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Preliminary study on effects of tourism on Mosuo matriarchal culture

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Key words: Axia relationships, matrilineal families, Lugu Lake, tourism development

SUMMARY

The ethnic communities of Lugu Lake have experienced the rapid development of tourism because of the attractions of their culture and traditional customs as well as their beautiful environment. Tourism and other economic activities have a variety of socio-cultural effects on host communities. Based on a survey of 105 Mosuo families, statistic correlation analysis was used to examine the local people's viewpoints regarding marriage, language, traditional dress, diet, and factors which could lead to changes in people's opinions. The results show that although Mosuo people are more open to the outside world, Axia relationships and matrilineal families still dominate their life. More than 50% of interviewees have Axia relationships and live in matrilinear families. Tourism income, education and age are three important factors that impact on local people's viewpoints regarding their culture and life. People who are more educated and earn more money from tourism prefer traditional culture and customs. The younger generation is more likely to be affected by tourism because they have contact with the outside world more often in their everyday life. Further research is needed on how to protect the local culture from the boom in tourism, as well as how to minimise its influence on local residents.

INTRODUCTION

The impacts of tourism have been extensively studied by researchers in a variety of disciplines, from anthropology to geography, and economics to sociology. Many researchers found that tourism has both positive and negative impacts on local residents, involving economic, cultural, social and environmental effects. The finding that there is a relatively strong and favourable perception towards tourism is not particularly surprising in that tourism plays an important role in facilitating cultural exchanges and

creating opportunities to learn about other people and cultures (Ekerm 1998). Early research on the impacts of tourism focused on the positive economic effects (Pizam 1978). In recent years, researchers noticed that tourism was also linked with changes in community life and the socio-culture. Geertz (1999) stated that 'Anthropologists need to understand what caused the culture change and how it happened.' Therefore, researchers have emphasized this aspect in order to understand the attitudes and

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perceptions of tourism among rural residents as well as the socio-cultural effects of tourism in developing regions (Cervený and Lee 2004).

Researchers found that tourism has a diversity of socio-cultural effects on host communities, which may change their life style (dressing, eating, entertainment and recreational activities). From the sociology viewpoint, these effects were mainly on life styles, employment and shifts in social structure. Although this influence may be interpreted positively as an increase in the standard of living, it may also be considered negatively, as an indication of acculturation (Brunt and Courtney 1999; Dogan 1989). Tourists from different cultures will participate in local society with their own ideology and life style, which could affect local residents. This might change the consumption style and behaviour of local people, especially young people (Li and Zhao 2002). This change can be transformed to social psychology through the demonstration effect. The development of tourism also modifies the internal structure of a community by dividing it into those who have or have no relationship with tourism or tourists (Brunt and Courtney 1999). Generally, the impact on women was greater: their economic and social status was completely transformed, which distracts from family structure and values (Zhou and Wu 2004; Gee *et al.* 1997). Tourism may lead to a decline in moral values, use of alcohol and drugs, increasing crime rates and tension in the community (Milman and Pizam 1988). Because of the conflict between traditional and exotic culture, people's self-identity and pride in local culture is questioned (Zhou 2003).

This paper describes development of the tourism industry in Lugu Lake and examines the attributes and extent of tourism effects on local life. Over recent years, Lugu Lake region has experienced a remarkable growth in tourism. The number of tourists increased by 22.4% per year from 1992 to 2004 and revenue reached 126.8 million Yuan in 2004 (Statistical Bureau of Ninglang County 2005). In response to tourism, the local socio-cultural structure has changed, as have viewpoints regarding tourism. Identification of these changes and analysis of the factors which affect the changes have become more important. Using statistical analysis, this study attempts to identify the cultural impacts of tourism in Lugu Lake region. Lugu Lake attracts tourists from all over the world because of its unique natural and cultural resources which are preserved.

