A Landscape of Travel

Chio, Jenny T., Harrell, Stevan

Published by University of Washington Press

Chio, Jenny T. and Stevan Harrell.
A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/29418.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/29418

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1120675
On a bright summer afternoon in 2007, a group of Chinese travel-media photographers, editors, and publishers gathered in a Beijing bookstore for a casual brainstorming session. Their task at hand was to discuss the creation of a Chinese-language guidebook to China for the domestic tourism market, but under the imprint of an iconic Western travel guide brand, which I’ll call “Travelprints.” I was invited along by a magazine photographer, a friend of a friend, who knew that I had been living in two rural ethnic tourism villages in Southwest China and that I wanted to know more about the Chinese travel industry. In the villages, I learned just how vital good publicity is in creating and maintaining the success of a tourism destination. Village residents in each place loved to recall stories about the photographers, writers, and television crews (domestic and foreign) who had visited and who inevitably had become enamored with the warm hospitality of the local community as well as the beauty of the surrounding landscape. These villagers were proud of being seen by the media and by people across the country and the world. Now in Beijing, I wanted to listen in on how Chinese travel-media producers talked about their work, which in large part was promoting and selling the experience of tourism to potential travelers.

The discussion focused on how to create a Chinese-language edition of an internationally established travel guide brand for domestic tourism in
China. This inverted the common association of the brand with “off the beaten track” travel in exotic, far-flung destinations for budget-conscious, presumably “Western” tourists (xifang, i.e., from North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand). The publishers wanted to see if they could take the Travelprints brand and localize it just enough to appeal to the exploding market for in-country tourism without losing the cachet of its perceived distinction as a Western, and therefore more cosmopolitan, perspective on travel. Up to this point, they had already published a number of Chinese-language Travelprints guidebooks to destinations outside of China. In large part, this was achieved by translating the English editions into Chinese and editing out certain parts that might be irrelevant for a Chinese audience (or potentially sensitive to Chinese censors) but leaving the bulk of the content intact. But in the case of a China guidebook for in-country tourism, the lead publisher explained that they could not simply translate the existing English-language Travelprints guidebook into Chinese and sell it in the Chinese market. How could they “domesticate” an international travel guide to China? Was there something different about Chinese domestic tourism?

Travelprints—indeed anyone interested in profiting from the domestic Chinese tourism market—faced a number of contradictory conditions. By the mid-2000s the staggering growth and market potential of domestic tourism in China could not be ignored. In 2006 the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) reported that there were nearly 1.4 billion domestic tourist trips taken, or approximately 1.06 trips taken per person (CNTA 2007). In 2010 the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported 2.1 billion domestic tourism trips taken, which, given China’s official population of 1.34 billion, translated to about 1.6 trips per person (NBS 2011). Chinese were traveling domestically in enough numbers to more than justify, and indeed to demand, a China guide from Travelprints. But such a guide had to offer its potential consumers something different, something distinctive, which in this case would be a certain status based off its brand. While the English-language Travelprints guidebook to China was associated with budget-minded, foreign “backpackers,” the travel-media publishers pointed out that the Chinese-language Travelprints guidebooks were generally purchased by a more well-to-do segment of the Chinese population: those who could afford to travel internationally and who wanted to do so in a more independent, worldly manner. After
all, the Chinese-language Travelprints guidebooks were some of the most expensive on the market—typically twice the price of other guides.

The problem with selling travel and tourism was its relationship to the actual content. For example, the point was raised that many Chinese tourists prefer to travel in groups with tour guides arranged through travel agencies, and as a result, these tourists often don’t bother with guidebooks. Of course, organized groups of tourists are not the target audience for Travelprints; the publisher acknowledged that this guide, even more than others, would ultimately be about branding. The Travelprints guide to domestic travel in China would need to emphasize its desirability as an international brand by appealing to the Chinese tourist who wanted to travel around China in a “Travelprints” kind of way. What might this kind of Chinese tourists want? Travelprints needed to figure out how to offer something just different enough from the current guidebook marketplace, but how were travel-media producers and others involved in the tourism industries, tasked with providing (or describing) the travel experience, supposed to give the tourist what they thought he or she wanted?

