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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Nate-Chei, A. (2011). Beyond commodification and politicisation: production and consumption practices of authenticity in the white Tai tourist market in the uplands of Vietnam. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *4*(1), 30-50. https://doi.org/10.4232/10.ASEAS-4.1-3

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Aktuelle Südostasienforschung / Current Research on South-East Asia

Beyond Commodification and Politicisation: Production and Consumption Practices of Authenticity in the White Tai Tourist Market in the Uplands of Vietnam

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Citation Nate-Chei, A. (2011). Beyond Commodification and Politicisation: Production and Consumption Practices of Authenticity in the *White Tai* Tourist Market in the Uplands of Vietnam. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies, 4*(1), 30-50.

This paper is based on an ethnographic enquiry conducted over the last four years and shows the setting of a close interaction between hosts and guests in the White Tai villages in Mai Chau district, in the northwest uplands of Vietnam. The author argues that tourism is utilised as a medium to demonstrate a culture of hospitality. A new trend in tourism production and consumption is brought into discussion; in relation to this, this paper looks at what is really happening in the tourism spaces of the White Tai villages through the experiences not only of tourists but also of villagers. The author identifies several types of host-guest relationships and argues that there is a transformation of the host-guest relationship within these tourist spaces, a transformation evident in the new production and consumption practices of the market. Such relationships must be understood by looking beyond conceptions of commodification and politicisation of ethnicity.

Keywords: *Ethnic Tourism, Tourist Market, Authenticity, Production and Consumption, Vietnam*

Basierend auf einer vierjährigen ethnographischen Feldforschung schildert dieser Beitrag die Interaktionen zwischen Bereisten und Reisenden anhand von White Tai-Dörfern im Mai Chau-Bezirk im nordwestlichen Hügelland Vietnams. Die Autorin argumentiert, dass Tourismus als Medium zur Demonstration von Gastfreundlichkeit eingesetzt werde. Neben einer Diskussion zu touristischer Produktion und Konsum, werden in diesem Artikel auch die Erfahrungen und Wahrnehmungen der TouristInnen und DorfbewohnerInnen analysiert sowie verschiedene Typen von Beziehungen zwischen GastgeberInnen und Gästen identifiziert. Es wird dabei argumentiert, dass im Kontext touristischer Räume eine Transformation dieser Beziehungen stattfinde, die in den neuen Produktions- und Konsumpraktiken evident sei. Solche Beziehungen können nur verstanden werden, wenn ein altbekanntes Verständnis von Kommodifizierung und Politisierung von Ethnizität erweitert werde.

Schlagworte: *Ethnotourismus, Tourismusmarkt, Authentizität, Produktion und Konsum, Vietnam*

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www.seas.at

doi 10.4232/10.ASEAS-4.1-3

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Introduction

The notion of commodification currently dominant among academics sees the tourist product (that is ethnic authenticity) as a sign of value. In other words, a variety of meanings of ethnic authenticity are created by tourist actors. In addition, since the late twentieth century, postmodern society has been categorised as a consumption society. This means that through consumption, consumers construct and express their identity. On the other hand, ethnic tourism can be seen as a tool of production which consists of produced representations of ethnic authenticity. That product is created by the second producers (tour agencies, the state, and so forth) including economic victors who are not from a local minority group (Michaud & Turner, 2006, p. 785). That product is subsequently contested by first producers through a manipulation of ethnic identity that helps local people base their claims to power as shown in many ethnic tourism studies in South-East Asia and Southern China (Adams, 1984; 2006; Cohen, 2001; Cole, 2007; 2008; King, 2008; Su & Teo, 2008; Wherry, 2006; Yang & Wall, 2009; Zhihong, 2007). Such an attempt at simplifying the complexity of market relations into cultural sign values or symbolic interaction reduces ethnic relations to an instance of minority politics.

Nonetheless, in the context of a rapidly globalising market, the cultural economy of ethnic tourism is seen in this paper as integrating both production and consumption of ethnicity in complex and multiple ways. In the process of negotiating authenticity, production and consumption do not remain isolated: Rather than exclusively by the primary producers (villagers, tour agencies, and the state), the tourist product is co-produced by the consumers themselves (that is the tourists) in the process of consumption. In order to sustain these ideas, this paper looks at processes of production and consumption of ethnicity within the space of a village homestay in which hospitality plays an important role. Even though the relevance of notions such as 'commodification' and 'politics of ethnic minority' is not denied, reaching beyond such notions, and reflecting the achievements of the ethnic tourist market, the paper concludes on a positive note regarding the establishment of these 'new social relationships'.

