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EL FUTURO DE LA ALIMENTACIÓN Y RETOS DE LA AGRICULTURA PARA EL SIGLO XXI:

Debates sobre quién, cómo y con qué implicaciones sociales, económicas y ecológicas alimentará el mundo.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD AND CHALLENGES FOR AGRICULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY:

Debates about who, how and with what social, economic and ecological implications we will feed the world.

ELIKADURAREN ETORKIZUNA ETA NEKAZARITZAREN ERRONKAK XXI. MENDERAKO:

Mundua nork, nola eta zer-nolako inplikazio sozial, ekonomiko eta ekologikorekin elikatuko duen izango da eztabaidagaia

The Rural Tourism Development Fallacy: An Agro-Tourism Extractivism Story from China

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The Rural Tourism Development Fallacy: An Agro-Tourism Extractivism Story from China

Anthony M. Fuller

Abstract

Tourism has long been touted as a panacea for the development of rural areas. Marketing ecological, and cultural landscapes to attract visitors is especially compelling for governments and tourism businesses alike as the landscape asset is already in place and needs only to be secured and accessed. Its development therefore only requires a relatively small amount of capital investment. Profits on the other hand are large and can be extracted easily. In this way, standard rural tourism introduces capital development to rural communities and unleashes waves of seasonal tourists, who bring outside influences and relative damage to the ecosystem, the very asset that attracts tourists in the first place.

A political economy approach to this common phenomenon is instructive. An example from South China, an FAO designated Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System, a distinct rice terrace system many centuries old, is presented to demonstrate how capital is provided and extraction is divided between local government and tourism businesses with few benefits to the local ethnic minority of farmers, the Hani people. The negative impacts are extreme on the people and their culture (locals become waiters and cleaners in the hotels that are built on their former land and homes) and soon the rice terraces, the very asset that attracts the visitors, increasingly neglected, will deteriorate to an unsustainable level mainly because of a lack of water at critical times. The tourism demand for water is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the situation in this example is considered to be a success story in rural development.

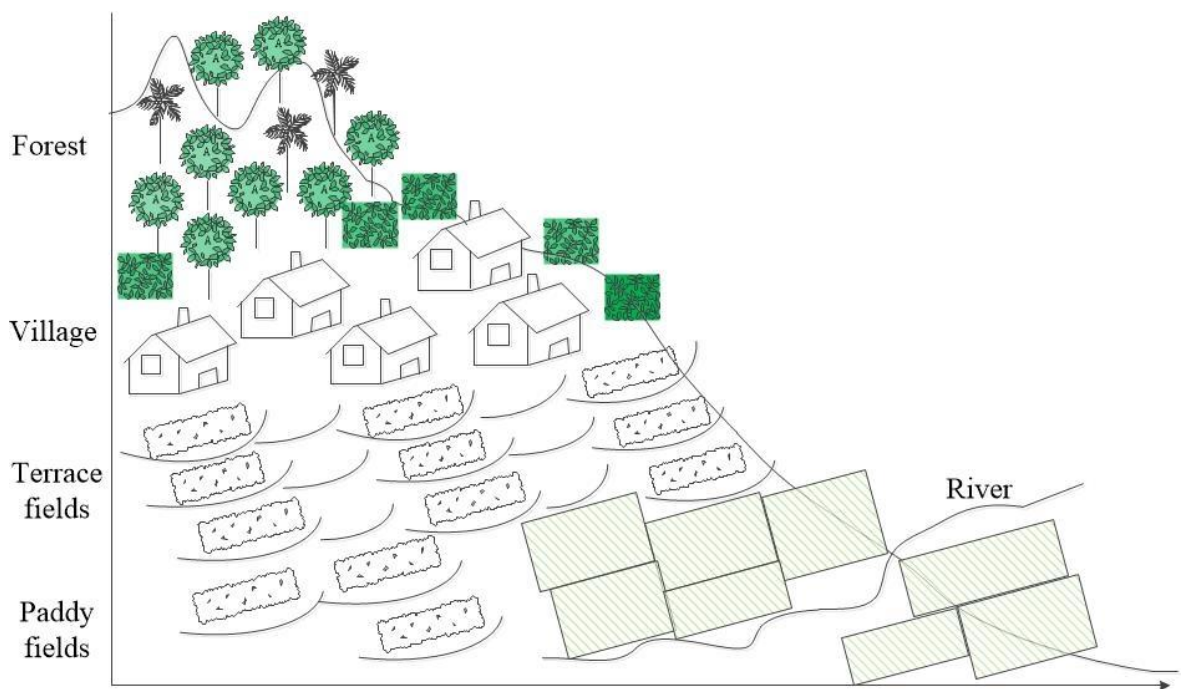
Key words: rural tourism, rice terraces, extractivism, water management, capital accumulation, Hani People.

