A Case Study of Tourism in Chinese Peasant Society

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Introduction

In this essay, I discuss a hitherto neglected aspect of the anthropology of tourism: namely, touristic attitudes and behaviors in peasant societies. I fix my analysis in cultural space by focusing on a case taken from China; however, I am interested not only in description, using a cultural ecological perspective, but also in explanation of the distinctive pattern of sightseeing that obtains there. I fix my analysis in cultural time by first outlining and briefly discussing an evolutionary schema of tourism consisting of three stages: primitive, peasant, and modern.[1] In this essay, I focus less on the primitive and the modern in order to consider in detail aspects of tourism in premodern and modernizing peasant society. This paper is thus cultural ecological in conception and evolutionary in perspective.

While I am interested in deducing from the Chinese case a touristic morale applicable to modernizing peasant society in general, I am aware of the fact that there may be aspects of Chinese tourism that are unique to the Chinese case. I hope to point out several features of Chinese tourism that distinguish it from the non-Chinese variety and that, therefore, cannot be attributed to peasant tourism in general.

Finally, in this paper, I define tourism broadly as travel for noneconomic purposes. That is, from this perspective, the two aspects of tourism that serve to minimally define this subset of human activity are its mobility and its leisure, the latter referring to freedom from immediate economic concerns.

The Evolution of Tourism

Touristic behavior in the most general sense (i.e., that of the definition given above) is present at all cultural levels. However, it manifests itself differently in primitive, peasant, and modern societies. I present in this section several concepts that I believe are critical determinants of the way touristic behavior is expressed in various societies. I begin by presenting a preliminary list of the preconditions for tourism. Such a list might include the following:

(1) *Higher productivity*. As Nash points out, higher productivity "has made possible the development of leisure classes as well as an improved material apparatus for travel" (1977:36).

(2) *Sensory input*. Following Berlyne (1962), a precondition for tourism is a level of sensory input that is outside the optimal range (Graburn 1977).

Hunting-and-gathering groups living in temperate climates and most of the tropical ones would have been able to accumulate the surplus necessary to occasionally make trips that satisfied nonmaterial needs. Thus some, although by no means all, hunting-and-gathering groups would have been able to satisfy Nash's criterion of surplus. Additionally, in the absence of roads or means of transportation, whatever travel was undertaken would have been severely limited in extent. In sum, even hunting-and-gathering groups would seem to have had, with some qualifications, a level of production that would allow some travel of limited duration and distance for noneconomic purposes. Under the definition given in the introduction, this type of travel would be considered tourism.

The second precondition for tourism—a level of mental stimulation outside the optimal range—requires greater elaboration. In order to make cross-cultural sense out of Berlyne's proposition (1962) for primitive groups, the proposition requires refinement in two ways. First, a distinction must be made between the two main sources

of "novelty, complexity, and information." Second, the absolute level of sensory input for each technocultural level must be assessed.[2]

With regard to the first point, an initial dichotomization of the stimulus field of human beings would separate stimuli originating in the behavior of other human beings from stimuli originating in the natural world. It seems to me that primitive societies can be differentiated from peasant and modern societies precisely along this axis (Figure 1). My intuitive assessment of the relative balance of natural versus anthropogenic sensory inputs is that it is biased toward the natural world for primitives and toward the anthropogenic for peasants and moderns. This "imbalance" in sensory inputs may be behind the focus among hunters and gatherers on large seasonal gatherings and the accompanying relative deemphasis of encounters with the natural world and, among peasant and especially modern societies, the relative emphasis on encounters with nature.[3] To put the matter in economic terms, given the relative abundance of environmental stimuli and the relative scarcity of human stimuli in hunting-and-gathering groups, marginal utility of the latter exceeds that of the former.