This paper presents the illustration of a *White Tai* (in Vietnam, this group is called *Thai Trang*) ethnic minority site in the north-western uplands of Vietnam, popular

nowadays as an ethnic tourism attraction. The two villages studied, *Ban Lac* and *Ban Pom Cong* in *Chieng Chau* Commune, are located in a valley in *Mai Chau* District, *Hoa Binh* Province. Before the colonial period, *Mai Chau* District was a town (*muong*) of *Sipsong Chau Tai*. Since the first half of the 1990s, the 'tourist market' has held an increasing importance for villagers' livelihoods; it has become the main source of income for most households, especially in *Ban Lac*, the main tourist village.

The tourist market here is not in the hands of outsiders. Villagers have rapidly grasped the opportunities brought by the tourist market as a means of changing their economic situation. The popularity of the site is not only due to the beautiful landscape, but also to the traditional hospitality of the *White Tai* people in charge of the homestay business. Whereas outsiders have attempted to commodify this culture as a 'cultural product', the villagers have moved beyond that by taking this opportunity to transcend the economic rationality of the tourist market. The villagers construct their new identities with the aim of claiming dignity as well as power to control and manage cultural resources. In addition, through the interactions between hosts and visitors the *Mai Chau* tourist space creates a new kind of relationship. This paper attempts to overcome accepted notions of 'commodification' and 'minority politics', and looks for more adequate explanations.

As a researcher who has gained a fair degree of skill in speaking, reading, and writing Vietnamese and *White Tai*, I collected the primary data during 2007-2010 from mainly informally talking with the informants and long-stay observation in a variety of roles (Bruner, 1995; Crick, 1995). Such roles include being a tourist, a student studying *White Tai* in *Mai Chau*, and finally a researcher.

Commodification of Mai Chau

In a similar way to many other tourist places in Vietnam, *Mai Chau* has been promoted as an 'ethnic tourism community' by many tourism organisations, including state and local authorities, hotels and tour agencies located in the old city of Ha Noi, the national television channel for ethnic minorities (VTV5), websites, and even by Lonely Planet (the world famous travel guidebook). In this promotion, *Mai Chau* is often referred to as the beautiful valley of rice fields where the *White Tai* people live. It is a place for exploring the ethnic minorities' cultures and livelihoods, and for enjoying

nature trekking. Furthermore, as the main tourist villages of *Mai Chau* District, *Ban Lac* and *Ban Pom Cong* are promoted as homestay villages where visitors can enjoy the *Tai* stilt houses, local fabric weaving, and cultural performances. At present, *Mai Chau* is known as a romantic place for couples, a site of eco-sightseeing (trekking), an ethnic cultural attraction for Vietnamese and foreigners, and a research site for university lecturers and students. Every weekend, *Kinh* couples ('*Kinh*' is the ethnographic name of the Vietnamese majority), and large groups of *Kinh* and particular Ha Noi students, as well as foreigners including backpackers, flock to the villages. In short, the success of *Mai Chau*'s commodification lies in its representation in terms of a traditional and exotic culture and way of life, a representation determined by the notion of 'otherness'.

We can see that the commodification of *Mai Chau* carried out by outsiders is mainly based on a certain representation of *Mai Chau* (even the way of life of ethnic minority is also seen as a production of place). The exception is the representation of hospitality, which brings a sense of social relations. However, villagers, especially those who are involved in the tourism business, overlook being represented as primitive. Actually, they attempt to differentiate themselves from the *Kinh*, and see themselves as more than just another different and exotic ethnic group and culture: in relation to their interaction with tourists, the *White Tai* here feel that they are better than the *Kinh*. They will say, for instance, "We are better-hearted and more moral." Furthermore, they see themselves more skilful in any craft-making, and forming a more peaceful community than the *Kinh* majority.

Even though they engage with processes of modernisation and Vietnamisation, the tourist market of the *White Tai* in *Mai Chau* has allowed them to construct a new moral identity which moves beyond the image of a primitive community. Villagers proudly present themselves as modern: in the villages, there are satellite dishes, washing machines, cars, concrete roads, and modern toilets with water heaters. Certainly, they are reluctant to dress in *White Tai* traditional costume when government officials or other guests ask for it. This tourist site also offers a combination of modern economic rationality and traditional *White Tai* moral values. In this way, villagers are able to maintain their old ways of hospitality, while at the same time diversifying their products and services.

Therefore, far from the images constructed by outsiders, villagers are willing to

construct their village as a space of cultural richness with not only tangible but also intangible elements, such as honesty, modesty, and hospitality. Of course, this commodification of ethnicity is not only aimed at making money, but also at stating a claim for ethnic dignity, and for power to keep their authority over the management of their 'places' as both tourist spaces and agricultural lands. Certainly, that construction is not based on temporary transactions which depend on the mechanisms of the market, but rather on a more elaborate and complex relationship which goes beyond the framework of minority politics.

Local Cultures and Habits in the Ethnic Tourism Market

Before examining how complex host-guest relations are constructed and experienced in the context of the tourist market, it is necessary to understand the cultures underlying such relations. Those driving forces are hospitality and the morality of money.

