the area where we were sitting, being watched in turn by a grandmother and mother. Many Tibetan people had passed by; the older ones were recognizable by their particularly worn faces and long, equally well-worn robes. A girl dressed in full Sichuan Opera regalia stood in front of the theater we were facing, advertising a 29 yuan-per-seat *bianlian* (变脸, "face-changing") show that was always "*just* about to start." Finally (and rather abruptly) Mr. Wei said he had to go meet a friend but he would be in touch later about dinner. And he left. Just like that, I was free again. I almost couldn't believe my luck. I stayed sitting there for a

little while just to make sure he wasn't going to rematerialize. The sun came out from behind the clouds (figuratively, not literally; the sky remained that typical Chengdu grey).

I had some new notifications on my phone. A few men that I'd met two years ago in Qinghai and Gansu had commented on my photo. "You're back in China?" asked one. "You've lost weight," commented another.

Naturalizing discourses and male dominance

While it is impossible for me to remove the social fact of my foreign-ness from this situation, in light of later observations I'd make in Hailuoguo, the encounter is still revealing about gender in leisure photography, and the mobility and capital afforded gendered bodies more generally.

Why was I the subject of our photoshoot, and not Mr. Wei? Awkward as it already felt for me, switching roles would have been much more unnatural. The "naturalness" of our photographic roles both resulted from *and* produced a gendered objectification. Women are conditioned to be hyperaware of their appearance (to others, as an object) and encouraged to pursue aesthetic capital in lieu of other forms of capital. That women *simply like* having their photos taken/taking photos (especially selfies) and *like* beautification (by virtual or non-virtual means) becomes a naturalizing discourse that reinforces the stark power imbalances between genders in Chinese society.

Previous studies have attended to women's bodies as objects of tourism or the tourist gaze (e.g. Desmond 2001) but it is also the case that tourists—especially, in my study, women tourists—make themselves the objects of a photographic and (anticipated or actual) social media gaze, repeatedly, through the prolonged activities of smartphone-based digital imaging. While overall I observed nearly as many men who liked taking and posing for photos while walking around Hailuoguo Scenic Area, gendered differences in image practices became highly pronounced after the tour. On the bus ride down the mountain, men were more likely to nap or make a phone call and much less likely to spend time reviewing photos on their phone. The gendered difference in smartphone-image engagement was even more evident in other leisure settings

such as restaurants, KTVs, bars and hot springs. If it was a mixed-gender group, the men tended to dictate the main flow of social activities and the direction of conversation in the “real” world, while the women would keep one or both feet in the “virtual” world. They’d find a place to take photos, or, if there was nowhere to do that, would sit and rather quietly pass the time, their eyes regularly glued to their screens. They devoted a lot of this time to reviewing and editing photos taken earlier in the day. So much as the ever-ready virtual realm provides a fun diversion, a space for creative self-expression, and a means to claim aesthetic capital *for anyone*, it is that much more enticing—and entrapping—for women who do not have other forms of capital as widely open to them, and whose social capital is assumed to be tied to their bodily appearance more than a man’s.⁶⁷

Safety or security is highly valued in Chinese discourse and yet few people remark on how constrained women’s lives are by the threat of sexual violence (or suspicion of sexually promiscuous intent). Being from the US, I was often drawn into conversations comparing the merits and demerits of the two countries. By far the most frequent merit voiced for China was that it is a much safer place than the United States because private citizens can’t keep guns. “In China, even in a big city, you’re not afraid to walk the streets at night the way you would be in the US,” people told me. While I do not disagree, I always grated my teeth if this observation was coming from a man. There were many times I felt trapped or unsafe, or witnessed another woman clearly feeling unsafe—not because they were walking on a street at night, but because they were in the company of men at leisure and were beyond the protection of their familial, hometown networks. During one group meal in Moxi Town, an older and intoxicated man (in a position of some power) repeatedly asked me my room number so, he explained, he could visit me later. It would have seemed like a bad joke if not for his insistent repetition. After the meal I requested a female friend who had also been at the dinner to come to my room for a while, just in case he had found out where I lived. She explained that what I had just experienced was common. Because she was from another town in the county

⁶⁷ While a preoccupation with smartphone self-images was more intense among young adults, I found that behavior was more differentiated by gender than it was by age; older women were also put a lot of time and energy into photo shoots with their friends, image and video editing apps, building online personas, and so on.

(and therefore had local relatives and other connections), the men here knew not to mess with her, but if she were from somewhere far away, she assured me it would be happening to her, too.

A different moral geography exists for women. There were also times I was blamed for putting myself in those unsafe situations, and I was told that in China accepting *any* social invitation from the opposite sex was sending a message of sexual interest. Whether or not that's completely accurate, it's telling enough that some believe it. Nightlife and drinking culture are huge elements of male sociality especially if one works in/with the government or does business, but women are often excluded from these spaces of revelry and power negotiation (unless they are hired to be there, or *are* the entertainment—a common enough dynamic further naturalizing the objectification of women in spaces of leisure);⁶⁸ if not excluded, they may end up looked down on or put in danger.⁶⁹ Gender disparities in comfort and safety may be even more pronounced during travel, when one is away from home and dependent upon strangers. For example, during fieldwork, I saw online news stories circulating which said that many people travel to Tibet with the explicit purpose of hooking up. Men were cited bragging about their successful quests to sleep with numerous women—even if they had to “trick” them into it, for example, offering a ride to a woman and then driving to the middle of nowhere and demanding sex. The sheer popularity of the Tibetan travel routes and increase in independent tourism (especially low-budget “穷游” *qiongyou*), along with the dangerous, sparsely populated landscape presents ample opportunities to cooperate or band up with fellow tourists but at the same time puts women in a more vulnerable position.

⁶⁸ It is commonplace, for example, that KTV parlors have young women available for hire simply to accompany men in drinking and singing. In some establishments, these women also strip. Although the single instance I witnessed the latter sort, the stripping was limited to a short timeframe and supervised by a female manager, one can imagine how such leisure practices feed into a larger “sexual economy” (Zurndorfer 2016) where beautiful women's bodies are used to symbolize men's status and reinforce gendered power dynamics.

⁶⁹ For example, during a small COVID-19 outbreak in Chengdu in December 2020, a 20-year-old woman ended up testing positive; maps detailing her movements from the past few days were released online, and indicated that she had gone to several downtown clubs and bars in a single night. The online criticism and cyberbullying against her were harsh, suggesting that there was something indecent about her movements across the city beyond the fact of her infection status (which was unknown to her at the time).

Regarding comfort in more benign situations, I observed male tourists dominate unfamiliar spaces in a way that women did not. On my first trip to Hailuoguo I was traveling with a large tour group, and whenever we stopped for a restroom break, meal, or scenic enjoyment during the tour, men would stroll (and expectorate) in wide circles around the area with the confidence of having been there before (though I'm sure they hadn't), as though nothing were off limits to them and nothing surprised them. The women, in contrast, tended to stay closer to the bus, and to sit and play with their phones or talk softly with the people they already knew. These gendered differences in spatial being were observable even in patterns of photography within the park. At the red rocks beach in Camp 4, men tended to stand on a tall rock and outstretch their arms, taking up as much space as possible. Women tended to pose seated on the rocks, at an angle, centralized in the frame but making themselves much smaller in the landscape.

For women especially, the smartphone seems to offer a kind of “safe space,” a place to simply *be*, unobtrusively, and something to do. Staying home—or if out, abstaining from alcohol and male-dominated social activities—and withdrawing into the phone, one can pursue a pleasurable virtual life instead. This is a kind of defense mechanism that may feel like a “natural” gender preference but reinforces the power hierarchy that creates it and makes women more susceptible to unhealthy smartphone addictions, body dysmorphia, and the alienation of an objectifying Lacanian gaze.

Conclusion

To return to that August hike through Hailuoguo, it seemed that Qingqing—and to a lesser extent Zhen—approached the landscape like a large photography studio backdrop, while their husbands tended to fill the role of photographer. Qingqing didn't seem to want to play with water so much as she wanted to create images of herself playing with water. Indeed, one of the photography tropes I had seen people attempt along that stream many times was an action shot of splashing, where the water droplets extending from a joyful tourist's fingertips appear magically suspended in the air. Such an image expresses an unreal beauty and joy that will look like one is having more fun than anyone rightly should just for flinging their hand through icy water. Frozen in time, it becomes a symbol, a lifestyle-aesthetic brand through which the subject

asserts and attempts to know their own identity and value. Similarly, upon thought of Xinduqiao, Zhen immediately called to mind the photographic trope of wearing a skirt for a grassland. Especially in the springtime when wildflowers are in bloom, “women in flowy skirts” is one of the social-media photography tropes that circulates for places like Xinduqiao. It reminds me of the red dress trope I discovered upon visiting Chaka Salt Lake in Qinghai Province. (Hailuoguo itself hasn’t seemed to inspire as particular of a wardrobe aesthetic.) That day Qingqing and Zhen had in mind ideas for what their images should convey beforehand (and the way their faces should look), and then sought to actualize the ideals. Acting out the poses and always immediately viewing the results bled the virtual, imaginal space into reality (even if the ideal didn’t always materialize in the actual image), shaping experience in the moment. While Liangjie also posed for some photos, he seemed unconcerned with capturing any certain aesthetic, and Lei never posed for any photos at all (that I saw). Lei was entirely focused on the creative, social photographic interaction between himself and his significant other. Liangjie meanwhile surveyed the scenery, but found it most remarkable through the screen of his phone, experiencing the “nowness” of an ever-framed, aestheticized world.

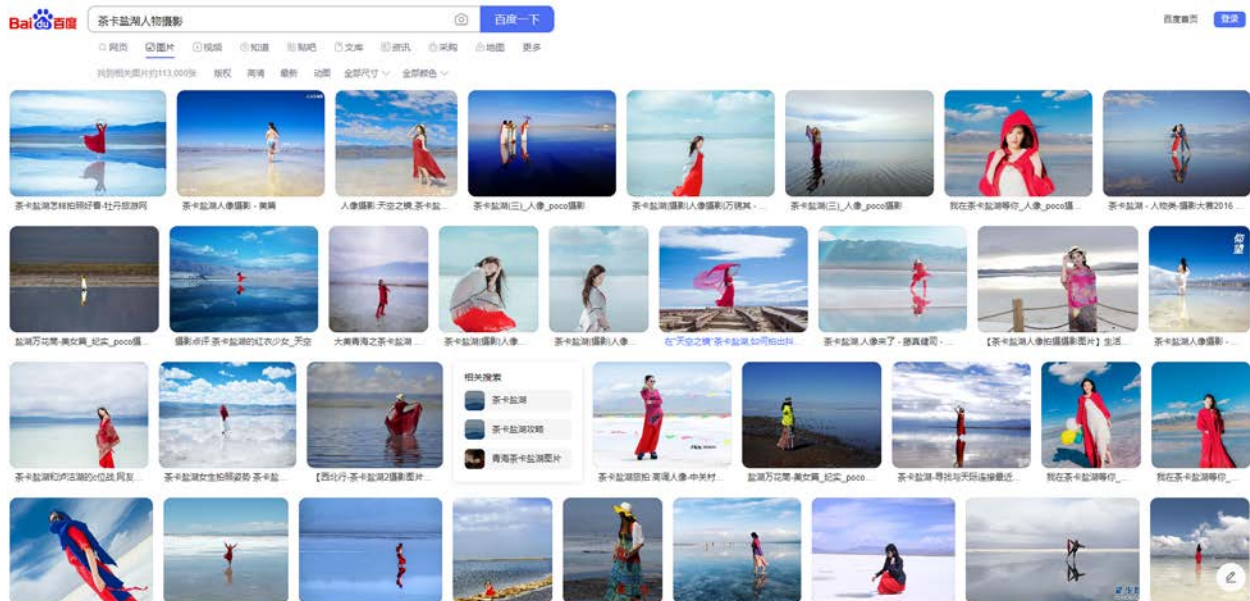


Figure 23: Screenshot of Baidu image search results for “Chaka Salt Lake human photography” (茶卡盐湖人物摄影). Search conducted December 18, 2022.

Even for me, the absolute normalcy and pleasantness of all the hike's activities, its photographic focus, and gender roles lead me to ask, how else *would* one interact while touring through a forest or glacier landscape? What could be missing?

First of all, part of this feeling that we must *have something to do* while at leisure, even at a forest or glacier, is an effect of the tourism structure and pace (mirroring the pace expected at the workplace), a sort of compulsion to check in and then leave, which is amplified by competitive commercialization among Chinese scenic areas. Although Liangjie and Zhen didn't work, they still were living in a fast-paced urban society and had family responsibilities back home. Going to Tibet seemed to be a compulsive behavior that they had to complete, and their typical small-group tour organized stops at the most popular destinations along the way with a fairly rigid timeframe for each scenic area. Even though the group was playful and relaxed, there was still some pressure to do the big things and move on.⁷⁰ They weren't particularly critical of the scenery, but they also didn't spend much time stopping to *look*. There was a dissociation, a distance from what they were presumably there to see or feel. Despite his critique of Camp 4 being too far from the glacier, when he had the chance to see Hailuoguo Glacier up close at its terminus, Liangjie wasn't interested. Meanwhile, Hailuoguo's development has (and continues to) work to streamline access to main sightseeing points and provide photography props, backdrops or cues to improve tourists' sense of product value. It competes for a certain kind of social-mediatizable attention. It reinforces the valuing of landscapes, nature and place through the whims and demands of a social media ecology.

Second, the safety of the highly developed scenic area and friendly dynamic of the small tourist group minimized and thus obscured the circumstances of gendered disparities in leisure security and freedom of movement. Photography provided a fun activity for the women in particular, even a means of empowerment and control. Qingqing was literally commanding her husband's actions the entire way. As

⁷⁰ The only tourists I ever guided who were visiting Hailuoguo Scenic Area multiple days in a row were Lu Zhiyi and Zhen Mengzhu, a young adult couple mentioned earlier in this chapter. They also didn't work per se; Ziyi managed his own ecommerce business remotely and spent most of his time traveling and paragliding. The couple came across Hailuoguo by chance after paragliding in the area and decided to stay for a few days on a whim.

for Zhen, it was only when the two of us were alone that she revealed she wasn't that interested in this trip to Tibet, and also suggested that her freedom of mobility before marriage had been restricted by familial demands. Thus, while the tour was a safe way for Zhen to leave home, it wasn't necessarily the way she'd have preferred to move through the world. Her safety and comfort came at the cost of conforming to her expected social roles, and her ability to go out now depended on the labor of another woman—her mother—staying home.

While in some contexts, social media and smartphones may be used to liberating ends, there are also qualities of the medium and facts of political economy that predispose certain ways of engaging and being, whether on or off the phone. Escape is not entirely a matter of mindset, nor of the degree to which one indulges in or abstains from digital image practices. We are immersed in an ecosystem that disciplines our perception, our awareness of our visual selves, and how we move through the environment, to the extent that many have trouble imagining other possibilities. Digital photography and smartphone practices are shifting culture and values with an addictive and persuasive force. They do not just add another option for our social and place interactions; they settle in as a frame for experience.

When it comes down to it, social media usage requires relinquishing control. To create, we must cooperate within an external structure that disciplines human behavior toward distraction and compulsive, addictive behavior (both to produce/share *and* to consume) to the benefit of neoliberal capital and government surveillance. Though it may be used to political ends, “shareveillance,” as Birchall calls it, produces an antipolitical public: “shareveillant practices both invoke political agency and severely delimit it... they encourage actions framed by the notion of choice and the citizen qua consumer” (2017, 2). Shareveillance is hegemonic because we are consenting; we want to play; we want to be seen (as valued). The virtual space extends our cognitive-affective being in the world; it gives us a sense of power, freedom, connection and vitality, but that very sense causes us to ignore the ways in and degree to which we have limited our being, or relinquished these same things. It has become easier than ever (or *compulsory*) to low-tech cyborgify and *be-with* the smartphone, but the smartphone has its own agendas. It conditions us to fit

our own wants and desires into its own. Smartphone in hand, we are disciplined to approach reality as a quest for aesthetic capital.

Interlude 4. The Glacier Terminus

On the first day of August, I'm accompanying a married couple in their late 20s from Chengdu. Both are well-traveled, including some international trips, but it's the man, Pang Yuebin, who is particularly interested in the topic, and talkative in general. Yuebin is slim, bespectacled, somewhat tall, with the slight hint of oncoming baldness, though he otherwise has a youthful look. He wears a T-shirt and some jeans with the cuffs rolled up a couple inches above his work boots. He also wears a necklace of black stones, the central one being in the shape of a crescent moon. His wife Zhong Qingyu, meanwhile, gives an even younger impression, though I gather they are the same age. I had noticed them on the bus right away, because she is wearing beautiful *Hanfu* (汉服, traditional Chinese dress). She is also wearing make-up and contact lenses that make her eyes appear a soft gray color. Knowing that some people like to wear Hanfu specifically for travel photography, I ask for what kinds of occasions she usually wears it. Qingyu's voice is soft but her reply is firm—"I always wear Hanfu." She teaches guzheng, so she wears it when she teaches, but will also wear it out and about on a typical day. "And for travel, it's a must."

Her husband Yuebin jumps in: "There's nothing strange about wearing Hanfu." He compares it to wearing a Western suit. "It's just a bit more formal, but there's nothing weird about it." They make sure to tell me this is a Ming-dynasty Hanfu, and that it has certain specifications distinguishing it from the clothing of other eras.

Yuebin has been to Hailuoguo once before, as a kid. It was probably 20 years ago, he guesses, before the cableway was installed. So he was curious to see it again, especially since it's so close, a convenient way to escape Chengdu's heat. "But my number-one reason for coming here is to see the glacier," he tells me. "Just about anywhere around Chengdu you can see snowy mountains, or go hiking through old growth forest. Even my home city, Leshan, has old-growth forest. But it isn't easy to find somewhere with glaciers, especially so close!" So we take the electric shuttle from Camp 3 to Chengmendong, which now that the path beyond the Old Observation Deck is closed, offers the closest view of the glacier anywhere in

the park. An industrial metal walkway has been installed here recently here as well, and we follow it out to its farthest point in the direction of the glacier terminus.

The glacier in hand

Chengmendong gets its name from the tall, gate or cave-like structure that tends to form at the glacier's terminus, through and under which ice-cold meltwater flows downstream. Here we get an interesting cross-section, right at the most dynamic part of glacier. Isolated ice structures jut out over the rocky riverbed in odd shapes. I find the landscape disquieting and otherworldly. The glacial stream tends to split into several branches, and frequently changes course (within the confines of the valley). Tourists like to collect polished (or “jadeized” 玉化, *yuhua*) river rocks from wherever it has receded. There are also more of the red rocks to be found here—usually more than at Camp 4, though here, too, the red fungus is heavily damaged from being underfoot.