A suggestion was made that perhaps they could start by translating into Chinese the English-language Travelprints guidebook to Southwest China, because this region was already popular with both domestic and international tourists looking for a culturally exotic experience in some of China’s ethnic minority areas. But to the notion of simply duplicating the existing Travelprints guide written by non-Chinese authors, one travel magazine editor exclaimed: “Why would I want to hear what a foreigner has to say about Guizhou [one of the provinces covered in the English-language guide to Southwest China]?” This editor’s outburst revealed a deeper problem: how were they to provide interesting, different information about China to a domestic audience who already had a strong sense of what to expect and what they wanted to experience? In the marketplace for travel guides, the best-selling domestic guidebook at the time was a series called China Independent Travel (Zhongguo Zizhu You). Inexpensive and mostly full of practical details on distances, travel times, and hotels, these guides offered very little background information on destinations. However, the publisher scorned, without a history and culture section in a guidebook, tourism was just “getting out of the bus to take a picture, getting on the bus to take a nap” (xiache paizhao, shangche shuijiao). Relatively speaking, the existing Chinese-language Travelprints
guidebooks to other countries and world regions contained quite a lot of background information; this was part of their perceived distinctiveness and would need to be written anew for a domestic audience.

When I interviewed the Travelprints publisher a few days after this brainstorming session, he said that although they still had no concrete plans, the ideas had been helpful. He mentioned that a Chinese-language Travelprints guidebook to China might include “foreign voices” to provide new perspectives and to promote “different types of discoveries” (bù yíyang de faxiàn) for Chinese tourists while maintaining the brand’s international flair. This was one of the first attempts by an international travel guide brand, he said, to “go native” in the Chinese travel guidebook market. After listening to the publisher’s musings on what his books might offer a domestic tourist that would be “different,” I was struck by the similarities between his concerns and those expressed to me by the residents of Ping’an and Upper Jidao villages, where I had been conducting fieldwork on tourism, development, and rural social change for the previous year and a half.

While the travel-media producers in Beijing strove to find the most appealing and distinctive means of describing the tourism experience in order to sell more guidebooks, villagers in Ping’an and Upper Jidao voiced uncertainties over how to “do tourism” (gāo lǚyóu), or more precisely, how to do the work of tourism successfully. For village residents this entailed, in part, being different enough from other nearby tourism destinations to attract tourists, but it also meant calculating whether or not they could earn more money working as a migrant outside the village. For both villagers and guidebook publishers, the work of tourism was to make travel desirable as a consumable experience for tourists and therefore profitable for themselves. Whether in a rural ethnic tourism village or in a publisher’s office in Beijing, the issues raised at the Travelprints meeting highlight the contested meanings of tourism and the difficulty of making sense of the experience of travel. From these perspectives tourism was no longer an activity engaged in by tourists but rather something enacted and made possible by those who have to do the work of tourism.

This book explores the myriad ways in which rural ethnic minority village residents are doing tourism in China today, in response to and entrenched in the country’s dramatic socioeconomic transformations, programs for rural development and modernization, and global con-
cerns for cultural heritage preservation. Like the travel-media producers I met in Beijing in 2007, the people who reside in tourism villages such as Ping’an and Upper Jidao confronted similar questions about how to create, construct, and provide tourism experiences for tourists; they debated and occasionally doubted the possible benefits of doing tourism for themselves, their families, and their communities. Tourism is never just leisure or economics but rather a matter of perspective, representation, and imagination. Guidebook publishers in Beijing, guesthouse owners in Ping’an, and members of the Upper Jidao Tourism Association were all engrossed in the common project of teasing out the constituent parts of tourism as they envisioned their opportunities and ambitions within this moment in contemporary China. As they imagined what tourists might want, they engaged in acts of imagining what tourism and travel meant to themselves, as individuals, framed by their own experiences and desires. As tourism was produced and problematized by village residents, travel itself became meaningful in revealing ways. By paying close attention to the concerns and aspirations expressed by Ping’an and Upper Jidao residents as they lived in, through, and with tourism, this book presents these circumstances as a landscape of travel—a landscape in which the act and the imagination of travel become key nodes through which tourists, migrants, ethnic minorities, mainstream majorities, rural villagers, and urban dwellers negotiate and make sense of current social, economic, and political conditions.

