

Commercialized Traditions: Costs and Benefits of Cultural Tourism of the Miao Ethnic Group

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Abstract

This research explores the sociocultural effects of cultural tourism on the Miao ethnic minority in Guizhou, China, specifically focusing on Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village. The study assesses the degree of commercialization in the village and the balance between cultural preservation and commodification. 62 village residents were surveyed with a questionnaire, conducted through spoken interviews. Responses generally showed mixed opinions regarding the effects of tourism. While almost all respondents acknowledged the economic benefits of tourism, concerns about overcrowding and cultural commercialization remained prominent. Overall, the findings suggest that aspects of the village's culture and lifestyle have been compromised in favor of the tourism industry. Greater cultural awareness amongst tourists and the action of the local government is crucial for the protection of the village community and authentic Miao culture.

Keywords: cultural tourism, Miao ethnic minority, cultural preservation, commercialization

1. Introduction

Tourism has grown exponentially worldwide with the rapid development of international travel, global advertising, and the widespread use of social media. The industry has generated new economic opportunities in various destinations, but it has also raised ethical, safety, and cultural concerns, particularly associated with the surge in tourist numbers.

For smaller minority communities, tourism can provide new breakthroughs in their economic and sociocultural development. Specifically, cultural tourism, a branch of tourism focused on attracting visitors interested in experiencing unique cultures, offers these communities the chance to showcase their heritage. Such is the

case for the Miao ethnic group, an ethnic minority concentrated in southwest China and parts of Southeast Asia. Historically, the Miao have faced significant challenges, including forced relocation, assimilation into the dominant Han Chinese culture, along with high rates of poverty within their villages ("Miao in China," 2017). Threatened with this cultural extinction and poverty, some Miao villages turned to cultural tourism to bridge the gap between their isolated mountain regions and the rest of China.

In Guizhou province, one of China's most ethnically diverse regions, the 2,000-year-old Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village is the largest Miao settlement in the world, and 99% of its 6,000 residents are of the Miao ethnicity (Jie et al., 2021). The village was originally considered a

national-level poverty-stricken village, with the average income in 2005 at 1,431 RMB, less than half the national average. However, the village has undergone a dramatic transformation through cultural tourism; in 2008, local authorities renovated the village into a tourist site, showcasing its unique culture and lifestyle. By 2021, 90% of the village's Miao residents had found employment in the tourism industry, including in hotels and cultural institutions (Jie et al., 2021). Despite its past of poverty, Xijiang is now the largest and most famous Miao village in the world, generating up to 7.5 million visitors and a tourism income of 6 billion RMB (\$923.7 million) in 2018 (Miao, 2018).



Figure 1. Map displaying Guizhou, China, the province of Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village

While cultural tourism has undeniably boosted the local economy and brought attention to Miao culture, it also raises questions about the true nature of cultural preservation. The process of transforming a village into a tourist destination inevitably involves marketing its culture to appeal to visitors. This can lead to cultural commodification, where the local culture is turned into a product for external consumption, often modified to meet tourist expectations. In such cases, the most marketable aspects of a culture are emphasized as “authentic,” while other, less visible parts may be forgotten or misunderstood, potentially altering how the culture is represented both locally and globally permanently (Becker, 2015; Lundup, 2013). Therefore, while tourism continues to support the economy and cultural sustainability in places like Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village, it is crucial to examine how this transformation impacts the balance between cultural preservation and commodification.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze both the

effects of cultural tourism on the village's Miao residents and the global perception of Miao culture, with a focus on the Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village. It will also explore the broader consequences and implications of how cultural commodification has shaped minority groups and their relationships with the outside world. Because current studies often overlook the perspectives of local residents, this paper seeks to further ongoing research by highlighting the deeper, sociocultural impacts of tourism, especially in regions like southwest China.

The rest of the paper will review existing literature on tourism's impacts in small communities, explore key theories surrounding cultural tourism, and outline the data and methods used in this research. Finally, the findings will be discussed along with their implications and recommendations for the tourism industry.