Figure 24: A tourist making off with a chunk of glacier.
Source: photo by author. August 9, 2019

Although technically prohibited, many tourists walk beyond the metal platform, coming right up to Chengmendong's ice cave. Its soft blue glow entices them to get as close as they dare, but it's a dangerous

place to linger. The glacier is more accessible to the sides of the cave, however, and chunks of ice break off and float downstream, sometimes catching on the rocky riverbank. Today I notice once again how many tourists are not only collecting rocks (some filling up large bags) but taking pieces of glacier with them as well. Some are putting the ice in plastic baggies or water bottles (as otherwise the ice simultaneously melts away and leaves their hands freezing cold). Qingyu decides the rocky riverbed would be too rough on her footwear, so Yuebin and I venture on while she waits on the platform. Yuebin picks a chunk of ice out of the stream, as well as a rock he finds attractive, and brings them back to his wife. Qingyu accepts the rock, putting it with two others they had picked up earlier, but does not accept the chunk of glacier that he shows her. He continues to carry it for a while before giving up and tossing it on the ground to the side of the path.



Figure 25: Zhong Qingyu's rock collection for the day.
Source: photo by author. August 1, 2019

“It’s just melting,” he explains.

“Why did you even bring it in the first place?” she asks.

“To show you,” he says, “because you didn’t go see it for yourself.”

The icy souvenir seems like a metaphor for the entire concept of glacier tourism. As developers try to get a handle on it, it is already fading away; as tourists struggle to get as close to the glacier as possible, they are uncertain what to take away from the experience. When they photograph it, it’s not always so obviously a glacier. If they try to physically take the glacier away, it melts, ceasing to be a glacier. How to engage with such an ephemeral object?

In a hurry to get through Hailuoguo, many tourists prioritize Camp 4 over Chengmendong, even when it’s so foggy that they’re less likely to see much glacier from the former. This is likely a result of Hailuoguo’s layout and encouraged traffic flow, as well as the general expectation that a site’s best views are to be found at its highest point. But Chengmendong can surprise. Tourists here can not only see the glacier from a distance that actually makes it feel large and imposing; they can lay their hands upon its ice, convince themselves of its reality, and feel a chilling connection. Even the air here is noticeably colder. While many tourists find a far-off view of the glacier tongue disappointing if not suspicious, the immersive experience of walking around its dynamic lower boundary demands a reverence for what *is*. As suggested by Yuebin’s comments, “seeing” the glacier actually means verifying it through touch. However, I’ve guided a few tourist groups that never make it that far. Some ride or walk all the way from Camp 3 to Chengmendong only to decide it’s unattractive and turn back immediately—even before walking far enough to catch sight of the glacier. I will share three more brief experiences at Chengmendong to illustrate the range of reactions at the site of the glacier’s melting.

“The reason we came”

On September 1, one month after guiding Yuebin and Qingyu, I’m with another couple—Qiu Shaohui and Wan Zihan—who work in Chengdu’s furniture industry, and I estimate are in their mid- to

late 30s. Today was supposed to be a workday for them, but they took it off last-minute for this trip, suggesting there is some flexibility to their work schedule. “Just to see what fun things there are,” Zihan says, while her husband says his main interest is to breathe some clean air, to get some oxygen. “I’m old, and I have high blood pressure,” Shaohui explains as he walks with unhurried movements, occasionally moving his left forearm up and down in slow, graceful arcs like he’s dribbling a tai-chi basketball. He complains if Zihan and I are ever walking too quickly, or if she is looking at her cell phone instead of the surroundings—which admittedly, she does much less than most tourists.

When we finally reach the glacier up-close, however, Shaohui says, “Now *this* is the reason we came here.” He and his wife both get out their phones.



Figure 26: Chengmendong, the glacier terminus. Source: photo by author. August 7, 2019

The glacier terminus looks completely different than the last time I’d seen it. Chengmendong isn’t even *there* anymore; the cave has collapsed. The river has swelled to such an extent that there is a whole

new branch disrupting the area where tourists were once able to walk. The whole landscape feels like somewhere I've never been before, and I have trouble getting my bearings. We end up taking a wide path around the collapsed glacial cave and approaching the remaining, odd glacial shapes from upslope rather than head-on. Like archaeological ruins, a couple high walls of ice hang over some smaller shelf- and stalagmite-esque ice formations. All this, too, is rapidly melting, water coming down in off of the shelves and ledges in steady clear droplets, creating a peaceful sound. The couple are still hesitant to believe it's ice until they are able to touch it. Then they are enamored. They use words like "mystical" and "spectacular" to describe the glacial world we now walk through and on, thus finally achieving the "zero-distance" glacial experience that brochures claim is unique to Hailuogou, but other tourists have instead complained Hailuogou uniquely lacks (though, we are technically breaking regulations to experience it). Zihan boldly climbs over the formations, while Zihan leans in close to a pillar of ice and chips away at it as though conducting an investigation.



Figure 27: A close-up of the glacier. Source: photo by author. November 24, 2019



Figure 28: Tourists inspecting the glacier at Chengmendong.
Source: photo by author. September 1, 2019

“Not really interested”

Ruan Yaojie is in his late 20s (but looks like he’s in his early 20s) and works in tourism administration in Chengdu. So far I am having a pleasant time guiding him and his significant other Lan Ruqin on an unexpectedly warm day in late September. They had been attracted by the view of Crescent Moon Lake from the cable car, so as we are eating lunch at Camp 3, I ask if they would be interested in

seeing the glacier terminus. They want to confirm that that's the same site with the lake, then happily agree. But Ruoqin persuades Yaojie to walk instead of taking the electric shuttle, and that's when his mood begins to deteriorate.

The walk is admittedly rather unpleasant today—in addition to the brutal sun, there is some construction underway along the road. Several times massive, rock-laden trucks need to pass us, stirring up dust and leaving barely enough room for us to avoid being hit—this in addition to all the usual shuttle traffic one has to dodge. Yaojie keeps asking how much further it is. Ruoqin is more chipper, pointing out that by walking they are losing weight.

“We're definitely taking the shuttle on the way back,” Yaojie vows.

But when we arrive at Chengmendong, Ruoqin realizes she'd lost her leopard-print scarf somewhere along the way. “I'll just pick it up on our way back,” she resolves. I groan inwardly, imagining how grumpy Yaojie will be on another walk. In the meantime, I am eager to lead them up to the attractions, especially the lake, giving them something to look at and putting them back in a good mood. Maybe they'd like to play around in the river rocks, as so many tourists do—maybe even find a chunk of ice to take with them as an ill-fated souvenir? But Yaojie walks up to the lake, takes one look, remarks how it actually isn't attractive from down here, and decides to go back immediately. Ruoqin seems totally unbothered by the decision. They don't take a picture; they don't walk around the lake to get a full view; and they totally ignore the river, riverbank, and glacier that lie just ahead.

“I'm not really interested in the glacier terminus anyway,” Yaojie says. We begin walking back. Along the way, the couple complains about Hailuoguo's scenery in general terms. The mood of the tour has entirely shifted since this morning.



Figure 29: Crescent Moon Lake. Source: photo by author. July 28, 2019

A matter of quality

While Yaojie was clearly frustrated by the entire experience that day—the unpaved road, the construction, the heat, the sheer length of the hike—I would find many tourists disappointed by Hailuoguo’s natural scenery, and Crescent Moon Lake in particular, as it prompts immediate and unfavorable comparisons to Jiuzhaigou. Jiuzhaigou is the most famous national park in Sichuan Province, best known for its clear and colorful lakes. Shu Cen, a tour guide who has worked at Hailuoguo for two years, confirms that this is her experience as well. She tells me that how much she enjoys her job depends on who she’s with: “If the tourists’ *suzhi* (素质, “quality”) is high, then it’s great. But if they don’t have *suzhi*... haha,

that's no good. The thing I dislike the most is when we arrive at a scenic site, and the tourists bring up some other place." She says that tourists are most likely to do so here at Chengmending and Crescent Moon Lake, where we are currently guiding a group of ten tourists. Sure enough, this group finds the lake's appearance wanting. A gust of wind has blown a layer of leaves and finer plant materials over its surface, so that the water appears murky at first glance.

"It's not clear at all," complains one of the tourists. Shu Cen points out that it's just a thin scattering of leaves. When the grandmother of the group looks more closely, she agrees with the guide. "It's true, when you look down you can tell the water is clear."

I reject the idea that Hailuoguo Glacier, the old-growth forest, or Crescent Moon Lake are somehow inherently unattractive, though many tourists do speak as if dealing in facts and not opinions, especially if the ugliness is ascribed to "dirtiness." But shouldn't nature be "dirty?" So I always felt this was a critique of the human elements involved in making Hailuoguo, rather than "nature" itself. When the in-person experience didn't match expectation, it didn't prompt thinking or raise questions about natural phenomena (e.g., *maybe the debris on the glacier is important; maybe that's just leaves on the lake*) but stoked suspicions that Hailuoguo was trying to deceive or cheat its paying guests. The "ugliness" really lies in this mistreatment or disrespect, and reflects the quality of the local administration that is ultimately responsible for developing and promoting the site, creating a clean, safe and modern place that is comparable to others on the market.

Shu Cen, on the other hand, suggests that ugliness is in the eye—or rather the *quality*—of the beholder. It is almost a moral failing that tourists cannot "see" the value in the landscape and are generally uninterested in being educated about—for example—supraglacial debris. Tourists and guides, each in their way, are viewing the landscape through a social, moral, and markedly developmental frame. Beauty could be achieved or uncovered if only the right party would develop further.

Today, most members of the group are uninterested in walking over to see the glacier terminus, but Shu Cen and I accompany the few who are. It's November now, and Chengmendong looks totally different yet again. As we approach, Shu Cen explains how the glacier is changing more quickly than ever. "When I first got here three years ago, the end of the glacier was right here, where we're standing now," she tells me. The distance seems far more extreme than I'd imagined—at least the length of a football field. "You can tell because there's still some glacier over there," she says, pointing straight across at the valley wall. Sure enough, I see a slab of ice on the opposite side of the stream, disconnected from the main body of the glacier. It's hard to imagine that's where the entire glacier had extended to just a few seasons ago.

Chapter 5.

Ecological Frame: Making Hailuoguo Glacier Invisible, Illegible, and Incredible

One day (that in fact had particularly good weather and visibility) I was riding the cable car down from Camp 4 with several strangers. The return ride down to Ganheba, the park's main traffic hub, is always a little less exhilarating than that initial ascent into the unknown. Still, the cable car's panoramic views are incomparable to elsewhere in the park. Suspended at a stomach-turning height of up to 200 meters, the cableway roughly follows the path of the park's eponymous valley but keeps a straight course as the valley gently spirals, views changing as the flanking mountain ridges successively reveal and obscure far reaches of the landscape. These fir-topped mountainsides have been cut deep by the glacier to create steep, unstable-looking rocky slopes with a few particularly sheer faces higher up where waterfalls continue to smooth the bedrock before filtering through the lateral moraine or disappearing beneath the glacier itself. Red streaks are splashed across the nearest cliff face, difficult to identify between oxidation and the red fungus (a type of *Trentepohlia*) said only to be found in environments with exceptionally clean air; in any case it cuts a striking contrast to the grays, whites, blues and dark greens of the wider surroundings. Below, accompanying us for nearly the entire journey, is the famed Hailuoguo Glacier. Between the glaringly white icefall opposite Camp 4 and the glacial terminus only visible in the latter part of our descent, most of the glacier is covered in debris: grayish rocks of highly variable size. But the cover is incomplete, and a range of dramatic ice formations are visible even from our high vantage point. The ice has ripples and divots, caverns and hillocks, crevices, pools, small superficial streams, and some imposing icy shelves with only a light layer of silvery rock dust on their vertical slopes.

Seated on the bench next to me were a couple women, probably around 30, exuding an air of athleticism with their brightly colored hiking get-ups. Then across from me sat a family of five: a couple likely below 30, an older woman with the couple's approximately six-month-old baby strapped to the front of her body, an older man who had his body turned away from the others to gaze intently out the window. The baby must have been staring at me because the mother began asking "Are you looking at that pretty auntie? Does she look different from other people? Yeah, she's very pretty, isn't she?" I wanted them to

know I understood, so I looked at the mother and smiled. Somehow we got talking, maybe she asked about my work ID. I said I was researching tourism here, and they asked what aspect, and I said “tourists,” which I’m sure sounded weird, but they let it go without any follow-up questions. The family seemed friendly and in good spirits—except the grandfather, who only interrupted his intense window-gazing to deliver some sharp complaints. I asked where they were from, and they said Chengdu. Then *they* asked the two women sitting next to me where they were from, confirming that they weren’t together. The pair of women were from Guangzhou. “Ah, it seems there are lots of you Guangzhou friends who visit here,” the Chengdu mother said. Then the conversation turned into a series of complaints about Hailuoguo.

“We won’t come here again,” said one of the Guangzhou women, unsmiling. She said that they particularly regretted taking the cable car up to Camp 4, where there was nothing to see. “There’s actually no need to come up, you can’t get any views of snowy mountains.” The Chengdu family agreed with her but focused instead on the price of the ticket. “The main issue is that the entrance ticket is too expensive.” The mother from Chengdu looked at me, still smiling. “This place really rips you off. You buy an entrance ticket, then they still make you buy a cable car ticket. They take advantage of you (太坑了, *tai keng le*). And on top of that there’s no attractive scenery.” The Guangzhou duo agreed, “When you arrive in the park, there’s no option but the cable car.” The Chengdu mother added, “And the cable car doesn’t have any feel to it, *ga!*” Even though to be fair, she wasn’t looking out the cable car window, focused instead on keeping her baby entertained. I was surprised that the grandfather, who seemed so interested in looking out at the glacial landscape below us, sounded the angriest when he threw in his own two cents about the park, vehemently concurring there was nothing to see here and it was a waste of money. On the other hand, the two women to my left seemed legitimately depressed about whatever misguided decisions had led them to this place. The one in the middle of the bench stared down at the floor the entire time. The other one turned around so she could see where the cable car was headed, and had a blank yet stern expression on her face. Neither of them moved from these poses or said anything more after their short exchange with the Chengdu family.

These kinds of tourist reactions and commentaries were common. In my time volunteering as a tour guide at Hailuoguo, they continued to surprise me even as I learned to brace myself for them. Many tourists—or even acquaintances in Chengdu to whom I casually mentioned my research site—informed me, with varying levels of vehemence, that there was “nothing to see” or “nothing to do” in Hailuoguo, “no scenery,” “no culture,” or “no history.” I remember one time I asked a graduate student in tourism studies if she had ever been there. First she said no, but then after a long pause, remembered she had *just* gone there with friends over the most recent holiday. (And somehow it had already nearly escaped her memory.) I was interested to hear her industry-insider take on the site, but she only remarked “there wasn’t anything there.” Bewildered, I didn’t know where the conversation could go after that.

Climate Change and glacier anthropology

The main thing that *is* at Hailuoguo is, of course, Hailuoguo No. 1 Glacier (Hereafter “Hailuoguo Glacier”). Taking this particular glacier as a central yet ephemeral object of analysis, this chapter contributes to a growing body of anthropology on climate change and the Anthropocene, and specifically what I call “glacier anthropology.”⁷¹ Glacier anthropology would be the subset of environmental anthropology that considers human-cryosphere relations—relations that are rightfully garnering more attention across academic fields in recent years. Retreating glaciers have become key indexes *and* symbols of climate change, lending visibility and legibility to complex, highly scientific descriptions or forecasts. They are often touted as “canaries in the coalmine” giving clear early warning of greater environmental disasters to come. An anthropological approach reminds us, however, that glaciers are not merely objects of science but are culturally embedded and ecologically entangled in multiple, complex ways.

⁷¹ “Anthropocene” is not embraced by all historians or scientists. Some argue that by centering the power of the human over nature, it feeds into narratives of human domination that are part of the problem, undermining situated, multispecies perspectives and pointing us toward a technological solution; others argue that “Anthropocene” equalizes the blame and responsibility for climate change among all *anthropos*, and suggest alternative or supplemental terms such as Capitalocene or Plantationocene; still others reject that the events in question meet the qualifications for a geological epoch (Haraway et al. 2016; Moore, ed. 2016). By using the term “Anthropocene,” I do not mean to dispute these critiques, only to reference the collection of realizations and ongoing discussion it has inspired. As Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016, 20-24), I believe the wide and weighty implications of “Anthropocene” capture the inherent contradiction of “sustainable development” with which we must grapple.

Environmental loss is accompanied by cultural loss, as disappearing with the glaciers are human connections to place and past, collective identity and imagination. Given the unprecedented rate of climate change, there is a growing sense of urgency to gather indigenous knowledge of glacial landscapes before those ways of being and perceiving are also gone.

Glacier anthropologists have offered accounts of agentive glaciers that can “listen” and “see” (Cruikshank 2005; 2012), sacred glaciers that are the destination of pilgrimages and site of rituals (Paerregaard 2020), and cryospheric landscapes that are repositories of memory (Nuttall 1992). Anthropologists are among those to describe how the loss of glaciers is disrupting livelihoods and reconfiguring cosmologies for arctic and high mountains communities (Allison 2015; Byg and Salick 2009; Walker-Crawford 2022) and farming communities dependent on glacial runoff (Rhoades, Zapata-Ríos, and Aragundy 2006; Stambach and Kwayu 2021). But interactions with and interpretations of glaciers exceed the bounds of indigenous communities in mountain villages. Most people who encounter a glacier today will do so through the tourism industry; tourists and tourism workers also possess, mobilize, and reproduce particular knowledge, interests, and affect in relation to glaciers. Nöbauer (2022), for example, describes how workers at a Swiss ski resort see themselves as engaging in relations of care with glaciers, despite outside environmentalists’ concern of their techniques’ ultimate environmental impact. Tourism actors are quite often non-locals, rarely have deep cultural connections to glaciers, and rarely fall into the extreme categories of staunch climate change “denialists” or well-informed scientist-activists—indeed, we can assume that most glacier tourists will have above-average consumption habits, thus disproportionately contributing to the loss of their desired object. While this uncomfortable truth makes it tempting to simply dismiss the glacier tourism industry, studying tourist perceptions of glaciers gives insight into the large middle ground of (unconcerned or concerned) inaction on climate change, and studying touristic framings of the environment gives insight into the everyday structuring of these perceptions.

This chapter is not about climate change discourse *per se* at Hailuoguo, but addresses its absence as one aspect of the glacier’s overall unintelligibility in the tourism context. Considering what we

collectively face as denizens of the Anthropocene, the absence of climate change discourse in everyday contexts is a significant “zero” warranting reflection and investigation (Sillitoe 2022, 15). Orlove et al. (2019) take climate change inattention as something that demands explication and contextualization rather than a given of human psychology. Studies and public discourse often suggest that inaction or inattention is because climate change is too distant from people’s lives, its effects too difficult to perceive, and its science too difficult to grasp. Now, as firsthand evidence of the phenomenon becomes undeniable and costly, we may be tempted to focus all effort on simply promoting the science. A “scientific worldview” cannot be forced, however; science will (or should) not be the only language used to frame what is happening. In their study of three mountain communities where the effects of climate change are obvious and uncontested, Orlove et al. find that people are utilizing not only the cosmopolitan-scientific interpretations, but also “community” frames to contemplate and respond to the changes in their environment. A more productive way to promote adaptive action may be through these moral-cultural frames, the authors suggest, rather than pushing full acceptance of a scientific account that can seem far away from both everyday life and spiritual ontologies.