This book aims to build an anthropological understanding of the contemporary regimes of labor and leisure in China today by approaching tourism as one part, and at present one very integral part, of life in rural ethnic China. In tourism, after all, one person’s leisure is another person’s labor. At stake is our knowledge of the work and debates involved in making tourism possible and how these intersect with, or interrupt, the ongoing formation of rural, ethnic subjectivities and livelihoods in China today. The focus is the doing of tourism—in other words, the work that is conducted and debated by village residents as they pursue their own life goals and aspirations within the growing tourism economy. The analytical and practical significance of not privileging the tourist in tourism studies is emphasized throughout this book; meaning-making in tourism is not the exclusive purview of those who travel from destination to destination, from site to sight. Rather, as my ethnography shows, the people and com-
munities who do the work of tourism are just as, if not more, invested in making tourism meaningful. The “front stage” of tourism (MacCannell 1999 [1976], building on Goffman 1990 [1959])—or what is seen by a tourist—cannot be interpreted without due diligence to the “backstage,” or what creates the conditions of possibility for tourism. What happens in the backstage occurs in relation to a host of other imperatives, claims, and desires. These backstage conditions determine how tourism can, should, and will be done in rural ethnic villages like Ping’an and Upper Jidao.

FIELDWORK, METHODOLOGY, AND THE VILLAGES

It shouldn’t surprise me how much things have changed each time I return to Ping’an and Upper Jidao, and yet every trip leaves me somewhat astonished. In 2012, the number of multistory, concrete hotels in Ping’an (an ethnic Zhuang village in Guangxi) had doubled while the number of village residents who ran family guesthouses appeared to have decreased. Many villagers had found new opportunities in the tourism backstage—for example, by buying produce and meat from regional markets and reselling them at a markup in the village to restaurants and hotels, which were increasingly run by outside entrepreneurs. From the looks of it, business was still very good in Ping’an; tourists streamed up and down the mountainside in regular waves, and the entire Guilin Longji Terraced Fields Scenic Area (Guilin Longji Titian Jingqu), of which Ping’an is a part, was expanding its tourism offerings and sights. Clearly, villagers were invested, both emotionally and financially, in the ongoing success of tourism in Ping’an, but at the same time the village elementary school had closed due to low enrollment. Families with school-aged children were moving to the nearby township and county towns, in Heping and Longsheng, and subleasing their businesses to relatives or other contractors.

In Upper Jidao (an ethnic Miao village in Guizhou), construction plans for a new parking lot, granaries, and the village sewage system were under way, funded in large part by a World Bank project loan to the provincial government. A much anticipated village hotel had not been completed because of mismanaged funds; instead, six furnished guestrooms and an indoor shower and toilet had been built on the third floor of a village house, paid for by a philanthropist from Hong Kong who had connections with
provincial tourism officials. Some tourists still came to Upper Jidao, but the general opinion throughout the village was that tourism numbers had fallen since 2008, when the nearby Xijiang Thousand Households Miao Village (Xijiang Qianhu Miaozhai) had been redeveloped and reopened as the region’s premier Miao ethnic tourism destination. The World Bank project promised a number of much needed and desired infrastructure improvements to Upper Jidao, but residents expressed doubts about the future benefits of tourism on their everyday lives and livelihoods.

This book represents an effort at making sense of the transformations in the lives and expectations of residents in these two rural ethnic minority villages in the early years of the new millennium. When I began fieldwork in Ping’an and Upper Jidao in 2006, the Chinese government had just released its 11th Five Year Plan, in which they foregrounded rural development as a key national policy, dubbed Build a New Socialist Countryside (jianshe shehui zhuyi xin nongcun). The development of rural tourism was widely promoted as a significant means of achieving the stated goals of improving rural-urban relations and rural living conditions. But what did the building of a New Socialist Countryside and this attention to rural life mean for the residents of Ping’an and Upper Jidao villages? Were village residents satisfied with the ideas and suggestions put forward in government policy? What else did they want from tourism? Has tourism, which was so hotly promoted in 2006 as an integral part of the strategy for developing rural China, ultimately made a difference to them?

