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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Elite circulation in Chinese ethnic tourism

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ABSTRACT

Chinese ethnic tourism has grown rapidly alongside national goals to eradicate poverty by 2020, but not without concern. This study analyzes the rise and evolution of ethnic tourism elites ($n$ = 29) in three minority villages of southwest China. Linking Elite Circulation Theory to ethnographic work in the region since 2013, findings highlight a differentiable conversion of ethnic tourism and other resources fueling 1) individuals' rise to power, and 2) shifts characterizing elite positioning across political, traditional, economic, and educational fields. The study proposes a framework for understanding elite-led tourism, conceptualizing elite circulation in rural China according to evolving attributes of elite groups competing for increased rights and capital within ethnic tourism systems.

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, many rural areas in China have been “hollowed”, or emptied, through mass migration of Han peoples (China's ethnic majority) into urban areas (Liu, Fan, & Liu, 2019). Meanwhile, rural areas dominated by ethnic minorities have maintained largely intact populations and social structures while becoming the focus of state-led development projects.

Such projects in rural China increasingly look to tourism as a tool for poverty eradication, particularly in southwest China where many non-Han minorities reside. This region – described as ethnically diverse, ecologically vulnerable, economically undeveloped, autonomously governed, and culturally fragile (Li, 2018; Oakes, 1992) – has seen the Chinese government in recent decades implement myriad ethnic and pro-poor tourism development projects to encourage economic growth (Donaldson, 2007; Yang, 2006, 2011; Yang & Wall, 2009).

Overlapping in some ways with community-based tourism (CBT), both ethnic and pro-poor tourism emphasize an egalitarian distribution of economic benefits alongside cooperation with key stakeholders to enhance local participation in destination development (Gascón, 2015; Tosun & Timothy, 2003; Zapata, Hall, Lindo, & Vanderschaeghe, 2011). Such practices can increase socio-economic mobility of community residents through livelihood diversification, supporting ethnic village interests to transform from agriculture-dependent communities into modernized agritourism destinations.

However, in the process of tourism-based development, many ethnic communities in southwest China have seen vast reforms in their socio-political structures, with capital-intensive and elite-directed tourism reshaping local social and cultural patterns (Feng,

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2017). Among ethnic communities of Guizhou Province (the focus of the current study), state-led promotion of ethnic tourism as a rural development tool has reshaped relations of power. Such changes have generated new and rapidly evolving ethnic tourism elites whose increased mobility and ongoing transformation remain little understood, despite recent attention in the ethnic tourism literature (Huang, 2019; Huang & Sun, 2017; Lor, Kwa, & Donaldson, 2019).

Notably, research suggests that ethnic tourism elites may in fact disempower some community residents through forms of coercion (Graburn, 2018; Knight, 2018; Knight & Cottrell, 2016). These actions can exacerbate existing threats to already vulnerable groups (Montefrio & Sin, 2019; Park, Phandanouvong, & Kim, 2017; Tosun, 2006) while disproportionally and at times exclusively increasing benefits for a select few. In the process, relations of power blend, break and reform to varying degrees as rural, ethnic elites position themselves to gain from regional shifts toward more modern – including tourism-dependent – socio-political systems (Feng, 2017; Li, Yu, Chen, Hu, & Cui, 2016).

While research has linked relations of power to poverty alleviation among rural and ethnic tourism communities (Han, Wu, Huang, & Yang, 2014; Knight & Cottrell, 2016; Park et al., 2017; Scheyvens, 2002; Tosun, 2006), further study is needed on the relationship between recent changes in Chinese development policies and pro-poor/ethnic tourism outcomes among China's rural community residents. To be sure, after lifting some 700 million people out of poverty in the last 40 years, China's government considers tourism-centered policies crucial to national goals for completely eradicating poverty by 2020 (defined as living on less than 1.90 USD per day; Gupta, 2019).

Particularly salient to this paper, despite recent explosive growth in domestic visitation to rural China (Li, Zhang, Zhang, & Abrahams, 2019), few studies have analyzed tourism elites' rise to power in rural China nor how such elites evolve to maintain and diversify ethnic tourism resources and influence. Broader questions remain, as well, about ways that increased elitism in ethnic tourism communities may in fact deter tourism governance and poverty alleviation goals as crucial elements of current development practices in southwest China.