What is the frame through which casual tourists encounter a glacier and perceive (or do not perceive) climate change? I draw my attention to the more dispersed and “community” frame of tourism without necessarily arguing for its merit over (or even in addition to) a scientific frame, while also recognizing that the touristic and scientific spheres overlap in the production and consumption of place. It is precisely because the “community” of tourists is so transitory and nebulous that tourism becomes a good site for understanding widespread climate inaction. Tourism is part of a global capitalist economy, affecting the way that we think and feel about places (as essential, distinct, bordered entities) and our relation to natural objects like glaciers (as national, natural heritage) even outside of specific tourism settings.

Touristic conceptions of “place” may promote confounded or even environmentally harmful attitudes and behaviors. The conception of nature as existing in bounded zones to be valued for their beauty or scientific uniqueness makes certain ways of caring more possible or evident than others. For example,

classifying certain glacial areas as “world heritage” sets protective boundaries for strict conservation. However, a study by Bosson, Huss, and Osipova (2019) indicates no difference in the rate of glacial loss between unprotected glaciers and those that fall within world heritage zones. Should we then care for glaciers by promoting glacier tourism? On the one hand, nature tourism or mere time spent in nature may increase pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. On the other hand, no matter how eco-conscious they are on-site or after the fact, tourists must expand their carbon footprint to arrive (especially to glaciers, which tend to be long distances from major population centers—Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska, for example, is only reachable by boat or plane). But it is one thing to recognize the futility of ethical glacier tourism intellectually, and another thing to feel it. Journeying to be in the presence of a glacier may feel like a proactive, positive expression of climate concern or spiritual reverence for nature, especially compared to staying home and never interacting with a glacier. Some glacier tourism sites, such as Glacier National Park and Glacier Bay National Park in the US, and Jasper National Park in Canada, have actually experienced a huge surge in visitors by promoting news of their glaciers’ expected disappearance—a phenomenon known as “last-chance tourism” (Lemieux et al. 2018). Surely tourists are flocking there because they care about the glaciers, not to make them disappear more quickly. There seems to be a certain cognitive dissonance in the eco-morality of the Anthropocene.

The case at Hailuoguo National Glacier Forest Park is quite different than Jasper National Park. Even though climate change is not denied or politicized, its narrative is scarcely promoted, either top-down in official media or bottom-up per tourist interest. It is the real “elephant in the park:” although it takes over 20 meters off the glacier every year (lengthwise) and noticeably changes the glacier’s thickness, appearance, and stability, tourism narratives don’t center it, continuing to focus on the glacier’s beauty, majesty, and impressive (if outdated) metrics. Tourists, meanwhile, almost never draw on climate as an explanation for the glacier’s (dis)appearance, evaluating it in purely aesthetic terms against a glacial tourism imaginary. Both sides, I argue, are operating within a much larger “developmental framing” that is fundamentally at odds with climate change frames.

Development in transportation and visual technologies makes it easier than ever to visit a glacier, and easier to forget how precarious such encounters are—as in both dangerous and endangered. Whether or not we make the trip to a glacier park, we do ourselves multiple disservices in sidestepping our dynamic, globally interconnected reality to see glaciers as merely static, localized objects. Two mundane effects of a touristic approach are misrecognition and dissatisfaction. While all parties directly involved in tourism—guides, local government workers, business owners and tourists themselves—want visitors to have positive experiences of awe in Hailuoguo Glacier’s presence, many of those visitors are never able to bridge the distance and feel something outside of a consumer positionality or pervasive (if subtle) competitive societal context. Indeed, many tourists have a hard time recognizing the glacier at all. While they are approaching it as an aesthetic object, guides try to convince them to see it instead as an object of science. They explain, with some degree of detail, precisely why the glacier looks the way it does. But rarely does this have the desired effect of satisfying tourists or improving their impression of Hailuoguo Glacier.

In the context of climate change forecasting, I also must pose the question—what is the ultimate value of a person’s positive experience with a glacier? There is something absurd about the entire conflict I detail in the remainder of this chapter between the scientific/state framing and the touristic framing. The site aims to attract more and more visitors to see a glacier that they largely try to ignore is disappearing year-by-year. In this case at the very least, tourism development is participating in the problem that will be its undoing, and we the consumers are complicit. Hailuoguo can be taken as a microcosm for examining these contradictions of development and value in the Anthropocene.

Environmental attitudes and action in China

In the subsequent three sections, I consider the glacier’s in/visibility, il/legibility, and its in/credibility—that is, its positioning and appearance in the context of the tourism site, its overlapping scientific, national, and commercial frames, and, in contrast, the way that many tourists (as wary consumers) are predisposed to perceive the glacier. But first, I provide an overview of environmentalism in China. As previously indicated, very few tourists in this study brought up climate change or explicitly voiced

environmentalist sentiments while observing or conversing about natural landscapes, especially the glacier. What to make of this absence?

Climate change in China is not a politically divisive issue as it has been in, for example, the United States, but survey results are mixed as to how China compares to developed countries in terms of public awareness and concern on climate and environmental issues or public support for pro-environmental policies (Jamelske, Barrett, and Boulter 2013; Lee et al 2015). Part of the problem is a difficulty in defining environmentalism—which encompasses cognition, affect and behavior—for comparison across different cultural contexts. While some individuals and activist groups in China have a more cosmopolitan perspective, popular Chinese environmentalism takes a different form than in more individualist or democratic societies where green consumer choices, voting behavior, explicit protests, or “belief” in the underlying science are some of the key indicators of environmental concern. In China, environmental attitudes are more often the result of personal, firsthand experience of environmental degradation (Harrell 2023).

In that sense, the tourists in this study did express environmental attitudes, just not in the terms of cosmopolitan scientific discourse. At Hailuoguo, tourists’ awareness of environmental quality was focused on perceived signs of purity or of pollution. Tourists focused praise on scenes of bright blue skies with pure white clouds—which is a set phrase in Chinese (蓝天白云, *lantian baiyun*)—as well as crystal-clear lakes, potable stream water, edible wild plants, and fresh air. These signs of purity were contrasted against signs of air and water impurity, with which both urban and suburban tourists are all too familiar. Thus, when encountering the debris-covered glacier or a murky body of water, tourists were quick to identify these as “dirty” or “polluted,” even though the sediments were most likely natural and in no real sense out of place. They similarly depreciated overcast or foggy weather, which foreshortened and muddled the visual field, all too reminiscent of smoggy urban conditions.

Just as with environmental affect, it is unreasonable to assume environmental action will look the same across different cultural contexts. Back in the 1990s and early 2000s, China saw the burgeoning of environmental NGOs and a series of grassroots protests and campaigns (*as in* Yang and Calhoun 2007). Following initial optimism, however, political scholars have noted China's failure to develop a broad and continuous environmental movement, which they link to decentralization and structural limitations on civil society (Economy 2011). Chinese NGOs do not have extensive leeway to challenge authority, and therefore seek to cooperate with government offices; however, local governments tasked with the actual implementation of environmental protection measures prioritize short-term economic goals at the environment's expense (Schwartz 2004). While climate change is not a politically divisive issue in China, it is still a potentially sensitive one. For example, the 2015 environmental documentary *Under the Dome* was banned in China 48 hours after its release, not because of its inherent content, but because it set off a wave of public debates and complaints (Pan 2017; Wang and Zhou 2021). This suggests that public sentiment is poised to erupt into a large-scale environmental movement, if given focus, direction, and the space to grow.

On the other hand, environmental apathy or passivity could be another aspect of the national techno-optimism which I describe in chapter 1. For better or worse, Chinese people see the meeting of basic needs and direction of national policy as the domain of the central government. Even when, in hushed conversation, people mentioned failures or abuses of power within the party-government, they were quick to follow these critiques with praise. "Chinese people are so many," they'd explain, "the fact that the government has basically resolved the issue of starvation, or poverty, is an amazing achievement." Several people I talked to said that China was on the path from a developing to a developed country, along which problems such as air pollution are merely "growing pains" to be inevitably overcome with higher-quality development. In 2020, the state's success in curbing the first wave of COVID-19—especially compared to Europe and the US—further reinforced faith (at least, from my observations, outside of Hubei Province) that the Chinese government would continue to fulfill its responsibilities to safeguard people's basic

conditions for survival. Therefore, even if recognizing climate change as a potential existential threat, most people don't seem to think mitigation needs to be prioritized over economic growth or national strengthening, and don't assume that the responsibility to respond to climate change will fall directly on their shoulders. It feels like a needless worry.

Some citizens would also disagree that China *as a nation* has any responsibility to respond to global climate change. While China has had the largest carbon footprint of any country since 2006, its historical emissions and per capita emissions remain substantially lower than those of the United States, which makes any “Western” critique of China ring hollow and hypocritical. In 2009, Ding Zhongli, a paleoclimatologist and then-vice chairman of the Chinese Academy of Sciences suggested that per-capita emissions were a human right that was being denied to China. This was in response to director Chai Jing's statement that, as a large population, China should work to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions: “Are you saying that Chinese people are human, or not?” asked Vice Chairman Ding. “That's the fundamental question here—why should a similarly human Chinese person emit less [than a Western person]?” (*as quoted in Wen 2020, my translation*). These comments have continued to resonate with the public and been reprinted in online articles over a decade later (e.g., “Thunberg” 2021). Unfortunately, the effects of climate change will not abide by national boundaries or respect per-capita emissions “rights,” even if the historical causes and blame for anthropogenic climate change do lie disproportionately with European and North American industries.

In sum, I attribute the absence of overt environmentalist expressions at Hailuoguo to a number of background factors. Popular awareness of environmental quality is based on personal experiences with degraded urban or industrialized environments rather than scientific discourses of global climate processes, so people do not pick up the same cues or use the same language to express environmental concern; grassroots environmentalist movements or environmentalist activities that would incite disorder or contradict economic policy are discouraged within the Chinese political structure; nationalist sentiment and faith in the nation's upward trajectory of development discourage national and individual senses of

responsibility, respectively. For the remainder of the chapter, I will zoom in on Hailuogou to consider what framings of the natural landscape do come into play, providing a specific account of the absence of a climate change framing.

In/visibility

Rather than a forest park that also happens to include glaciers, Hailuogou is China's only "glacier forest park." It is designed, marketed, and presented to tourists primarily as the place to view (and perhaps touch) Hailuogou Glacier. The physical layout of the site is arranged accordingly—to build anticipation for and to privilege views of the glacier. Of its three hiking routes, two end at glacial observation decks, the other at an old glacial moraine lake, Caohaizi (草海子). In addition to the view from the cable car, which was intentionally built in parallel with the length of the glacier tongue, the park has three main sightseeing destinations, each offering a different view of the glacier: there's Chengmendong (城门洞), the site of the glacier terminus; there's the Old Observation Deck at the mid-point of the glacier tongue, which advertises "zero-distance contact," suggesting that tourists may touch or walk on the glacier from that location; and there's Camp 4, reachable only by cable car, the literal high point of the park. Camp 4 is located on the high knee of a forested peak with multiple observation decks—all aimed at the glacial icefall and, though less frequently visible, the main peak of Mt. Gongga beyond it.⁷² Even the cultural attractions at Camp 4 are strategically positioned to complement the view of the glacial icefall, that tourists can photograph it with various signs and structures in the foreground to achieve different aesthetic variations on the same theme.

Second, maps, travel guides, and tourism workers all direct tourists toward these focal points, almost never suggesting that tourists prioritize, for example, the old-growth forest instead. In addition to the general, government-run tour guiding service, the private company which operates the cable car has its own tour guides specifically dedicated to the cableway and Camp 4. I heard these tour guides in particular

⁷² I translate "零距离接触冰川" as "zero-distance contact with the glacier." Such an experience is promoted, for example, on a post of hiking itineraries given on the official Hailuogou Scenic Area website: <https://www.hailuogou.com/wzhl/lygl/2018/0612/1092.html>

discouraging tourists from exploring the lower areas of the park. Meanwhile, tourist surveys and photography analysis (Zhao 2012) also suggest that visitors' main interest in the site is the glacier.⁷³



Figure 30: A tourist's photo of the Tibetan stupa at Camp 4 centers the glacial icefall. August 2019

Hailuoguo Glacier's centralization in the park, both solidified in design and active in direction, is not only a cause but an effect of tourism practices—for example, the fast pace of sightseeing in China. Many tourists do not have time for leisurely hiking in their itinerary and may even have to fit Hailuoguo into one day's schedule between breakfast and lunch. These tourists naturally equate having seen or “punched in” (打了卡, *da le ka*) at Hailuoguo with having seen *one thing*—the glacier—best exemplified in the single view of the icefall from Camp 4. This makes the success of the stop a clear hit-or-miss. Such reductionism is common enough in tourism, but Hailuoguo is a rather extreme case in nature tourism for

⁷³ Tourist survey data from Hailuoguo in 2019 finds that of 526 tourists in the sample, 343 indicate viewing the glacier was a “very important” motivation for their visit, 101 indicate it as an “important” motivation, 27 indicate it was somewhat important, and 0 indicate it was “not important” (55 did not respond to this item).

fetishizing a singular object rather than a type of view or a set of objects (in Sichuan, one can compare against the hundreds of pools of Jiuzhaigou or the three peaks and multiple lakes of Daocheng Yading).

In addition to the layout of the site, tourists are prepped for the ultimate experience of viewing Hailuoguo Glacier by theming in and around the park. It all begins on the road to Moxi Town as one passes through Hailuoguo Tunnel, which is designed to look like a glacial cave, with oversized blue and white geometric crystals ringing the entrance. The Tourist Center in Moxi Town, where one buys entrance and bus tickets for the scenic area, has a small glacier museum. Then inside the park, near the glacial terminus, is a small “Glacier Experience Hall,” its interior a fantastical representation of a polar landscape bathed in blue lighting. There is even a song about the Hailuoguo Glacier; not only do some promotional videos play it, but the local garbage service blasts an operatic rendition of the tune from truck-mounted speakers while making the rounds. When town residents hear the familiar refrains, they know to come out to the curb with their garbage bags.

*Hailuoguo Glacier,
How are you so warm?
That's because hot springs flow at your side
Shambala Glacier,
Why are you always in spring?
That's because you hold green old-growth forests in your embrace*⁷⁴

Though the lyricist probably meant “warm” in a more figurative sense, it turns out their first question is quite pertinent. Global warming is one reason that the glacier is harder to find than ever, though it is not the only factor at play. Despite the entire park being focused on Hailuoguo Glacier, the foremost challenge is to see the glacier at all. Job shadowing and volunteering in the park, I quickly learned that pointing out the glacier was a tour guide’s most important task. Tourists would often thank me when I did, as they wouldn’t have known they were looking at a glacier otherwise, even though maps and signage also identify and explain the views. Looking at the full range of situations where tourists could not find the

⁷⁴ “The Romance of Hailuoguo” (海螺沟之恋, Hailuoguo zhi Lian), original Chinese lyrics by Liu Daoping. Translation by author.

glacier, this invisibility is sometimes attributable to fog obscuring the view, and other times attributable to the glacier tongue's surpraglacial debris. But neither of these physical screens could account for all cases. One time I was approached and asked where to go "to see the glacier" while we were all standing on a Camp 4 observation deck in full view of the glacial icefall, unobscured and brilliant white. Even after pointing out the glacier, some tourists disagree that it is actually a glacier. Others are accepting but still disappointed.

Hailuoguo Glacier is a slippery, retreating object that tourists have a difficult time visually grasping. But among glaciologists, it is relatively well-understood compared to other Chinese glaciers and is the subject of hundreds of studies. This is a result of its easy accessibility, as well as strong ties and openness between the Hailuoguo Administration and large research institutions. Much scientific information has percolated into tourism narratives to try and improve the glacier's legibility and the site's educational function. Details such as the location, size, typology, formation process, and some facts on the evolutionary-ecological context are all included in Hailuoguo's tour guide script (that is, the script that all tour guides are required to memorize, a periodically updated canon of facts). In promotional materials and tour guides' hands, these facts become arguments for the glacier's unique qualities and thus its value. Information on the glacier's retreat also makes some appearances in official tourism discourse, but its framing suggests a far-off and vaguely regrettable loss at most. The causes and effects are un- or under-stated. The only mention of glacial retreat in the tour guide script is below in bold type:

Can our guests guess what that grayish thing is below the cableway? That's right, it's the glacier tongue of our Hailuoguo No. 1 Glacier's ablation zone. It reaches six kilometers in length, its entire body intruding the old-growth forest of Emei firs. This creates a sight rarely seen in the world—a natural landscape of glacier coexisting with old-growth forest—that has been hailed as a miraculous "glacier in a green sea." **The glacier tongue used to be at a position of 2,850 meters' altitude, but due to rising global temperatures, every year it is continuously melting; now our glacier's position has already retreated to 2,940 meters at Chengmendong.** The gray sand and gravel on its surface comprise its superficial debris layer. Upon reaching a certain thickness these can slow the glacier's direct exposure to the sun's rays, slowing the glacier's melting, just as if a layer of sunscreen has been put on the glacier. At the same time, the superficial debris provides anti-slip functionality, allowing us to ascend it in the summer-autumn season without any

climbing gear. Relying only on the glacier surface debris cover, we can directly stand upon the glacier, achieving zero-distance contact. Thus as early as 1988 did the [UN] World Tourism Organization appraise it as “the most accessible glacier to humans.”

The tour guide script bookends retreat with blocks of upbeat information and praise that persuades toward a positive aesthetic and hands-on experience of the glacier. The single fact about retreat includes no time frame, and focuses on a more neutral-sounding upward shift in elevation rather than the volume of ice lost. What might natural-scientific studies of Hailuoguo Glacier explicate that the tour guide script does not? Do they provide greater legibility for the glacier? Might they promote the perception of the glacial landscape’s value? Upon investigation of geoscientific accounts, a narrative emerges on the unique features of Hailuoguo Glacier and its entanglements with climate processes. The glacier emerges (and participates) in a context of recent and rapid uplift, steep topography, high precipitation, and high biodiversity.

II/legibility

Now that I have established the centrality of the glacier, in the remainder of this chapter I will explore the why and how of its elusiveness by focusing on its selectively overlapping scientific, national, commercial, and touristic frames. I draw on natural scientific reports to contemplate a processual view of glaciers—that is, glaciers as the unfixed manifestations of dynamic bio-geo-cryospheric relations.