Hospitality

Customarily, the *White Tai* always welcome outsiders who pass through their villages. Their villages are more likely to be chosen for a homestay than other ethnic sites in the same area. In the past, villagers offered visitors a night in their houses and a meal for free even if they were strangers. *White Tai* society has a saying, "*hach peng khach ma huon*", which means "love whoever visits your house." According to *White Tai* custom, if someone arrives at a house, the house owner must first ask "How are you and your family?" and then serve the visitor a drink.

While talking with their visitors, *White Tai* people always ask them, "Could you have a meal with us?" According to Trong (2007), after this, if the visitors show their desire to eat, the host will be happy to serve them food, and family members and guests will sit around the table and have a meal together (p. 27). Sharing good food and drink is the best way to get acquainted and cement a lasting friendship (Trong, 2007, p. 91). Anyone who shares a meal with a *White Tai* family is considered to be their guest. This means that foreign tourists brought by tour agencies are not treated as guests, because they usually do not share meals with their hosts.

Another basic point about the villagers' perceptions of their visitors or guests is

that, even though the terms 'guest' or 'visitor' can be translated in general as *khach* in *White Tai*, there are many kinds of *khach*, and villagers will treat them differently. The guests mentioned directly above are sometimes called *khach huon* (meaning the guest of the home or *khach nha* in Vietnamese); however, they would not be considered as 'close guests' (or '*khach than tinh*' in Vietnamese), i.e. non-paying guests in the social sense, as opposed to paying guests or 'customers'. In most cases they are from the same ethnic group, i.e. any *Tai* (or in most of the remaining cases, a *H'Mong* trader whom the villagers know well, or otherwise in several cases they are from other ethnic groups such as *Muong* or *Lao*, coming from villages in other locations in Vietnam or even other countries such as Thailand or Laos for whatever reason but not as tourists.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese tourists are referred by the hosts as only *khach* or *khach ma inn* (*ma inn* means visit; this kind is known as *khach du lich* or *khach vang lai* in Vietnamese). It is a term expressing the normal feelings towards a visitor. Foreign backpackers, in turn, are called by the more derogatory term *Tay ba lo* (*Tay* means Westerner; *ba lo* means backpack). In contrast, the foreign tourists who are brought in by tourist agencies are perceived as high-class visitors and known by the term *khach Tay*. In the villages, it is possible to hear stories about locals cheated by *Tay ba lo* which seem to demonstrate the untrustworthy character of such visitors.

However, we may ask what the difference then between a 'guest' and a 'visitor' is. A guest relationship is understood to be a long-term connection, based on a close or kinship relationship, even if the connection is for market business. Besides this, in host-guest relationships, the two parties treat one another on an equal basis. The host-visitor relationship, on the other hand, is just a temporary interaction. Regarding their business relationship, it is an asymmetrical transaction where it is actually expected that participants will try to take advantage of each other.

For that reason, not all visitors are treated as guests; they will not be perceived as such if they do not share a meal with the host, especially the *khach Tay*. Even though the host family lives in the homestay venue, the host-visitor relationship is not very different from that of a hotel – because they do not communicate directly. The tour guide acts as an intermediary, quite in the same manner as the front desk clerk of a hotel would do. However, according to *White Tai* culture, whether you are a guest, a visitor, a customer, or a friend, you are warmly welcomed by villagers. According

to custom, once a guest or a visitor comes into the house, the host must act in a specific way. Firstly, the host cannot ask, "What's the matter, why have you come here?"; second, the host must say "Hi" followed by "How are you?" before the visitors do so, then invite them into the house and serve them tea or plain water. Letting visitors say "Hi" before the hosts will be considered impolite. Third, if the visitors or guests are likely to stay long (one hour or more), the host must invite them to stay longer and prepare to have a meal together; fourth, once the guests have finished their meal, the host must invite them to take a nap in the house; fifth, if the guests are travelling to a distant destination, the host must invite them to stay overnight and provide them with dinner and a takeaway breakfast. As for the guests, if they know in advance that they are going to eat with the host, they may bring some food or fruit to the house, however if they have nothing to share with the host family, it does not matter. According to all this, many *White Tai* villagers maintain that *White Tai* hospitality is run by the 'heart' – that is to say, hospitality is part of the traditional culture of the *White Tai*. This is unlike other ethnic groups living in the same district who do not welcome strangers: only relatives, friends, and people introduced by relatives and friends are welcomed.