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to conceptualize subtleties in the relations and transference of power characterizing ethnic tourism elites in southwest China. The study uses Elite Circulation Theory (ECT) to qualitatively analyze these subtleties in three villages in Guizhou Province at different stages of ethnic tourism development. It addresses three primary research questions:

1. What processes characterize ethnic tourism elites' rise to power in Guizhou Province?
2. How do ethnic tourism elites transform to maintain and diversify power in rural China?
3. How does elitism in Guizhou ethnic tourism affect state-led tourism governance and poverty alleviation outcomes?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. It begins with a review of the literature on elite mobility (including ECT), elite-tourism dynamics, and Chinese ethnic tourism. The methodology and three study sites are then described before presenting results from the analysis, organized in terms of growth and change in elite power linked to ethnic tourism systems. The paper closes with a discussion of findings including implications for understanding and optimizing ethnic tourism development in rural Guizhou and elsewhere in China.

## Literature review

### *Elites, mobility and power*

Researchers have traditionally considered elites as the ruling class with more extensive control over, or access to, resources (Khan, 2012; Weber, 1992). Gaining and redefining their power within complex and dynamic “power networks” (Pakulski, 2017, p.13), elites were initially and somewhat simplistically described as those few individuals running social and political systems through subjugation and rule of an unorganized majority (Mosca, 1939).

Over time, research on elitism has become more nuanced. One area receiving significant attention includes the concept of elite mobility, with research considering the complex characteristics, drivers, and effects of mobility and its relationship to power. Such research considers not only ways that power may be measured, but the complex relations characterizing elite mobility such as social configurations and the role of elite autonomy (Acemoglu & James, 2012; Higley & Pakulski, 2012; North, John, & Barry, 2009; Weber, 1992), social networks (Gould, 1989; Korsnes, Heilbron, Hjellbrekke, Bühlmann, & Savage, 2017), and changing psychosocial make-ups and governing styles (Best, 2011; Marshall, 2010). Linking together many of these elements, Birtchnell and Caletrio (2014) suggest that “elite mobility is inextricably tied up with power, inequality, stratification, governance and decision-making” (p. 6).

One conceptualization of mobility which may support analyses of tourism elites in rural China is Elite Circulation Theory (ECT). The theory suggests that while early elites in a particular society may gain positions of influence because they are most *capable*, both they and future elites often increase and maintain their power by *constraining* the social mobility of others (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935). Such a view ultimately criticizes acts of manipulation and control by elite or ruling classes, aligning in many ways with Sen's (2000) Capability Approach, which counteracts “coercion from above” by idealizing freedom of opportunity such that people can live the kind of life they value.

Early research on elite circulation considered two patterns in elite behavior: vertical mobility emphasizing a hierarchical trend, and horizontal mobility emphasizing elite circulation (Pareto, 1935; Sorokin, 1927). The first stresses ways that elites rise to power while the second emphasizes a shift or transformation in power, with both processes contributing to a restructuring of social relations.

More recent studies suggest that any increase in elite mobility (vertical or horizontal) correlates with increased elite power, the rise of new elites, and significant changes in the original power structure (Bottomore, 1993; Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). Studies

also argue that elites themselves play a major role in expanding each form of mobility, often at others' expense (Cresswell, 2001; Knight & Cottrell, 2016; Sheller, 2008).

Measuring vertical and horizontal mobility, in particular, requires an in-depth look into the distinct power resources that elites possess, the distinct ways that elites employ power, and the possible reasons they employ it (Daloz, 2010; Higley & Pakulski, 2012; Khan, 2012). Such factors not only highlight the utility of ECT for analyzing expressions of power and their effects on communities considered here, but they represent crucial determinants of major development (including ethnic tourism) outcomes in rural areas (Birtchnell & Caletrio, 2014; Church & Coles, 2007; Mills, 1963; Ohnmacht, Maksim, & Bergman, 2009; Sheller & Urry, 2016).

The concept of power thus remains pivotal for understanding elite mobility (Birtchnell & Caletrio, 2014; Danley, 2018; Korsnes et al., 2017; Winter, 2019). From a Foucauldian perspective, power is relational, permeates society, and can be both repressive and productive (Foucault, 1978, 1980, 1983; Han et al., 2014). Foucault suggests that theorists should give particular attention to analyses of repressive power through "the study of the techniques and tactics of domination" (Foucault, 1980, p. 102).

