Article

Living with Colours and Pride: Tourism, Ethnicity, and Gender in Yunnan, China

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Abstract: The current research attempts to understand how gender relationship, livelihood, social structure, and identity evolve within tourism development. Data were collected on the sites from participant observations, in-depth interviews, and focus groups over the course of 12 research field trips from 1995 to 2019. This research provides evidence that family-based, small tourism business appears to survive well in volatile times. When family members establish their own network as equal decision makers, they tend to work together in tourism and help each other, leading to gender equality and interdependence in the relationship. They were also found to have expanded into other income streams and contributed to the career advancement of other members in the family or even the wider community. Gender gaps appear to be reduced, with ethnic woman often conducting better business than their male counterparts. Additionally, ethnic women have the opportunity to explore the potentials of their own capacity. They come into contact with the outside world and gain better social capital, along with expanding choices, and social recognition. They work hard as the hostess with dedication, warm heartedness, and local knowledge, winning respect and trust from the tourists. When ethnic women make an income directly from tourism, no matter how small it is, they have made a great step away from the previous patriarchal dominance. Tourism provides more choices for life with gender equality.

Keywords: china; ethnic women; gender equality; tourism; yunnan

1. Introduction

If a tourist looks for destinations with colourful and exotic lifestyles in China, then Yunnan would certainly be one of the more popular choices due to its high proportion of ethnic populations [1,2]. Approximately 92% of the total 1.3 billion Chinese people are Han by ethnicity [3]. Over 100 million Chinese are classified into 55 ethnic groups as a result of their family history, facial features, oral or written language, and other complex factors [3]. Located in Southwest China, Yunnan province hosts around 47 million people, and one third of them are ethnic groups [4]. Further, there are some ethnic groups that live only in Yunnan [3].

Ethnic women have been part of the tourist attraction where gender and ethnicity are packaged as the commodity to satisfy the pursuit of exotic ‘Other’ [7–9]. Many of the locals...
work hard with growing tourism but suffer from the loss of identity, power, and economic benefit [10–12]. With at least four million ethnic females in Yunnan being involved in tourism, either willingly or by default [5], there is an increasing urgency to understand how gender works in tourism when ethnic women are playing an essential part. Hence, this research attempts to provide insights on this question: What is the role of females in the survival of small family businesses? More specifically, the research is engaged in addressing three research objectives:

(1) To understand how ethnicity affects the life of females in Yunnan;
(2) To explore how gender relationship has shifted in the past two decades;
(3) To provide evidence on whether, or how, tourism has impacted gender relationships in Yunnan.

This research is based on the authors’ experiences as travellers and researchers in Yunnan over the past 20 years. Detailed data were collected from people in Yunnan who are involved in tourism for the purpose of understanding how gender relationships, livelihood, social structure, and identity evolve with the volatility of tourism.

This paper first undertakes a literature review on the related publications before presenting its research methods. Discussions are then derived from interviews and case studies on family, tourism, and the future. This research also undertakes analysis on the growth path of ethnic women. The paper ends with a note on celebrating the achievement of ethnic women in Yunnan in tourism, other business areas, society, personal growth, and beyond.

2. Literature Review

Tourism research has witnessed remarkable growth and diversification since the 1970s [13]. Although there is an increasing attention to gender equality, the challenges inherent in gender mainstreaming are replicated, or even exacerbated, in the tourism sector [14]. The following review attempts to explore how tourism research has addressed gender relationships and the role of ethnic women.

2.1. Tourism and Gender

After the initial feminist movement from over two centuries ago, gender inequality is still very much alive, although the challenges are different in the ‘post equal opportunity’ world [15]. The feminisation of the paid labour force occurred with social and economic changes in the twentieth century in the West [16]. However, its impact remains debatable as men continue to dominate the business world [17,18].