The Hengduan Mountains are a group of north-south parallel ranges found at the eastern end of the Himalayas. They cover present-day western Sichuan and western Yunnan, as well as small parts of Qinghai Province, the Tibet Autonomous Region, and Myanmar. Their north-south orientation is rare among China’s major ranges, which has important implications I will cover below. Within the Hengduan’s Daxue Range, Hailuoguo Glacier is found on the eastern slope of Mt. Gongga. Mt. Gongga has over 70 glaciers in

total, with five valley glaciers exceeding 10km in length; among these, Hailuoguo Glacier is the longest, and the third largest in terms of volume or total surface area (Pan, et al. 2012).^{75,76}

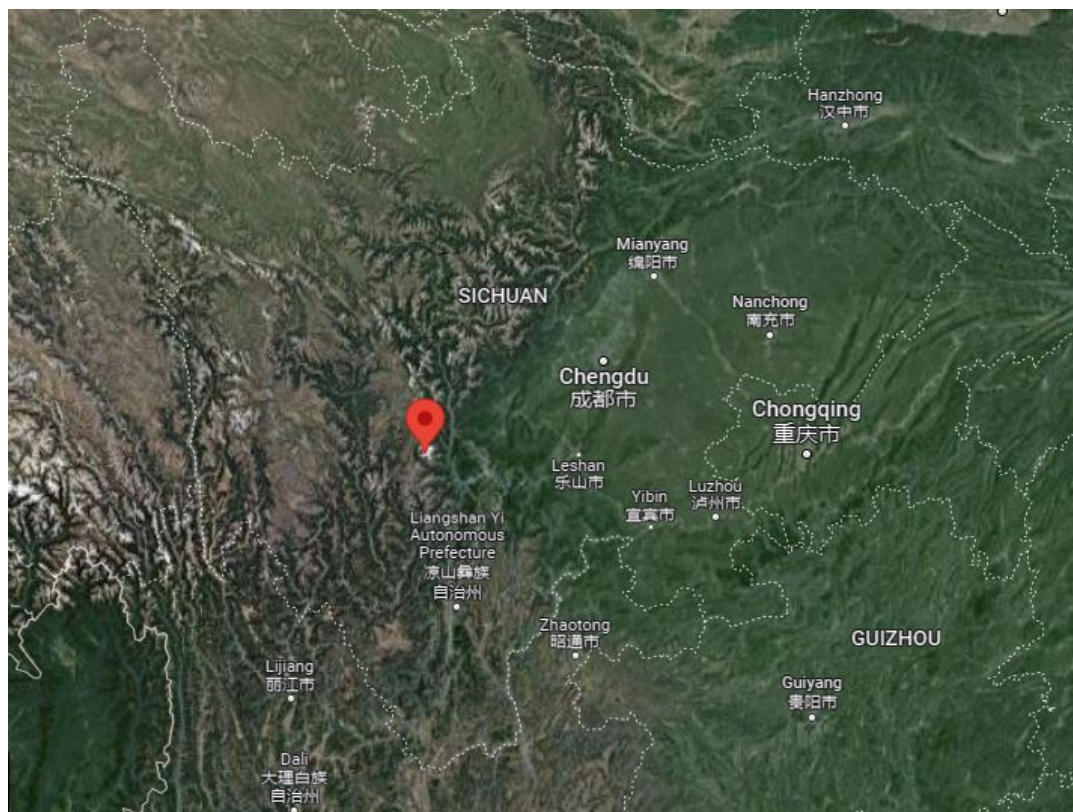


Figure 31: The location of Hailuoguo in the Hengduan Mountains.
Source: Google Earth. 2022

While a recent study (Ding, et al. 2020) suggests uplift of the Hengduan Mountains may have begun approximately 30 MYA (million years ago), traditional models suggest a late Miocene orogeny of merely 8 MYA, a result of ongoing Indian-Eurasian continental collision. Uplift had a number of direct and indirect effects. Subtropical, semi-arid flora evolved in step with the orogenic event, accruing adaptations to higher elevation and colder temperatures (Xing and Ree 2017). Strengthening of the South Asian monsoon

⁷⁵ Regarding the number of glaciers at Mt. Gongga, 76 and 74 seem to be the most cited figures, but the number continues to fluctuate as some glaciers split apart and some disappear. So far I have not encountered any figure under 70. Furthermore, I am unable to confirm if the five valley glaciers still exceed 10 kilometers in length.

⁷⁶ Hailuoguo ranks third in volume and surface area after Yanzigou and Mouzigou. However, this is discounting that Yanzigou, Mouzigou and Hailuoguo have all split into multiple glaciers since first observed; in any case, some popular/tourism literature simply refers to Hailuoguo as Gongga's "largest glacier."

increased precipitation and powerful rivers carved out new valleys, isolating and diversifying species separated by high peaks and wide gorges. The north-south orientation of the mountains, on the other hand, gave species the flexibility to migrate up or down-latitude during climatic shifts, unlike in the Himalayas. It became a nurturing environment that not only preserved ancient genetic lineages but also birthed many new ones (Sun et al. 2017). Today the Hengduan Mountains constitute one of thirty-six global biodiversity hotspots recognized by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, estimated to contain “about 50 percent of [China’s] birds and mammals and as much as 40 percent of its vascular plants” (Conservation International 2022).⁷⁷ The temperate glaciers of the Hengduan Mountains also participate in local ecology, most notably by regulating the water cycle, but also in subtle ways that are in need of further research—for example, on glaciers’ roles in microbiome and invertebrate ecologies.

Glaciers in the climate process

Glaciers’ existence is dependent on a positive balance in the accumulation (of snow) to ablation (melting) ratio. The Hengduan glaciers are temperate mountain and valley glaciers whose mass balance is the net effect of monsoon activity specifically, making them more dynamic than high-latitude glaciers, and more vulnerable to macro-climate shifts. That is, western Sichuan’s heavy monsoonal precipitation makes for high accumulation, while its high temperatures promote high ablation. This cycle keeps the glaciers flowing at a high speed (as far as glaciers go). In fact, the Mt. Gongga area is affected by both the South Asian and East Asian monsoon systems, so accumulation is not limited to a single season, and because the mountain is so high, precipitation falls as snow all year round. Without these conditions, it would be impossible for such low-latitude and low-altitude glaciers to replenish themselves. As indicated in the tour guide script, sediment cover is another environmental factor that has supported Hailuoguo Glacier’s remarkable existence. The surrounding mountains’ steep slopes with many rockfalls result in supraglacial debris, which studies have found adds protection from the sun’s rays and thus impedes melting.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ The Hengduan Mountains are listed as the “Mountains of Southwest China.”

⁷⁸ Although thicker layers of debris comprised of rocks and boulders help shield underlying ice from the warmth of the sun’s rays, thinner coatings of dust—windborne particles, sometimes connected to air pollution—has the opposite

Glaciers are not formed in a singular event, but manifest over centuries or millennia. They advance and retreat according to the current climate. Rather than permanent features of their mountain residences, we may consider them the dynamic expression of particular and complexly interdependent conditions. In light of monsoon-influenced glaciers' high-accumulation, high-ablation setting, we may expect to see the effects of global warming manifest more quickly, even when precipitation is constant. In recent years, precipitation has slightly increased around Mt. Gongga (Zhou et al. 2022), but it has not been enough to counteract the rise in temperature, leading to an overall negative trend in mass balance (Pan et al. 2012). Despite this, for months after beginning to volunteer at Hailuoguo, I was unsure if the glacier even was substantially retreating, because no one ever mentioned it. This is not due to the administration's lack of "belief" or knowledge on glacial melting. Instead, I argue, it points to a disjuncture between the scientific narrative and national-commercial-touristic frame when it comes to climate change. To accommodate the developmental spirit of tourism, the scientific framing of Hailuoguo Glacier must be progressive, or at the very least static. But either is a mismatch with reality. To give some sense of the scale of the issue, I next offer a brief account of Hailuoguo's contemporary retreat—perhaps the dominant narrative of Hailuoguo Glacier in the scientific literature since it first fell under the scientific gaze.

Hailuoguo Glacier's retreat



Figure 32: Hailuoguo Glacier downstream view and glacial icefall as viewed from SE.
Source: Heim (1936).

effect. The dust has insufficient thickness to absorb the radiation, while also disrupting the albedo effect, promoting more rapid glacial melting.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Hailuoguo Glacier was relatively stable, with intermittent advances associated with the Little Ice Age. On a 1930 expedition to determine the height of Mt. Gongga, Swiss geologist Arnold Heim encountered Gongga's eastern valley glaciers, providing the first known measurements and maps (1936). According to analysis by Li et al. (2010), at that time Hailuoguo Glacier was approximately 14.8 km long, but by the 1960s it had retreated over one kilometer, and in 2006 was measured at just under 13 km. Since then, tourism and popular science materials have continued to cite the length of the glacier as 13 km, reflecting either outdated measurements or a discrepancy in measuring practices, as recent studies (e.g., Shi, et al. 2021) show that the rate of retreat has been accelerating over the past two decades.⁷⁹ In the three years from 2017 to 2020, for example, Xu et al. (2022) recorded a loss of 236.4 meters at the collapsed portion of the glacier terminus, Chengmendong.



Figure 33: Hailuoguo Glacier icefall in 2008 and 2020 (view from Camp 4).

Source: Qiao Liu/IMHE. <https://www.icimod.org/initiative/hkh-cryohub-spotlight-qiao-liu/>

Change in thickness is a better indicator of the trend in glacier mass balance than length or surface area. In relative terms, Hailuoguo Glacier's loss in thickness has been more dramatic than its loss in length. The upper surface of the glacial tongue was measured at a position 12 meters higher in 1993 than in 2004 (Li, et al. 2010). Zhang et al. (2010) calculate the thinning of the ablation zone at a rate of 1.1 meters/year. The most iconic of Hailuoguo Glacier's features—the glacial icefall—demonstrates particularly noticeable

⁷⁹ In fact, actual signposts in the park (at least as recently as 2020) gave the length of HLG glacier as 14.7 km.

thinning. The icefall's frequent and spectacular avalanches are increasingly irrecoverable, leaving bare rock exposed below. In photographs taken from Camp 4 in 2020, it appears that the icefall had completely separated into two sections.

It is difficult to predict how long Gongga's glaciers will last. As long as temperatures climb, the loss will continue, but the rate of loss will depend on precipitation, and thus on how climate change affects monsoon patterns in the years to come. To reiterate, the near absence of climate change-related information in Hailuoguo's touristic framing is not due to some aversion to the facts, or to scientific detail. The official 16,000-character informational script that tour guides at Hailuoguo are required to memorize goes into surprising depth on other technical topics that would seem much further from public concern like glacial polish (磨光面, *moguang mian*), and the multi-step process by which snow becomes glacial ice. In my experience, very few tourists want to hear that much science from their guide. Still, armed only with these facts, tour guides often choose to draw from this scientific information to persuade tourists of the glacier's uniqueness, wonder, and educational value to improve the overall tour experience. In practice, I never heard tour guides actually recite the scripted sentences about glacial retreat. And when showing disappointed tourists the glacial tongue, tour guides never pointed to the increased dust or supraglacial debris in relation to anthropogenic climate change which necessarily exacerbates the dust/rock-to-ice ratio, but regularly defended the debris as a natural and necessary feature of monsoon-influenced glaciers that made the glacier's existence possible in the first place, then protected it from more rapid melting. Only tour guides who had been at Hailuoguo long enough to personally witness the glacier's dramatic changes might go off script to incorporate more pessimistic personal observations into their narrations. But many tour guides were only interns staying for a matter of weeks and could have no such frame of reference.

Science in a developmental frame

Facts about Hailuoguo Glacier's typology, ice-making, and (pre-decline) length are not the only facts with which tourists are bombarded during their visit. Equally specific information on a range of natural phenomena effectively becomes background noise by merit of its bewildering omnipresence. Apart from

brochures and informational signage, there is a less escapable informational soundscape. For example, throughout the unavoidable hour-long bus ride from Moxi Town to Ganheba, a video plays on overhead-mounted screens, alternating between destination announcements and a densely fact-packed introduction to the park, accompanied by saccharine music and a slideshow of professionally touched-up photos advancing across the screen. Even after one has disembarked into natural surroundings, a similar experience is rarely far from sight or earshot, disrupting potential moments of quiet. At Camp 4, for instance, there is a decent-sized indoor seating area that sells instant coffee and snacks (if the person at the counter is awake to sell them). An informational video plays on loop there as well, though it competes for attention against a looped recording just outside that announces the offered concessions items in a monotone drawl. I became aware of the video as I was sitting there one idle day and trying to read, only to be distracted, yet again, with the list of minerals found in Hailuogou's hot springs. Part education, part advertisement, the lists and descriptions combine with epithets, honors, and superlatives to communicate Hailuogou as a highly desirable, scientifically certified world-class tourism place. This approach goes back to the very conception of Hailuogou as a commercial site.

Teacher Yuan, the now-retired official introduced in chapter 2, was a key figure in Hailuogou's initial opening for tourism. He told me the story of how he came to recognize Hailuogou's value. He inspected the site on horseback in the early 1980s and did some of his own research. "I discovered," he said, "five things that Hailuogou has, which are truly unparalleled." He enthusiastically recounted to me the site's "five number ones," which he had verified at the time through personal research and presented to the China National Tourism Administration committee for scenic area designations:

1. Hailuogou has the easternmost low-altitude continental monsoon-influenced modern glacier in Asia.⁸⁰
2. Hailuogou has the largest icefall in the world.
3. Hailuogou is the only place in the world that has glaciers, tall mountains, old-growth forest, hot springs—not to mention hot springs of four temperature grades—all in immediate proximity.

⁸⁰ I have translated “海洋性冰川” (ocean-type glacier) as “monsoon-influenced glacier.” In Chinese glaciology, the country's glaciers (all inland, and thus all continental) are further categorized as either “continent-type” or “ocean-type,” indicating whether or not oceanic climate (i.e., monsoon) is a primary influence.

4. Within its geographical scope of 30 kilometers, there is a difference in elevation of 6,500 meters—the largest for any terrestrial location at that distance.
5. Again, from the peak of Mt. Gongga to the mouth of the valley, there is a record total of seven habitat classifications: subtropical monsoon, broadleaf forest, broadleaf/needle-leaved mixed forest, needle-leaved forest, shrub forest, alpine meadow, and alpine tundra.

After the presentation of these facts, however, the central committee had been unimpressed. It was only when Teacher Yuan showed them photography of the site that they changed their minds, and Hailuogou was enshrined as an official scenic area.

As a guide, relating these number-ones during tours had much the same effect. With the possible exception of the world's largest icefall, very few of these “number ones” roll off the tongue or make a strong impression on casual visitors.⁸¹ Perhaps that is why the claims are often simplified in everyday exchanges. I would sometimes hear people (employees or tourists) say that Hailuogou Glacier was the longest glacier in China, or the lowest-altitude glacier in China, neither of which are true—though it may be the lowest-altitude glacier at its particular latitude, or the longest valley glacier in China; these subtler claims are trickier to disprove. In addition, official tourism materials claim that Hailuogou Glacier is the closest glacier to a city (Chengdu), but Qiyi Glacier in Gansu Province, Tianshan Glacier in Xinjiang, and Dagu Glacier in Sichuan all make the same claim, so it at least depends on what is meant by “city,” if not what is meant by “closer” as well. Another highly advertised point is that Hailuogou Glacier is one of the only places in China that tourists can interact with a glacier at “zero distance;” however, due to rockslides destroying the path down from the Old Observation Deck and general glacial instability, this is no longer strictly accurate. (Now, tourists can only touch the glacier by breaking park rules.) Other hyperbolic descriptors are often used to honor the glacier in poetic terms: “ten-thousand-year glacier” and “ten-trillion-year glacier” are common examples. At least some take these descriptors literally, however. I remember tourists being confused and dismayed to read a sign posted at Caohaizi which says Hailuogou Glacier

⁸¹ The title of world's largest icefall has also been attributed elsewhere—Hailuogou may at least have the largest “viewable” icefall (*as claimed in Zhang 2010*).

formed just 1,600 years ago: “Isn’t it a ten-thousand-year glacier?” None of us tour guides were really sure about the timeframe.⁸²

In practice, then, the framing of the glacier and its envelope of a scenic area is something simplistically elongated into the depths of time, but frozen in space: a 30-kilometer span isolated from context and parceled up for quantitative comparison and ranking against any other attraction in the province, nation or world—no matter how qualified those comparisons must be to put Hailuogou in the top spot. The glacier’s value has been defined for years in terms of its world-class size, length, height, and (low) altitude—but these metrics have always been in flux, and are now changing more rapidly than ever, in a way that the loss is most likely unrecoverable. What, then, of the glacier’s most moving quality—its beauty? Unfortunately, as the glacier retreats, it also becomes fragmented and less aesthetically pleasing (Wang and Zhou 2019, 73). When China National Geographic Magazine named Hailuogou among the “top six most beautiful glaciers in China” in 2005, it was taken as a permanent accolade, immortalized in proud signage within the park. But as the glacier shrinks, separates, and grays under an increasing layer of dust and debris, we should know that it will never again look as resplendent as when the prize was named, and older photos displayed in the park are less an index of the glacier we now see than a rhetorical symbol of grandeur. However, when tourists express discontent with the glacial views, most tour guides are only equipped to defend it with memorized information about its classification, formation, geographical position, and various superlatives. They work to solidify the glacier as a constant resource rather than the manifestation of a rapidly changing climate.

Filtering scientific accounts of Hailuogou Glacier through state-run tourism creates a national and commercial object that should be valued for all the ways in which it makes the shortlist of geographical world wonders. Yet this framing fails to impress most tourists in practice, because working against that goal are the dynamic complexities of glacial appearances, the underacknowledged but visually evident

⁸² While glaciers have been carving the Gongga landscape at the scale of millions of years, the valley glacier “Hailuogou” specifically formed 1,600 years ago, according to park signage.

ravages of anthropogenic climate change, consumer suspicion, and the dislocating force of tourism-site production—in addition to exalting the glacier, tourism decontextualizes it for easy commodification and comparison. In practice, Hailuoguo Glacier doesn't “belong” to its local geographical or cultural context so much as it is one item on well-trodden tourism routes, for example, National Highway 318.⁸³ This is the context in which it is valued. In conversation with tourists, the story of the glacier's formation is less moving than the “story” of how Hailuoguo is or isn't better than other highly developed nature tourism destinations in western China. A closer look at the touristic frame helps explain further why only certain scientific information is so prevalent in the tour guide narratives, and why the information is not enlightening or compelling to many tourists.

In/credibility

I have already discussed how scientific research and facts are massively—if selectively—mobilized in the creation of Hailuoguo as a tourist site and creation of Hailuoguo Glacier as a tourism object from the top down. Despite the site's layout and the promotion of scientific knowledge, tourists remain incredulous about the existence of the glacier. In this section I will move from production to the consumption of tourism places across three dimensions: 1) scenic areas as a national genre; 2) commercialization, taste, and class; 3) a smartphone-based social media ecology.