The Morality of Money

Generally, *White Tai* vendors usually say "I beg you" and "thank you" when receiving the money from customers. When they ask customers to buy their goods, they usually say in pidgin English "helping buy for me". I have tried to use these *White Tai* idioms when dealing with the *Kinh* selling food in the *Mai Chau* market: they sneered at me and they felt it was strange because they understood I was trying to 'help' a vendor sell their bread. *Kinh* vendors do not usually say "I beg you" and "Thank you" after taking the customer's money, unless they are much younger than their customer. From these ("I beg you" and "helping buy for me") I assume that money is not just a symbol of wealth for the *White Tai*, but can be the basis of a relationship that expands beyond mere business.

Talking about this, an old and educated man explained to me that the *White Tai* perceive that their goods should actually be sold at a cheaper price, or even given for free to guests whom they appreciate. When they sell goods at market price, they feel

obliged to thank the buyers for the extra money. If the buyer does not bargain, the seller should return some money to them. For instance, knowing that I did not have much money, after buying two traditional pillows, the seller returned some of the money to me (the *White Tai* usually give pillows as presents to guests they appreciate). The old man previously mentioned also noted that the *White Tai* have a saying concerning the handing over of money: "(I) do (sell goods) similar to the *Muong* and *Kinh* (sell at the market price) in this way; (I) beg you," in order to make clear to the buyer that the transaction is an economic and not a social one and thus takes place at the correct market price and not at a lower price.

In addition, according to my long-stay observation in the village, compared with other merchants, *White Tai* merchants are quite honest. They are much less shrewd at selling, and they usually do not inflate prices. Some of them even protect tourists from being cheated by *Kinh* tour guides. Many tour guides think that villagers cannot understand English or French; then they normally translate the prices asked by villagers to their customers increased two or three times. Some villagers understand what the tour guides say, but pretend that they cannot. Then, there are also many ways in which a host may respond to this misbehaviour on the part of the tour guides. On one occasion, the host wrote the correct prices on paper to inform the tourists when the tour guide was absent. As a result, the tour guide got involved in a quarrel with the tourists; then came back to argue with the host, who simply pretended she cannot understand English, so she had no way to tell the truth to the tourists. However, as proved by the research, the morality of trading is very complex; depending on the relationships between the host and the tour guide, as well as on the character of the guests, and many other conditions which I will refer to in the following section.

Production and Consumption Practices of Hospitality

Unlike other tourist spaces such as shopping, sightseeing, cycling, and so forth, hospitality is a good setting for close interaction between host and guest. This section draws out the social implications involved in these interactions in a particular homestay which provides accommodation, food, and drink. As pointed out, these relationships are not just seen as a temporary exchange for consuming goods and services; rather, at the sites under study the tourist market has been built on long-term and

close interactions. Five instances will be used to illustrate different types of social relationships that may take place within the *Mai Chau* tourist market. Two of these examples include Vietnamese tourists, who normally visit the villages in groups of between 10 and 20 people. The other three illustrations are concerned with foreign tourists: firstly, those who travel with tourist companies; then, those who are long-term residents in Vietnam; and finally, backpackers.

Vietnamese Tourists

Vietnamese tourists normally arrive at the villages in groups of about 10 to 20 people. They usually travel during the weekend. The activities they participate in *Mai Chau*; such as playing cards, enjoying cultural shows, partying, sightseeing, or shopping, are related to leisure. It seems that they also engage in the consumption of 'ethnic authenticity' by gazing at the locals, even if Vietnamese tourists rarely put any effort in trying to discover something authentically '*Tai*' by trekking out of the villages, as many foreign tourists do. Generally speaking, Vietnamese tourists are very noisy, drink alcohol, and often drop litter on the ground. *White Tai* villagers do not appreciate their behaviour at all, and feel annoyed about it. A common saying by homestay hosts is that "the *Kinh* likes to talk much and loudly; the *Kinh* is dirty." However, villagers show patience towards this behaviour or simply stay away from the tourists; they consider themselves more quiet, gentle, and clean; and, in short, more civilised than the *Kinh*.

Additionally, Vietnamese student tourists like to enjoy night parties, dancing to the sound of amplifiers, and campfires. They are often organised in large groups of around 50, and up to 160 people. Regularly arriving at the villages every weekend, these tourists may cause the villagers and other tourists some trouble; and so the villagers have arranged that any party and noise-making must stop by 10 p.m. in winter and 11 p.m. in summer. As villagers respect each other, they themselves force their visitors to stop, and consequently this rule works efficiently.