I would argue that the most exciting part of a primitive's environment is the human environment: that is, the people with whom he comes into contact. At the same time, many hunting-and-gathering groups travel great distances in their quest for food. These trips, the primary motivation of which is economic, also generate environmental stimuli in abundance. With the sedentarization that accompanies the shift to slash-and-burn horticulture, and the even narrower delimitation of the "exploited" natural world that comes with agriculture, one's natural horizons are successively restricted. The pursuit of one's livelihood no longer takes one great distances. In the extreme case, which is represented by China, one's miniaturized fields are located within a few minute's walk from one's front door. One sees little of nature's variety in such an economic context.

Paradoxically, at the same time that the dimensions of the experienced natural world are shrinking, those of the social world are expanding. Agriculture permits great masses of people to live in close quarters. Although what may be called "social density" is difficult to compute precisely, a sense of what this means may be gained by comparing the population densities of hunting-and-gathering with agricultural societies. Hunting-and-gathering societies seldom average more than five people per square mile, usually much less. By comparison, the current population density of the Canton Delta region of China is approximately 3,000 people per square mile. The emphasis on pilgrimages to local and distant beauty spots, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section, may result in part from the extremely high social density.

Primitive, peasant, and modern societies probably also differ in the absolute level of sensory inputs. Individuals in hunting-and-gathering groups probably experience the lowest stimulus level; members of modern societies the highest; and peasants the intermediate level, but one closer to primitives than moderns (Figure 2). Individuals in developed nations are stimulated at will. With the development of the mass media, workers are sensorially released from the purview of their workplaces. The never-ending grind of work and sleep that characterized life in the early stages of the industrial revolution has given way to the electric/electronic revolution and its society of leisure. A book, movie, or television program can instantly and totally saturate one's senses for several hours, taking one to another time, place, and life. Moderns have become adjusted to a high level of stimulus and, in its absence, experience stimulus deprivation (e.g., boredom, listlessness) at levels that primitives or peasants would perhaps

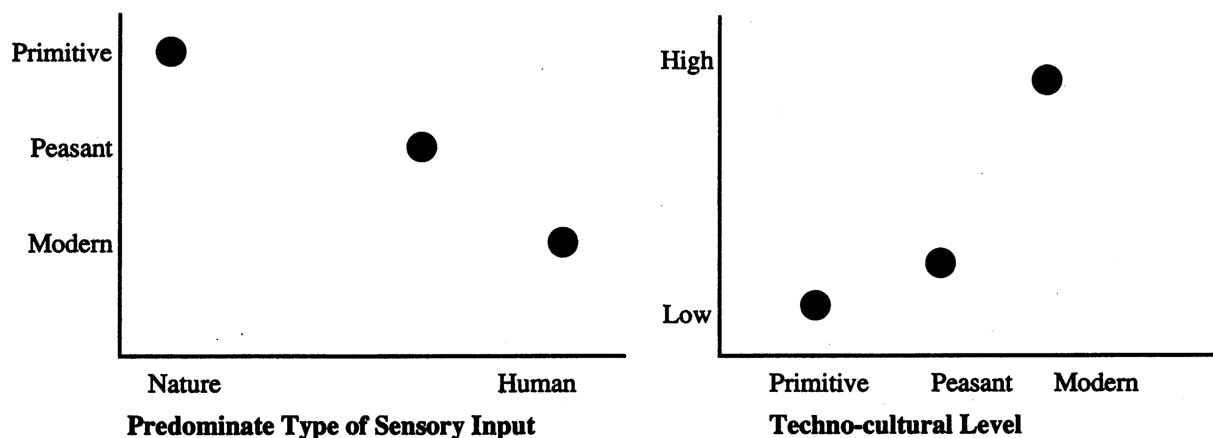

Figure 1. Diagram of the relative balance of natural versus anthropogenic sensory inputs for primitive, peasant, and modern man.

Figure 2. Sensory input levels for individuals in societies of differing technocultural levels.

find quite tolerable.