Scenic areas as a national genre

Hailuoguo has a great deal of official designations, but its most pertinent category in everyday practice is that of a “scenic area” (景区, *jingqu*), an officially recognized sightseeing location.⁸⁴ The scenic area is a modern invention, though many sites have longstanding cultural significance or histories as pilgrimage destinations. Nyíri (2006) describes how the first batch of scenic areas (he translates them as

⁸³ Sometimes compared to US Route 66, G318 is the longest and most famous national highway in China, running East-West from Shanghai to the Tibet Autonomous Region. The section from Chengdu to Lhasa is considered particularly beautiful.

⁸⁴ Hailuoguo is also a national geopark, national forest park, national glacier park, and falls within the greater Mt. Gongga National Nature Reserve..

“scenic spots”) were delimited in the 1980s, then heavily commercialized in the 1990s as a top-down modernizing and nation-building project.⁸⁵ Cultural signifiers were effectively standardized and place meanings hardened to resolve ambiguities and give tourists a “shared cultural grammar” for understanding the nation and what it meant to be Chinese (12). As part of this legitimizing work, scenic areas promoted themselves with superlatives or styled themselves as the Eastern or Chinese versions of famous locations in Europe or North America, comparisons meant to imply China’s equal footing if not surpassing of renowned destinations abroad. A digital brochure I received for my 2018 group tour of Hailuoguo, for example, says Moxi is known as “Little Switzerland.” This is also the nickname I was given for Langmusi in Gannan, Gansu Province, when I visited in 2016. One tourist told me that all of western Sichuan is known as “Little Switzerland,” which is interesting considering it is about seven times the size of the European country. This Eurocentrism is complicated, perhaps, by the fact that I also saw promotional material advertising Hailuoguo as a “Little Lijiang.” Lijiang is a popular tourist destination in Yunnan Province, catering both to foreigners and domestic Chinese tourists with its proximity to the official Shangri-la.

Assertions of China’s belonging to an elite world order via comparison to locations in the Global North, but never in the Global South, perpetuate a racialized and developmentalist framing of nature that overvalues European or “whitened” natural resources and cultural framings thereof, reproducing an elite epistemic and aesthetic ordering. Making China’s multiethnic borderlands into scenic areas (i.e., designated tourism sites) naturalizes the singular use of space as *for* affluent leisure, as Cooke, Grimwood, and Richins argue is the case for Canadian ski resorts (2016). Meanwhile, a semi-imported notion of science (科学, *kexue*) is evident in the appraisal and management of scenic areas—not science in the sense of open-ended discovery, but as a system of categorizing facts, reinforcing consensus and, again, signaling [Western] modernity (Hui 1997).

⁸⁵ Though its infrastructure lagged behind until the early 2000s, Hailuoguo may still be considered part of an early wave of scenic-area tourism development, first opening to the public in 1987.

Even as scenic areas designate places of cultural and natural heritage in China, the category connotes a certain level of socioeconomic development, adding a new kind of value. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains heritage as a process of “transvaluation” (1995, 369). Rather than simply identifying and preserving value that is already there, heritage introduces novel framings, tools, and interventions which are themselves vehicles of meaning (375). These instruments are often at odds with the cultural or natural objects they target. In China’s case, the transvaluation involved in scenic area designation can be explicitly developmentalist. A comprehensive system initiated in 1999 officially rates all sites according to on a scale of A to AAAAA (or “5A”) for overall quality. The rating reflects comprehensive quantitative scores for transportation, level of services, safety, cleanliness, telecommunication infrastructure, shopping, management, and environmental protection (AQSIQ 2003). Attractions don’t only apply to become scenic areas, but must work to maintain if not improve their star ratings over time. (Hailuoguo won its bid for 5A status in 2017.) This kind of framing is at odds with a natural object like a glacier, especially when the glacier is obviously declining, rather than “developing.” But because scenic areas are also an argument for national greatness—even national resource security—acknowledging glacial loss would cut against the moral tone of touristification as a win-win model of development.

Although scenic areas like Hailuoguo are often *also* national forest parks or reserves, and in many ways analogous to national (or state) parks in the US, they are separated by scenic areas’ more business-driven model, with intensive branding and marketing, a greater dependence on private capital, and oftentimes extensive services and amenities. Wang et al. explain how parks are expected not only to be self-sufficient but also to support local economic growth, incentivizing commercialization at the expense of conservation goals (2012). Pressures to compete with other sites for profit pattern the framing of nature even as consumers are buffeted with arguments for uniqueness. The proliferation of nature-based parks and scenic areas in China presents a national-scale example of what Richard Wilk refers to as “global systems of common difference” (1995). Responding to Friedman’s (1995) optimistic assertion that a proliferation of local cultural phenomena evidenced a breakdown of global homogeneity, and thus of hegemony, Wilk

argues that although difference is being promoted rather than suppressed, it is “difference of particular kind,” instituting a hegemony “not of content, but of form” (118). Despite the vast variety of sites and local particularity of each, their deliberate crafting and operation as “scenic areas” conditions visitors to approach them as variations of a type. Although some scenic areas also have international designations, such as World Heritage Sites, there is a limit to the “globalization of nature;” Breidenbach and Nyíri (2007) describe how in practice, China’s national framings and domestic demand for modern tourism services tend to supersede pan-human framings and calls for resource preservation.

The scenic area genre and attendant developmentalist discourse conditions visitors to expect Hailuoguo will be analogous to other 5A scenic areas, especially others in the Tibetan tourscape. This is the country’s vast tourism resource of repurposed (and sometimes forcibly emptied) nomadic lands. In my experience, and according to other guides, tourists compared Hailuoguo to Jiuzhaigou most frequently. Jiuzhaigou National Park is enthroned along with the archaeological site Sanxingdui and the Giant Panda as “*san-jiu-da*” (三九大)—the key tourism assets of Sichuan Province. Jiuzhaigou is most famous for its incredibly clear waters, with waterfalls and brilliant lakes of different hues accented strikingly by forested landscapes of any season. In the modern Chinese tourism imaginary, Jiuzhaigou is perhaps *the* pinnacle of natural beauty. Although 5A ratings are based on the built and managed aspects of the site rather than aesthetics, there’s only the single rating to set a tourist’s expectations for everything, and it is unsurprising that tourists expect 5A sites to have the most attractive landscapes as well as the best amenities. Both the system itself and tourists’ continued use of site ratings as reference points perpetuate a developmental framing of place value—objective, quantifiable, and improving over time. These expectations are evident in the following exchange I had with a young tourist couple:

“There’s no attractive scenery here,” Lan Ruoqin said, directing this comment at me as if inviting a response, maybe an argument. “I really kind of regret it. Now that I’ve come I don’t want to come again,” the young woman said.

I then asked which scenic areas in Sichuan they thought were particularly fun or attractive. She and her significant other Ruan Yaojie, a tourism government official in Chengdu, thought for a moment. “Daocheng Yading,” she said.

“And Jiuzhaigou,” he added. “Right now, at this time of year, those places are really beautiful.” He then returned to the critique of Hailuogou: “How is this a 5A area? The government must have just *given* that to them. Not only is the scenery unattractive, but there isn’t anything to *do*.”

“Well, opening a scenic area takes a long time,” Ruoqin finally granted, vaguely gesturing to some construction work currently underway on the very path we were on—as though someday Hailuogou might transform from an ugly duckling into a beautiful, entertaining swan.

As we finally reached the Camp 3 bus stop and sat down to wait, Yaojie said to me, “Then *you* must be *really* bored here. Every day seeing the same thing...”

I said, “Not really. If you pay attention, you notice every day something is a little different.” But he seemed dismissive of what I was trying to express about the landscape. It was like he didn’t want to hear it. Like many times throughout the day, my comment hung in the air, the conversation stalled.

Finally he said, “Well, you can meet different people.”

Ruoqin’s complaints target both the landscape aesthetic and the entertainment value of the site, specifically in reference to expectations set by its 5A rating—and Yaojie doesn’t contradict her, even though as an official, he has an insider’s view into culture and tourism governance. Ruoqin assumed that a scenic area of the highest level would offer objectively thrilling views and amusements. Indeed, popular additions to Chinese nature parks nowadays include entertainment options such as glass-bottom bridges or ziplines, but Hailuogou in 2019 was still working on laying down walkways and roads.

Some argue that the hegemony of the scenic area is waning, if it was ever real to begin with. Geographer Klingberg writes: “Nyíri’s account got China’s tourists wrong because it lumped visitors to scenic spots into a single, homogenized subjectivity” (2014b, 111). True enough, the state’s intention to order all space into harmonious legibility has never been actualized. Today, Chinese tourism academics and developers tend to agree that the scenic area model, like organized group travel, is outdated. The new focus in tourism development is on deepening, diversifying, and personalizing tourism content and products, catering to demand for more exclusive, individualized travel experiences. Tourists, meanwhile, find ways to actively and passively resist given place narratives. The scenic area genre does not fit well with the burgeoning spirit of exploration Klingberg describes in his dissertation, the exact spirit that is drawing so many tourists to the Tibetan tourscape in particular. The rise of “self-driving” tourism (自驾游, *zijiayou*) in particular is affecting the way that Chinese tourists think about the meaning of travel and the value of

space. Several tourists told me how in western China (or on the way to Tibet), “all the good scenery is on the road.” Scenic areas, which tourists associate with the old mode of passive, highly structured mass tourism (“get on the bus to sleep, get off the bus to pee, arrive at the scenic site to snap a photo”), are devalued in this emerging context. Still, independent tourists continue to patronize scenic areas. Out of a sample of 526 Hailuoguo tourists surveyed in 2019, only 50 reported coming with a tour booked through a tourist agency or through their workplace, while 98 reported they were self-organizing (i.e., making an itinerary and booking transportation and lodging on their own), and an additional 361 were self-driving as well.

The scenic area genre—if partial and contested—remains hegemonic in two senses. First of all, today’s young adult to middle-aged tourists are a generation that grew up going to (or hearing about) scenic areas like Jiuzhaigou throughout their childhood. If now they are rejecting formulaic place narratives and modes of travel, they do so within an overarching system—and mindset—informed by the scenic area model. Scenic areas are well-entrenched and inescapable by their sheer ubiquity. While many desire experiences “off the beaten path,” in 2019 it was not necessarily easy to find a hiking or camping spot that was not commercially developed on the one hand, yet not excessively dangerous or trashed due to a complete lack of services on the other. And when it comes to viewing the country’s most renowned natural heritage, there is often no choice but to pay the entrance fee, ride the bus, and stand in line to ride the cable car. Many tourists I guided at Hailuoguo commented on the inescapability of “Chinese-style tourism” (which they primarily associated with standing in lines for an attraction). For destinations like Hailuoguo, it is hard to imagine going back to a more exclusive, lower-volume mode of tourism based on horseback riding with local guides. Even those who critique Hailuoguo as a tourism product tend to see the solutions in *more*, not less, development—for example, Wang Fangmei’s suggestion that the scenic area would improve from installing informational LED screens around the park (chapter 2).

Second, despite its huge volume and massive growth, tourism in China remains a middle-to-upper-class activity. Even among the moderately to lucratively employed, it’s rare that a job allows the flexibility

or time off to plan and undertake long trips. Hailuoguo is close enough to Chengdu for a weekend trip, but still many of the tourists I guided represented the flexibly employed, executives, retirees, housewives, college students, inexplicably non-working adults, or coworkers on a work-organized trip. As more people are joining the ranks of the middle class or retiring and are finally able to enjoy some non-local tourism, they too will still start by going to China's famous scenic areas because this is the safest and easiest, most streamlined option. Focusing only on young counter-culturists or the well-traveled upper class who eschew scenic areas for intensive trekking experiences or private resorts ignores the still-majority experience of the relatively untraveled swath of the population, the people who look forward to their own chance to stand in line and see scenic area-enshrined views. This brings me to the second dimension of the touristic frame—the negotiation of class.

Commercialization, taste, and class

Tourism has been thoroughly analyzed as a classed activity of “conspicuous leisure” (Veblen 2008; MacCannell 1999). Although expressions of class standing among tourists in my study were rarely explicit, the near-constant complaints, comparisons, and contestations regarding the natural scenery more often seemed to be socially oriented than they were about the landscape itself. Tourists—whether traveling together or meeting one another in the scenic area for the first time—pit their experience against one another, swapped facts, demonstrated their tourism knowledge and capabilities, and even engaged in arguments about what was a glacier or what was beautiful. In the constant social play, the natural scenery at hand was a tool either for bonding with the like-minded or making a distinction between oneself and some other, whether playfully or seriously. I was a participant to some degree, but found I had little authority despite my affiliations and educational capital. As an outsider, my views—or assumed views—about Chinese places were easily dismissed, as though I didn't know how to read the landscape correctly. At times I even inspired pity in others for my plans to stay and research Hailuoguo for an entire year or more. Many tourists told me I needed to go somewhere else (oftentimes their own home city or province), a look in their eyes like *She really doesn't know!* When I did find a like-minded person, there was a relief and greater ease in

our communication simply because I felt like we were actually seeing the same place, taking a similar joy in the natural surroundings. Even as I connect taste to class in analysis, then, it should be remembered that these experiences of landscape and expressions of aesthetic value were genuine and personally meaningful.

Quick comparisons or evaluations (positive or negative) of Hailuogou Glacier or the general scenery were a means for tourists to assert their taste and thus their cultural capital against less traveled, less discerning place-consumers. This manifested in two “ideal types.” The first generally comprises tourism workers as well as some of the higher class, perhaps “most cosmopolitan” tourists (for example, those who had been abroad) who would critique [other] tourists’ inability to appreciate Hailuogou. To them, the inability to recognize beauty demonstrated a lack of *suzhi*. Such critique is not meant to be as harsh as it sounds in translation. They saw inexperienced, lower-class tourists as not knowing any better, as in-the-wrong but not personally to blame for throwing litter, smoking within the park, or calling the glacier ugly. Often, the tourists who *were* able to find beauty and draw inspiration from the scenery explicitly stated they were “different from other tourists,” “more like foreign tourists,” or “on a different level than most people.”

The second and more common ideal type comprises tourists who used negative comparisons or evaluations of Hailuogou to demonstrate their knowledge and experience in tourism. Their complaints tended to be short and lack detailed content: the glacier is “dirty”; the scenery is “not attractive.” They did not dwell on the glacier’s *in situ* context but contextualized it by comparison against tourism products elsewhere. Once in a while a tourist would have expertise on glaciers or Hailuogou and would try to educate other tourists nearby. But most tourists lacked local or specialized expertise, relying instead on general knowledge of the regional tourscape to assert authority. When I was guiding tourists who disapproved of Hailuogou’s scenery, I would find myself drawn into a defensive position—structured by my affiliation/role as a tour guide, and, either incidentally or by my class, as someone who enjoyed the scenery. Tourists effectively dismissed my aesthetic tastes as uninformed or provincial by asking if I had ever been to Jiuzhaigou, Daocheng Yading, Meili Snow Mountain, etc. (which I had not).

Simplistic differentiation by aesthetic tastes underscores the extreme difficulty of perceiving Hailuogou's scenery outside of a (classist, developmentalist, site-bound) touristic context. Chinese tourists are not necessarily accepting the place values they are fed on-site—on the contrary, they seem predisposed to ignore or reject many of them—but they, like “the state” in Nyíri's analysis, are mobilizing places as a way to understand or signal social class, personal development, and belonging to cosmopolitan communities of travel. As for their contrarian disposition, I believe the general cost and constant points of sale within the scenic area reinforce a commercial, class-conscious tourist positionality, increasing wariness of being cheated, rather than encouraging an “explorational” openness to many potential experiences.⁸⁶ On the one hand, the 5A rating, level of infrastructure, shopping opportunities, presence of crowds/lines, and money spent on tickets builds expectations that Hailuogou, and especially its centerpiece Hailuogou Glacier, will be fun, beautiful, interesting, and valuable—creating a framing that facilitates something similar to Urry's “tourist gaze” (1990). As one tourist cheerfully remarked upon being told she'd need to buy a cable car ticket: “If you want to see the good stuff, you have to pay; if you don't pay, you won't see the good stuff.” On the other hand, some tourists have the *opposite* response to all the hype. In promising an incredible glacier, the scenic area builds rivaling expectations among tourists that they are being set up to be cheated. When they see the glacier covered in dust and rocks, and notice tourism marketing showing the glacier thickly draped in pure white snow, their wariness of deception comes to feel fully justified. Thus, it is partly the commodification itself, but partly the unfulfilled implicit promises carried with the high rating and high level of commercialization that trigger tourist disgruntlement.

Smartphones and experience

The third dimension of the touristic framing is that which I have already covered in the previous chapter, regarding the major role played by smartphone-based digital photography in landscape perception.

⁸⁶ Even without extras (food, souvenirs, clothing rentals or tour guides), it cost about USD 50 per person to navigate Hailuogou's attractions in 2019.

Here I briefly review how contemporary camera phone technology mediates perception in real-time for the specific tourism setting.

Artist and art theorist Joan Fontcuberta (2014) describes how analog photography is dictated by time in a way that digital photography is not. With digitization, there is no longer a wait for the photo to develop, no wondering what it will look like or how it turned out. To him, digitization leads to a sense of loss—there is no longer that period of anticipation between capture and reveal where one may wonder and dwell in a “promise of happiness” (37). Rapid socioeconomic development and a certain techno-optimism in China, however, mean that fewer people have much experience with, or bear nostalgia for, film photography. Here especially, the speed of digital photographic production feels right. If there is a promise of happiness in smartphone photography, it is placed on anticipated likes and the aesthetic capital gained after one has shared their images on social media. But in the moment, a different kind of joy takes hold. It is the simple joy of living with, and perceiving beauty through, the smartphone. The real-time mediation of the imaging device puts frames on momentary experience, allowing simultaneous existence in a magical, more artistic virtual space.

The easy personalizability and creativity of smartphone-based digital photography blurs visual consumption and production in tourist experience, while making photography more central than ever. Taking and viewing photos is an ongoing back-and-forth that together comes to dictate the flow of activity on tour, rather than the flow of the tour dictating certain points for photography. This is freeing compared to the rigid canon of sacralized sites and site meanings described by Nyíri, but it also intensifies disengagement with the wider environmental context and shifting materialities of place in favor of their convertibility into personal capital and momentary pleasure. Walking with tourists through Hailuoguo, and even participating in urban leisure activities in Chengdu, I observed how people fixated on their screens. They would evaluate the images as they appeared there rather than through the window of the cable car, or simply out there in the air. This behavior seemed spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious. Like putting on a pair of glasses, it was as though they needed their phones to see what the scenery “really” looked like. It

marks a transposing of the virtual and the real. Photography activity in material space was *really* oriented toward a virtual space, an image-world that held more personal value and had a greater social effect.