The first papers on tourism and gender were written in the 1980s, and the general trajectory has been upwards [13]. A Special Issue on gender and tourism was initiated by the Annals of Tourism Research in 1995. Mountain Research and Development published a Special Issue on Gender and Sustainable Development in Mountains in 2014. China Tourism Review presented a Special Issue on Gender and Tourism Development in China in 2018. Tourism research is paying more attention to gender relations over time, the construction or deconstruction of gender identity, and the differences and boundaries in power hierarchies [19–21].

Margaret Swain [12] (pp. 258–259) defined gender as identity and social relations in order to emphasise the dynamic and political struggle of gender construction in tourism. Kinnaird and Hall [22] proposed a framework with relevance to gender and sexuality construction in order to address identity and power in tourism contexts.

It is important to explore the gendered complexities of tourism and the power relations involved [20]. Researchers recognise the gendered impact of tourism in host communities, and that tourism modifies local cultural practices in ways that affect men and women differently [13]. Tourism provides potential for women’s participation and leadership in family, community, and political life, thereby promoting pride, entrepreneurship, activism, and gender equality, especially in rural areas [23–25].
Although tourism brings a source of opportunity for women to develop economic and social independence, conflict also occurs as women and men negotiate new gender roles and identities [8]. Employment of women in the tourism industry has challenged or reinforced the traditional gender ideology when women gain autonomy and more conflicts arise between partners [26]. Tourism may reinforce problems such as the double workload for women at work and at home, domestic violence, and even increasing disparity in gender [1,12].

2.2. Tourism Expanding Gender Gaps?

Some scholars believe that it is easier for women to undertake tourism work, which offer part-time opportunities in order to accommodate household duties [11]. Many ethnic women possess the charming characteristics of honesty, warm heartedness, and sharpness, which often make females more successful than males in negotiating with visitors [6]. Tourism work is preferred because it is viewed as enjoyable [27]. This is because tourism employment is often offered in a place with a relaxing and leisurely environment; additionally, the interaction with tourists makes the work more interesting. Women employees may benefit from the development of tourism, as it may widen their social horizons [27,28].

However, there is a wide body of research contesting that tourism does not seem to improve women’s status [13]. ‘Tourism jobs are feminised, low paid, low status, low-skilled, seasonal and precarious with few development opportunities or employment rights’ [29]. The flexibility of tourism work does not necessarily empower women but may instead maintain their subordination to men [10]. The traditional gender ideology of men’s superiority is not challenged but may be reinforced by tourism [1].

There are case studies indicating that unexamined masculinist values are deeply embedded in tourism and that the gender gap is increasing [12,21,30]. Önen [8] discusses how tourism work affects gender roles in the family-run guesthouses at Bozcaada Island in Turkey. In addition, Önen comments that although tourism may provide women with some social capital, there appears to be no direct link between tourism development and women’s empowerment, which is found as a result in the complexity of gender relations and culture [8]. Feng [1] examines the changes in gender relationships among the ethnic Miao with the growth of tourism in China, and concludes that tourism does not necessarily empower Miao women but may instead maintain their subordination to men under changing socioeconomic circumstances. In addition, women workers are perceived as less available by recruiters due to their supposed social reproductive responsibilities in Portugal as well [29]. Berlanga-Adell [10] presents a case study about ethnic women in Morocco suffering an increase in gender inequality in the process of tourism development, with women’s loss of political and economic power to the male community. Women are working in low-paid casual jobs with little career advancement opportunities [10].

2.3. Tourism and Ethnic Women

Ethnic tourism features the quest for the cultural uniqueness of ethnic groups, with a colour of exoticism [7] p. 84. The tourism industry commercialises ethnic cultures, with ethnic women as the key attraction, for tourist consumption [30]. Ethnic women, sexual imagery, and gender are used in tourism practices in order to market destinations, to reinforce stereotypes, and to perpetuate uneven power relationships between hosts and guests [29].