Apart from the tour guides and the drivers, Vietnamese tourist groups do not share any meal with their hosts, except in the case of small groups of tourists requesting to do so. For tour guides and drivers, only at the *White Tai* villages it is possible to get accommodation and meals (plus beers) free of charge, so they can spend

their travel money at other tourist sites. As reported by some homestay owners, none of them appreciates what they get for free from their *White Tai* hosts. According to the interpretation of the latter, these tour guides and drivers think that the *White Tai* provide them with free accommodation and meals because of the benefits they will get from the guides when they bring the tourists to the villages. Based on his own belonging to Vietnamese culture, one of my Vietnamese friends interpreted the attitude of tour guides and drivers in the sense that "they think that they can exploit the backward culture; in other words, they think it is not wise to give things free of charge" (Vietnamese scholar, personal communication, March 2010). Nevertheless, *White Tai* homestay owners act in the same way, regardless the number of tourists, which is sometimes as few as only two. In terms of economic rationality, accommodating and giving meals for free to both tour guide and driver bringing only two visitors cannot bring any benefit to the hosts. Moreover, the food they serve the tour guides is as good as the food they give to tourists, and even better than the food they consume themselves. When I asked them about loss, a 67-year-old woman, mother of a homestay host, justified this behaviour: "Don't think about the loss, we are always hospitable to anyone visiting our place." Therefore, the tour guide with such kind of negative thinking cannot act as a cultural broker for a relationship that moves beyond market rationality. Apart from this, another channel for the close interaction between villagers and tourists is the cultural show. Apparently, most tourists enjoy the cultural show, some of them even join the dancing once the show team invite them to do so. Yet, this space functions as a simple cultural product which hardly holds any potential to create a quality relationship, but may actually lead to a hostile interaction, as some *Kinh* tourists occasionally make advances towards young dancers, or show their contempt towards them as 'ethnic minority' members.

While gazing at the locals, Vietnamese tourists also try to show their political and economic power. For many of them, being served by the *White Tai* reinforces their view of the villagers as uneducated and backward people. Such point of view is determined by biased discourses of 'otherness'. In general, Vietnamese tourists' actions show their belief in the possibility of purchasing hospitality. For instance, many of them behave inappropriately in the villages: shooting fish in the host's pond, using a washing machine without the owner's permission, gambling, trampling on the house's floor, and shouting at the host for any request. *White Tai* hosts may respond

to this behaviour simply enduring it, or calling the attention of visitors towards some cultural taboo. Villagers expect visitors to stay merely a few days, while they may still use them as a way to expand their own networks: villagers may pretend to admire such visitors in the hope of attracting other wealthy customers. In any case, and without doubt, those visitors holding negative stereotypes about the *White Tai* will hardly be able to break free from traditional discourses of otherness and understand the 'other'. At the same time, they are often unwittingly utilised by the villagers, who contest these discourses of economic rationality and otherness giving in turn their visitors a name card and asking them to bring other tourists to their homestays.

Ordinarily, *White Tai* hosts are patient and gentle when dealing with tourists. Unlike people in other tourist villages, they do not put too much effort in convincing visitors to have a meal at their homestay, buy their souvenirs or their local liquor, or hire their trekking tours, or their motorbike taxi service. They give free pots of hot tea to their visitors; something which always costs a price in Vietnamese society. Moreover, making guests and visitors feel entertained is considered an important part for sustaining their homestay business. *White Tai* hosts will do anything for visitors to feel comfortable at their place. This is why homestay owners would ask their guests if they want to enjoy a cultural show at their home, without being paid any fee by the local show team. Those who do not know how to entertain visitors and guests well will gradually lose them, and those *Kinh* who rent *White Tai* houses to carry on a homestay business themselves will also see these businesses fail, as what they offer is not a 'real', run-by-heart *Tai* hospitality. The buzzing among tourists afterwards recommends visitors to bypass these homestays. Besides, making acquaintances is a common experience in *White Tai* villages: As a custom, *White Tai* villagers show their welcome whenever Vietnamese tourists pass by their houses, or stop at their souvenir shops. If the villagers like the visitors, they will invite them into their house, then serve them tea, and keep on chatting with them. This makes an impression on some Vietnamese tourists, since in *Kinh* tourist communities everything will be given at a price. Besides, some tourists, especially the adults, will talk to the hosts in order to learn more about their living.

However, once the tourists see the villages and their inhabitants are civilised and modern (as previously stated in the section concerning the 'commodification of *Mai Chau*'), they may react in two ways. They may react negatively, complaining that

the *White Tai* are becoming *Kinh*, which means they are becoming 'modern'. Some interviewed tourists explained this as follows: All roads in the village are made of concrete, villagers use modern electronic appliances and satellite dishes, they do not wear *White Tai* traditional costume in their everyday activities. According to this perception, rather than becoming modern, *White Tai* culture must remain traditional and primitive. In relation to this, the accepted image of the *White Tai* as cleaner, quieter, and gentler than the *Kinh* majority is publicised in Vietnamese-written articles on many tourist websites and newspapers, together with the interviews. Last but not least, Vietnamese tourists are surprised by the business abilities of *White Tai* villagers. Such reaction in turn brings a feeling of ethnic dignity to the villagers: On the one hand, it makes *White Tai* villagers proud of themselves, on the other, the view of the *White Tai* as backward and uneducated people and other stereotypes constructed by outsiders are shaken off.