Instead of locating the tourist at the center, as the active subject who “does tourism,” my analysis takes the “hosts” as the primary actors who do tourism. It is the host communities, in conjunction with and in response to diverse local, regional, and state imperatives, who create the conditions of possibility for tourism. This was reflected in the way village residents talked about tourism; in China, rural tourism is often referred to as nong jia le, which I loosely translate as “peasant family happiness” for reasons outlined in chapter 2. This is a name and category used generally to describe tourism businesses that involve family-run rural guesthouses, rural-themed restaurants, and the experience of relaxation and leisure in a rural, homey environment. Village residents frequently use the phrase nong jia le as an activity; for example, when talking about how they might further develop tourism, they would sometimes say “we could do nong jia le” (women keyi gao nong jia le).
To examine tourism from the perspectives of village residents and not tourists, I situate the transformative experience of tourism as development within what I call a landscape of travel. The notion of a landscape—criss-crossed by travel routes for tourists and migrants as well as all of the hopes, dreams, desires, and disappointments associated with these types of mobility—provides a framework for understanding how tourism is designed to and indeed does become a part of everyday experiences in places like Ping’an and Upper Jidao. Moreover, as I elaborate in the introduction, by bringing together the concept of landscape with the idea of travel, my analysis integrates two fundamental characteristics of tourism itself: sightseeing (visuality) and human movement (mobility). Much of the literature in tourism studies demonstrates how visuality and mobility are important for tourists, but my purpose is to understand how visuality and mobility are equally, if not more, significant and transformational for destination communities.

By “visuality,” I am referring to the “social fact of vision” (Foster 1988; Mitchell 2005; and Mirzoeff 2011), which is exemplified in the frequent arguments over the outward appearance of a village (waimao) or how terraced fields should be maintained in order to reproduce well in photographs. By “mobility,” I am considering multiple forms of, and diverse reasons for, travel, including tourism and migration. Thus the landscape of travel I map is an ethnographic project in taking seriously how travel influences individual understandings of opportunity and identity; how rural ethnic villagers acquire the skills and knowledge to renovate their homes to better suit tourism and achieve modern living conditions; and how village residents learn to be touristic to successfully adapt their tourism industries to attract potential visitors.

My fieldwork took place primarily in Ping’an, in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and Upper Jidao, in Guizhou (see map). Both Guangxi and Guizhou are equivalent as provincial-level administrative units in China. Guangxi and Guizhou share a border, and regular public bus services connect towns throughout the region. The villages were chosen for their current participation in tourism industries and tourism-based development programs, their popularity (as evidenced in provincial, national, and international media coverage, in guidebooks, and in numbers of incoming tourists), and their promoted status as rural ethnic tourism destinations. Ping’an (population approximately 850) is a single
Surname village, Liao, and residents who trace their lineages to families within the village are all ethnically Zhuang; it is located an hour and a half north of Guilin, a well-known city of cultural, historical, and touristic significance in China. Ping’an is administratively part of Guilin, a prefecture-level city. In Upper Jidao (population approximately 400), local village families are ethnically Miao and the village is comprised of two lineages, surnamed Pan and Huang. Upper Jidao is located in the Qian-dongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, whose administrative capital is Kaili, a county-level city about forty minutes by bus from Upper Jidao. Kaili is three hours by bus from Guiyang, the provincial capital of Guizhou.

Fieldwork in Ping’an and Upper Jidao was initially conducted over twenty-three months between 2006 and 2007, when I lived with a local family in each village for an extended period. Between 2007 and 2012, I visited the villages on average once a year, staying anywhere from three days to three weeks. I have also spent time outside of Ping’an and Upper Jidao with village residents, as they themselves traveled for work and sometimes leisure to regional towns near their home villages and to factories in Guangdong. I met, interviewed, and discussed tourism, rural development, media representations, and ethnic identity in China with university professors, government officials (including tourism bureau officials), tour guides, journalists, and graduate students in cities across the country, including Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Guilin, Guiyang, Kunming, and Xiamen. These conversations, across the spaces of village and urban China, helped me to comprehend the broader intersections of domestic tourism, rural development, and discourses of ethnicity in China today. Ultimately, however, it was my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the villages—including participant observation, a household survey, and semistructured interviews—that illuminated the simple fact that what these villagers are participating in is best understood as a process of learning how to be ethnic and rural in particular ways that have emerged in tension and in tandem with larger national policies for development and modernization. Doing tourism is therefore a deeply significant means through which village residents are making sense of their place and role in these broader transformations.

My initial encounter with rural ethnic tourism in China occurred in 2002, when I visited Ping’an for the first time. The day I went to see the
terraced fields was cold and foggy, and although I hadn’t planned well enough in advance to stay overnight, the place stuck out in my mind not only because the terraced fields were truly breathtaking but because of the ticket offices. The idea of charging entry to a “real” village both baffled and fascinated me. It was enough to prompt me to revisit the village in the summer of 2004, when I stayed for a few nights at a local family’s guesthouse, chosen simply because the mother of the household was the brashest, most insistent, and most unrelenting woman who immediately approached me as I stepped off the public bus at the village parking lot. Since then, I have almost always stayed with her family whenever I visit Ping’an. In 2008, her family began building a large, concrete hotel just steps away from their older wooden home, and in the summer of 2012, I was honored to be their first overnight guest in one of the new rooms.