The lack of employment opportunities for women in rural or ethnic regions has been well documented [25,30], mainly as a result of ethnic women traditionally suffering from a lack of formal education, family support, and social recognition [7,31]. Tourism provides ethnic women greater opportunities than men due to the fact that women are often better in jobs that do not have a clear structure, such as customer service and tourism [29]. Many ethnic women stand out from their male peers in tourism due to their personality, physical appearance, and what are often seen as ‘feminine’ connoted skills, such as building a connection with customers during face to face encounters [32]. However, Trupp and
Sunanta [33] argue that while urban ethnic tourism enables ethnic minority women to become breadwinners in Thailand by selling souvenirs on foot, it also reproduces gender asymmetry as these women stay at the bottom of the informal tourism economy. Ethnic men are not as successful in tourism most likely because they are shy [6]. However, a deeper inquiry reveals that ethnic men may have better opportunities, and that they feel ashamed to carry out low-status tourism work, such as souvenir vending, cooking, or servicing [1,33].

Kinnaird and Hall [22] encourage observation of indigenous gender relations in tourism development at the household, community, and societal levels, and the transformations seen in women’s roles. The fact that women have found new employment opportunities in tourism and have overcome their traditional constraints is a positive sign [34]. Attributed to tourism, the dynamics of power in gender relationships and marriage have transformed some traditional ethnic societies in China, encouraging ethnic women to be more ambitious, independent, and successful, as a response to increasing income and social capital, pride in their heritage, network, and interaction with tourists [6,27].

Previously small and isolated lives are replaced with interactions with tourists, who establish their connections with the destination, and mutually benefiting partnerships may develop [28]. The multidirectional care relations between ethnic women and the guests may contribute to more sustainable business practices [35]. Ethnic women tend to link visitors with authentic experience in the local community, and they provide an avenue to defy the potential of commodification of ethnicity [32,36].

All of the complexity as well as the contradictory issues detailed in tourism literature call for further study in these areas. This study thus attempts to enrich the current debates on ethnic gender issues in tourism via the following research design.

3. Research Methodology

The authors of this paper are working in universities and are constantly up-to-date on academic literature. Data were collected on site via participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups over the course of 12 research field trips from 1995 to 2019. After the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, communication continued on Wechat, Zoom, and other social media platforms in 2021 and 2022.

A convenient sampling method was used to recruit interview respondents [37]. The researchers conducted over 90 interviews and 30 focus groups in Yunnan and online. Notes were taken and voice recorded; additionally, any photos that were taken, were taken with permission. While most discussions were conducted in Chinese, some were in English with the foreign travellers in Yunnan. Data were transcribed, thematised, and translated from Chinese to English. Research correspondents are presented with pseudonyms in the publications in order to protect their privacy. Since this paper explores the dialogues and feelings of the respondents, it is more appropriate to present part of the research findings in thematic analysis, although the entire data set is not completely reported.

Interview data were interpreted by thematic analysis [38]. The researchers carefully examined the content of conversations during the interviews in order to distil the implication that most respondents gave to particular words and phrases [39]. Themes were established in the context of the language being used, as well as the keywords and issues being discussed over the course of the interviews. Content categories were devised in order to communicate the findings more easily. Participant responses were categorised and displayed in the form of a table. The results were compared across the entire sample to identify key themes and sub-themes in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, which need to be valid and robust [40].

The next section provides findings based on the research data collected and thematic analysis. Results are derived from the integrated use of qualitative research and the analysis of the data obtained from the field work and online.
4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Smaller Gender Gaps

Although China’s female labour force participation rate of over 60% is comparatively very high in the world [41], women in China still face ageism and sexist treatment at paid jobs [42]. Although the majority of the Chinese population was influenced by Confucianism, which treated women as inferior to man, Buddhism, however, has been the most popular religion in Yunnan specifically, and ethnic women in Yunnan present a long history of working alongside men, such as in the tea industry [6].