2. Literature Review

Many studies have explored how tourism influences the public perception of cultural minority groups and their living environments, both positively and negatively. The literature often highlights the economic benefits of cultural tourism and the improved attitudes surrounding the protection of endangered cultures. The influx of tourists eager to experience these unique cultures has been shown to boost local residents' cultural pride, motivating them to preserve and showcase their traditions (Ahebwa et al., 2016; van Beek, 2003). This creates an incentive for residents to present their culture in ways that remain true to its origins without sacrificing authenticity, as was the case with the Dogon in West Africa (van Beek, 2003). Additionally, the focus on tourism often leads to improvements in local infrastructure, bringing otherwise neglected traditions to the global stage (Jaafar et al., 2015). Singla (2014) also notes that in places like Jaipur, India, increased interaction between locals and tourists helped reduce misconceptions, fostering mutual respect and improving overall hospitality and security.

However, the growing number of visitors and the pressure to meet their expectations has also generated adverse effects on cultural preservation. While many tourists seek an “authentic” cultural experience, they often arrive with preconceived notions shaped by media or popular stereotypes. To market

themselves as authentic, some tourist destinations may feel pressured to present only those aspects of their culture that align with visitors' expectations, rather than an accurate portrayal of their traditions (Becker, 2015; Lundup, 2013). As a result, cultural elements like buildings or artifacts are sometimes reconstructed to fit a traditional or exotic image, deviating from the real lives of the local residents (Shahzadal, 2016; Becker, 2015). Aspects of the culture deemed profitable are prioritized and heavily emphasized, overshadowing other elements that, while equally important, may not fit the "tourist gaze" and are subsequently neglected or misrepresented. Research has shown that this commercialization has significantly enhanced tourist satisfaction, highlighting how catering to external expectations can become an essential marketing strategy (Sun et al., 2017).

Previous literature shows that domestic tourism has become a significant trend in China in recent years, with more citizens eager to explore their cultural heritage. This surge in interest, coupled with improvements in hospitality and transportation services, has significantly increased domestic tourism. In 2019 alone, domestic tourist trips reached approximately 6.01 billion, an 8.4% increase from the previous year (Zhao & Liu, 2020). Thus, tourism regions inhabited by ethnic minorities in China has gained significant attention in various research. For instance, a study in Fenghuang, Hunan, suggests that the Miao and Tujia residents generally support cultural conservation, perceiving tourism positively when it aligns with their cultural values (Yun & Zhang, 2017). However, rapid tourism growth has also introduced environmental and sociocultural challenges. In Lijiang, Yunnan, home to the Naxi people, the influx of tourists has led to the dilution of local culture and even forced migration of residents (Huibin et al., 2012). Therefore, to ensure that the benefits of tourism adequately outweigh the costs, the industry must be regulated in a way that prioritizes the residents' quality of life.

Specific research on Xijiang Miao Village reveals a similar dynamic. Sun (2017) concludes that tourism commercialization positively influences tourists' experiences, providing a clear economic incentive for villages to prioritize tourist satisfaction in their cultural presentations. However, studies also show that tourism can

lead to economic divides within the village, with service providers deeply involved in tourism reaping most of the benefits, while others remain unaffected or experience neglect (Qiong, 2015). Despite these divides, Qiong (2015) argues that Xijiang Miao Village has largely succeeded in preserving its cultural identity through tourism, with a resurgence in festivals, traditional arts, language classes, and restaurants contributing to the revival of Miao culture.

2.1 Theories and Hypotheses

Considering the reviewed literature, there are several theories for the causes of cultural tourism and how it attracts tourists. The tourist industry primarily serves to boost the local economy, leveraging their unique cultural or natural resources to allure visitors to spend on travel and tourist services. Institutions and governments play an active role in shaping tourism landscapes in China, utilizing rural tourism as a means to not only stimulate local business but also to enhance a region's political and cultural visibility (Yi et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). Thus, in order to maximize profit and maintain the continuous flow of visitors, local authorities focus on making these sites appealing by conforming to tourists' preconceptions and desires (Li, 2003).