There are also positive reactions on the part of Vietnamese tourists: Visitors recognise the falseness of their images of *White Tai* villagers as backward and primitive. They are surprised by the fact that *White Tai* villagers can cook delicious food, weave beautiful textiles, are educated and clean, and possess a nice personality. Some tourists even ask their hosts about the school where they study how to cook, only to learn that the hosts were self-trained. As a result of this, some tourists tell each other to avoid looking down on the villagers. Since *White Tai* businesses work very well, some of the Vietnamese tourists come to suspect locals receive subsidies from the government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help them establish their businesses – as it happens in many other tourist sites. Once these suspicions are proved wrong, the tourists respect the *White Tai* even more.

Through these interactions, hosts and visitors can not only become business partners, but also come to respect each other. As a result, visitors are more willing to learn about *White Tai* culture. For instance, there are articles on many tourist websites admiring *White Tai* villagers for their friendly and hospitable manners, or their skill at constructing and managing a community-based tourist market. Even though some of those articles still represent the *White Tai* as 'primitive', they at least reflect their ability to manage both traditional and modern values smartly.

Foreign Tourists

I differentiate between three types of foreign tourists visiting the *White Tai* villages. The first category are mostly Westerners between 40 and 60 years of age. They often come in small groups of between 6 and 15 people. In this case villagers engage in a 'vertical relationship' in relation to their visitors, to the tourist agencies in Ha Noi, and to the tour guides acting as cultural brokers. In such relationships, tourists are not treated as guests, but rather as clients or visitors, while house owners adopt the role of servants. There are no opportunities for hosts and visitors to share a meal, or just a chat. Most house owners opt for staying away from these tourists, except during the time they must serve them food and drinks. Obviously, this distant interaction, together with the role tour guides play as intermediaries, does not allow for a direct contact. Even though some tourists in this category will join the dance of the cultural show team, the relationship cannot move further beyond: *White Tai* culture remains a cultural product or simply an object for the tourists' gaze.

The relationship between hosts and the second type of foreign visitors is based more on expectations sprung from traditional forms of relationship. Most visitors in this category are working or studying in Vietnam; they can speak some Vietnamese and are therefore more familiar with Vietnamese culture. House owners therefore treat these visitors as guests who bring them not only money but also friendship. If these tourists visit the villages alone or as a couple rather than a group, the host will sit down and talk with them. Sometimes, for instance on a special day, they will all share meals or drink beers together; furthermore, the hosts often come to talk to these guests, take special care of them, lend them their bicycles, and show other signs of hospitality.

Consequently, a long-term relationship often emerges. Some tourists are known for returning to the villages every year, for example an American family and a Spanish man who came back frequently for 4 or 5 years. One German man, married to a Vietnamese woman and owner of an alcohol export company, stayed one month at the village in order to learn how to produce local liquor. In another case, three American tourists and a group of western students joined the villagers cultivating rice. These guests are very familiar with many of the households in the village. For instance, an American tourist could identify the names of many of the villagers after conversing

about their health and living situation with a host. This guest is friendly to everyone in the villages: smiling, greeting, or even teasing others who just know him as a tourist. A German man keeps regularly in touch with his former host; when that host went to Ha Noi, where the German man has his own house, the host also received accommodation without charge. Lastly, a Spanish man came back to the village to say goodbye to his old host before returning to his home country.

The market space, perceived by many people as a space for temporary transactions (for instance, bargaining, swindling, and so forth), can be re-created as a space that produces and experiences a quality relationship in terms of both business and social understanding. A Spanish guest, who is the director of an under-construction *Muong* ethnic tourist village in the same province of *Hoa Binh*, used to visit the *White Tai* villages; after learning about the management abilities of *White Tai* homestay hosts, he brought a group of 30 *Muong* ethnic people with him to be trained in catering with the *White Tai* homestay hosts. He still keeps in touch with the villagers and returns regularly to the same homestay with his family. While sightseeing, a villager who is not a homestay owner, spots him and his family. Even if they had never talked to each other before; the villager recognised him and invited the whole family into his house, served them tea, and talked. All members of the household joined in to welcome the guests. This made an impression to the Spanish man's wife. The interaction between host and guest can become determined by generosity, with no expectations of material return. This is also the circumstance of an Australian man who came to *Ban Pom Cong* every year for five years and paid the labour costs for the house of a family living in a mountainous area next to the villages. Some tourists also asked their tour guide to come back to the village and donate things to children on their behalf. If hosts and guests come to appreciate each other, they often exchange gifts regardless the value of the objects exchanged.