Over the past decade, I have followed the ways in which Ping’an has attempted, perhaps unintentionally, to transform itself from a destination for landscape photography based on sight-seeing into a more ethnic tourism scenic area. This is in large part a response to the changing discourses of tourism, rural development, and ethnicity in China. The history of tourism in Ping’an is grounded in a particular way of looking at the terraced fields that surround the village, and these fields remain the village’s most highly valued asset. They are now highly contested, however, because they are the least capable aspect of tourism in the village for generating income for residents, as discussed in chapter 1. Discord characterizes the political and economic relationships between the village of Ping’an, the tourism management company in charge of the Longji Scenic Area of which Ping’an is a part, and the local county government.

My first visit to Upper Jidao was in March 2006, at the suggestion of Zhang Xiaosong of Guizhou Normal University and the Guizhou Tourism Bureau. By then, Upper Jidao had already been marked as a site for tourism development. Under the guise of a World Bank project loan application and a program implemented in the early 2000s by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which is part of the United Nations, Upper Jidao was selected by a team of consultants and government officials to be a part of a “demonstration project” (UNWTO 2006, 41–44). The plan for Upper Jidao was consciously constructed in light of experiences from other tourism villages, including Ping’an; in fact, in 2004, organizers of this rural tourism development program in Guizhou arranged for a group
of villagers, including two men from Upper Jidao, to visit Ping’an as part of a study tour. In many ways, Upper Jidao is a relative newcomer to the rural village-as-ethnic tourism destination trend in China. However, it is located within a few kilometers of the most well-known and long-standing ethnic Miao tourism villages in southeastern Guizhou: Upper Langde and Xijiang (on the former, see Donaldson 2007 and 2011 as well as Oakes 1998 and 2011; on the latter, see Schein 2000).

With the involvement of regional, provincial, national, and international organizations and agencies, the pace and impact of tourism-related changes in this corner of Guizhou have been large scale. The bigger idea is to turn the entire prefecture, Qiandongnan, into an ethnic tourism “heartland,” while raising the standard of living in both Kaili and the surrounding rural countryside. A wider, straighter highway has shortened travel times between Kaili and Upper Jidao from an hour to about forty minutes. The construction of this highway was timed with the 2008 Beijing Olympics; village residents in Upper Jidao recall with pride the Olympic torch procession that passed by the village. The difficulty for villagers has been in negotiating their newcomer status within the already existing ethnic tourism market in southeastern Guizhou, while grappling with the continued daily concerns that face households who still rely on subsistence farming and migrant remittances. Since 2010, whenever I visit, I find myself spending more and more time in Kaili with friends from Upper Jidao who have since moved to the city. Their travels back and forth between Upper Jidao and Kaili are reshaping the fabric of everyday life in the village. The new, improved roads certainly do facilitate more continuous movement between the city and the village for both tourists and village residents, thus demonstrating the continued complexity of understanding mobility as a social process.

In many respects, the individuals from Upper Jidao who choose to migrate are no different than other migrant laborers across China; they leave often with the intent to return and return often with a desire to leave again. What made Upper Jidao and Ping’an so fascinating, however, was the layering of mobilities in each place, the interwoven trajectories of tourists and migrants cross-cutting everyday village livelihoods. Migrants from Upper Jidao and Ping’an were returning home to find their homes transformed into tourist destinations for urbanites from some of the places they had themselves worked and lived in. As I lived in each village
community, I found myself drawn to the stories of travel told by returned migrants; their narratives of where they had been and what they had seen across China highlighted, and indeed asserted, their subjectivities and their village socialities in rural ethnic tourism—a perspective I explore in chapter 3. Like research conducted by Tamara Jacka (2006) with migrant women in Beijing and by Rachel Murphy (2002) among returnees in rural Jiangxi, I became interested in the individual stories of travel and how, from these narratives, potential, current, and former migrants were giving form to and making sense of contemporary social and economic opportunities. In Upper Jidao and Ping’an, these opportunities are in tourism, which operates in ways particular to the contemporary regimes of labor and leisure in China. Thus mobility is doubly revealing as an analytical perspective on both individual, subjective experiences of encountering the world beyond one’s home and as a shared, community chance for an active, productive role in national modernization agendas.