Tourists could have a variety of motivations for visiting these sites, such as their desire to experience a different culture and lifestyle that they find special or exotic. However, especially with the underrepresentation of these minority communities, these tourists may already have a certain image or expectation of what the visited culture should look like (Becker, 2015). This gap between the authentic culture and the tourists' expectations may then cause simplification or alteration of the culture — in order to increase the appeal of their services, the culture may shift over time to cater to the "tourist gaze," presented in an inaccurate "exotic" manner. As Hewison (1987) argues, this eventually turns cultural heritage into "empty commodities."

With the development of social media, tourists are also often incentivized to visit a site by online advertising and social media trends. Research indicates that social media platforms have become critical tools for promoting tourist sites, allowing potential travelers to visualize destinations with photos and videos. Tourists' satisfaction with a destination is often

influenced by their social media engagement before and after their visit, which helps form prior expectations of that location and create idealized perceptions of the experience (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Algyapong & Yuan, 2022). Tourists' shared experiences online can continually influence future visitors, reinforcing these expectations and thus, the commodification of local cultures.

During a visit to the Xijiang Miao village, some personal observations suggested that its popularity is partly fueled by its presence on Chinese social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu or Douyin. Attractions popularized online were often overcrowded or full. Numerous services in the village seemed to be developed specifically for tourists, such as the high number of clothing rental stores where tourists would take photoshoots wearing traditional Miao clothing. There were artificial backdrops seemingly created for the purpose of helping tourists take attractive photos. With frequent, scheduled Miao performances and shuttle buses to transport tourists around the village, for example, the buildings and infrastructure of the village seemed to be fully designed around serving tourists.

3. Data and Methods

To analyze the sociocultural effects of cultural tourism on the local residents of Xijiang Qianhu Miao village, a questionnaire was created to inquire about both positive and negative effects. The questions mostly focused on the impact of the tourist industry on the residents' daily lives and the preservation of their culture, with a few other brief questions on the extent and causes of tourism in the village.

Questionnaires were distributed through in-person, spoken interviews with village residents, with respondents answering the questions verbally and the interviewer filling out the survey form with their response. Most questions had multiple-choice answers with an "Other" space for any other answers or opinions the respondents may have given, along with a few questions that were entirely short-answer. The multiple-choice options included both potential positive and negative effects based on previous studies and literature. The spoken interviews allowed for respondents to answer freely and easily despite the multiple-choice structure of the form itself, as well as ensured the accuracy of the responses with the

interviewer present to clarify any questions.

The sample frame of the survey consisted of local village residents throughout various housing areas of the Xijiang Miao village. The questionnaire also recorded each respondent's age, gender, and current job, with a final number of 62 responses. The responses were analyzed to examine the effects of tourism on cultural preservation and local life from the residents' perspectives themselves and better understand their overall attitudes towards the tourists.

It is also important to first acknowledge the possible biases that may affect the survey data. Since the questionnaires were distributed by a group of multiple people, there may have been slight discrepancies in how different interviewees framed or emphasized different questions. Additionally, as villagers were interviewed in a various range of settings, including shared living spaces with nearby relatives, which may have led to conformity bias in which the respondent may alter their answers to fit in with their family's opinions (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Issues regarding the tourist industry may be controversial for some residents to answer, as it is their village's main employment field and source of economic growth, possibly resulting in incomplete or hesitant responses. To address this, the questionnaire was designed with neutral language, and anonymity was ensured to encourage honest responses.

4. Findings

The respondents were relatively equally distributed amongst male and female, with 32 (51.6%) female respondents and 30 (48.4%) male respondents. Most respondents were aged in the 31-40 range at a number of 17. Common jobs of these respondents included restaurant owners, restaurant workers, and other small retail workers. As respondents were allowed to offer more than one answer per item, the total percentage of the following data tables exceeds 100%.

Table 1. Respondents' demographic information

Demographic	Percentage (%)
Gender	
Female	51.6

Male	48.4
Age	
16-20	16.1
21-30	19.4
31-40	22.6
41-50	27.4
50+	12.9

4.1 Extent of Tourism

In the section regarding the extent of the tourism that takes place in the Xijiang Miao Village, the vast majority of respondents (99.4%) agreed that there is a high number of tourists coming to visit the site, and 71% agree that this number has still continued to increase. Respondents reported that this development indeed began with a reform in 2008, and that tourist influx consistently during summer months. These tourists mostly come from places within China, especially Guizhou and its nearby provinces of Guangdong and Sichuan.