Landscapes perceived as unamenable to photography were therefore further devalued because they offered no conceivable real-time enjoyment, either. One day after guiding a group to the glacial moraine lake Caohaizi, fellow tour guide Ke Ya pointed out which platform had the best view. The group walked onto it to look at the lake but then immediately turned around and headed on towards the bus stop. “I feel like there’s nothing to photograph there,” one of the men commented as he walked away. Not only did Caohaizi deny him the pleasure of having an attractive photograph, it denied him the pleasure of creating and viewing something beautiful in the moment. It was taken for granted that if you couldn’t play with it in the virtual image realm, there could be no other purpose in looking at a lake. On the other hand, the funhouse-esque “Glacier Experience Hall” located near Chengmendong rarely disappointed because every bit of it—the floor painted to look like sea ice, the oversized stuffed red panda prop—persuaded anyone in that space toward silly photographic practices that were inevitably fun in the moment.

Just like at Caohaizi, many tourists were explicit in their disappointment with the actual glacier, especially at its terminus (Chengmendong). This is where the glacial stream emerges from beneath the glacier and where glacial melting is most dramatic. It is an unstable zone that tourists are not supposed to hike all the way out to, but if no one is actively crowd-controlling, many tourists will break the rules to get close to, onto, or into the glacier. The clean inner walls of the glacial cave in particular glow an alluring blue, but here is especially dangerous; the ice cave collapses at least once every season. Still, tourism workers and professional photographers working for or with Hailuoguo will often go to the cave to take stunning photos and videos that then circulate on official and social media channels. As many potential tourists now select their destinations based on Douyin videos, they are quite possibly setting themselves up to feel cheated once again when they find they are not allowed in the glacial cave—or find that it already looks totally different than in a recent video, due to melting and collapse.

Much like the Glacier Experience Hall that depicts a cartoony polar landscape, many photographs of the glacier promoted through official channels play into the tourism imaginary because they are taken after snowfall. Sometimes the entire landscape is bathed in white, while other times the snow only clings to the surface of the glacier (and its debris cover). Draped in snow, the glacier is less visible than ever, but tourists tend to be highly pleased with the pure aesthetics. On the other hand, tourists who see these winter photos but visit in the summer easily feel cheated, because they think the glacier is a seasonal phenomenon and they didn't come at the right time. In either season, rather than wondering about what lay beneath the surface of the object, the touristic framing of the glacier and desire for virtual play quickly led to a conclusion about the entertainment value of the site (and whether or not it is a rip-off) rather than anything about environmental context or climate process.



Figure 34: Promotional photo taken at Chengmendong. The glacier terminus is in the background. The characters say, “The lowest-altitude glacier in the world—Hailuoguo 2850m.” However, not only is Hailuoguo not the lowest-altitude glacier in the world, or even in China (Mingyong Glacier reportedly extends to 2700 meters), it has not been as low as 2850 meters for decades. Summertime tourists are more likely to feel “cheated,” however, by the seeming whiteness of the glacier in this photo. Its debris and dust are covered by snow.) Source: Hailuoguo Scenic Area Administration WeChat account. January 2022

The precarity of haptic glacial interactions

Is it possible to find greater joy in the moment by setting the phone aside or engaging with the glacier in a more multisensory manner? The rule-breaking tourists who explore Chengmendong often do seem entranced as they walk among the strange glacial formations and press their hands against them. At the point of physical contact, there is no longer any doubt over whether it is ice or not. The shock of cold and physical connection to something much larger than oneself offers at least a brief reprieve from the tug to produce potential social media content. Tourists I accompanied into the area have described the experience as “magical.” But as the glacier destabilizes, these experiences are increasingly hazardous. Some tourism workers turn a blind eye or even encourage tourists to touch the glacier, while others try to stop the tourists from putting themselves in danger. One park worker criticized tourists for touching the glacier, claiming that it exacerbates melting. Once again, the real issue—global anthropogenic climate change—is ignored in favor of localized explanations that feel more in line with the touristic frame (low-suzhi tourists misbehaving within the boundaries of the site). As melting accelerates and the glacier becomes more unstable, enforcement of the safe viewing boundaries will surely strengthen. Already the workers who once specialized in guiding tourists out onto the glacier’s surface from the Old Observation Deck have lost their livelihoods. Hailuoguo Glacier will become a purely visual experience, and tourists will only be able to watch from a distance as it fades away. Will they connect this (dis)appearance to climate change? Below I share the experience of one tourist who acknowledges the reality of climate change but not as the main reason for the dramatic changes she observes at Hailuoguo.

Guo Xinyi moved to Chengdu in 2013, where I met her in August 2020. An avid traveler (though mostly international), she has visited Hailuoguo two times—first in 2016, then in 2020. The glacier left her with dramatically different impressions on each visit. In the summer of 2016, she remembered hiking to the Old Observation Deck and getting a view of the whole glacier, then hiking down to its surface. She was struck by the size of the glacier, which seemed to fill up the entire valley. And though it looked gray from a distance, as she got closer, its spectrum of white and blue hues became clearer and more enchanting. She

struggled somewhat to define the amazement she had felt during her close encounter with the glacier, walking on it, touching it with her hands: “It’s like you’re seeing some huge historical thing, and it makes you feel like you’re small. You’re shocked by its beauty, and how it’s lasted for so many, many years.” But when she returned in 2020, it looked like an entirely different place. “The valley was so much smaller, so much narrower, and the glacier looked completely different,” she said, “small and gray.” When she asked a worker if the hiking path down to the glacier was still open, she was told no. In way of an explanation, she was told that the earthquake in December 2019 had caused the destruction. Considering the stark contrast between the Hailuoguo of her not-too-distant memory and the one before her eyes, this had been a convincing explanation. When I asked if it might have been climate change, Xinyi agreed it was a contributing factor: “I mean, climate change is all the time. But that change is actually very slowly destroying the glacier. The biggest change is because of the earthquake. Of course they say the glacier is smaller than before, because of global warming, but you can’t see that change. Before the earthquake it was getting smaller every year, slowly, slowly, but after the earthquake, people say it will disappear soon.”

I wasn’t in Sichuan during the level 5.2 earthquake Xinyi mentioned, but the epicenter was in Neijiang, which is southeast of Chengdu, rather than southwest like Hailuoguo. Moreover, I had been in Hailuoguo soon before and soon after that event. No one had ever mentioned any destructive change in the time I’d been gone. It is possible, I think, that tremors triggered some minor rockslides. But there’s no conceivable way it could have reconfigured the size of the valley, or in an instant, disappeared a huge portion of the glacier. I am also unsure why a park worker would have come up with this excuse for the path’s closure (it had actually been closed since late Spring 2019, and the path was already seriously damaged on my very first visit in December 2018). Perhaps it was just an easy excuse, and believable enough considering Jiuzhaigou was closed that year for precisely earthquake-related reasons. Or it may be

easier to attach one's disappointment and sense of loss to the tragedy of a singular event than to accept that the larger tragedy is the one unfolding day by day.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Hailuoguo Glacier is the physical and thematic center of Hailuoguo Glacier Forest National Park and Scenic Area, but tourists have a difficult time finding, recognizing, and appreciating it. As one park officer told me, this is because it doesn't look like the tourists expect. Mainly they are thrown off by the supraglacial debris. Informational signs, videos, and park employees are widely available to point out the glacier and interpret its appearance, yet the assemblage of facts fails to form a persuasive narrative of value. Even though the tourism site has objectified and enshrined the glacier as "beautiful," a lot of tourists don't buy it. Rather than a place where the public is educated about glaciers and climate change, Hailuoguo becomes a site for expressing and negotiating consumer positionalities and class distinctions. Both those who do and do not find beauty at Hailuoguo utilize the glacier and other natural objects to claim aesthetic capital and to understand their place in an assumedly ever-progressing society, rather than to reflect on the (now very troubling) state of human-environmental relations. A photographic mode of visibility, meanwhile, alienates tourists from the full sensuality and materiality of the environment in which they are embedded, refocusing their desires on interactions between themselves and their phones. Sometimes, when tourists get close enough to walk among the glacier's odd formations, to touch the glacier at "zero distance," unscripted and technically forbidden, they have an unexpected response of awe—despite the rock-covered glacier's incongruity with their idealized preconceptions. Here is a victory for the glacier's value in a touristic context only; there is still a major disconnect between the scientific narrative of climate change and emotional reality on the ground. Even if one of those moved tourists comes back years later and sees the dramatic

⁸⁷ On September 5, 2022, Moxi was struck by a 6.7-magnitude earthquake. The epicenter located right between Moxi Town and Hailuoguo. It damaged many buildings and roads, triggered rockslides, and resulted in nearly 100 confirmed deaths. The tremors were felt strongly even in Chengdu, causing people to flee buildings (though some were warned to stay inside for reasons of pandemic control). Hailuoguo happened to be closed to tourists at the time due to a COVID-19 outbreak in the province, which certainly minimized losses. According to a Sina news report (Jiang 2023), major reconstruction projects are expecting completion by September 30, 2023.

changes in Hailuoguo Glacier with their own eyes, they might not connect it to climate change. There are a lot of earthquakes and rockslides in this area—always something to explain the change away without facing up to the catastrophe our collective development is deepening each day.

In the Anthropocene, the weight of reality crashes down upon us. But we often feel and explain that pressure in ways that refute our intellectual or scientific understandings of its workings. How do people actually value a glacier, and mobilize its meaning, as it melts away? At Hailuoguo, where climate change is not denied but rarely engaged with, reality is still breaking through. As the glacier thins and retreats, the rate of melting only increases; every year the glacier will look less and less like its photos from the year before. One may think it will be increasingly difficult to construct narratives of progress and national greatness—or of distinct natural objects separate from global processes and our shared fate—but it is amazing how people will gladly deny what is right before their eyes.

***Interlude 5.
The Glacial Rainforest***



Figure 35: On the Rainforest Hiking Trail in spring. Source: photo by author. April 14, 2019

After returning to Camp 3, there's one more area of the park that tourists may hike through. Starting near the Camp 3 bus stop, a path winds through conifer and broad-leaved mixed forest for 3.6 kilometers to the park's final operating bus stop at Caohaizi (2,850 m). This "Glacial Rainforest" path is longer than the Challenge Hiking Path, but with fewer stairs. It also tends to be quieter (no looping advertisements or canned music in earshot), and, with its stone paths and its wooden bridges, feels much more organic than the areas of the park with the new metal walkways.

This pocket of Hailuoguo fits the definition of temperate rainforest for its evergreen vegetation, thick canopy, high moisture, high precipitation, and low average annual temperature (between 4 and 5°C). The Hailuoguo meteorological station (at 3,000 m) recorded an average annual precipitation of 195 cm between 1988 and 2010, compared to an average annual precipitation of 105 cm in Moxi Town (1,600 m)

over a similar period (Wu, Li, Zhou, and Cao 2013).⁸⁸ Thomas refers to the forested zone east of Mt. Gongga between 2,600 and 3,100 meters as an “upper montane rain forest or ‘cloud forest,’” a type typically found near oceans (1999, 23). Like their oceanside counterparts, Hailuogou’s rainforests have higher total environmental moisture than can be accounted for by precipitation alone. This suggests that atmospheric cloud cover and soil moisture are important factors in this ecosystem, both of which are likely to change as nearby glaciers retreat and air temperatures rise.

From the first time I enter the glacial rainforest, it gives me an ominous but not unpleasant feeling. The trees near the beginning of the path are spread out more widely than those around Ganheba, but just as amazingly tall. The ground is flat, with natural shallow terraces sometimes holding pools of water. Everything is covered in moss. It makes it feel like I am stepping into a great, living hall, and the human scale feels tiny and insignificant. Further on, the forest grows denser, crowding the path, sometimes forcing hikers to go single file. Tree roots and branches do unexpected things—reaching out, wrapping around, entangling, growing in all directions. For half of the year, the color palette here is subdued as if all painted in a gray-brown wash, but in the summer it is a kaleidoscope of ever-more-intense greens. This is the part of Hailuogou where I would sometimes imagine what it might be like to be here after dark—and shiver at the thought.

⁸⁸ Data is sparse for the period prior to 1988. Both temperature and precipitation fluctuate year-to-year; however, while temperature has increased over time, precipitation exhibited a slight decreasing trend until 2009, after which it began to increase (Yagoub et al. 2018).

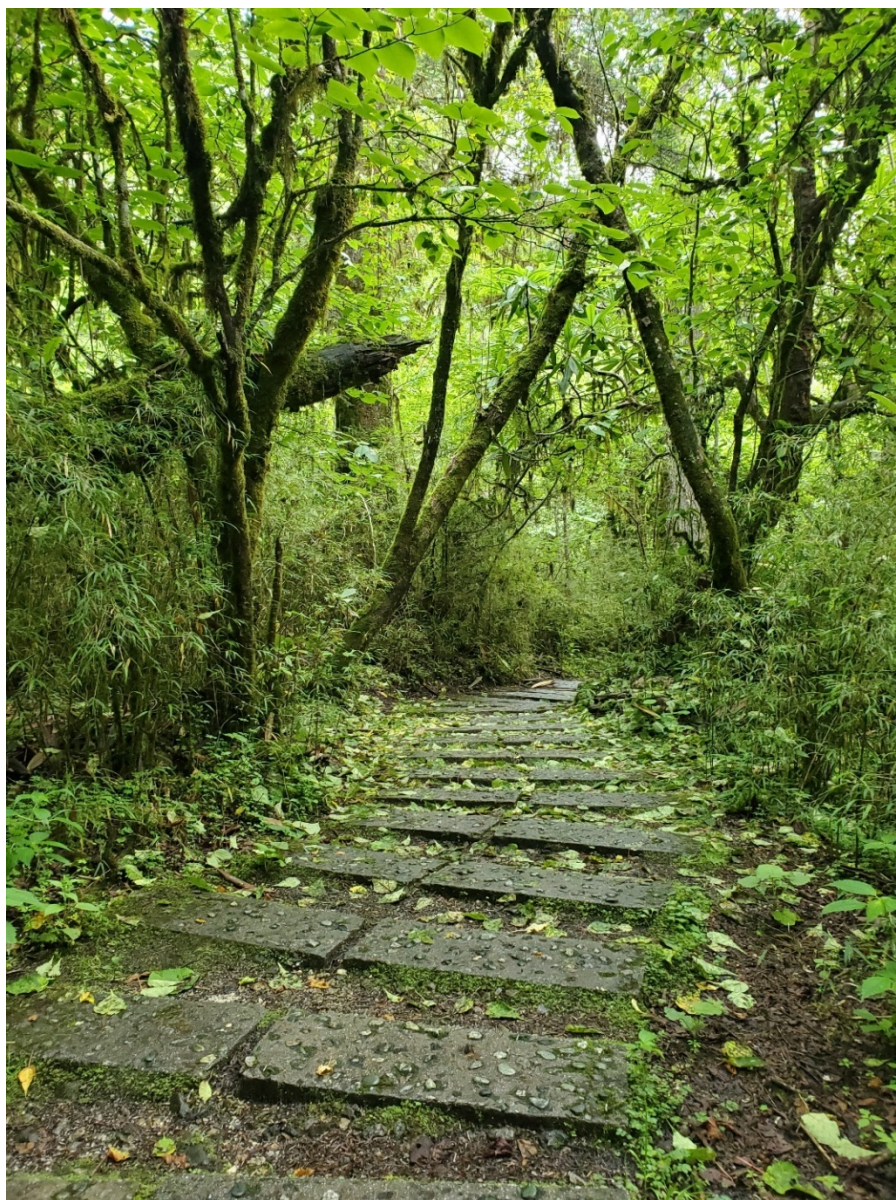


Figure 36: On the Rainforest Hiking Trail in summer. Source: photo by author. June 19, 2019

It's late September. Ke Ya—the tour guide I partner with most often—has asked me if I'd like to join her group of eight today. There are two young couples, one of said couples' eight-month-old baby, the baby's grandmother, another young woman, and a young man with a large camera and moderate-sized hiking backpack (whom I soon learn is their private guide). When we first meet up in the morning, I ask one of the younger women where they're from, and she says: "Chengdu. But also, Shenzhen. From all over." The whole group feels a little off, actually, as if they're not even that familiar with one another, and they

don't respond to any of Ke Ya's explanations, despite having hired her (presumably) to impart Hailuogou-specific knowledge. Only their *other* tour guide, Li Liangxiang, is quite talkative. He's in his late 20s but has already accumulated a great deal of experience hiking, rock-climbing, and guiding groups across western China's Tibetan areas. (Deeply impressed by the culture as well, he has a Tibetan tattoo on his arm.) Liangxiang is originally from rural east China and began traveling after college. Slowly he found a way to turn his passion into his career. He's not prioritizing job stability, or getting wealthy. "What's most important is freedom," he says.

After seeing Camp 4 and lunching at Camp 3, some members of the group want to return to Moxi Town, but others are interested in more hiking, encouraged by Liangxiang. "I feel like if they don't see a little more, it will have been a waste of a trip," he says. Thus, half of us begin the hike from Camp 3 to Caohaizi, a small moraine lake.

At first the group seems to be enjoying the natural surroundings and stone path. "This place really has a feel to it," one comments. "I like this kind of path," says another. But the ratio of critical to appreciative commentary grows as the journey progresses. Pooled water in the forest is immediately critiqued as "dirty" and negatively compared to the waters at Jiuzhaigou. A little later, one of the girls in the group laments, "This place just can't excite me," again in comparison to Jiuzhaigou.

Into the second half of the hike, there's a small, covered area on the path with benches, a glass ceiling, butterfly-themed décor and informational signage. At first glance there appear to be actual butterfly specimens preserved in the glass, which catches Liangxiang's eye. But then he realizes they're just stickers, many now peeling off or faded from time out in the elements. "Fake butterflies," he observes, both disappointed and amused.

Caohaizi (literally "Grass Lake"), and honestly more of a wetlands than a lake, lies at the end of the hiking path. At 2,850 meters' elevation, it marks a former site of Hailuogou glacier's terminus. The view here turns out to be especially disappointing for today's group.

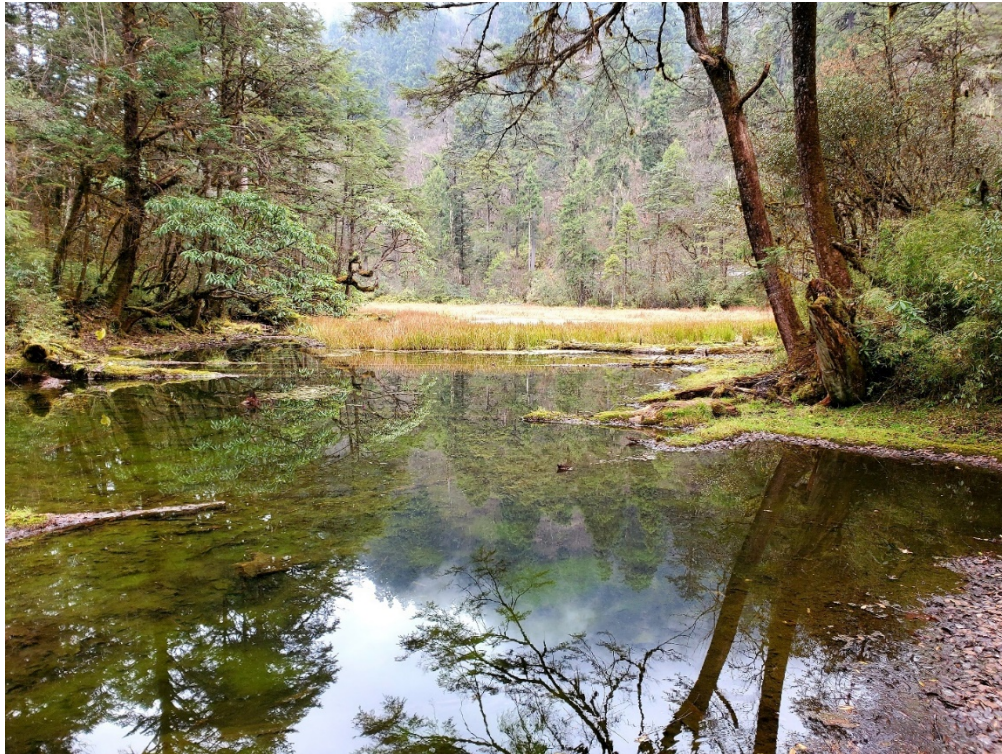


Figure 37: Caohaizi. Source: Photo by author. November 17, 2019

“What’s that murky stuff on top of the lake?” one of them asks.