Whether discussing migration or tourism, one conceptual figure around which many of the village residents shaped their stories of travel was that of home. The element of “home” is often invoked in popular forms of homestays and family-run guesthouses (Yu Wang 2007) and frequently plays a central role in the marketing of rural tourism. The push to develop village hotels and guesthouses in Ping’an and Upper Jidao was representative of this trend, encompassed in the promotion of rural tourism as nong jia le, or peasant family happiness, where the middle character jia stands for both family and home. For returned migrants, however, the concept of “home” was complicated by their own travels and by their perspectives on leaving home and then returning to create and sell their “home” to tourists. For these people there was one personal, remembered understanding of home from not-being-at-home and then another layer of collective nostalgia added upon return when their homes were changing to meet tourist demands for the fulfillment of urban nostalgic longings. Participating in rural, ethnic tourism was inevitably entrenched in a need to reconfigure local ideas and ideals about what kinds of home were desired, by whom, and to fulfill what needs.

As an ethnographer trained in visual anthropology, I entered my field research sites with the clear intention of recording footage that would eventually be edited into an ethnographic film (Chio dir. 2013). Throughout my fieldwork I shared clips and sequences from my footage with vil-
lage residents; these collective viewings of video recordings made in each village provided a deeper sense of how tourism was cultivating a particular “way of seeing” in the communities. Using visual media in this way allowed me to explore not only how people in Ping’an and Upper Jidao responded to my own visual representations of their communities but also to discover their expectations of what tourism, and rural villages-as-ethnic tourism destinations, should look like. Collaborative visual research was a multivalent learning process for me as an anthropologist and for residents in both Ping’an and Upper Jidao as stakeholders in China’s rural, ethnic tourism industry. Much of my thinking on and analysis of visuality in the context of tourism has been deeply shaped by the comments, reactions, and questions of the villagers who watched my footage and, in 2010 and 2012 as the film took shape, reviewed rough and final cuts of the film itself.

Over the course of my research, I integrated video production into the ethnographic flesh of my project by using digital video’s portability and its visibility as a means of creating data about living in, through, and beyond tourism in China. I also realized that by sharing footage of one village with residents of the other, I made my project more transparent to the villagers and myself. They could see where I was when I wasn’t in their village and get a sense of what I was doing. We talked about how to produce images and what images are good for. Not only did this model the tourism “sight-seeing” experience but it became a part of how we all were learning about what tourism entailed. Discussions with village residents in Ping’an and Upper Jidao about the visual representation of rural Chinese villages revealed the lasting importance of knowing how to be seen in tourism. This in turn focused my data collection and analysis on the moments and sites at which this visual knowledge emerged during encounters with tourists or when this knowledge was invoked for the purposes of understanding where tourism was headed. My analysis thus benefited immensely from using video as a research method and later through the process of editing the film itself.

It was apparent that local village perspectives on tourism and travel were greatly influenced and shaped by mass media representations (beyond my own footage). This is what prompted me to spend time with travel-media producers in Beijing after completing many months of ethnographic fieldwork in the villages. So many of the conversations I had and opinions that
had been expressed in Ping’an and Upper Jidao dovetailed with larger, media-based narratives of travel, and indeed residents were always quick to engage with any and all media personnel who showed up in the villages. Television programs beamed in idealized images of urban living, while tourism travel shows demonstrated to the villagers just what tourists want to see and do when in a rural village. As Arjun Appadurai (1996, 53–54) has noted, “more persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms.”

Pushing this notion further, Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein (2006, 22) have pointed out that “messages about other places are being transmitted through all these media at a remarkable pace and density. And desires to tour or live in these places seem to have burgeoned concomitantly.”

Notions of place and home are increasingly complicated by the transmission of images and stories of “other” places through media representations. Coupled with the occasional researcher or development consultant who showed up unannounced and usually asked too many questions, villagers were learning from a plethora of sources just what constituted contemporary tourism practices and discourses. I came to understand the value village residents placed on learning about tourism through a variety of means—from direct interaction with tourists to training sessions funded by international donors to media portrayals of their villages, their ethnic group, and rural tourism activities. The residents of Ping’an and Upper Jidao depended on “being seen” for their local tourism industries to be profitable. For the tourists who visited these places, seeing ethnic, rural livelihoods in all of their olfactory, tactile realities was a part of the anticipated and desired experience. Learning how to be seen was therefore integral to the future success of tourism in these villages.