4.2 Causes of Tourism

The biggest draw factor for tourists seems to be the village's natural scenery, mentioned by 85.5% of respondents, followed by its cultural heritage at 61.3% and traditional food at 56.5%. This specifically reflects the village's scenic spot within the mountains, with most village structures being built into the mountainside. More than half of respondents agreed that the influx of tourists began due to environmental improvements (58.1%), promotion on social media (54.8%), and promotion by the government (51.6%). Several respondents additionally emphasized that a major draw factor is the number of popular photo-taking locations that have become trends for tourists to post online, fueling the influence of social media promotion. The natural mountainous scenery may contribute to the photo-taking trends as well.

Table 2. Respondents' opinions regarding the causes and attraction factors for tourists

Causes of tourism	Percentage (%)
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1. Draw factors for tourists	
a) Natural scenery	85.5
b) Cultural heritage	61.3
c) Specialty food	56.5
d) Activities and performances	43.5
e) Family entertainment	24.2
f) Promotion and advertisement	24.2
g) Exploring the unknown	4.9
2. Possible start of tourist trend	
a) Environmental improvement	58.1
b) Social media promotion	54.8
c) Government promotion	51.6
d) Appeal of unique resources	45.2
e) Improved quality of life	41.9
f) Cultural revival	32.3
g) Facility and infrastructure development	29
h) Increased demand for entertainment	9.7

4.3 Positive Impacts

The majority of respondents agreed that the economic boost was a clear benefit from the development of tourism at the village, with increased employment, increased income, and economic prosperity being the top three most commonly chosen responses (at 88.7%, 72.6%, and 72.6% respectively). Regarding sociocultural effects on tourism, there was a greater range of responses, including increased cultural influence (48.4%) and preservation of Miao architecture (62.9%), clothing (61.3%), activities (48.4%), and crafts (41.9%). The buildings throughout the village have maintained their traditional, wooden *diaojiaolou* style. Clothing rental services have been very popular amongst tourists, with which visitors can try on ethnic outfits for photoshoots, greatly increasing the available opportunities to wear Miao clothing and outside awareness of the culture.

Respondents emphasized the increase in cultural pride due to tourism. They noted that

they have “discovered more about their own culture,” that “available services have increased because tourists have increased,” and that they have found more value in their own culture. One 22-year-old interviewee stated that the interaction with the outside world is especially beneficial because it “expands the local residents’ knowledge and language skills” and because it “boosts the confidence of the residents in their cultural heritage.”

Table 3. Respondents’ opinions regarding positive effects of tourism

Positive effects	Percentage (%)
1. Daily life and sense of community	
a) Economic prosperity	72.6
b) Increased cultural pride	37.1
c) Improvement in infrastructure	30.7
2. Protection of Miao culture	
a) Increased influential power	48.4
b) Increased society’s awareness of the culture	16.1
2a. Preserved elements of Miao culture	
a) Architectural style	62.9
b) Traditional clothing	61.3
c) Cultural activities	48.4
d) Arts and crafts	41.9
e) Natural landscape	29.3
f) Intangible cultural heritage	22.6
g) Ecological environment	22.6
h) Lifestyle	11.3
i) Religious beliefs and rituals	8.1
j) Other	8.1
4a. Economic benefits	
a) Increased employment	88.7
b) Increased income	72.6

4.4 Negative Impacts

The responses regarding negative effects of tourism were a lot more confined to a few specific options with a much smaller range of answers, but there were a lot more respondents that chose “other” (27.4%). They focused mostly on changes in everyday life: a more fast-paced, pressured life (43.6%) and a loss of their original lifestyle (48.4%). Some other common answers included an increase in prices throughout the village (64.7%), an overall worsened environment (43.5%), and the commercialization of Miao culture (66.1%). Overall, regarding the downsides of tourism, most residents are concerned about the more chaotic lifestyle rather than any specific effects on Miao culture other than general commercialization. One recurring response from the “Other” option was that transportation has become very difficult for local residents. With the massive influx of tourists every day, they expressed frustration that they often cannot get their cars into the village or find parking spaces.