While ethnic women are restricted in seeking external job opportunities due to their lack of formal education, language, transport, or family obligations, they often find opportunities in tourism at a low starting cost, such as in converting part of their home into a guest house, where they can run a business while looking after the family. When a married couple establishes their own network and both are equal decision makers, they tend to work together and help each other, leading to equality and interdependence in the relationship. Gender gaps seem to be reduced with ethnic woman often doing better business than their male counterparts.

Ank is a Bulang girl who live at Jingmai Mountain, running a guesthouse and a tea business with her husband Aili. Ank prefers to stay at home in order to run the guest house while taking care of two children, although her husband plays a more important role in the tea business. She said:

“Ank is good at working with tourists. She also helps me with the tea shop. I can concentrate on the tea business with her taking care of our home and the guest house. She even brings people who can do good marketing for our tea. We are very lucky to complement each other.” (Ank, September 2016)

Jue is a Bulang girl in Wengji village running a hostel with her boyfriend Yu, who is from Beijing. Jue runs the hostel and sells tea, while Yu works in interior design for guest houses and photography. The hostel has been so popular that even Lonely Planet recommends it to backpackers.

“I came here from Beijing as a backpacker but I found my life here. Jue is my goddess and the inspiration in design. She reminds me to use elements of ethnic culture, especially ethnic girls, as vehicles of dialoguing with tourists. I am so proud when tourists wish to take photos with Jue in her traditional Bulang clothes. She serves as the cultural symbol, instead of an object to entertain the external greedy eyes.” (Yu, September 2016)

4.2. More Choices in Life

Ethnic girls used to marry men from other regions in the past due to their own villages being remote and poor. After the wedding ceremony in her village, the bride would leave her village with her husband in order to settle down in her husband’s hometown. It was a sign of great achievement for an ethnic girl to leave her home village to work or find a husband in a big city [43]. With growing tourism in Yunnan, females who left their villages are returning back home to seek better opportunities, even bringing their men back to Yunnan and its villages in order to enjoy a balanced life. They still keep in contact with the big cities, and therefore bridge their villages with the external world with their network and skills. The inter-marriage radius has, as a result, expanded significantly over the past decade [6].

Ashu is a Dai girl who moved from Xishuangbanna to Shanghai with her father when she was ten years old. She worked in Shanghai for a fashion studio and came back to
Xishuangbanna to work with the local ethnic artists to design a special fabric. She was attracted to Ming, a local Yi man with skills in dyeing traditional cloth. After managing a long distance relationship for two years, Ashu decided to move back to Xishuangbanna to marry Ming.

“We started a business that manufactures handmade cloth with special Dai ethnic visual elements by employing the local Dai women. Since I have a wide network in the fashion industry, our products sell well for tourist souvenirs, garment making and interior decoration. Ming is good at the dyeing and the manufacturing aspect. I really enjoy this life style as compared with the stress in a mega city.” (Ashu, June 2017)

Yuni is a Bai woman from Kunming and moved to Lijiang after marrying a Hani man named Ou. Ou’s parents had three boys and did not regard Yuni as a good choice for Ou as she did not have any dowry with her when she married. Further, Yuni was not allowed to eat at the same table with Ou because she did not produce a boy heir for the family.

“With growing tourism in Lijiang I made the decision in 2006 to open a small restaurant focusing on street style noodle soup. I leased a shop in the main street and worked by myself plus a casual waitress. Most of my clients were loyal neighbours who enjoy my authentic and reasonably priced food. But with my increasing reputation, travel agencies have signed a contract with me for the supply of take away noodles for tourists. My sale volume has since tripled. I have more free time now as I have employees dealing with the daily routines. I visited Australia last year with my daughter, to improve her English.” (Yuni, October 2016)

4.3. Ethnic Females: Colours and Pride

Women’s clothing, marked as ethnic and non-ethnic, are bound to images of a unified nation. The notion of ‘Other’ is often feminised and exoticised in the discourses about identity and difference [12]. It is true that ethnic women in colourful dresses are part of the tourist attractions in Yunnan, and that females in elaborate ethnic costumes contribute to the overall experience. However, beauty and difference do not serve as a selling proposition for consumption, rather as a triumphant statement of pride and respect [32]. Ethnic women are simple and genuine by nature. They are proud of their beauty and enjoy their own decisions to show off their handmade costumes and jewellery, which may take months of embroidery and mending [1]. Instead of categorising this as a ‘gendered attraction,’ we should instead understand that ethnic women are not consciously staging or earning income from their beauty and colours. Rather, they are simply proud of their culture and they would like to share their beautiful lives with the visitors.