Yuanyang county is a remote mountainous area in South Yunnan Province in South China. The region has been inhabited by the Hani people for centuries. These people with their own language, customs and beliefs have practised a common subsistence livelihood by adapting to the harsh conditions of the mountainous landscape by constructing walled terraces on the steep hillsides forming small fields in which they can grow a variety of crops, depending on elevation. Over time they have learned how to conserve and manage the water resources in this environment to enable them to grow rice in the terraces and to survive, droughts, floods, diseases and conflicts. They have added fish to the rice paddies to gain a good source of protein and to assist with pest control. Fish, consume the leafhoppers and other bugs that reside in the rice plants by disturbing the stems with their tails when swimming such that the bugs fall out of the rice plant and drop into the water where they are promptly swallowed. This simple relationship between fish and rice has been extended to ducks and rice and both traditional systems could still be found in many upland areas of South China. That is until hybrid rice was introduced by Chinese scientific authorities in a Green Revolution format that substantially

increased the rice yield, but required fertilizer and other treatments that made having fish and ducks in the rice paddy an untenable practice. It became another policy decision that privileged yield over ecology and large business interests over peasant livelihoods. Be that as it may, the Hani Rice terraces for this discussion are important for their attraction for tourists. The large scale of the terraced landscapes is the asset that brings thousands of tourists to this remote area in the Winter season to see and photograph the terraces.

The water cycle in the Hani rice terraces is the key mechanism in the life system of the area. Rainwater is conserved naturally in the ground protected by the tree cover at the top of the mountain ridges. It is available as a fresh water resource for the villages all the year round, but released seasonally for water in the rice terraces which flows by gravity down through the terraces to the river in the valley several hundred metres below and out to sea several hundred miles away. This is depicted in Figure One as a gravity flow water cycle.

Figure One. Depiction of the Rice terrace system in Yuanyang County.



It is the water in the rice terraces that, indirectly, attracts the tourists. Water standing in the terraces from December to February, waiting for the transplanting of the rice seedlings, that reflects sunlight in a myriad of shades and colours and forms a variety of field shapes according to the contours followed by the terraces, the angle of the sun and the cloud cover. In the early morning, when the sun rises, the terraces are at their best in terms of colour and attract thousands of tourists to photograph the silver and gold patterns in the landscape (see Figure Two)

Figure Two: Early morning rice terrace landscape, Yuanyang County, January, 2016.



At first, because of its remote location, only photographers and eco-tourists found their way to the Hani rice terraces. There was only one hotel in Yuanyang when I went there in 2009, but now assisted by aggressive tourism businesses and a helpful local authority, there are over 50 small hotels and over 50,000 tourists that make the trek to South Yunnan to see the Hani terraces (Figure 3)

Figure Three: A village with a city profile.



Figure Four: New functional hotel, Duoyishu, 2016



The Tourism Factor

Rural tourism, however defined, is very often seen as a panacea for economic and social decline in rural areas around the world. The term 'decline' of course is a comparative notion, it is most often the outside world that changes and the village remains basically the same, such that, over time, it is considered comparatively disadvantaged. The Hani people are a case in point. Only when it became desirable and then necessary to have cash for purchasing daily needs did it become advisable to adopt hybrid rice and sell this commodity into the State system for cash. The careful Hani farmers nevertheless still sow red rice in a corner of their fields for home consumption. Up to the introduction of hybrid rice, the terraced field system worked well and gave most households an adequate source of food and fibre. With the advent of tourism, things changed a lot, and quickly.