In modern societies, transportation is convenient and relatively cheap. Many can readily afford to travel long distances in search of adventure, stimulus, and excitement. Ironically, the very process by which transportation becomes accessible and by which long-distance travel becomes a simple matter of mechanics also implies a political, economic, and social integration and homogenization that undermines the very search for stimulus for which the trip is undertaken. From the standpoint of the American leisure class, there is little to be said for long-distance trips that consist only of visits to eateries and night-eries with the standard amenities, since there is little difference between the East Coast and the West Coast with regard to these matters. In traditional societies, on the other hand, travel is arduous and is undertaken only for important material or spiritual rewards, not for sheer "neurotic stimulus." As in modern societies, the boundaries within which easy travel is feasible also define the area within which ethnic and economic interaction and homogenization are beginning to occur.

Of course, in traditional peasant societies, the dimensions of integration are drawn much tighter around local populations as a consequence of the much lower levels of commercialization and the difficulty of travel. Peasant societies, in China and elsewhere, consist of a mosaic of country markets and their associated cluster of villages or hamlets. This is referred to as a "standard marketing area" in the regional systems literature and is in general that area located within a day's round trip of the market town. This is, as Skinner (1977) has so brilliantly demonstrated, the basic economic, social, and cultural unit of Chinese society in particular and of peasant society in general. I claim that it is also the area within which, in a peasant society, sightseeing for sheer pleasure (i.e., the positive stimulus of the trip) occurs.

This is not to say that people never cross the boundaries of their standard marketing areas. There are certain goods and services that cannot be purchased in the standard market town and can only be obtained further up the hierarchy of economic central places. But such trips are rare or nonexistent for the ordinary farmer, whose needs are well served at the local level. Although there were certain classes in traditional Chinese society, notably landlords and merchants, whose interests extended beyond the standard marketing area to the central market or even higher, such people constituted only a small fraction of the total population. Thus, it is my contention that the effective world of the peasant is the standard marketing area and that he is unlikely to travel outside of this area for any reason, including sightseeing.

The Setting: Jiang-wei ("River's End"), Guangtong Province

Jiang-wei is located in the delta of the Pearl River. The name Jiang-wei means literally "river's end" and is used by residents to refer to a football-shaped area approximately eight kilometers wide and fifteen kilometers long. Although it is surrounded by water and is thus technically an island, it is only separated from the other "islands" of the Pearl River delta by two arms of the alluvial landscape and is punctuated by a central mass of low rolling hills and a half dozen small hillocks in the north of the island.

Jiang-wei has constituted a recognized district for several hundred years. Along with several adjacent, smaller areas, it comprises the People's Agricultural Commune of Jun-an. There are thirteen brigades in the Jiang-wei portion of Jun-an Commune, just as there were thirteen *xiang* (subdistricts) in traditional times, each consisting of a single large village or a cluster of hamlets. Agriculture is the mainstay of the local economy, employing more than 90 percent of the population. According to the 1929 *Shun-te County Gazetteer*, sericulture and pisciculture have been the mainstays of the local economy since the early 1800s. Contemporary Jiang-wei remains a mosaic of fish ponds and mulberry fields, although small quantities of sugarcane, vegetables, bananas, and rice are also cultivated. The main exports of the area are silk thread and fish, while most of the grain consumed in the area is imported.

Tourist Attractions: The "Eight Sights" of River's End

Over the past three decades [to 1979], the Communists have succeeded in establishing a sense of national pride and identity among the residents of Jiang-wei. The youth, several dozen of whom were able to journey throughout China during the Cultural Revolution on the national rail system, are clearly cognizant of the Chinese nation. Even older, uneducated villagers have some sense of the country as a whole. This was not always the case, however. Older villagers clearly recall a time when the provincial capital, Kuanghow City, located fifty kilometers away, was a sight that only a privileged few would see in a lifetime. This was also the time when the "Grand Tour" for the Jiang-wei villager consisted of visiting the circuit of the "Eight Sights" of River's End.