That said, individuals rarely view their low-profile (day-to-day) interactions in terms of power, politics, or domination. The so-called 'everyday politics' characterizing these daily interactions have been categorized into four types: support, compliance, modifications/evasions, and resistance (Kerkvliet, 2009). How such interactions play out may contribute to differences in (elite) mobility across both political and non-political spheres, depending on how individuals acquire and use available resources (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Foucault, 1980, 1983; Hunter, 1953; Mills, 1963).

In his sociology of elites, Khan (2012) places resources into five categories: political, economic, social (networks), cultural and knowledge-based. He suggests that political resources are built into political arrangements to create biases in favor of a particular group. Economic resources refer to material wealth or influence over others' economic opportunity. Social resources include networks and ties to others. Cultural resources generally constitute the identities of particular interest groups, leading to various forms of exclusion (Beckert, 2003). Finally, knowledge itself may be viewed as a resource – comprised of ideas, information and even ideology viewed as central to the maintenance of elite power.

### *Elites and ethnic tourism*

While Khan's (2012) work has broad applicability, this study focuses on the rise and transformation of ethnic tourism elites at the local level as opposed to elites in general who possess few to no ties to the tourism system. Local tourism elites ostensibly increase power as tourism activity begins at a particular site, but their resources and control become more differentiated as tourism develops, oftentimes drawing from pre-existing resources and non-local networks (Freitag, 1994; Lee, 1978). Here, power refers to an ability to influence others, with ethnic tourism elites gaining advantage by more effectively (and often exploitatively) utilizing resources and opportunities for personal and/or collective gain (Han et al., 2014; Robeyns, 2005).

Elite theory applied to the tourism context must consider relations of power surrounding local involvement in tourism decision-making (Dolezal, 2014; Han et al., 2014; Huang, 2019; Timothy, 2007), with grass-roots participation presumably minimizing social tensions, inequality, and erosion of ethnic identity (Donaldson, 2007; Dredge, 2006; Tosun & Timothy, 2003; Yang & Wall, 2009). At the same time, critics suggest that even endogenous tourism development will tend to be directed by a small number of powerful tourism elites emerging from within the community (Wang & Yao, 2007).

Such critiques highlight an unjust distribution of tourism benefits and imbalanced power characterizing relations among elite groups and between elites and non-elites (Mbaiwa, 2017; Yang & Wall, 2009). Studies suggest these tensions hold significant sway over the success or failure of tourism systems, with the direction of tourism development being driven by governments, brokers, tourists, and locals (Cheong & Miller, 2000; He, He, & Xu, 2018; Yang, 2006).

While the current study focuses on ethnic tourism elites at the local level, these individuals may have substantial influence over tourism planning, implementation, and governance at multiple scales ranging from complicated, multi-national networks to more decentralized systems such as CBT (Dredge, 2006; Hall, 1994; Li, Turner, & Cui, 2016; Montefrio & Sin, 2019; Richter, 2007). Meanwhile, "weaker actors" (often local people) may experience disempowerment through coercion or manipulation, resulting in village-level actions of evasion and resistance by those most vulnerable (Cornet, 2015; Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014; Li et al., 2019; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). Ethnic tourism presumably holds the least promise, then, for regular community residents who, knowingly or not, serve the interests of more powerful actors like government authorities, business owners, and even visitors disproportionately gaining from a community's tourism system (Li et al., 2016; Knight, 2018; Montefrio & Sin, 2019; Mowforth & Munt, 2016; Scheyvens, 2002; Taylor, 2017).

### *Elites in Chinese ethnic tourism*

While many studies highlight the impacts (both positive and negative) of ethnic tourism on local people (Cornet, 2015; Montefrio & Sin, 2019), an increasing number of researchers are analyzing relations of power and notable tensions in Chinese ethnic tourism (Graburn, 2018; Yang & Wall, 2009). Overlapping in many ways with Khan's (2012) work, research on rural China often divides ethnic tourism elites into four categories: political, traditional, economic, and educational (Gong, 2011; Li, Turner, & Cui, 2016; Zhu, 2012). Other research suggests the qualities of such elites appear dependent on a complex interplay of personal, socio-political, and environmental factors characterizing actors operating across a range of elite fields (Knight & Cottrell, 2016; Robeyns, 2005).