Apei is an extroverted Zhuang girl in Tengchong. She is a tour guide, but also takes tourists to jade shops in order to earn her commission. She made this comment:

“Ethnic women have the opportunity to keep their culture and heritage in tourism. I work as the cultural ambassador in traditional Zhuang clothes, because visitors would like to encounter and experience the local culture. Beauty is the eternal message for all to appreciate. My male colleagues also wear ethnic costumes. It is not just about looking pretty, but more about showing live culture to tourists.” (Apei, October 2018)

4.4. Stepping Forward from Tourism

Since the tourism industry is heavily impacted by external factors that are beyond the control of destinations, it is risky for the local community to rely heavily on tourism [44]. In the tea-producing regions of Yunnan, the employment opportunities are far more diverse with the development of tourism [6]. If they do not own tea resources, ethnic females can also play an important role in industries that complement tourism. There are diverse employment opportunities that provide income for ethnic females.
Humiao was a tour guide in Dali when she was first interviewed in 1995:

“I’m saving hard to start my own hostel. Since I take tourists up the mountains for trekking and photographing, I earn more money than my colleagues in the travel agency.” (Humiao, May 1995)

She stayed in touch and started her hostel but moved ahead even further:

“I started the hostel in 2002. I found that the guests loved the pickles my mother made for breakfast. A guest was in the food business and suggested a joint venture of using local produce to make traditional snacks and pickles so people can enjoy Yunnan gourmet food from anywhere. Our products are exported to USW and Europe now. Although there are currently very few tourists with Covid restrictions, our food factory is doing well with online business.” (Humiao, February 2021)

5. Discussion

When ethnic women make an income directly from tourism, no matter how small it is, they have already made a great step away from the previous patriarchal dominance. This is their ticket to freedom. Although researchers presented critical views against the busy maid working long hours for a penny, there is no reason to underestimate the significant leap made by women obtaining income not from begging money from their fathers or husbands, but from their own humble income from their work. As ethnic women make progress in their involvement with tourism, they explore more potentials when their connections established from tourism stretch out into other business activities. They have expanded into other income streams and contributed to the career advancement of other members in the family or even the wider community. In addition, ethnic women appear to be enthusiastic, charming, and nurturing in nature. Therefore, it is easier for them to work and gain trust from the visitors than ethnic males [33]. Ethnic women play a much more important economic role in Yunnan, catching up with men or even surpassing men in monetary gains. Involvement in tourism has certainly provided the opportunity for ethnic women to live with colours and pride, resulting in a reduced gender gap and conservation of ethnic heritage.

Family tourism business has been a unique feature in Yunnan. Ethnic females play a key role in designing the business and exploring new avenues of development, reinforcing the gender discussions on the influence and power of females in family businesses.

When using ethnic women in advertising, instead of only utilising them posing as just as the pretty figure in the centre of the photos, instead there are instances of combining women with the scenes of the village, or presenting women when they are working in the field or in the workshop—as this seems to send a message of valuing their colourful ethnicity based on what they do rather than how they look.

During this research, which has extended over 20 years, significant changes have been identified on the ethnic women respondents. Most of them remain in doing work related to tourism while diversifying their business into retailing, organic food, crafts, and other tea-related sectors. Instead of being an employee at the beginning of their career, most women have established their own businesses based on the expertise and network accumulated in their initial tourism jobs. Their family tends to be stable, although women have expressed their growing confidence accompanied by an increasing status in the family and community.

