



## Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China

Yujie Zhu Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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To cite this article: Geng Li (2020): Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, DOI: [10.1080/14442213.2020.1757192](https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1757192)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1757192>



Published online: 30 Apr 2020.



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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China**

YUJIE ZHU

Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018

The typical image of an ancient town is often that of a mysterious and exotic place for backpackers. Yujie Zhu in *Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China* points out that people travel to Lijiang, an attractive tourist destination in Yunnan Province, and a UNESCO World Cultural Heritages site, in search of romance and an alternative lifestyle. Lijiang is the main region inhabited by the Naxi, one of China's 55 minority ethnic groups. Power asymmetries between the core and periphery—symbolising the Han Chinese majority and ethnic minorities—in ethnic politics in China has produced 'internal otherness' through exoticisation and self-objectification. Ethnic people and their cultures become a 'living spectacle' to be photographed and observed. At the same time, as Zhu finds, state-led discourse of exoticisation has been incorporated into the local desire for economic prosperity. There is a popular saying in Chinese that can be translated as 'Lijiang is a place to heal a broken heart and to find a love affair'. Visitors to Lijiang are supposed to be in the mood for a love affair with strangers or seeking an emotional cure in a fantasy land.

Against this background, *Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China* examines the friction that arises when romantic consumption occurs against the backdrop of tourism's immense impact on the global cultural landscape. Here 'romantic' includes, but is not limited to, the notion of romantic love. It also refers to individual desire, pleasure seeking and the motivation of consumption.

Zhu focuses his observation on the 'Naxi Wedding Courtyard', a tourist attraction in Lijiang where visitors can pay to experience a 'traditional' Naxi wedding ceremony accompanied by religious rituals, the latter reflecting an industry of cultural performance. His ethnographic research is not limited to tourists and local actors' experiences vis a vis the cultural performances inside the wedding courtyard, but extends to all kinds of spaces in Lijiang, including guesthouses and bars. He also traces the daily life of several couples before and after their romantic consumption in the Naxi Wedding Courtyard. Zhu's narration thus unfolds stories of contemporary Chinese young people's adventurous pursuit of individual happiness and desire.

Reflecting the form of ‘performance’ in the wedding courtyard, the book is beautifully structured—as a theatrical production of sorts. The main part of the book is divided into ‘stage’, ‘scripts’, ‘local actors’, ‘guests’ and ‘after the show’. In effect, the physical setting, redesigned stories, and social interactions between local actors and guests produce everyday life as a drama. Taken together, the metaphorical and real approaches offer a mirror to examine how heritage and ethnic tourism discourses affect sociocultural transformation, and how people perform identity.

At the beginning of the main body of the book, Zhu sketches the history of heritage development in Lijiang, discussing how the place was transformed into a theatrical ‘stage’ for the performance of heritage.

In the next chapter, Zhu outlines the ‘scripts’ of the performance by examining the evolution of Naxi wedding traditions. With the rediscovery of their ritual practices and the development of tourism, the wedding rituals in the Naxi Wedding Courtyard have become aesthetic exercises and exotic cultural shows. The religious elements of the wedding have been commodified; the plural religious practices transformed into a singular economic good and an object of desire.

In the following chapter, Zhu presents the voices of local actors in the Naxi Wedding Courtyard. The official script is subverted and transgressed by local actors who negotiate and resist heritage and tourism discourses, led by their own interests and memory, knowledge, skills and emotion. These stories tell us how people adopt, negotiate and resist heritage and tourism discourses.

Zhu further explores Naxi Wedding Courtyard guests’ experiences and their life in Lijiang. The most typical guests are middle-class couples who wish to experience ethnic weddings on their honeymoon; lifestyle migrants who aspire to settle in Lijiang; local Naxi interested in their own culture; and tourists who come solely for entertainment. ‘The social construction of the heritage space offers the guests alternative experience of romance, pleasure, and freedom’ (123). The guests’ stories illustrate the various forms of desire and pleasure being performed and consumed in Chinese society. Heritage is reproduced through people’s romantic consumption and the sharing of their experience in mass media and social interactions. Tracking the lives of guests before and after Lijiang, Zhu reveals that ‘while enjoying freedom, romance, and an exotic atmosphere in the escape from the urban life, these guests do not leave behind their materialistic, capitalistic, and consumerist privileges’ (136). The exoticism offered by heritage consumption becomes mere decoration for these guests whose original selves are cultivated and empowered by a modern lifestyle. As Zhu notes, ‘The desire for consuming romance and an ongoing dissatisfaction with reality is bound to result in a never-ending journey of fantasy seeking’ (142).

Throughout the book, ‘romantic consumption’ is the key issue. Tourists and new immigrants are attracted by Lijiang’s ‘romanticized’ past that serves their hedonistic desire and compulsion for experiencing the ‘Other’ (141). Local government, wedding performance actors and business people perform authenticity to serve the needs of romantic consumption and obtain economic profit. As such, ‘they are all

embedded in the ephemeral nature of heritage tourism and the magical realism of romantic consumption' (144).

While Zhu relies heavily on 'romantic consumption', he might have offered more analysis on its two ingredients: romance and consumption. For example, what is the relationship between romance in the narrow sense and romance in the broad sense (seeking an alternative to a mediocre lifestyle)? As Zhu himself points out, Lijiang's fame as a site for love and romance has overridden its brand as a historic town and World Heritage site. While romance in its broad sense is commonly attributed to historic towns, 'capital of love affair' is not a popular signature for a heritage site. Why are these two categories of romance found in Lijiang and not in other heritage sites? The author explains this briefly in Chapter 2 with reference to local ethnic custom in sexual relations and mass media effect. However, he does not answer two closely related questions: what constitutes the bridge or medium between the two levels of romance; and what connects the romanticisation of Lijiang with its past if, as Zhu argues, history is not even taken into tourists' thoughts? Further, how did the desire for consuming romance emerge in contemporary China? If the author can probe deeper into the above questions, his insights in the book would be more comprehensive.

In sum, *Heritage and Romantic Consumption in China* is a beautifully structured monograph possessing a reasonable balance between sharp political analysis and ethnography which demonstrates sensuous feeling and embodied practice. The book greatly contributes to the fields of tourism anthropology and heritage studies by putting forward an important concept of 'romantic consumption' which has broad explanatory power on the ways that global communities have been transformed by the heritage and tourism industries.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2020.1757192>

