

CHAPTER IV

LOCAL INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF TOURISM

The author conducted face-to-face individual in-depth interviews and some focus group interviews in Dali Old Town in June 2005 with a total of 40 people⁴, half of them of Bai ethnicity, and the other half Han (the majority Chinese). The age of the interviewees ranged from 9 to 73. The author prepared and brought questions to the interviewees, in parks, bars, a middle school, residences, restaurants, and on the street. Three 9-year-old girls were interviewed, and obviously not asked all the same questions designed for the rest of the interviewees. It was interesting to explore their attitude to the traditional Bai dress, songs, life style and the language.

All interviews were conducted in the Dali Han dialect because every interviewee can understand it and participate, and the author translated all the content including quotations. Mandarin is the national language in China based on its northern dialect. Most of the regions in China have their own dialects. Dali Han dialect is the dialect the Han Chinese speak in the Dali Prefecture, and is similar to Mandarin. The Dali Han dialect is widely used in Dali Old Town for all ethnic groups, because basically Han and other non-Bai ethnic groups do not speak the Bai language.

The author categorized the result into different perceptions according to interviewees' feedback. On the whole, they had very positive attitude to the development of tourism especially on its cultural aspects.

⁴ Including with persons from three villages in the adjacent area.

Tourism and the Bai Culture

Perception 1: Tourism has helped promote Bai culture. (Support rate: 16/40)

“Yes, tourism does help to promote Bai culture because many traditional Bai customs which people almost forgot in the past have been coming back since the development of tourism. Not only Bai but also Han people participate in these Bai traditional activities.”

(A primary school teacher, 29, Bai)

“Bai culture boosts tourism development while the tourism industry promotes Bai culture. Some elements of Bai traditional culture had gradually declined but were later brought back by tourism development.... The Bai culture will never be totally ‘Hanized’ as long as the tourism industry exists.” (A bar owner, 30, Han)

“Tourism development has promoted Bai culture not only to outsiders, but also to local Han since they also participate in Bai traditional activities.” (A nurse, 27, Han)

“Tourists travel to Dali for three reasons: a) the pleasant weather, b) the natural beauty and c) the Bai culture. The three make a complete attraction of Dali and all contribute to Dali tourism development. Tourism development promotes Bai cultural and ecological protection, since they can better promote tourism development.” (A director of executive office, 30, Han)

Perception 2: Tourism and Bai culture are not obviously related. (Support rate: 11/40)

“There is no tourism in our village. It is not our business. Our lives have remained the same for decades.” (Five Bai housewives and farmers in their 30s from a Bai village north of Dali Old Town)

“No, tourism in Dali has no impact on Bai culture. Bai people are always Bai, and they

will never vanish. I think tourists come to Dali mainly for pleasant weather and natural beauty. They would still come to visit without the Bai people and the Bai culture here.” (A village leader, 45, Han, from a Bai village north of Dali Old Town)

“A good mountain, high quality water, fresh air attract tourists to Dali, who come to relax and enjoy the pleasant natural view, not the Bai culture.” (A retired policeman in Dali Old Town 73, Bai)

Perception 3: The changes in Bai culture are not mainly due to tourism. The slight impact of tourism on Bai culture can be ignored. (Support rate: 10/40)

“Our culture does not change much. Small changes are fine and happen all the time. Yes, we and especially children watch TV, and the programs are all in Mandarin. It does not influence us much. What happens on TV is on TV, and it is nothing about our reality. Bai and Han are the same in our village. We have the same life style and mainly speak Bai language. Yes, some of our cultural change is influenced by the Han in Dali, and this is good. It is civilization.” (Three Bai housewives and farmers with age 63, 64 and 53, form a Bai village east of Dali Old Town)

“The changes of people’s customs, food, dress and thinking are in this trend. The reason is that Bai people are good at accepting new concepts. It is the historical characteristics of Bai people. The government has realized the importance of cultural attraction and has done a lot to promote and protect Bai culture. However, it should not be an old style protection, but a protection with a development concept. Since no ethnic group remains the same all the time, the simple copy of the past tradition is not proper for the development of an ethnic group. Therefore, some loss of tradition is not a big issue if the majority elements of this group’s culture, which is distinct from others’, are preserved and cultivated. Inevitably, development generates progress, as well as loss.” (A lawyer, 29, Han)

“Of course some aspects of the Bai culture were destroyed unavoidably, but they are so tiny that they can be ignored. A negative side always follows the positive side on everything, and people need to judge it according to real needs and the proportion of each side. Generally, Bai culture has been promoted and protected, and that is good enough. (A doctor, 29, Han)