When I mentioned the Eight Sights to older informants, I could sense their excitement as they eagerly explained what it was about the various sights that was extraordinary and worth seeing. Their attitudes, enthusiasm, and the layers of lore surrounding each of the sights made it clear to me that a tour of the Eight Sights had been a real "occasion," even as late as the 1940s.[4]

The trip took one day for the hardy and two, or perhaps even three, for the elderly and infirm. Although there were no designated starting or ending points, the Eight Sights were usually visited in the same order, which was determined entirely by the shortest complete circuit of the entire set of eight. This order is maintained in the discussion of the Eight Sights that follows:

1. The Mist-scape of Fu River (Fu Hai Yin Bwo)

In the subdistrict of Fu-an, there is a Buddhist monastery previously inhabited by a small coterie of monks, but currently unoccupied. On a small hill a few feet from the temple is a pavilion once famous for its view. Before the revolution, a swath of bamboo extended from the pavilion north to the river 100 meters away. The heavy morning river mist formed a backdrop to the bamboo grove and, swirling through the bamboo thicket, added a surreal element to the scene. The bamboo grove, like all other previously uncultivated areas within the commune, has since been leveled and the area that it once occupied is now planted with uninspiring vegetables. Today, there is only the mist and the river, a sight for which few ascend the stairs. There are many stories told of the fairies and other creatures that would occasionally be seen in the bamboo grove. These, of course, are seen no more, for they were a manifestation of the grove's special appeal, and they disappeared when it did.

2. The Floating Rock of Xing-chai

Before the revolution there was a large, partially submerged rock in the Pearl River near Xing-chai. The rock, several meters in circumference at its widest, had a peculiar shape. It rested on a relatively narrow base, but was capped by a bulbous protrusion. Entirely submerged during the summer flood waters, the upper portion of the rock was gradually exposed as the river subsided during the fall. At low water during winter, the top of the rock was exposed but the narrow base was still submerged. The rock thus appeared to be floating on top of the water in violation of common sense. The rock was not merely attended to because of its ability to float, but because it was also a serious obstacle to navigation (i.e., during high water, it caused navigators to go aground). It was removed in the early years of the People's Republic in order to clear the ship channel.

3. The Well with No Leaves (Wu Ye Jing)

According to local tradition, one of the oldest wells in Jiang-wei is located in Sha-bu. It is a fine well, wide and lined with stone, offering particularly sweet water, as it has for hundreds of years. The area surrounding the well is also attractive, for it is densely planted with trees. Despite this fact, there are never any leaves to be found in the well itself. What magic it is that causes this small miracle the villagers do not know, but they are sure that it is no ordinary well.

4. The Blue Water Bowl (Ma Lan Shwei Wan)

There is a small rice-bowl-sized depression in a rock near Sha-bu. The bowl is always filled with water, although it never overflows. The bowl is said to be impossible to dry out, even with a cloth, for water keeps appearing. It is, of course, a small spring, with the water seeping in through pores in the rock invisible to the naked eye. It still exists, and occasionally children can be seen attempting to empty it of water.

5. The Stone Bridge of Nan-mian (Nan-mian Xi Qiau)

Near the district of Nan-mian, there was a small stream running down the hill into the river. Arching over the stream at one point was a natural stone bridge large enough to walk across three abreast. Since the revolution, the stream has been diverted for irrigation purposes, but the archway still exists.

6. The Moonless Pond (Chi Tang Wu Yue)

In Sha-tou before the revolution, there was a fish pond that did not reflect the moon, despite the fact that it resembled the numerous other fish ponds in the vicinity in its size, shape, and depth. This pond's special property was destroyed in 1958 when it was enlarged, along with many others, in the name of efficient fish culture.