BACKGROUND AND DATA

Study area

The study area in Lugu Lake region is described in the Introduction to this Special Issue. The local ethnic communities have experienced flourishing tourism development due to their unique cultural heritage and traditional customs as well as the beautiful environment. The area is inhabited by a large number of Mosuo people who settled in this area more than 1,500 years ago, and assimilated Tibetan, Mongolian, Yi, Naxi and Pumi cultures to form their own unique Mosuo culture.

Because of their comparatively closed geographical location and under-developed economy, the Mosuo still maintain Axia relationships and matriarchal families, and is known as the 'Oriental Feminine Kingdom' or 'A living fossil of human social development'. An Axia relationship is a primitive form of matrilineal marriage based on congeniality. As couples do not live together, children are raised in their mother's family. In a typical Mosuo family, one female family member is in charge of everything, including economic activities and decision making. This matriarchal culture has nurtured a tradition of harmony, solidarity between family members, honesty, generosity and mutual help among villagers. Most Mosuo believe in Tibetan Buddhism and the Daba religion, which have a significant influence on their values, culture, customs and marriage.

Review of local tourism

Because of its rich natural and cultural resources, tourism developed very rapidly after the late 1980s, when Lugu Lake became a provincial nature protection area. In 1992, Lugu Lake as a tourist destination was officially opened to all tourists. With improvements in roads and more communication, the economy of some villages has changed from relying on agriculture to tourism. Both the number of tourists and tourism revenue have risen since the opening up to outside tourists (Table 1). The number of visitors to Lugu Lake grew almost three-fold, from 36,000 in 1992 to 82,600 in 1995. At the end of 2003, the number reached 250,000, although the pace has slowed recently. The fast growth of tourism has impacted on the traditions of the Mosuo, and their matrilineal culture is changing.

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Data

The database used in this study comes from a survey conducted in Lugu Lake region. The questionnaire examined the Mosuo viewpoint on marriage, language, traditional dress and diet. We also collected demographic information of the interviewees, such as age, education and family income. In August 2004, we interviewed 105 Mosuo families in 10 randomly chosen villages. A basic description of our survey is given in Tables 2 and 3. Using correlation analysis, significant factors which impact the change in traditional culture were found.

RESULTS

Status quo and tendency of matrilineal families

Because Axia relationships and matrilineal marriage are unique characteristics of Mosuo

traditional culture, Mosuo families have aroused public curiosity and sociologists' attention (Yan and Song 1983; Zhou 2003; Tang 2005). Table 4 shows changes in Mosuo marriage and families in Yongning, Ninglang County in the past 50 years (Tang 2005). There has been a decreasing trend in families with traditional Axia marriage, from 78.6% in the 1950s to 54.7% in 1999. The families that retain Axia relations in which couples do not live together increased to 36.8%.

Among the 105 Mosuo families surveyed in 2004, 47% only have traditional Axia marriage – the couple do not live together; 17% only have Axia marriage – the couple live together; and 13% have monogamous marriage. About 23% of families have two or three coexistent marriage types. For example, 13% of Mosuo families have an Axia marriage (whether live together or not), and about 10% have Axia marriage and monogamy simultaneously. Therefore, we can conclude that Axia relationships and matrilineal marriage still dominate in Mosuo families of Lugu Lake region despite the influence of tourism. The attitudes of local residents explain the status quo of matrilineal culture: the majority of residents agree to preserve traditions such as the Axia relationship (Table 5).