Additionally, some “Other” responses offer more insight into the “lost elements of Miao culture” section. Several respondents noted that while Miao culture is being more actively shared with the outside world, it has already been simplified or altered for the tourists’ satisfaction — and even that the “preferences of tourists have changed the locals’ own understanding of their culture.” Additionally, while the clothing and architecture seemed to be the best-preserved elements of Miao culture, some residents noted that “the building materials have changed” and especially that “clothing rentals and photoshoots have created a gap between original ethnic clothing and the tourists’ perception.”

Table 4. Respondents’ opinions regarding negative effects of tourism

Negative effects	Percentage (%)
1. Daily life and sense of community	
a) Life is more fast-paced	43.6
b) Increased pressure	38.7
c) Loss of cultural values	16.1

d) Increased social conflict	12.9
2. Protection of Miao culture	
a) Culture commercialization	66.1
b) Environmental pollution	24.2
c) Culture deterioration	19.4
2a. Lost elements of Miao culture	
a) Lifestyle	48.4
b) Other	27.4
c) Religious beliefs and rituals	19.4
d) Traditional clothing	14.5
e) Intangible cultural heritage	14.5
f) Architectural style	12.9
g) Ecological environment	12.9
h) Arts and crafts	9.7
i) Natural landscape	4.9
j) Cultural activities	3.2
4a. Economic challenges	
a) Increase in prices	64.7
b) Environmental damage	43.5

4.5 Overall Changes Caused by Tourism

The vast majority of respondents agreed that the tourism industry has led to an increase in employment and income (91.9%) and the rapid building of hotels and restaurants in the village (90.3%). Some other changes that respondents noted include the commercialization of Miao handicrafts (53.2%), frequent performances (51.6%), and an influx of skilled workers (41.9%). With the rapid increase of tourists and hospitality services in the village, a range of businesses have been created to sell Miao products to visitors, such as craft stores and dance shows. This can lead to both a boost in employment and simultaneously, the risk of over-commercialization.

Finally, the last two questions of the survey asked respondents what they hope tourists can learn or understand about Miao culture, and to what degree this has been achieved.

Table 5. Respondents' opinions regarding village changes caused by tourism

Overall effects	Percentage (%)
2b. Changes made to fulfill tourist needs	
a) Commercialization of handicrafts	53.2
b) Presentation of culture	25.8
c) Facility construction	24.2
d) No change	4.9
3. Village services and architecture	
a) More hotels and restaurants	90.3
b) More activities and performances	51.6
c) More public transportation	35.5
d) Improved service quality	25.9
e) Greater diversity of building functions	25.8
4. Economic changes	
a) Increase in employment and income	91.9
b) Brain gain (influx of skilled workers)	41.9
c) Improved infrastructure	12.9
d) Improved business structure	9.7

Out of the interviewees that shared a cultural aspect they wished for tourists to understand, most revealed this was slightly achieved (57.9%), followed by mostly achieved (26.3%) and not achieved (15.8%). No respondents answered that their wish was fully achieved. It is important to note that most respondents chose to answer the second question generally without giving a specific answer to the first. Out of those who chose "not achieved," corresponding answers included their "farming culture," that their "traditional clothing has been changed," and "village basketball." For "slightly achieved," answers included traditional dances, that "original clothing has been changed for photoshoots," and that their "lifestyle has changed." One 70-year-old respondent stated

that she hopes tourists would “better understand a more real, authentic version of their life and culture.” For “mostly achieved,” answers included *lu sheng* instrument playing and folklore, but most did not specify.

Table 6. Respondents’ opinions regarding the degree that tourists have learned about their culture

Degree achieved	Percentage (%)
Fully achieved	0
Mostly achieved	26.3
Slightly achieved	57.9
Not achieved	15.8

Some trends in the interview responses also revealed deeper insights into how tourism affected the village. Notably, there may be a variation in the trend of answers depending on how close the respondent lived to the main tourist areas. Five respondents explicitly noted in their interviews that, as residents of the “upper mountain area” or “non-tourist area,” “the tourists have had almost no effects on their daily lives.” Two of those respondents even commented that the “village’s development is uneven between the lower and upper areas.” Those with closer proximity to tourist hotspots seemed to experience more direct impacts, both positive and negative. Evidently, those in the “upper” or more remote parts of the village seemed to experience significantly less impacts, both positive and negative, than those in closer proximity to tourist hotspots. This could help explain the many outlier responses that stated that tourism didn’t greatly affect the village or even its economy. However, since the living locations of each respondent were not recorded, further research and possibly a second round of interviews would be required to fully conclude whether there is an uneven level of development across the village, with the lower areas experiencing much more infrastructure improvements.