“I did see some of Bai culture destroyed, but it is understandable because people did not have experience and were not aware at the beginning. These minor effects don’t mean anything compared to the benefits from the promotion of culture and its revival. Bai and Han in Dali are one family and the only difference is the different titles to their ethnicities in the citizen registration book. The negative effects cannot be simply attributed to the development of tourism. Without awareness and better education, local people themselves may have the possibility to destroy their own culture, too. Nobody likes living in an underdeveloped place even if they can fully keep their culture. I believe that development is necessary and the change it brings to culture is necessary as well. (A female clerk, 28, Bai)

“Their culture does not change due to tourism development but due to the experience in history.” (A public prosecutor, 53, Han)

➤ The Bai Language

As an important part of culture, the issue of ethnic language has been addressed. It is then important to allocate a special section on the relationship between tourism and the Bai language.

Perception 1: There is no obvious relation between tourism development and the Bai language. (Support rate: 9/40)

“My children and grandchildren do not speak Bai at all, but I don’t think it is a pity

because Bai language is not useful outside of Dali. Children can communicate well with others here in the Han dialect and Mandarin. I cannot see any obvious relation between language and tourism development.” (A retired policeman in Dali Old Town 73, Bai. He speaks Bai as his mother tongue, perfect Dali Han dialect and good Mandarin.)

Perception 2: It is progress that the Bai language is gradually mainstreamed (Hanized), and it is also natural that the knowledge of the local Han dialect or Mandarin is important. (Support rate: 40/40)

A calligraphy seller (73, Bai) speaks Bai and some Han, and all his children speak both. He agrees that Bai language is gradually ‘Hanized’, but he thinks this is a good trend, and he regards this ‘Hanization’ as progress.

“Adults do not normally change or forget their mother tongue. In Dali a large number of adults spoke Bai when they were born.... Nowadays, people like me living downtown where almost nobody speaks Bai, would not speak it even without tourism development, because this is the trend.” (A director of executive office, 30, Han)

“I support the learning Han language because it is widely used and there are only a few people in the world speaking Bai.... People are in a Bai village where everybody speaks Bai in daily life. Those children who do not have a chance to learn Bai in school or at home, learn it naturally in daily activities when communicating with other village members.... Once a person speaks Bai, he or she speaks it forever. It is not a language that can be easily forgotten.” (A village leader, 45, Han, from a Bai village north of Dali Old Town)

Like others of the few Han in his village, the village leader speaks the Dali Han dialect as his mother tongue as well as fluent Bai language. His Bai wife does not speak Han while their two daughters speak both. Basically, in this Bai village, most of the Han marry Bai since Bai constitute the majority, and children are all registered as Bai. Because Mandarin teaching is

encouraged by the government in all schools, those who only speak Bai may find their studies difficult, as bi-lingual education is not very prevalent. This village leader speaks Han to his Bai daughters in daily life, and the children speak Bai with their mother and other village members. Other Bai villagers encourage their children to speak Han in school and with classmates as well. This is a typical situation in a Bai village. Han is seen as the symbol of ‘modernity’, ‘civilization’, ‘enlightenment’ and ‘development’, which means opportunity in and communication with the ‘better’ outside world. In the meantime, Bai is merely kept for communication especially within the household or the local community for daily purposes. In this way, many consider that Bai language is not facing a threat because people will use it in their daily life anyway.

Among the interviewees, there are young Bais under 20. They seem to dislike speaking the Bai language, as they feel it “unfashionable”. Some feel like speaking Han outside the home or community because it is difficult to know who can speak Bai in schools, as Han is encouraged in school. But these interviewees do speak Bai and all say they will never forget it. People think it is a natural process that things get ‘Hanized’ as that represents civilization.

It seems reasonable that the Bai language will be maintained, as the circumstances never disappear within households or the local community. But look at the tendency: parents encourage children to learn Han, schools encourage learning Han, speaking Bai is not fashionable, so the language is only kept within the village or the community. When this community opens or integrates with others further one day, will the language still be maintained?