“Pollution,” says Liangxiang. (I am confident that it is not.)

Everyone continues out of the forest to wait at the Caohaizi bus stop, declining to view the lake from any of its other platforms. “Bye-bye, Hailuogou. I won’t come again,” says Liangxiang. The others agree wholeheartedly. “I’ve discovered,” he says, “scenic areas that charge an entrance fee *aren’t* that beautiful, but the free ones really *are* beautiful.”

“All fabricated”

A couple months into my tour guiding stint, I decide I should collect more local stories about the glacier, and about Mt. Gongga. Most of what I hear or have gathered from the other tour guides and written tourism materials has to do with their quantitative and scientific aspects, but signs and the official script also make mention of local legends—the origin of Hailuogou’s name, for example, or the religious

significance of the red rocks. On the other hand, no one *really talks about* these things. Instead, I once see a Hailuogou Administration employee trying to memorize the scientific names of the park's different trees in preparation to guide an important delegation of outside officials.

One day I'm assisting another worker from a different department to do some promotional work in the park. At the end of the day, we're at one of the park's bus stops, sitting and waiting for the next trip down the mountain. As we chat, I tell her that I'm interested in the cultural stories of Hailuogou's natural features.

She thinks for a moment before telling me, "But... the stories here are all fabricated." She explains how the previous director of the administration had been very active in making sure that each attraction in the park had a story to go along with it.

I'm a bit incredulous. "He made up these stories himself?"

"No," she says, "but he at least assigned the tasks to different departments, allocating the fabrication work throughout the administration." I ask for an example. "Like Crescent Moon Lake. Actually, it's a man-made lake. But the former director wanted to come up with a story to make sure it seemed like it was a natural feature... All these stories are already set down. It's all in the tour guide script."

The descent

After talking to Officer Hong at Camp 3 that August day, I decide I've done enough and head to the Camp 3 bus stop. By coincidence, I encounter an elderly man who had added me on Weixin earlier in the day. We sit next to one another and chat on the ride down. His name is Xu Yuze, and he's a retired professor of medicine from Fujian Province. He asks me politely about my research and where I'm from (*Chicago! I've been there*, he recalls) before diving right into more personal topics. It turns out Teacher Xu is a third-generation Christian. His grandfather originally came into contact with Christianity from foreign missionaries. That's also where his grandfather learned doctoring, a profession that likewise became a three-generation trend.

Teacher Xu shows me some photos he took of flowers in the park today. “I’m a pursuer of beauty,” he explains. Even though it was a foggy day, he seems upbeat about it, saying that the fog itself was beautiful, just in a different way than sunny weather. Indeed, his photos of the mist and trees are quite captivating, eerie in my opinion, accentuating the ancient woods’ more mysterious features. He searches through his digital albums to a picture he’d taken of the Chicago skyline. “This is man-made... it’s very beautiful.” He flips to another photo, of Niagara Falls. “But *this* is made by God. It’s *more* beautiful. [The kind of beauty] is very different.”

Now 70 years old, Teacher Xu travels frequently. Sometimes he travels by himself, but sometimes (like today) he goes with an organized tour group. There are 46 members in his group today, including a colleague of his. “Tourism in other countries is more standardized, not so messy as in China,” he says. “Traveling in China is exhausting. Like on this trip.” They’d already gone to Daocheng Yading, and would be on their way back to Chengdu today. “Last night we didn’t get to our hotel until 10:30. We came through Luding to get here, but it was already dark and there wasn’t time to see anything. We’re going to pass through it again today to make up for it. But this morning we had to get up at 7:00 again. The management in China just isn’t good. The scenery is so beautiful, but it’s not managed well.” He concedes that there’s not much that can be done in certain places, like western Sichuan, that are still so wild and expansive. Then he lowers his voice to tell me that, “also, there are tours at different prices that are really just the same tour. The one I’m on costs 1,200 yuan. But there’s also 2,000-yuan, even 2,400-yuan tours, that are all identical.”

Teacher Xu tells me more about his travel philosophy, his religious views, and even offers me relationship advice. “I bet you don’t meet many people like me,” he guesses. “And I realize I’m talking about a lot of deep topics. Other people just talk about this and that—” (he gestures around as if pointing to material items right in front of us) “it’s pretty meaningless. All the tour groups I join, people really like me. Because they can feel my compassion. And people who know me, who talk to me, they can tell that I’m rather high-level.”

After an hour of conversation, we disembark at the bus terminal in Moxi Town. Teacher Xu and I warmly part ways.

Xu Yuze was not the only one I encountered to explicitly state that he was set apart on a different level because of the things that he talked about and the value that he found in his surroundings. He is likely one of those tourists whom Shu Cen would deem to have “high suzhi.” Surreal mist slowly drifting through Hailuogou’s landscape appeared not as deceptive and obscuring, bad weather, or bad luck to Teacher Xu, but as a different sort of emergent beauty. It not only reflected his inner qualities back upon him; it created a stark contrast with the messy hurriedness of the mismanaged group tour. And while he attributed his appreciation of nature to his Christian faith, I feel the influence of Chinese philosophical traditions, where human and nature are harmonized rather than opposed, and the perception of the landscape is a cultivated practice—not learning to see a uniform material reality, but shared spiritual and ethical principles. As Sofield and Li put it: “When Western tourists look at the Yangtze, they see a river; the Chinese see a poem replete with philosophical ideals” (1998, 367).

However, this romanticizing of a philosophical Chinese gaze upon Hailuogou is simplistic. It is complicated, for one, by the sheer novelty of viewing Hailuogou through the national frame as a Chinese place. Unlike the Yangtze River, Hailuogou is outside of the historical canon of sacred Chinese sites and poetry inspiration. It does not resonate in the same way. Chinese seem to imagine that before development, Hailuogou was just empty, acultural wilderness, which the undeveloped tourism sites in its vicinity remain.⁸⁹ In a (perhaps half-hearted) attempt to clothe Hailuogou’s nature with culture, adding value and improving tourist appreciation, the local administration even had cultural stories made up. Whether or not they are *all* made up is difficult to verify; in any case, neither employees nor other local residents find these stories compelling or worth sharing. It is no wonder, then, that visitors come away with a reinforced sense of “no history” and “no culture,” left only to rate the area as a commercial product, health resource, social

⁸⁹ Even Jiuzhaigou, wildly popular and so highly regarded for its natural beauty, is a “newly discovered beautiful landscape” and therefore “denigrated for [its] lack of culture,” according to research by Rupf et al. (2019, 305).

media backdrop, or by its ability to impart a masculinist sense of domination over nature. Without faith in, or appreciation for, any cultural value to be found in Hailuoguo, the administration continues with its scientific and commercial cataloguing of facts, with the glacier objectified as centerpiece, and finds ways to develop tourist experience around the limits of conservation.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Summary

This ethnography demonstrates the multiplicity, mobility, and (often disappointing) experience of place, and the frames involved in guiding and limiting affective experience. I suggest frames as a necessary theoretical complement to both “place-events” and “tourist gaze(s).” The former reproduces or ignores an experientially meaningful space-place dichotomy that can only be understood through a consideration of politics. Based in a Foucauldian model, the latter implies that the tourist (or sometimes, the local) is an isolated and empowered figure who commands control of the visual field. Appreciating that sensory perception is mediated, we can begin to interrogate the geographic, technological, and ideological frames that order and confine experience at different scales and for different social groups. Frames slyly impose particular values to reproduce particular social configurations. In particular, I draw attention to the moral geography that maps people, places, and associated qualities according to multidimensional (spatial, temporal, ethnic, classist, and mythological) hierarchies. Like the touristic framings of Hailuoguo, Chinese moral geography tends to be developmentalist. The appearance and feel of places are judged against a conviction that the nation is on a linear upward path, limited only by those who oppose the inevitability. This imagined collective trajectory, like smartphones and social media, provides excitement, pride, and empowerment in a society where people may easily feel untethered and helpless to affect the direction of society or even their own lives. Spectacularized development drowns out the ways in which agency and possibility are curtailed in the rise of the technological state. Moral maps, perception, and affect lose touch with reality. We misrecognize that the retreat and disintegration of object-processes such as glaciers have direct and enormous consequences for our continued survival.

Chapter two focused on the nation as a frame. This frame is simultaneously spatial, temporal, and moral. Incorporation into the modern-nation state has located Moxi in a generic ethnic periphery, glossing it with negative qualities of rurality, backwardness, insularity and uneventfulness. Envisaged as more or less empty space, it becomes a place defined by its need of (Chinese) development, and that owes any of

its development thus far to the party-state. Local groups benefit (to varying degrees) from the tourism economy but are no longer afforded the flexible autonomy of the imperial or colonial borderlands that preceded its present-day encapsulation in Sichuan Province. Those who have the chance to leave Moxi and pursue opportunities elsewhere tend to take it. The remaining diversity of the resident communities, alongside diverse religious and historical heritage, are acknowledged and celebrated in tourism placemaking but so selectively as not to challenge the patriotic and developmental messages of History at the national-mythological scale. Moxi must appear as a place that is unquestionably Chinese, and therefore only came into its own with Liberation in 1950. In other words, the story of Moxi must be one of development and patriotism. But adding value to the site through these frames devalues it as anything else it is or has been. This invaluation sets the realistic limits of tourist perception and experience. As Sutton and Kang observe of Huanglong, “the tourists are made to experience Tibetan and Chinese culture in the right order,” with the former subservient to the latter (2009, 203). A pretty image of Moxi’s History comes together, albeit awkwardly, in the Moxi Catholic Church—with the statue of Mao Zedong beside it. Framed as national Long March heritage, the decontextualized chapel represents a singular romanticized event while other not-so-distant histories are silenced and forgotten, other buildings lying in ruins among the trees.

This dissertation is one of only a few works (e.g., Chen 2014; Sigley 2020) addressing heritagization of the Ancient Tea Horse Road. Two difficulties with this kind of “route heritage,” according to Gary Sigley (2010), are that the location of the heritage is dispersed, and its material aspects easily destroyed or difficult to perceive in the first place. Sigley recounts how after a 2007 earthquake destroyed historic buildings at Nakeli, an Ancient Tea Horse Road heritage town in Yunnan, it was rebuilt with modern materials, resulting in a “distinctively ‘themeparkish’” feel (2010, 541). Even in Moxi, where the ancient street still stands, there are few reminders that this is part of a centuries-old trade route. Historical markers direct tourists instead to remnants of Mao’s visit or the old People’s Liberation Army offices. The wooden facing added to the rest of the town’s buildings has further disguised the ancient street as yet another formalistic fabrication. But there are a few workers or scholars who do romanticize the tea trade through

Moxi, and they are mainly interested in contemplating the physical feat of bearing heavy tea bricks over huge elevations and distances. Although there are some important differences between the porter (*beifu*) practices in Meishan and those in Moxi, I concluded chapter 2 with a description of porter heritagization in Meishan for one look at what and how this memorialized labor force might communicate to a contemporary audience. As with the Meishan performance, memory of the Ya'an–Dartsedo route is of an inspiring masculine feat (it is not remembered that some porters were women; all the famous photographs depict men) that must somehow be contextualized within the upward trajectory of the nation. Thus, even the tea-horse trade is made to resonate with the triumphant conquering spirit of the Long March and the general background energy of Khampa masculinity *qua* touristic representation. Different heritage narratives gather around common values that tell us more about contemporary Han outsiders than any indigenous communities present or past.

In practice, the pull and promotion of Hailuoguo Scenic Area/National Park overshadows any historical heritage or significance of Moxi Town. Tourists mainly come to see the glacial scenery (or simply to get away from the polluted city); even red tourists will spend more time in the park or a hot springs hotel than they will contemplating the importance of the Moxi Conference. Within the park, an absence of actual local lore—and increasingly, any local guides—solidifies a selective canon of tour guiding facts that inspire neither emotional connection with the landscape nor concern for glacial loss and global climate change. Tourists call upon their firsthand knowledge of regional sites, including scenic area ratings and ticket prices, to critique Hailuoguo's deficient scenery, which they ultimately attribute to a failure in—or deception by—its management. Their critiques range from casual to heartfelt, but in any case serve to distinguish the informed consumer from those less traveled, who might only appreciate Hailuoguo's beauty because they do not understand the beauty of someplace else. From a tourism developer or marketer's perspective, the glacier's appearance is also a major pain point, but the only metrics that really matter for the site (and their careers) are tied to visitor count. Therefore, development and promotion that is untenable within the bounds of the park intensifies just beyond them, attempting to widen tourist interests to incorporate

Hailuoguo/Moxi's (assumedly) more permanent natural resources—clean air, blue skies, and comfortable temperatures, all within a few hours' reach of Chengdu. (It is as if the developers have forgotten that Moxi, too, is a precarious site, built on glacial debris that is prone to slide away under force.) Meanwhile, the layout of the park is fixed, and the glacier remains the central attraction whether it is visible or not. Most tourists coming to Hailuoguo are first-time visitors, and thus a farce of deception and disappointment plays over and over again.

However, Hailuoguo is not drawing visitors as a singular destination; it must be understood within its larger tourism context. In the Tibetan tourscape—the major geo-ethnic frame I analyze in chapter 3—Hailuoguo/Moxi is defined by its position along a spatial and temporal line, with familiar Han modernity at one end and an othered Tibetan roughness on the other. Tourists there are on a secular pilgrimage, journeying both upwards in elevation and backwards in a romanticized developmental imaginary, testing their bodies and opening themselves at least to the possibility of emotionally moving (or seductive) experiences in the ethnic periphery. This binary framing of a Han-Tibetan continuum excludes groups like the Qiang and Yi who are imagined (and classified) as further back in their social evolution and whose script, religion, dances, etc. are neither fetishized nor associated with the landscape aesthetics of Moxi and Minya Konka. While Tibetan art objects mix with artifacts of a secular Chinese nostalgia as bar décor along Moxi Ancient Street, Yi art is more likely to appear in a museum—if at all—even though Yi are the larger indigenous population and more active in tourism work (the Qiang and Minya Tibetans being much more elusive or unreachable). At the same time, the everyday absence of ethnic dress or makeup among all ethnic minorities in Moxi makes them inscrutable even to interested outsiders. It is only because of demand and planned programming for Tibetan culture that Tibetans are able to perform and capitalize upon their ethnic identity. Even so, the Tibetans best positioned to do this are government workers and businesspeople who migrate to Moxi Town from other Tibetan counties bearing preexisting social and economic capital.

Rather than being able to forge a distinct branded identity, the ethnic minority communities in Moxi remain simultaneously too divided and too “Hanified” to leverage their borderland ambivalence for tourism

profit. Although in some respects, this mixing and illegibility, and the organizing force of an outside economy, continues Moxi's formative process as a post for trade, military, and mission activity. Rather than lamenting and trying to recover some lost local essence, we can recognize the multiplicity of place from the perspective of communities themselves, recovering voices past and present, and work toward more diverse participation and representation in tourism programming.

Although I was guided away from engagement with Tibetan groups (local or otherwise) in this study, I paid close attention to how Tibetanness was mobilized, perceived, and judged—or ignored—among tourists and tourism workers, some of whom were Tibetan themselves. By working alongside local government and official tour guides, I was able to present a contrast and complement to studies of ethnic-minority-area tourist destinations in China that situate debates over tourism development, identity representations, and placemaking from the perspective of the ethnicized local and/or take a broad and distant view of tourism development hegemony in terms of state projects and policies (e.g. Feng 2017; Notar 2007; Tenzin 2014; Yang 2011). In this study, those who fall somewhere between longtime residents and the state, such as local government workers, are presented in more unique detail. This study also provides a contrast to observations on the feminization of Chinese ethnic minorities (especially in Yunnan Province—Chen 2014; Hyde 2007; Walsh and Swain 2004) by highlighting the masculine appeal of Tibetans and associated landscapes among the Han Chinese. The attractiveness of Khampa men's imagined self-reliance, freedom, closeness to nature and distance from modernity especially appeals to Chinese men and women disillusioned with and disempowered by the strictures of white-collar work, oppressive familial expectations, and claustrophobia of mega-cities. Consumption of the masculinized ethnic periphery may increase with a sense of impotence as the discontents of slowing development and degraded environments build.

In Moxi's ethnic heritagization, perhaps the most remarkable thing is that most tourism-industry actors have decided there isn't a local culture there to bother with cultivating, at least not anymore. (Old Shen is seen as an eccentric outlier for his satisfaction and investment in Moxi, which itself is in substantial

part motivated by historical interest.) Yet there is still a level of paranoia regarding order and reputation for order, just because Moxi falls within a Tibetan administrative district. This paranoia was contagious, and it shaped the boundaries of my own access and terms of my mobility even in the absence of any known religious, political, or ethnic tension. Rather than the ethno-cultural content of the site, it was the frames that did the most placemaking work, making Moxi both lightly desirable and lightly “dangerous.”

Danger and desire also intertwine in chapter 4, where the smartphone is the central frame. I suggest that we the smartphone-holding public—and especially the techno-optimist and techno-nationalist Chinese—willingly enter into a symbiosis with our devices based on a sense of empowerment that is largely illusory. Approaching all experience with the smartphone-camera in hand, we may have more control over content, but less over the frames and parameters of communication, intimacy, even perception.