7. The Stone Dragon Drinks Water (Shei Lung Xi Schwei)

There is a large rock in Chwang-men shaped like a dragon. This alone is enough to make it memorable in the eyes of the locals, because the dragon is one of the most meaning-laden creatures in the symbolic pantheon of the Chinese. This dragon is noteworthy for another reason, however. During the rainy season, there is a small stream that makes its way down the side of the mountain and disappears into the dragon's mouth (a crevice in the rock). It thus appears as if the stone dragon is drinking water. This sight still exists.

8. The Colored Tortoise Back (E Feng Tsai Ying)

Located in San-hwa, this sight was quite small, occupying an area of ground roughly two-by-two feet. It was said to resemble the back of a tortoise in shape, although it was much more colorful, with blue, black, white, green, and red striations. The expanding village of San-hwa reached this sight in the mid-1950s, however, and there is now a house built upon it.

The Eight Sights were an important part of the natural and cultural environment of Jiang-wei residents. The shared knowledge of these eight natural wonders served to link the residents of Jiang-wei to one another culturally, while, at the same time, distinguishing them from residents of neighboring delta areas.

Jiang-wei has produced commercial crops, mainly silk and fish, for at least 200 years. The bulk of local production was exported to Guangzhow City and, later, to Hong Kong. Water transport was used exclusively, and local vessels, owned and operated by Jiang-wei lineages, dominated local trade. Jiang-wei merchants and rivermen were thus familiar with the water route to Guangzhou and with the sights that lined it. These sights, although familiar to a portion of the male residents of Jiang-wei, never constituted, as did the Eight Sights, a definable set, and special expeditions were not made to view them. Such sightseeing as was done along this water route was done casually in the course of shipping goods to and from River's End.

I conclude from this that, in premodern Chinese peasant society, and perhaps peasant societies in general, sightseeing followed the economic contours of the land. People were attracted to the curious and unusual, and so would visit attractions in the areas in which their livelihood took them. There was little sense of identification with such sights, however, and areas that, unlike Jiang-wei, were not commercialized saw little of such activity. Sights located within the standard marketing area were viewed differently, however. Any two points within a standard marketing area were, by definition, within walking distance of each other. Sights located within the boundaries of this economic-cum-cultural-and-social unit took on significance as markers of this local unit, thus serving to reinforce the cultural unity of the area.[5]

Tourism is not, as MacCannell (1976) would have it, merely a way of defining oneself by opposition with the world. It may also be a way of defining one's social group by identification with the local world.

In situations in which travel is arduous and/or dangerous, it tends to be undertaken by large numbers of people only for pressing reasons. These include significant economic gain and religious salvation, but not simple sightseeing. Tourism, thus, is limited to those areas that are easily accessible. In a peasant society with only rudimentary transportation facilities, this area is the standard marketing area. It is only within the standard marketing area that sightseeing takes on the attributes of the local society itself; that is, it is transformed into a marker of not only a local sight, but of a local society.

Discussion: Communication, Modernization, and the Evolution of a Tourist Consciousness

In imperial times and even during the republican period, formal government in China extended only to the county level. The republican government of China opened district offices at the subcounty level, but these never effectively administrated the areas in which they were located. As in imperial times, the village and the larger marketing area were left, on the whole, to rule themselves.

One of the major successes of the communist system has been the extension of the formal structure of government down to the village level and, indeed, down to the neighborhood level in the form of the production brigade consisting of two to four dozen families. This extension has been accomplished by the establishment of communes, production brigades, and production teams. The use of the word "commune" is a misnomer, since a Chinese *gongshe* is less a commune in the Western sense of the word than a complex collective farm and a unit of rural government. The next level of government is the county, but the county administration is sufficiently far removed from the world of the peasant that he is likely to be unclear about its leaders and organization except in the most general sense. This does not hold for the commune, however. The headquarters of almost all communes are located in market towns, which remain the site of many of the goods and services that the peasant needs for everyday life. As in traditional times, at least one member of every family goes to market once a week to purchase goods or to obtain services. The economic centralization brought by communization means that the standard marketing area has even more economic significance for the average peasant than it did in traditional times. Most peasants are thus quite knowledgeable about commune organization and administration.