➤ Bai Dress

Perception: The change of dress is for civilization. The Bai dress can still be kept. (40/40)

“My family does not wear Bai traditional dress. The society is making progress and wearing Bai dress is not civilized. In addition, children have to wear uniform in schools

and so they do not need to wear Bai dress.” (A calligraphy seller, 73, Bai)

“Bai adults in our village still wear Bai traditional dress for festivals but not for daily life as it is not convenient for work.... Children often wear it because parents and family members enjoy seeing them in the costumes. Parents always buy or make Bai and Han style dresses for their children and let them wear them in turn.” (A village leader, 45, Han, from a Bai village north of Dali Old Town)

➤ Traditional Festivals

Perception: Tourism has promoted festivals. (Support rate: 32/40)

“The impression is that tourism promotes Bai culture through festivals. People come to celebrate during the Spring Festival, the March Market, the Torch Festival, and other Bai traditional activities. Of course more and more local people celebrate western festivities since there are more and more western tourists coming to visit, but this does not affect the traditional festivals. I like more festivals so that I will have more customers. (A bar owner, 30, Han)

“We did not pay as much attention to some festivals before. But now, with more people celebrating, I feel like celebrating as well.” (A policewoman, 28, Han)

“Only Bai have the March Street Festival in the whole world! People think of Dali when talking about March Street Festival. Tourism makes it bigger and more famous now.” (A male clerk, 28, Bai)

➤ Authenticity

Perception: The loss of authenticity does not mean the loss of ethnic identity. Authenticity does not really get lost. (Support rate: 37/40)

“Han definitely can wear Bai dress and dance Bai dance because the two peoples in Dali are the same. It is the same with those non-Bai girls dancing traditional Bai dance as a show.” (A retired policeman in Dali Old Town, 73, Bai)

“People need to try to find ways to make a living and it is better than begging or stealing.” (A nurse, 27, Han)

“It is a way to promote the traditional dress. For example, some non-Bai wear Bai traditional dress to attract customers in Dali Old Town, and this make tourists know the traditional dress better.” (A postgraduate student, 28, Bai)

Bai people are good at accepting new concepts and are very creative. They started to integrate with Han culture very early and according to records in history have been willing to study advanced techniques and cultures from other ethnic minorities, in order to improve their own economic growth and cultural development (Zhan and Zhang, 1990). Bai people borrowed many words and expressions from the Han language already during the Tang Dynasty. All the Bai people interviewed for this research think that it is natural that Bai culture is getting ‘Hanized’. Such a perception is based on the long history of integration, which leads many Bai to believe that there is no clear boundary between Bai and Han. They also think it is a spontaneous process for ‘improvement’ and ‘civilization’. With such a perception, it is understandable that the ideas and judgment of rural villagers differ sharply from those critics of tourism, who claim that it endangers ethnic languages.

Questions of equal access to the benefits and involvement with tourism appear. Some people do not think they are influenced or affected by tourism because they do not even participate in tourism development. Is it good to maintain the culture and not have access to better opportunities, for example, through individual economic benefits, or to participate and take the risk of deteriorating ethnic culture? Like all many other topics in development, tourism is yet another ‘two-edged’ issue.

Tourism and Economic Growth

Perception 1: Tourism has brought rapid economic growth and it is the main approach for the rapid development in Dali. (Support rate: 28/40)

“People’s lives have been improved in recent years following the national economic growth. Dali has had obvious development in this context and even more so with its geography and weather advantage. Agriculture, tobacco and fishery provide the economic base for Dali development. Tourism has an important role as well” (A retired policeman in Dali Old Town, 73, Bai)

“No tourism industry, no food.” (A bar owner, 30, Han)

Perception 2: Tourism development did not bring economic growth to the immediate family. (Support rate: 9/40)

“There are too many fields being sold to build hotels, restaurants, and roads for tourism development. All the money goes to government officials. I don’t have any benefit.” (A calligraphy seller, 73, Bai)

“There is not much change in our living standard. We all depend on agriculture at the moment. Each family was only allocated one field, and nowadays it cannot support the growing number of family members.” (Three Bai housewives and farmers with age 63, 64 and 53, from a Bai village east of Dali Old Town)

“What is improvement? Oh, we haven’t seen much of this in our lives in recent years. We are not interested in tourism development. Tourism is not in our village. It is not our business. Our lives have remained the same for decades.” (Five Bai housewives and farmers in their 30s from a Bai village north of Dali Old Town)

➤ Employment

Perception 1: Tourism development has created working opportunities. (Support rate: 28/40)

“I did not pass the entrance examinations for higher education after graduation from junior high school⁵. I don't like studying but don't know what else I can do. My relative introduced this job to me at that time, and I thought I found a short-term solution. If there are more tourists, I can earn more. If no tourists come, I will lose this job. My long-term plan is to gain more experience and go to work in a bigger restaurant.” (A 17-year-old Bai girl working in a restaurant in Dali Old Town.)