In this ethnography of tourism disappointment, the smartphone-camera provides multiple solutions to underwhelming in-person experiences. First, during the tour, it is itself a tool for socialization and fun. The Hailuoguo Administration even supplies props and prop-seating to guide tourists toward specific points and aesthetics for photographic interactions with the environment. Part of the fun is the (albeit limited) creativity or silliness such props or group photography generally inspires, but additional appeal lies in the hope of realizing aspirational lifestyle aesthetics (often echoing established, wanghong tropes). Thus, second, the smartphone-camera offers a constant platform for unreal self-performance. We chase the satisfaction of seeing and evaluating our looks, our experience, and our social relations more positively by objectifying these in digital images, imagined from a distanced, social-media-consumer perspective (even if we often find ourselves falling short). The vast majority of photography is now oriented toward online cultures of sharing, for the building and maintenance of alluring personas rather than just the sharing of memories among a small circle of friends and family. When tourists are disappointed with the scenery at Hailuoguo, they can still isolate and stylize elements of its aesthetics as backdrops or stand-ins for the self. In other words, they are playing a different game than that of the camera-wielding tourist of slightly earlier generations. Third, the smartphone—with its endlessly addicting apps, content feeds, and image processing

tools—provides an escape during long hours of otherwise boredom or exclusion: on the bus, in line for the cableway, at the restaurant or bar, in the hotel lobby—especially for women who are socially encouraged to be passive, reserved, and image-oriented rather than brash, unapologetic, and in-charge.

It doesn't take a "technophobe" (Postman 1992) to find something troubling about the automatedness of perception through the smartphone frame. And because this framing is everywhere, it is invisible. What chapter 4 really speaks to is not so much that tourists are missing out on *specific* content and therefore failing to appreciate the wonders of Hailuoguo Scenic Area, but that social media's *pervasive* ordering of thought and manipulation of emotions are so embedded into our goals and ways of being that experiences across a vast array of settings and activities take on a disappointing similarity. This doesn't just close off possibilities for contingency and discovery; it closes off the basic sensibility that such possibilities exist. Despite the relative newness of an ever-present-smartphone culture, already it is becoming difficult for many people to even consider what else one should do alone with oneself or how else one should interact with friends than through a tool that is known to pose dangers to mental health, collect personal data for the gain of government and corporations, and in some cases literally distract one to death (*as in* BBC 2016). We are generally convinced that we are the ones controlling and using our smartphones, but we necessarily "use" this tool within a culture and social media ecology. We are used through if not by our devices, collectively, even if we can rise above phone addiction and the Lacanian sense of visual objectification as individuals.

Photography and wanghong culture have changed the aesthetics of Hailuoguo, inspiring new construction over the face of the old. The resulting images are romantic, but the emotional impressions—and the contribution to earthquake-preparedness—are not necessarily of great value. Numerous tourism potentialities cross paths through Moxi and Hailuoguo. Taking a holistic view of Moxi's tourism resources (exploited or not), stories, and "images" grants insight into different factors' competition for developer and tourist interest. Yet even with the rise of independent and self-driving tourism, diversification of tourism

types, and highly individualized itineraries, I find the scenic area remains hegemonic in this part of the Tibetan tourscape.

In chapter 5, the nation, the Tibetan tourscape, and the smartphone return as frames for a close-up consideration of Hailuoguo No. 1 Glacier. I also consider where the touristic-commodification and scientific framings of the glacier overlap or conflict, are amplified or silenced. While Chinese tourism workers and tourists alike generally accepted that global warming was occurring and affecting the glacier, it was not a major concern other than indirectly and hyper-locally, as it related to the glacier's aesthetics, experience offerings, or perhaps "bad" tourist behavior. This finding highlights the need for greater nuance in studies of climate change (un)awareness and (non-)response. Rhetorical denial may be rare and functional denial yet rampant, extending from the state to local government to the general public.

Hailuoguo Glacier as a site of climate change (un)awareness provides a contrast to last-chance tourism sites, just as this dissertation provides a contrast to studies documenting climate alarm in glacier-adjacent communities across the world, from indigenous Peruvians (Bolin 2001) to Californian hikers (Wolf and Orlove 2008). It shows the limitations of concern and knowledge in the current developmental order.



China's Most Beautiful Glacier - Hailuoguo

Based on the hydrothermal conditions and physical properties of the development of glaciers, China's glaciers can be divided into polar continental glaciers, sub-continental glaciers and oceanic glaciers. According to Chinese Glacier Inventory, there are 76 modern oceanic glaciers surrounding the peak of Mount Gongga with an area of 227.15 square kilometers. In the overflowing ice streams, several large glaciers including Hailuoguo Glacier, Moziguo Glacier, Yanziguo Glacier, Nanmenguo Glacier and Dagongba Glacier are like a huge palm outstretching fingers which hold the peak of Mount Gongga above clouds. Hailuoguo Glacier No. 1 is the longest "middle finger" of the huge palm. It is 14.7 kilometers long and covers an area of 25.71 square kilometers. The glaciers in Hailuoguo include 3 valley glaciers and 8 hanging glaciers and cirque glaciers. The glacier area in Hailuoguo accounts for 10.4% of the total area of glaciers and 15.7% of the drainage area of glaciers in the large Hailuoguo area. 3 valley glaciers are originated from the east slope of the snow mountain, of which glacier no. 1 is originated from the peak of Mount Gongga, and glaciers no. 2 and 3 are originated from both sides of the nameless peak to the south of the main peak; the remaining glaciers are originated from the south slope of the watershed of Hailuoguo and Moziguo, which is one of the east branches of the great snow mountain chain.

The glaciers in Hailuoguo are characterized by rapid movement speed, strong melting, high temperature (generally, the temperature in ice 0 °C and the water temperature on ice surface is about 0.3 °C) and stretching into forest, dense primeval forests surrounding glaciers, etc. The most amazing thing is that there are a lot of geothermal resources under the massifs with glaciers. Entering Hailuoguo glaciers, you can appreciate ice falls, ice cracks, ice avalanches and other glacier landscapes; glacial rivers, glacial lakes, ice caves and other glacier melting landscapes; and ice tables, ice stools, ice mushrooms and other landscapes on ice surface. You can take a bath in hot springs and overlook the snow-capped mountains, to enjoy the wonderful feeling mixed with cold and heat. In 2005, Mount Gongga was rated as one of the top ten most beautiful mountains in China and Hailuoguo glacier was rated as the most beautiful glacier in China by Chinese National Geography.

Figure 38. Signage in the park. Top: A terse sign that hangs in one of Hailuoguo's restrooms. Bottom: A wordy explanation of Hailuoguo, China's Most Beautiful Glacier, located near a viewing area in the park. Source: photos by author. 2019.

Limitations and illusions

This study suggests how abstract boundaries, whether imposed by force or convention, take on an *effectual, affectual* reality by ordering perception and values, simultaneously persuading us of their *inherent* reality. We might like to think of sensory perception and the immediate affective response as our personal and direct experience of an underlying objective reality; however, without denying a certain degree of objectivity *or* subjectivity, I argue that place qualities—including aesthetics—are much more highly structured than they “appear.” Tourists in this study might agree when they point to Hailuoguo’s ugliness as a problem of management or lack of local character. But these explanations are illusory. It is less the lack of interest, knowledge or ability that prevents greater visibility, community involvement and representation in local tourism and culture activities than it is a lack of time, incentive, and distribution of placemaking power in the current structure of economy, work, and governance.

The pace of development, transformation of landscapes and uprooting of communal life in China over the past several decades has been, on the whole, deeply disorienting. As Jon Friedman observes, “people are desperate to reorient themselves, cast out into an unfamiliar world,” making the issue of placemaking particularly urgent (2007, 260). Where has the disrupted population found grounding as cities are leveled and rebuilt, villages slowly (or all at once) emptied? Many have found it in the quest for wealth, luxury and social standing—work for their children’s sake, or even work for working’s sake. But there is also tourism, for some the only area of life that is somewhat disparate from work. In this realm of play and exploration, tourists look to reaffirm what they know *and* discover new truths through sensual engagement with place. They find reassurance in the wide open “spaces” of China’s west—notably the Tibetan and Xinjiang toursapes—that provide visual arguments for the beauty of the nation, its standing as a desirable, orderly and high-class destination among the global community of tourists, the wealth of untapped resources remaining to support China’s future development, and the survival of natural and spiritual purity as urban centers are choked with smog and distrust. The west is a reservoir for clean air and affect, creating

balance when framed at the national scale—or provincial, as Sichuan Province is a kind of microcosm, split down the middle.

Lang Bicheng, a woman in her late 20s whom I guided throughout Moxi as well as Hailuoguo, remarked not only on the simple innocence and moral quality of the locals we encountered, but also how western China's landscapes changed her perception of the nation:

Before, we [Chinese people] felt like other countries were really great... We used to think all the good scenery was in other countries, but it's different now... China's scenic attractions and methods of travel are also growing in number... For example, I used to really, really want to go to Yellowstone National Park [in the US], but I never had the opportunity. Now that I've started to travel in China, however, I've discovered that China has so much good scenery—a lot of beautiful and majestic places. I've been to Yinchuan, I've been to Danxia, and I've seen pictures [of Yellowstone] for comparison, so now I'm not so intent on going to Yellowstone. I particularly like how China's natural scenery, along with its culture, is so varied—snowy mountains in the west, water landscapes in the Jiangnan region, deserts, grasslands, and more. It's not like a lot of the countries in Southeast Asia, or even Europe, where everywhere is more or less of a single type. China has every kind of special scenery. I simply didn't have the time or opportunity to understand this before; when I used to look at a map, the thought of better understanding my own country never crossed my mind.

Leading up to the pandemic, new scenic areas and national parks were being developed and established at record rates across the Tibetan tourscape. These are places where tourists learn to perceive an unfamiliar cultural landscape as a natural, visual, discrete and yet inherently national “space” to which they proudly identify as members of a rising China. In this study, I encountered few tourists who were particularly interested in Tibetan or local ethnic cultures; most prioritized views of nature and tourism-oriented knowledge of places, which revalued Tibetanness in terms of its usefulness generating capital for the outsider through photogenicity, visible difference, cannibalization of romantic/sexual qualities, and difficulty of access. Because the Hailuoguo area no longer has any significant monasteries or evident nomadic communities, and is situated at a rather low elevation and short drive from Chengdu, those looking through the touristic frame fail to appreciate it as a place of great cultural value (except, they might say, for its Long March association). This only puts more pressure on the scenery to meet the hype of a 5A rating, and when the “development” of natural scenery falls short, pressure falls on the luxury and convenience of tourism infrastructure.

In this touristic framing, what is at stake? The answer is vastly different depending on for whom. But in the broadest sense, framing closes off possibilities (of interpretation, of being, of feeling) as it encloses and directs us toward one reality, such that even contestation occurs within a limited field.

This study emerged through my intrusion into a particular ordering of place. It is impossible to evaluate how any place “truly” exists, unmediated. But my disruptive presence, obvious out-of-placeness and others’ awareness and response to that disjuncture bumped into certain structures and limitations that themselves became objects of study. As Kirsten Hastrup reflects on the limits of anthropological knowledge:

The point of anthropology is not to tell the world *as it is* (which would be practically impossible) but to interpret it and to suggest possible (theoretical) connections within it as perceived and inferred from being in touch with a world that cannot be taken for granted—unlike the home world. By definition, the ‘home world’ is where frames and events are seamlessly and imperceptibly fused. (2004, 468)

As a foreign ethnographer, the possibility of my *knowing* Hailuogou was constrained by the nature of research and field access itself—institutional shepherding and safety concerns (which I’d say were ultimately order concerns)—as well as various effects of a history of placemaking and narrativization fully bent on forward motion along a single trajectory. In more formal settings, I was often in the company of or reliant upon others who either did not know or would not divulge more than superficial information about the area, or who expressed conflicting information. Trying to procure knowledge and perspectives from their own experience, I was often directed toward other people, books, and the tour guide script with its canon of uninspiring facts. Once when I directly asked a government worker for an interview, she declined by saying she “didn’t know enough.” Tour guides and other workers repeated information from the tour guide script until it became second nature, but few had been around long enough to have a grasp of the information’s origins, just as many had no firsthand take on the level of change occurring with the glacier. I was ultimately cautioned to approach the cultural stories in the canonized script as touristic fabrications. Indeed, in many subtle ways I was encouraged to perceive the entire site that way—formalistic, not “the real thing;” it was strange that so many approached Hailuogou as if it had a deep *problem* that could only (perhaps) be rectified through further, higher-quality development and branding. Meanwhile, in informal

settings, I was often not taken seriously as a conversation partner, let alone a researcher, on account of my being a foreign woman (and, probably, the oddity of my long-term, tourist-focused research—even after hearing my introduction, some tourists and tourism workers thought I was there studying geology or botany). What I *could* count on was full access to and welcome participation in various photographic and videographic productions, whether purely for fun or for marketing purposes. While this was my individual experience, these limitations do constrain all outsiders to varying degrees, including tourists, if attempting to learn about and understand an unfamiliar place through the most accessible and conventional means.

Glacial reflections

What kind of place is Hailuoguo? It is a place where the leisure class goes to see Hailuoguo Glacier—or Mount Gongga—and perhaps Tibetan culture. However, these things that tourism marketing promises to show are elusive in tourist experience, if not completely out of sight. Mount Gongga is hidden behind clouds for all but a hundred days in a year, and fog frequently rolls into the valley to cloak all other mountains and glaciers as well. At its lower, more accessible reaches, Hailuoguo Glacier is covered in debris. The gray surface conflicts with tourist expectations of a pure white wonderland, instead calling to mind the polluted landscapes with which they are all too familiar. Under layers of obscurity, many tourists do not see the glacier, or do not believe that they have seen a glacier, or may not care if there is a glacier there or not, only that it is not very beautiful. But where does this “beauty” happen? To consider what makes the glacier attractive or not, we are already considering an encounter, an interaction. One of the main assertions throughout this dissertation is that perception is not direct but filtered through a moral geography. It is entangled with values, emotions, motivations, expectations and ideologies. Perception is not *fully determined* by these frames, but it is focused and limited. There is always something excluded in our sensory grasp of the world, new dimensions we may be made aware of (within eco-physiological limits). A glacier is a good object, not unlike a virus, for considering perception, objectness, and the limits of comprehension.

Hailuoguo Glacier is an ephemeral object undergoing constant simultaneous creation and destruction. It is flowing—sometimes imperceptibly, sometimes crashing and roaring down to the earth. It is less object than process or gathering, a temporary slowdown and storage within the hydrological cycle. The glacier holds water, and water is life. In this view, it becomes impossible to claim the glacier has nothing to do with us. The interrelation should be more apparent than ever. But it is also a retreating object. Its retreat is both perceptible and imperceptible. The difference depends on what we know and how we feel about it, as sure as the technologies we use to sense and represent it.

Narratives of the glacier's "discovery" by Western science (Heim 1936, 445) and, more recently, of its value within the national tourism industry, cast the glacier as a fixed object that can be captured by measurements and photography, its essential characteristics set, explained and defended, rationalizing the continual development of surrounding amenities, awarding of accolades, and invention of local legends. But contrary to these efforts, the glacier is neither static nor developing. Or it is not developing in the right direction. A walk up to the glacier terminus reveals a different landscape every few weeks. The ice cave Chengmendong, though inscribed on the tourism map, only sometimes exists. On each visit, the distance between a safe view from the metal observation platforms and the precarious glacier terminus will grow. The glacier, already ephemeral, is slipping away at an increasing speed.

And yet pressure from the top insists that glacier tourism develop yet further. In 2005, Xi Jinping famously stated, "clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as gold and silver," which has since been used as shorthand for China's shifting emphasis toward green, sustainable development and "ecological civilization" (NDRC 2021). Eco-tourism development is a cornerstone of this project, as it brings investment and revenue to mountainous areas and incentivizes the protection of natural heritage. In 2016, President Xi issued an addendum to his slogan by stating that "the world of ice and snow is also as valuable as gold and silver." Since then, and particularly in conjunction with the 2022 Beijing Winter

Olympics, the government has been actively promoting winter sports and ice-and-snow tourism,⁹⁰ of which glacier tourism is a subset. There are thousands of glaciers across western China—in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, as well as the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In an overview of China’s glacier tourism situation, Wang, Xie, and Zhou write:

In contrast to some mountainous countries in Europe and America... the level of development of glacier tourism in China is relatively low... still in the primitive stage, and the glacier resources have not completely been transformed to fully exploit their economic advantages. At present, only around ten glacier attractions in China are available for tourism, with a relatively low level. (2020, 2)

Glacier tourism is thus presented as a viable path to development, one which China, considering its wealth of untapped cryospheric resources, can and should follow, as Western countries have done. Although glacier tourism policy and research recognize that glacier tourism sites must grapple with the effects of climate change, it is rarely characterized as a fatal threat, only a hurdle to overcome. Even in Wang and Zhou’s earlier paper which frankly addresses the many problems (ecological, cultural, aesthetic, economic) that global warming poses to glacier tourism sites, its conclusion continues to work within the language of development:

Currently, glacier tourism development is different from early simple tourism development. Its stakeholders need to be aware not only of the opportunities for glacier tourism, but more importantly, of climate change impacts, in order to adopt a perfect tourism planning system, protect glacier attractions, control the number of tourists, and strengthen science education. (2019, 78)

But is there a way to develop and protect at the same time? Some sites in China have already been compelled to fully restrict outside access to glaciers in a move to slow the rate of melting and protect freshwater resources. According to reports from the non-profit China Dialogue (Liu 2016), this was the case for Tianshan No.1 Glacier located outside Urumqi in Xinjiang. It turned out that placing the restrictions on Tianshan actually caused an increase in tourist traffic and did nothing to slow the glacier’s recession.

⁹⁰ In 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, National Development and Reform Commission, and General Administration of Sport of China issued notice of the “Ice and Snow Tourism Development Action Plan 2021-2023” (gov.cn 2021).

Would it in any way amend the situation if Hailuogou's management and marketing went all in on the promotion of a climate change narrative? Robert Fletcher would say no—that “Anthropocene tourism” is another form of disaster capitalism in which focus shifts from selling nature to selling “the end of nature” (2019, 523). Most likely, the tourists will still come; Hailuogou may become even more popular; if Hailuogou becomes less popular it will be because the tourists are going somewhere else. Redistributing development around subplanetary boundaries will not save the cryosphere. In the end, setting aside emissions and other metrics, I do not know what approach is best for a place like Hailuogou. Should tourists be further restricted from the site, or further encouraged to run forth and touch the glacier, maybe feeling something memorable, establishing a shocking connection? I just do not think that tourism narratives or programming can fix the issue so long as they are built on developmental models and ideologies.

Why can't we perceive the value of a glacier? Hailuogou Glacier is an ephemeral node in an incomprehensible reality. It is a rather arbitrarily bounded portion of the glacial mass enveloping the Mt. Gongga area; it is a hint of what Timothy Morton calls the “hyperobject” global warming (2013; Boyer and Morton 2021). Hyperobjects, Morton explains, are massive beyond comprehension. They affect us intimately, and we are aware of them in part, but we can't point them out or delineate their borders. While the fact of anthropogenic climate change is not controversial in China, that doesn't mean that it is actually graspable. Like most places in the world, the hold of nationalist and developmentalist sentiment runs too deeply. It is there in the leisurely perception of a glacial landscape. If we even can get out of this structure of feeling and to a place where climate change reaction makes intuitive sense, we will not get there through the now-dominant frames of capitalistic modernity.

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