The first round of tourists were well managed by tourism businesses who ferried them from Kunming in convoys of marked cars, occupied the one hotel and caused

the local authorities to organize some village look-out spots to disperse the tourists and not interrupt the routine work of the villagers. Most of these tourists had large cameras, and many were professional photographers who sought special places from which to take unique pictures of the terraces at dawn. They behaved like eco-tourists and had respect for the landscape and the people who managed it. Glossy photographs of the Hani terraces appeared in the media such as airline magazines on planes and the volume of tourists increased exponentially in the following 10 years. This economic cornucopia is now managed by tourism businesses with buses, encouraged by local authorities who build infrastructures such as car parks and toilets in an attempt to cope, and by the acquiescent Hani people who were presumed to benefit from such change and increased attention.

Figure Five: One of four viewing platforms in Yuanyang County, 2016



Nb, people are charged a fee when entering the viewing platform.

The result today is a classic case of extractivism. There are huge economic benefits to be derived from the concentration of mass tourism in Yuanyang County. Of the four counties in the Hani region* where rice terraces prevail, the most spectacular and accessible landscapes are found in Yuanyang and it is here that most efforts are being made to accommodate the masses of people that want to see and to photograph the terraces. The prime beneficiaries are the tourism companies who promote visiting the terraces, arrange bus trips and accommodation and basically ignore the Hani people with whom they can hardly converse. They deal with the Tourism Bureau of the County government to make tourism more viable and the impact on the local people less intrusive. Tourism businesses take 70% of the income. The government deploys the income derived from tourism (20%) to build infrastructure such as viewing platforms and safe pathways to viewing sites. The area is covered in well-appointed signs and explanation boards in Chinese. The Hani people collectively earn 10% of the income which presumably is held in trust

by the government. In effect, the Hani derive no direct benefits, unless they lease their house for renovation and development into guest houses and hotels. Some Hani women work in the restaurants and hotels as kitchen or cleaning staff. Many men work in construction, feverishly building new accommodation, eateries and car parking facilities; not easy enterprises on the 45 degree slopes at 2,500 meters. Today, most tourists come by car and car traffic is a constant problem for all concerned. At some point it will probably become necessary to park cars in outside car parks and transport tourists to the favoured sites by public vehicles, as is common practice in other mass tourism sites in China.

Figure Six: Car traffic at 8am in Duoyishu village (local pop.4,000)



Extractivism is also accomplished by outside capital invested in small hotels and guest houses, locally referred to as 'home stays'. The capital for renovations, facilities and furnishings comes from Kunming, Guanzhou and Hong Kong. Large profits return to these faraway places and many owners are absent for 2/3 of the year. Much of this capital may be referred to as family capital as it is not often raised from bank loans, but from family members, relatives and close friends. Most Hani, who are peasant farmers and who had little to do with money only 20 years ago are not involved in the rebuilding of their communities. As a result the new structures represent building styles that are functional and common in much of China and reflect almost nothing of the local culture. Hotels are extractivist containers for providing a quick experience of the rice terraces, but little of the local Hani culture; no music, no dance and not much local cuisine. The rich songs and poems of the Hani are not available at this level of extractive tourism. What is compatible however is the seasonality of this mass tourism cycle. The water in the terraces last for 3-4 months from December to the end of April. During this time the rice seedlings are planted and then transplanted and the small terraces are plowed ready for transplanting. Such activities take place away from the morning crowds and are only interrupted by road traffic jams which tend to disappear by midday. After April, the large crowds dissipate and village life resumes with a 'normal' flow of visitors as the landscapes are still attractive even when the rice is growing and there are no more water reflections to be seen at any time of day. For the Hani, only three months (January, February, March) are difficult.