Perception 2: Tourism employment opportunities are for somebody else. (Support rate: 8/40)

“We know nothing about tourism employment opportunities. We never think of participating in the tourism industry. We do not know what to do and how.” (Three Bai housewives and farmers with age 63, 64 and 53, from a Bai village east of Dali Old Town)

Local people do not really deny the economic growth from tourism development. The calligraphy seller does agree that the tourism industry is profitable, but that it does not benefit his household. The village women from east Bai village have not recognized there is economic growth, instead they think of more family members with the same size field, which makes life harder, as the population grows and urbanization leads to less land per capita. The difference is the degree of the effect of development on different people. According to the research, people with better education usually have more involvement in tourism development so that they get more or at least some benefit. And another factor to consider here is: cities normally get more development than villages as they have a different degree of access to the main tourism market, which reinforces the uneven development stronger.

This analysis also applies to the influence on employment. People who do not speak Han well

⁵ Compulsory education in China is nine years from primary school to junior high school.

may find it difficult to share these opportunities. On the other hand, some people have not acknowledged the increase of the opportunity and the benefit for themselves. Take the calligraphy seller as an example. He did not agree that tourism development had given him working chances, but does agree that more people come to buy his calligraphy in recent years. In the past, his business was good only before the Spring Festival (Chinese Lunar New Year), somebody's wedding, funeral or new house moving, because Dali people have the tradition to put new calligraphy on gate sides in these days. This tradition has been strengthened due to tourism development so that more people use calligraphy and tourists also buy calligraphy. He can earn more money to make him keep his business. However, it can also be argued that since he is a businessman, his benchmark for comparing himself to others has been constantly rising. Therefore, it may be difficult to have an answer from him with positive views. But when asking about the change for himself over time, he does recognize there has been a growth in sales.

Tourism and Other Social Aspects

Perception 1: Tourism development is not the direct reason for social problems. (Support rate: 37/40)

“Social problems such as crime, cheating in the market have been existing for long time, even before the tourism development. They will still be there without tourism development, and may become worse.” (A public prosecutor, 53, Han)

“I have heard of pollution, but did not see much by myself. I have never thought about the relation between tourism and pollution. I think industry may bring more pollution.” (A village leader, 45, Han, from a Bai village north of Dali Old Town)

“Every society has its own problems. It is not fair to say they are all the fault of tourism.”
(A male clerk, 28, Bai)

Perception 2: Tourism development has improved the living environment. (Support rate: 28/40)

“Tourism development provided more jobs that don’t require very high education. Some people have work to do, so they do not have time to waste or do bad things.” (A primary school teacher, 29, Bai)

“Now we have more services. If it were not for tourism development, the road wouldn’t be built as fast and as well as this.” (A lawyer, 29, Han)

“People have a way to earn money, so that they don’t need to think about how to steal or rob from others.” (A female clerk, 28, Bai)

Strategic Choice

Perception: Tourism industry is a main approach for the rapid development. (Support rate: 28/40)

“Without the development of tourism, Dali could never be developed as rapid and as well as now.” (A retired policeman in Dali Old Town, 73, Bai)

“Our resources are suitable for tourism development. I think it is a correct way that we catch this opportunity and this chance. I am satisfied with this direction.” (A bar owner, 30, Han)

“I can’t say that tourism will always be the support economy in Dali, but when it makes a large contribution to development, we should try to use it.” (A director of executive office, 30, Han)

As one of the interviewees said, social problems exist in every society. The difference is

the level. The general circumstances mean that people are used to face these problems, as the whole country is less developed. New social problems may be less obvious to the local people. On the other hand, the construction and reconstruction of buildings, roads and other infrastructure are obvious for people to see and feel. The threat on the environment such as more pollution is not serious now since the development is recent, but it has the possibility to get worse if people do not pay much attention on protection. However, it is also undeniable that the government efforts have led to an obvious improvement of the general environment.

When talking about the strategy for development, the government is in a strong position to influence and persuade the public. Furthermore, local people have seen the economic growth, the improvement of the infrastructure, the busier market and more tourists, which easily give the impression that a correct approach has been chosen. Yet obviously, different interest groups may have different attitudes.

When looking at individual perceptions on influences from tourism, it is crucial to look at people's age, background, ethnicity, linguistic ability, interests, livelihood and other factors, before making a generalized interpretation on whether local people think tourism is good or bad. The perceptions also illustrate the issues of a balanced tourism development and of how to provide equal opportunities, do exist. These different factors and questions/issues can offer important references for the government and relevant organizations, who have responsibilities in this area: 1) to develop tourism well so that people's lives can be improved; 2) to promote Bai culture and protect the natural beauty; and 3) to provide balanced benefit and involvement of the population.