Table 1 Tourism in Lugu Lake from 1995–2003

Year	Number	Annual increase (%)	Revenue (104 Yuan)	Annual increase (%)
1995	82,600	52.8		
1996	91,000	10.2		
1997	150,000	64.8	2835	
1998	209,600	39.7	3195	11.26
1999	214,000	2.1	6130	47.87
2000	231,400	14.8	6960	11.93
2001	237,000	2.4	7100	2.01
2002	250,000	5.5	7300	2.82
2003	250,000	0	7500	2.74

Table 2 Number of respondents interviewed

Sample 105			
	Sample	Valid sample	N.A.
Attitude to marriage	105	103	2
Age	105	100	5
Education	105	82	23
Income per person	105	89	16
Percentage of tourism income	105	73	32
Two languages	105	101	4
Daily dress and diet	105	100	5
Trational dress and diet	105	103	2

Table 3 Demographic profile of the Mosuo interviewed

Demographic characters		Number	Percentage
Age	< 25	33	33
	26–45	32	32
	46–65	25	25
	> 65	10	10
Education	Illiterate	42	51.22
	Elementary school	7	8.54
	Junior high school	18	21.95
	Senior high school and above	10	12.20
Attitude to marriage	Active	101	98.06
	Positive	2	1.94
Income per capita (Yuan)	< 800	20	22.47
	800–5000	46	51.69
	> 5000	23	25.84
Percentage of tourism income	< 10	22	30.14
	10–50	13	17.81
	> 50	28	38.36

Table 4 Comparison of Mosuo marriage in Yongning in different periods

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Axia marriage (live together)</i>		<i>Axia marriage (not live together)</i>		<i>Monogamy</i>	
		<i>No.</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
1950s ^a	1635	1285	78.6	182	11.1	168	10.3
1999 ^b	3224	1762	54.7	1188	36.8	274	8.5

Note: ^aData for the 1950s are from Yan and Song (1983); ^bData for 1999 are based on the the social analysis of Mosuo villages by the tourist bureau in 1999

Status quo of other aspects of Mosuo culture

In other aspects of Mosuo culture, nearly 100% practice Tibetan Buddhism. However, when asked ‘will you keep the traditional dress and diet in every-day life’, only half of residents answer yes, showing that normal life of the Mosuo has been influenced by tourism. The overwhelming majority of interviewees (87%) can speak at least two languages. Nearly 55% of people worry about their heritage and traditional culture.

DISCUSSION

Attitude to Axia relationships

There are three family types in Mosuo culture: traditional Axia marriage (couple do not live together), Axia marriage (couples live together) and monogamy. At present, traditional Axia marriage still dominates in matrilineal families. According to investigations in the 1950s and in 1999, a transition from matrilineal to patrilineal family is occurring, in that the percentage of Axia relationships decreased (from 79.6% to 54.7%) and the transitional type of Axia marriage, in which couples live together, increased. However, Axia relationships and matrilineal families still made up more than 50% in our samples, which is a relatively high percentage for Lugu Lake.

Using correlation analysis, we examined correlation coefficients of education, age, income per capita and percentage of tourism income to total income on the attitude to two forms of Axia marriage (Table 6). Both the correlation between age and attitude to Axia marriage and between percentage of tourism income and attitude to Axia marriage are significant, while correlations between education and attitude to Axia marriage and between income per capita and attitude to Axia

Table 5 Attitude to traditional culture of the Mosuo (%)

	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Axia relationship	84.3	15.7
Daily dress and diet	50	50
Festival dress and diet	98	2
Speaking two languages	87	13
Tibetan Buddhism	100	0
Heritage of traditional culture	54.7	45.3

marriage are not significant. The correlation coefficient of percentage of tourism income is significant, which means that people favour Axia relations when they earn more from tourism. It appears that, when the Mosuo are deeply involved in tourism activities, they consider that Axia marriage is the core of their traditional culture and that their unique culture is the most important reason for increasing tourism, which provides them with jobs and income. Thus, the Mosuo recognize the value of their culture in developing tourism and consciously protect the uniqueness of their culture. In other words, when people are more open to the outside world, their ethnic pride and confidence are enhanced, which helps to build their self-awareness in protecting and retaining cultural elements and resisting adverse impacts from the outside world. Taking Luoshui village as an example, where tourism is the major income resource, 24% more people prefer to retain their Axia relations than in Yongning village, where tourism is less developed.