This brings me to the costs of extractivism. There are many costs to be taken into account mainly in the area of cultural genocide. Hani customs and folklore are largely ignored by outsiders and mainly because of language, the Hani retreat into themselves. However, men and women are increasingly working outside in construction teams and are learning the ways of modern China which they introduce to their families and village associates. Children learn Mandarin in school and tourists bring knowledge and news of another world. This is a common problem identified in tourism studies and when tourists are involved with local cultures, culinary or otherwise, the result is a form of commodification. Perhaps the Hani are fortunate that the managers of tourism have not, to this point, marketed their culture as a tourism attraction, but have focussed on the landscape which is an asset managed by the Hani themselves.

The rice terrace system is vulnerable to excessive tourism, but in a roundabout way. The huge demand for water for and by tourists threatens the water system of the terraces. In January and February there is already not enough water to go around (Tian M et al, 2015). The critical time for water demand in the terraces is exactly the same time that tourism is at its height. The water demand for accommodating tourists, for washing, showers, cooking and cleaning is substantial. For example, all the small hotels and home stays with 8 to 12 bedrooms have washing machines running all day to wash the sheets and towels and table cloths for another full house of guests and diners in the evening or the following day. Few tourists stay for more than one or two days. Water use restrictions were already in force when I was last there in 2016.

A water shortage at the critical time for rice planting severely inhibits the whole terrace system and places pressure on local farmers who in fact maintain the very asset that tourists come to see. It is an irony that this ancient asset, functioning well for over a thousand years, may well be destroyed inadvertently by the very people who come to admire it. In China at this time, there is a growing trend of abandonment of agricultural land as the long term effects of out migration of migrant workers comes into play and land transfer is promoted and supported by most Provincial governments, mainly as a source of revenue since the farm tax was finally abandoned in 2005. The ecological benefits of these ancient mountain systems and the culture of the peoples who developed them are seemingly at risk, not by neglect as in the past, but by over-admiration of the Chinese tourist.

As this case demonstrates, rural tourism is a complex issue. Even seemingly successful tourism creates problems and these downsides may, in the end, be critical to the survival of the tourism attraction itself. The question of who gains and who loses is also not simple. In the short run the tourism businesses reap fat profits, and can move on in the long run if and when things turn bad. Local government officials reap the rewards of increasing their growth numbers to impress higher levels of authority. The income proportion for the local Hani people is kept by the local government and spent on improvements for the people as a whole. In effect, it is spent on the improvement of village infrastructures. The local Hani are not sure what this all means, but are gratified that their labours and their heritage is being admired. In effect they and their culture are being catapulted into the modern era of the cash economy, motorized transport and out-migration. They are now on the slippery slope of modernisation.

In 2010, the FAO designated the Hani rice terraces as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS). It has long been recognized by the creators of this designation, that acknowledges ingenuity and sustainability in old systems of agriculture, that modernisation is a greater challenge to the system than any of the previous predations of floods, droughts, wars and pests. In proposing that to sustain these old systems, farmers have to be rewarded appropriately to enable them and their indigenous knowledge to stay in farming and that to ward off the temptation to become migrant labourers, tourism has been seen as the most propitious way to maintain the whole system. As has been seen elsewhere however, tourism development can overwhelm the very asset that attracts the tourists. Such tourism development therefore requires strong planning that ensures the main benefits go to the local people, that tourist numbers are not detrimental to the ecological integrity of the asset itself, and that the whole system is sustainable and managed as an ingenious model of human endeavour to be seen by generations to come. In the long run, this may involve a form of multifunctionality whereby farmers are actually paid by the income derived from tourists to maintain the rice terraces, with fish and ducks (Liu et al, 2014). It may mean restricting the numbers of people that are able to enter the GIAHS zone by managing bookings, the number of hotels and the influence of outside capital. If left entirely to the market, the extraction of capital and political benefits will, in the short run, far outstrip the ability of the Hani rice terraces and the Hani people to adapt and prosper.

The system has adapted in the past, but must be given room to adapt to incessant modernisation in the future. Open tourism is not a panacea, it is a development fallacy in the rural context, but it can be one way to increase modest capital circulation if managed with modest local development objectives firmly in mind.

This paper was written with the research help of Zhou Xiaoyi (student at Renmin University, Beijing and resident of Yunnan Province) and Dr Wenjun Jiao (Researcher at the Institute of Geography and Natural Resources, China Academy of Sciences, Beijing).

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