One incident in which it was the host who was impressed is that of Grandfather *Nham* – the pioneer of the homestay business in the villages. A group of 20 American tourists who were war veterans stayed overnight at his homestay. One of them told him he regretted having dropped bombs over Vietnam during the war, and showed his surprise at the fact that no villager seemed to hold any hostile feeling towards them. "Now you come here for vacation, there is no reason to hit you; but if you hit Vietnam again, I would fight you again," replied Grandfather *Nham*. The American

man then apologised to him. Also, some French tourists said sorry to him for the same reason.

Backpackers differ significantly from the second type of foreign guests. The second type of foreign guests know how to relate to the villagers; the backpackers, on the contrary, since they are unable to interpret the behaviour of locals, do not know how to deal with them. A Dutch woman said she would like to convey her feelings of gratitude to the villagers, but was afraid of acting inappropriately and offend the villagers. Eventually, she decided to keep silent, and did nothing other than stick to the usual economic exchange. She did not understand villagers' actions; for example, because only a few people had said "hello" to her, she felt she had received a generally cold welcome from the villagers.

Due to the temporary character of their stay and the fact that they usually do not return to the villages, in the eyes of the villagers, the backpackers or *Tay ba lo* are not guests, but merely visitors; it is therefore not useful to try to establish any long-term relationship with them. Importantly, many backpackers bargain with villagers; trying to take much and paying little in return, sometimes cheating locals. It is possible to hear a few stories about villagers cheated by *Tay ba lo*, which shows their mistrust of this group of visitors. Homestay hosts often say in Vietnamese things like: "*ho rat kho tinh*," which means "they are very difficult [to deal with]." For example, two Japanese backpackers who had just met their host tried to bargain with him. For the *White Tai*, visitors who have just arrived at the house must sit down, be greeted by the hosts, drink tea; only after that it will be possible to talk business. However, in general, hosts give their hospitality to whoever stays in their houses; this host, therefore, did not listen to the bargaining, but concentrated to prepare a mat for those tourists to sit down, and took a hot pot of tea to serve them; even though in his mind they were not really his guests. Because of this, the *Tay ba lo* were ultimately satisfied with the way the host catered for them.

Obviously, and especially compared to the second type of foreign tourists, hosts tend to keep distant from the backpackers. Apart from money transactions, hosts will rarely become concerned about backpackers. A negative example of this deals with one host who built a homestay business with a motorbike taxi service and usually receives backpackers. He knows about backpackers' stereotyped behaviour, so he tries to take control of the situation by holding their passports – something other

homestays will not normally do. He also usually convinces them to buy his trekking tour, and to use his motorbike taxi service. In addition, he is very skilled in dealing with backpackers, even cheating them in order to get more money. On another occasion, a homestay owner cheated a Singaporean backpacker by getting him to pay almost twice the usual price for the service.

Analysis and Conclusions

First, the interaction between host and visitor can be creative or hostile. According to Erb (2004), there are varieties of culture-based anticipation and interpretation that tourists often inherit, and that lead to the divergence of interaction between the two different worlds of the host and the visitor (pp. 5, 86). In her words, the tourist encounter may be a space of redefining and shaping such interpersonal relations. Interpersonal relations, as shown by Erb's study (2000), can unexpectedly become hostile, despite initial hospitality. Nonetheless, they can also be friendly, or something even beyond; as it happens in *Mai Chau*. The second point is that the hospitality of the *White Tai* tourist villages in *Mai Chau* is not generally involved in 'power relations', in the sense of the host controlling tourists' behaviour; as some researchers have argued (Tucker, 2003, p. 126). It seems to be an equal relationship, which allows for the transformation of temporary relationships into long-term or quality ones.

Within host-visitor interactions there are many kinds of relationship being manipulated and transformed (McIntosh & Johnson, 2005). According to the understanding of the *White Tai*, the relationships between host and visitor can be divided into several types: (a) host-guest, (b) host-normal visitor, (c) host-strange visitor. The first type is represented by those Vietnamese tourists responding positively to the interaction (the second type of Vietnamese tourist) and those foreign tourists staying in Vietnam (the second type of foreign tourist). The Vietnamese tourists responding negatively to the interaction (the first type of Vietnamese tourist), and the foreign tourists travelling with tour agencies (the first type of foreign tourist) represent the host-normal visitor category; while the host-strange visitor is represented by the backpackers.

The first factor differentiating these types is not ethnicity (foreigner or Vietnamese); but the setting, so to say, the homestay and its hospitality, including how close host-visitor interactions are, and how long they last. The setting where tourists de-

pend on the tour guides does not lead to the production of new relations. Moreover, images and stereotypes concerning visitors like the backpackers hardly facilitate hosts to open their minds. In addition, ethnic stereotypes of backwardness and primitiveness constrain some Vietnamese tourists and lock them in the iron cage of ethnic bias. These factors are seen as obstacles to constructing a new, transformed relationship.