Age and Axia relations are inversely correlated. At first glance, this result suggests that younger people preferred Axia marriage in our survey. In fact, although matrilineal families and Axia relationships may still exist, the meaning of the association is changing among the younger people.

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As an impressionable group, some younger Mosuo couples live together and even move out of their respective matrilineal families, just like couples in other societies. However, they still call such relationships Axia marriage.

Changes in traditional customs

Besides Axia relations, other aspects of the Mosuo culture include mode of dress, language and diet. All of which are undergoing changes through interaction with tourists. These changes are most obvious in people with a higher level of education and in the younger people. Generally, the Mosuo can speak Mandarin or another ethnic minority language as well as the Mosuo language. Learning two or more languages will facilitate communication with other people. Table 7 shows that language skill is significantly correlated to education and age. About 86% of people and all people under 25 can speak two languages, in addition to the Mosuo language, because both highly educated people and young people have more chances to leave the area to work or study. In the past, the Mosuo could not speak Mandarin, but now they can even speak foreign languages, and some have studied overseas.

This change of languages is good for daily life and economic development of the region.

In terms of dress and diet, we found that more educated Mosuo people are inclined to preserve their traditions (Table 8), and the coefficient was significant. Although people’s dress and diet have already been altered to attract tourists and earn money. In their everyday life, about 50% of Mosuo did not like to dress traditionally and have changed their staple foods from maize and potatoes to rice and wheat. About 62% of Mosuo interviewees are profoundly concerned about maintaining Mosuo traditional customs, which they believe are threatened by constant interactions with outsiders.

CONCLUSIONS

Our survey revealed that although Axia relationships and matrilineal families still dominate the life of the Mosuo, accounting for over 50%, tourism is an important factor that is changing the Mosuo views on local traditional culture. Such effects can be expressed in both positive and negative ways. Increasing income from tourism made people recognize the value of their own culture and use several languages. Many aspects of traditional

Table 6 Correlation between Axia marriage and education, income and age

	Class	Coefficient	P
Education	Illiterate, elementary school, high school, university and above	0.046	0.261
Income	< 800, 800–5000, > 5000	0.115	0.133
Age	< 25, 25–45, 46–60, > 60	–0.172	0.087*
% Tourism income	< 10%, 10–50%, > 50%	0.116	0.078*

Table 7 Correlation between language and education, income and age

Component	Class	Coefficient	P
Education	Illiterate, elementary school, high school, university and above	0.081	0.026**
Income per person (Yuan)	< 800, 800–5000, > 5000	0.407	0.407
Age	< 25, 25–45, 46–60, > 60	–0.359	0.001**
Tourism income	< 10%, 10–50%, 50%	0.045	0.43

Table 8 Correlation between dress and diet and education, income and age

Component	Class	Coefficient	P
Education	Illiterate, elementary school, high school, university and above	0.083	0.049**
Income per person (Yuan)	< 800, 800–5000, > 5000	0.086	0.274
Age	< 25, 25–45, 46–60, > 60	0.025	0.811
Tourism income	< 10%, 10–50%, 50%	0.066	0.344

culture, including its core Axia relationships, have already changed. Furthermore, results from correlation analysis show that education has had significant positive impacts on local people's attitude to matrilineal marriage and traditional customs, such as dress and diet. Education can help people to better understand their unique culture and raise their awareness to protect it. Our analysis also presents an interesting correlation between age and local people's views on matrilineal marriage. The perception of Axia marriage has changed, and this also reminds us that, when focusing on the impacts of tourism on a culture, we should carefully define the concepts that might change their original meaning.

The unique matrilineal culture of the Mosuo is an important international cultural heritage. Booming tourism in Lugu Lake region has led local

economic development to flourish and increased local income, but also has slow, subtle and possibly irreversible impacts on the local culture. This study on cultural change of the Mosuo offers a snapshot of the general socio-cultural effects on Mosuo communities. A more detailed analysis of Mosuo cultural transitions in the more open and mutually influencing world should be undertaken as part of the future research agenda.

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