The COVID-19 pandemic is still shaking the world and bringing travel to a forced stop [45] (UNWTO, 2020). Massive travel and over-tourism that allowed quick access to most parts of the globe were resource intensive, and have resulted in pollution, destruction, and a fragile mono-economy in many destinations. De-tourism may occur as destinations attract lower number of tourists who are prepared to spend more for the premium experience, while activities beyond tourism generate more sources of income [46]. Although tourism still presents opportunities for less promoted and less tourism-industrialised heritage areas
to benefit from a pro-poor form of tourism [47], it is now time to prioritise wellbeing, equity, and sustainable futures, which is already occurring at the time of preparing for the restart of tourism.

Yunnan, fortunately, was very low in its cases of COVID-19 infection due to its relatively smaller population density. Since community-based small businesses may provide more reliable income [48], ethnic women in Yunnan make use of the skill, network, and capital accumulated from tourism in order to step forward into other activities for the diversification of their income and career directions. Sometimes they become head of the family, not just because of their monetary contribution, but also their vision, kindness, generosity, and humbleness. Many ethnic women are owners of family businesses that were based on tourism initially but have expanded into other areas that are less dependent on tourism. They are aware of the value of their heritage and invest in the conservation and rejuvenation of traditional architecture, craft, cooking, and ethnic cultural assets. Ethnic women in Yunnan may shed light on small businesses linking tourism with family and community, as well as enhancing diversity, conservation, and work life balance.

6. Conclusions

Tourism in Yunnan from the 1980s has encouraged ethnic females to participate for the purposes of economic gain, as well as career advancement and for less gender inequality. Ethnic women have become more confident, resourceful, skilled, and stronger from working in tourism. They may experience changes in personality, networking, and attitude. Hence, they acquire more human resources, financial assets, and social capital for a more satisfactory life.

This research attempts to address the research objectives on understanding how ethnicity affects the life of females via case studies conducted in Yunnan. Furthermore, it provides observations on exploring how gender relationships have shifted in the past two decades in Yunnan, while providing some evidence on how tourism impacts on gender relationships.

This research makes contributions to knowledge on the roles of ethnic women in tourism. While it has been widely recognised in the literature that ethnic women suffer from the commercialisation of their ethnicity and feminism [17], this research provides evidence that ethnic women working in small tourism businesses celebrate feminism by their persistence in dedication, creativity, and authenticity. They do not necessarily intend to gain commercial return from colourful exoticism, but naturally they promote and market their culture against commercialisation. Ethnic women promote authentic experiences, conservation, and education in Yunnan. They are advocating for low carbon consumption, harmony between humans and nature, as well as a simple life with enhanced happiness.

Family-based small tourism businesses are flexible in diversifying income streams. Facing the COVID-19 epidemic and the near stop of tourism, many tourism businesses in Yunnan are focusing on online activities, such as in the teaching people about ethnic crafting, cooking, tea processing, and other related activities. Local produce, such as tea, food, flower, and herbal medicine, is also providing cash flows for tourism businesses. There is a call for more policy support in training and capacity building when businesses attempt to stretch beyond tourism and diversify their activities.

This research focuses on people running tourism-related businesses in Yunnan. They are endowed with personal, economic, or social capital that equip them with a competitive edge in advancing their business and life. It must be noted, that people who do not run businesses were not included in this research. Moreover, further comparative studies of these two groups is needed in order to provide more insights.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, Q.L. and J.J.W.; Writing, Q.L., J.J.W. and K.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.
Funding: This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant number: 41801127), National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant Number: 41801128), and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant Number: 41701144).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Western Sydney University (protocol code 11683 18 October 2012).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the protection of the privacy for research respondents.

Acknowledgments: The authors are grateful for the support of the research participants, especially the gracious help from Quan, Lin, Ziyuan, Baozhi, Biao, and Bo.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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