In the context of ethnic tourism market formation in *Mai Chau*, the differentiation of relationships is important for the purpose of economic rationality. Unwittingly or not, the first relationships are formed over the long term, since tourist business partnerships can expand their market networks, whereas the latter category is seen only as a framework for making profit. Besides this, villagers take the opportunity brought by the tourist market to construct new identities while claiming ethnic dignity and power to control and manage cultural resources. This can be seen as a kind of 'ethnic minority politics' which actually works to transform power relations.

Furthermore, because the second type of both Vietnamese and foreign tourists are not influenced by discourses of otherness and ethnic stereotypes, since they experience something new in relation to one another, they can be liberated from the world of cheating and exploitation, and engage in a transformed relationship which may go beyond economic and political relationships, to become something I call a relationship of mutual respect. Surely, this can become a space of understanding the other; which can help tourists transcend the notion of consuming ethnicity, and can help locals transcend the notion of a minority politics. For this reason, the culture of hospitality is not perceived as an object for consumption, but rather as a kind of setting for a close host-tourist interaction. It can be manipulated and transformed into a space which emancipates tourists from the usual consumption of commodified cultural products.

The 'object' of consumption can be defined and constructed in different ways: as the direct core of the consumption process in postmodernist discourse, or as a focal point for interpersonal actions, according to either the interpretative (that is, consuming as experience) or the constructive approach (that is, consuming as integration and classification) (Sharpley, 2002, pp. 313-315). Accordingly, I have attempted to elaborate here on the impasse implied by these interpretations of social relations in ethnic tourism. The 'impasse' comes from the presently prevailing emphasis on

the social life of things, which forgets almost completely the 'interpersonal relation' itself. Of course, things have meanings, and can express social relations and power struggles. However, we can consume experience through interpersonal actions, without depending on things. Interpersonal actions, with regard to both consuming as play and consuming as classification, must stay at the heart of the research on consumption, rather than the 'object' alone. Tourists may interact with villagers by utilising objects as a resource or as a base for an interaction which expands beyond that object's experiential characteristics. By taking the object of consumption in their hands, villagers have a chance for a broader achievement. Equally, the tourist encounter may be a means to share experiences. Tourists, by holding communal interaction with the object of consumption, will be able to communicate or experience communitas, which is often the result of sharing collective experiences. In both ways of dealing with the consumption process, however, the communally social nature of the consumption experience, rather than the object of consumption at the final stage, is emphasised. Through highly valued experiences, those kinds of interaction are detached from the dependency on things (Sharpley, 2002, p. 315).

Postmodernism is often blind to all such notions. Slater (2002) has pointed out the postmodernist introduction of the cultural sign value in the form of 'symbolic product/interaction' in place of 'market features/actions' (that is, production and consumption processes) (p. 60). This is similar to the way in which postmodernists argue against modernists and realists' notions of commodification, reducing such notion to the form of a simple material relation. This dichotomy inspired me to look at ideas of existential authenticity in ethnic tourism (Wang, 1999; 2004, pp. 210-234). Wang draws the idea of existential authenticity adopting the existential philosophy of Heidegger. Heidegger's philosophy, in contrast to postmodernism, is never concerned with the representation of 'things' (Mulhall, 1996; 2005, p. 484). Rather, it is concerned with how humans understand themselves in relation to things, and therefore with how the decision to be authentic or not is taken in the very existential moment; that is, in a moment of fundamental self-understanding, tourists do not construct the meaning of the object (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006, p. 72 & p. 79; Steiner & Reisinger, 2006, p. 304). Meanings, therefore, do not lie in experience. Yet, Burch (2002) suggests a meaningful process of reflective comprehension of experiences. In this sense, Reisinger and Steiner (2006) believe that the more tourists can embrace all

experiences (that is, good or bad, authentic or fake, as the gifts of tourism), and do not travel with a head full of expectations, the more pleasant the experiences they may enjoy. Otherwise, they will certainly be disappointed somewhere along the line. 'Existential authenticity' is about the achievement of lived experiences that results originally and integrally from the process of experiencing different existential moments. And the experiencing of self towards itself, and to one another, will help tourist and host to relate (Burch, 2002). Steiner and Reisinger (2006), therefore, defend the notion of an existential authenticity providing free choices at every step and not simply concerned with the preservation of traditions or the recognition of identity politics (p. 309). Obviously, this notion goes beyond the usual notions of identity politics and of economic rationality.

Within the context of this existential authenticity, consumption makes a clear distinction between 'object action' and 'interpersonal action'. Lastly, the production and consumption processes are not in 'mutual interaction', as postmodern supporters see in negotiating authenticity. Rather, the key to these processes lie in experiencing new relations, where production is absorbed into consumption (or, more radically, production doesn't even exist) by the experience of consumption in every existential moment. Eventually, we do not know what product we consume, but just apprehend what highly valued experiences emerged from the worlds of both hosts and guests, no matter whether good or bad.

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