In short, the basic unit of traditional Chinese society, the standard marketing area, survives today in the form of the commune. The Jiang-wei of imperial and republican times has been transformed intact into the People's Agricultural Commune of Jun-an. This being the case, why is it that the Eight Sights of River's End have become irrelevant to today's villagers?

I would argue that the increasing irrelevance of the Eight Sights is a reflection of the declining social and cultural significance of the standard marketing area cum commune as a whole. And this I would attribute to the national consciousness that has been instilled in the generation raised under Communism. Jiang-wei youth are aware of the import of decisions made in Peking, even though few follow events avidly. The perspective of the youth and, to some extent, the middle-aged has expanded beyond the narrow confines of Jiang-wei to include the vast land mass of Asia. This modern perspective has sensitized them to the importance of supralocal political and economic movements, thus reducing the relative importance of events in Jiang-wei at the same time that their absolute importance, when compared to republican times, is increasing.

The Eight Sights have also suffered from more direct comparison. The sight of a jet airplane is much more impressive to the uninitiated than is a dragon-shaped rock that appears to swallow a small stream—especially to a villager with no understanding of jet propulsion. The mere knowledge that such "creatures" exist would not have been sufficient in and of itself to rob the Eight Sights of their importance; rather, it was also necessary for them to be seen, in picture if not in person. The advent of television insured that the former was easily accomplished, while the relative ease of boat and train travel insured that the latter was at least within the realm of possibility, even if not immediately realizable for the average peasant.

The modern world has impinged upon Jiang-wei villagers in many ways—through the mass media, through ease of travel, and most important, through the realization that Jiang-wei is no longer a self-contained political and social entity as it was in the not-to-distant past. It is now an integral part of a nationwide political and material economy that has undermined the earlier economic and social independence of the Jiang-wei standard marketing area. It is not that Jiang-wei has entirely lost its significance as a social unit; rather, it no longer exists as a separate and distinct social entity. It has ceded its social independence to the national government, which, in turn, has effectively instilled, through the medium of education, a view of China as a whole, rather than that small portion of China that is Jiang-wei.

It is no accident that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1969 involved a pilgrimage of China's youth to the capital, Peking, just as it is no accident that these youth went with a clear picture of what they wanted to see there. They went, in MacCannell's terms (1976), with "markers" that they wished to attach to various sights. These sights included the Great Hall of the People, Tien An Men Square, and the other monuments to China's new socialism. In one sense, it may be said that these youth went to worship the symbolic strength of the New China and its leaders, for personages, too, can become tourist attractions.

In the same way, international tourism takes tourists to areas that have already been integrated into their world view via the mass media, education, and travelogues. It is no accident that anticipation is said to be half the fun, and this anticipation hinges on a more or less detailed, more or less accurate picture of what the destination will be like. What was absent in traditional Jiang-wei was a world view that systematically incorporated elements from the world outside of Jiang-wei. This is what the Communists quite deliberately provided. Similarly, the development of the nation-states of Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries set the stage for massive internal tourism. A trip to the capital of France, Paris, was *de rigeur* for even the most countrified "Frenchman." It was this strong identification with national symbols that was the essence of nationalism and patriotism. Internal tourism served to consolidate the social boundaries of nation-states at the same time that military force served to maintain them.

We may thus define two sets of conditions necessary for mass tourism. The first we may call "material conditions." These include the availability of transportation at a cost that is within the reach of ordinary citizens, as well as a political and economic environment that insures that travel can be undertaken relatively comfortably and safely. The above conditions, while necessary, are certainly not sufficient. They do, however, serve to foster the development of the second set of conditions. These are the symbolic markers and meanings whose fulfillment is the reward of the traveler. These are the conditions that make it worthwhile to go to the expense and time of journeying to sometimes distant sights. These conditions, although not logically contingent upon the first set, are usually temporally second. That is, the development of economic and political interests serves to force capital into the development of a transportation infrastructure, and both of these factors, in turn, serve to stimulate information about the now accessible regions, the interesting sights there, and their significance.