**SCOPE OF THE BOOK**

Drawing on critical approaches in tourism studies as well as anthropological perspectives on contemporary Chinese culture and society, this book investigates the spheres of power, modernization, and nation-building latent in tourism with the goal of understanding how rural ethnic Chinese village residents make sense of their livelihoods and formulate new aspirations. I situate my analysis at the nexus of mobility and visuality precisely
because these are the two social processes I found to be most influential and dominant in shaping resident opinions on how best to do tourism in Ping’an and Upper Jidao. The introduction lays out the conceptual framework of this book, focusing on how an anthropological approach to landscape expands the critical study of tourism for understanding both the physical practices and material spaces through which travel is imagined and realized. I delve more deeply into notions of mobility and visuality to account for, and to account with, the multiple social actors in tourism as a transformative social phenomenon for destination communities, in contrast to many earlier works in tourism studies that have tended to emphasize the tourist experience of tourism.

Chapter 1 situates these villages within the contexts of ethnic identity and visual representations of ethnicity in China since 1949, drawing attention to how the knowledge and discourses produced in the Ethnic Classification project (minzu shibie) influenced the later development and promotion of domestic tourism—in particular, tourism about the nation’s official ethnic minorities—since “reform and opening” (gaige kaifang) in the late 1970s. I describe the history of tourism and current conditions in the two villages, Ping’an and Upper Jidao. Chapter 2 discusses how tourism has fit into recent national policies and goals for rural development, in part by drawing on earlier, dominant discourses of rural livelihoods in China, to justify tourism as development and to produce a desirable, consumable rural ethnic tourism commodity for the contemporary market. I focus on the national campaign to build a New Socialist Countryside incorporated into the 11th Five Year Plan from 2006 to 2010 and the popular tourism trend dubbed nong jia le—the catchy gloss used to describe rural household-based tourism enterprises.

One of the major domestic issues that both the New Socialist Countryside policy and the national-level support for nong jia le tourism were intended to address was rural-to-urban internal migration and the attendant social consequences of “the largest voluntary migration in the history of the world” for both rural and urban China (Wasserstrom 2010, 122).7 The goal in the mid-2000s was to create enough opportunities in the countryside to convince able-bodied rural residents to stay, or to return, home. In chapter 3, I explore the perspectives of some returned rural migrants in Ping’an and Upper Jidao on tourism and development in their home villages. It is crucial to recognize and take seriously the
multiple, overlapping mobilities that Ping’an and Upper Jidao residents must account for on an everyday basis in order to acknowledge that tourism development itself holds very powerful, if frequently unarticulated, assumptions about who should and who should not travel.

Chapter 4 considers the visual work undertaken in each village as a part of doing tourism—from architectural renovations as homes are transformed into guesthouses and hotels to the migrants who come to Ping’an to find employment as ethnic minority models. Not everything is as it looks on the surface of a tourism village, and this chapter details how village residents conceive of and make sense of what I call “the politics of appearance” in ethnic tourism. This is a politics that ultimately determines who and what looks appropriately ethnic and rural enough for tourism and tourists, and village residents by necessity have had to learn how to work within these changing expectations. Chapter 5 examines the internal politics of tourism on relationships within each village and between nearby villages (some of which may or may not also be doing tourism). The importance of being able to present oneself as just different enough from neighboring villages becomes a key factor in achieving success and profits in the competitive tourism marketplace.

Finally, I conclude by considering how doing tourism for Ping’an and Upper Jidao residents is a process of learning how to be ethnic and rural, and this learning process is very much entrenched in their identities as modern, rural, and ethnic minority Chinese citizens. The conclusion centers on a short study tour I organized for a group of residents from Upper Jidao to visit Ping’an in 2007. I close by thinking through some of the more recent changes that have occurred in each village as a result of shifting local and national politics as well as individual aspirations and ambitions. Tourism is as much about the physical process of movement as it is about the imagination of meaningful experiences to be lived—and for the people I have met and befriended in Ping’an and Upper Jidao, their labors at providing a memorable leisure experience for tourists demand both respect and further attention to the complex and often contradictory factors involved in the work of tourism.