Additionally, it is important to note that many interviewees were uncertain about some of the items on the questionnaire and left several questions unanswered, so some data regarding the response frequencies do not represent the

entire sampling frame. This may indicate that some residents did not engage deeply with Miao culture before the rise of tourism and are therefore unsure of how the culture has changed over time. This could additionally reveal that the changing and commodification of Miao culture has skewed the cultural understanding of some village residents themselves.

5. Discussion

The results of these interviews suggest that, while the development of the tourist industry has brought the Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village major economic benefits and some increase in cultural awareness, it has also left significant negative effects on the authenticity of its culture and lifestyle. In fact, the options regarding economic improvements were the only effects that received a response frequency of over 80%, including increased employment, income, and job creation through the establishment of hotels and restaurants. There is also a noticeable emphasis on increased influential power and the preservation of traditional clothing and architecture, alongside concerns about the commercialization of Miao culture, overcrowding, and increased pressure on daily life.

Furthermore, a closer examination of the free responses reveals that many villagers hold a negative attitude towards tourist development. Several respondents mentioned that, while tourists show more interest in Miao culture, what is presented to them has often been altered to better fit tourist expectations. This creates tension between cultural preservation and the demands of tourism. For example, although residents frequently answered that traditional architecture and clothing were the most preserved cultural elements, there were mixed opinions on whether their authenticity has truly been protected in their presentation to visitors. This reveals that there may be an increasing gap between how much of the “preserved” culture has remained true to its origins and how much has been reshaped for economic gain.

5.1 Limitations

There are some noted limitations to this study. As mentioned above, the questionnaire data may be skewed because a significant number of respondents left items unanswered, unsure of some questions that examined their culture’s history more deeply. As one respondent emphasized, even many local residents have

misunderstandings about their culture, likely because of these modifications that occurred after the influx of tourists. The relatively small sample size of 63, constrained by the nature of the interviews, limits the generalizability of the findings. A second round of interviews with a stronger focus on recording respondent demographics should be conducted to investigate the relationship, if any, of age, job, gender, and location within the village on how positive their attitudes are on cultural tourism. As aforementioned in the findings section, this would help investigate a possible dependency of the village on tourism for economic or infrastructure improvement, highlighting a potential neglect of residential areas farther from tourist hotspots. A more quantitative or longitudinal study could also complement this research, offering a more factual view of how Miao culture has evolved in the village, rather than relying on solely the residents' observations. Furthermore, future studies could explore the role of Chinese social media in promoting tourist destinations. Many respondents indicated that tourists are drawn to the village for vacation photoshoots and traditional clothing rentals, suggesting a stronger connection between media trends, tourist motivations, and cultural commodification.

5.2 Implications

This study has found that while cultural tourism has brought significant economic improvements and increased awareness of the Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village, it has simultaneously caused several negative sociocultural effects, adding pressure to the daily lives of its residents and compromising the authenticity of their culture to accommodate tourists. In order to maximize the benefits of cultural tourism and minimize these negative effects, a balance needs to be struck between economic development and cultural preservation. Local governments and cultural institutions play an essential role in ensuring the protection of the village residents and the greater Miao community. Efforts must be made to limit the influence of tourists over the development of the village, empowering Miao residents to develop a stable livelihood beyond the tourist industry and thus, allowing them to maintain the endangered aspects of their culture without the need to meet external expectations. This effort could also lead to more balanced development across different areas of the

village, ensuring that regions farther from tourist hotspots are not neglected in terms of economic and infrastructure improvements. Additionally, promoting greater awareness of the cultural aspects that have been lost or altered could help foster a more informed approach to both cultural preservation and sustainable tourism development.

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