As a final point of argument, let me point out that there are few travel agencies that offer trips to "unknown destinations." If, indeed, it is truly the thrill of the unknown that motivates people to travel, one would expect package tours to be offered to unannounced destinations on charter jets with shuttered windows. However, most members of what MacCannell (1976) refers to as the "leisure class" are intimately familiar with their destinations. They have, in effect, done their homework in advance, or, in most cases, have had it done for them by the media. They are members of a new international class of travelers whose world view is international in scope. The Chinese equivalent of the leisure class—that group of individuals who have international aspirations—is quite small,

but is rapidly expanding with China's recent economic and educational outreach.[6]

Conclusion

It is a truism that not all members of the same culture share the same world view. The "six-pack set," whose aspirations and imagination are still firmly middle American, "sees America first." Likewise, upwardly mobile Chinese members of the official, business, and working ranks (i.e., nonpeasants) want to see China and have few aspirations beyond that. In China, however, there is a large geriatric residuum of individuals who identify wholly and solely with their local district. For the older residents of Jiang-wei, the Eight Sights of River's End retain significance as markers of the world into which they were socialized so many years ago.

Notes

1. MacCannell (1976) chose to ignore the evolutionary aspects of tourism by making a distinction between tourism and sightseeing. However, he neither defines sightseeing, nor does he describe how it differs from tourism. In fact, the context of the argument makes it clear that MacCannell mentions sightseeing only to anticipate criticism over the fact that tourism preceded modernity.

2. It seems reasonable to assume that the optimal level of stimulation is only minimally determined by design features of human neural structure. The major factor in setting an acceptable level of stimulation is the level experienced during childhood. This level varies from society to society, and, as I argue here, from one culturo-technological level to another.

3. I may be glossing over an intermediate stage—namely, that of industrial man. I agree with Marx that the central relationship in industrial society is between man and his productions. It seems to me, however, that in postindustrial society, as in peasant society, the relationship between man and man is preeminent. The working class has been replaced by the middle, leisured class as the modal social group in Western society and with this change has come a renewed emphasis on interpersonal contact and understanding.

It is interesting that MacCannell, although taking a position similar to that given above, nevertheless claims that "the most important relationship in modern society is . . . between man and his productions" (1976:21). The whole thrust of his analysis negates this Marxist tenet, which thus represents a central contradiction in his thinking. This is only one example of the lack of sensitivity to process that flaws MacCannell's book.

4. Although many of the sights have disappeared in the last several decades, my informants promised to take me on the entire circuit of the Eight Sights. Because of my short stay in Jiang-wei, the trip never materialized, although I was able to see the first sight.

5. Note that my position here is similar to MacCannell's, when he writes: "The more I examined my data, the more inescapable became my conclusion that tourist attractions are an unplanned typology of structure that provides direct access to the modern consciousness or 'world view,' that tourist attractions are precisely analogous to the religious symbolism of primitive peoples" (1976:2). MacCannell, however, never clearly defines the set of markers or sights that he is analyzing, nor does he do a structural analysis (in the technical sense of the term) of all or part of these sights or markers. Rather, he deals with the symbolic aspects of tourism at a level of abstraction that obscures its temporal and spatial aspects. The contrast with my approach is obvious, although I owe a clear intellectual debt to MacCannell for his symbolic insights.

6. In this regard, China has signed contracts for six large, international hotels to be constructed in China's largest cities (Peking, Shanghai, Guangzhow, Nanjing, Wuhan, and Tienjin). The hotels are intended entirely for foreign tourists and not for their Chinese counterparts. Nevertheless, their very presence will serve as a constant reminder of the world outside of China.

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