Here, political elites are those holding authoritative resources who have benefited largely from the political (governmental) power structure, discourses and decision-making processes. Traditional elites in rural China possess strong social relations and cultural values with community members, are usually elected, and tend to be charged with 1) settling disputes within/among communities, and 2) organizing agricultural activities, festivals, and worship ceremonies. Economic elites are those possessing

material wealth in the power resource structure and hold influence over others' economic opportunity (e.g., through employment). Finally, educational elites are those whose power is largely tied to the esteem with which both educators and well-educated individuals in China are generally held. These individuals can hold sway over the judgment of others and community decisions, with greater access to political circles.

Ethnic tourism elites have emerged more recently in rural China, stemming from increased competition and mobility tied to the country's promotion of tourism-based poverty alleviation (Sheller & Urry, 2004; Wu, 2007; Zhu, 2012). As previously mentioned, the current study focuses on ethnic tourism elites at the local level. Such elites represent a kind of umbrella category applicable to any individual more effectively positioned to gain power from the tourism system while drawing from and expanding political, traditional, economic, and/or educational resources and opportunities.

In view of recent trends, questions persist regarding whether ethnic tourism elites may help state-led tourism governance and poverty alleviation outcomes in rural China more than they hurt. That is, while imbalances of power may be seen as normatively bad in the West, a so-called “high power-distance” characterizing Chinese society (Hofstede, 2001) may in fact contribute to a culturally-driven deference toward people in positions of power, causing residents of ethnic tourism communities to not merely accept but encourage or welcome the formation of elites in their midst.

In any case, recent policies underscore the government's push for more ethnic tourism in pursuit of rural development, even if benefits are disproportional. Two national-level development policies worth noting include the ‘Targeted Poverty Alleviation Through Tourism’ and the ‘Rural Revitalization’ policies, established in 2013 and 2017, respectively (Gao & Wu, 2017; Li, 2018). Through these and other policies, ethnic tourism has become embedded into the national discourse of economic development and poverty alleviation.

Such policies call for increased government intervention in rural areas, leading to the formation of new ethnic tourism communities and elite groups that would not otherwise exist. Government-led ethnic tourism operations thus change the livelihood capitals and competition logic (“rules of the game”) via top-down forces (Li et al., 2016), expanding the mobility potential of local residents (Huang, 2019). The current study questions the benefits to such a top-down approach, analyzing elite power in three communities comprised almost entirely of ethnic minorities and urged by government to participate in ethnic tourism.

### *Study sites*

Qiandongnan Prefecture lies in Guizhou province in southwest China (Fig. 1). It has a population of 3.47 million people and is comprised of 33 minority groups (Li et al., 2016), with the Miao and the Dong minority groups constituting a majority (2.44 million) of the total population. By the late 20th century, specific communities in Qiandongnan were selected as representative ethnic communities and targeted for tourism development. Ethnic tourism has since flourished to become a primary livelihood for local residents.

The three field sites in the current study are characterized by different levels of tourism visitation and development (Table 1). Xijiang Village is the largest and most-developed tourism community, with annual tourist flows/income reaching 6.06 million and RMB 4.99 billion (approximately 743 million USD), respectively, by the end of 2018 (Y. Li, Xijiang Tourism Bureau, personal communication, January 4, 2018). Basha Village sees fewer visitors, with the total number reaching 180,000 (mostly daytrips), and tourism income increasing to RMB 1.27 billion in 2018 (approximately 189 million USD; Y. Li, Basha Tourism Bureau, personal communication, January 4, 2018). Finally, Huanggang Village is the smallest and least known of the three field sites, catering primarily to a mix of researchers, photographers and backpackers, with only eight guesthouses and three restaurants. Xijiang and Basha are Hmu ethnic communities while Huanggang is a Dong ethnic community.

In the first author's long-term, ethnographic study of these three field sites, residents previously alluded to many local-level confrontations and conflicts stemming from tourism expansion and state-driven tourism planning directives among a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., Zhailao elites, core and peripheral tourism communities, country-level governments, local residents, and tourists; Li et al., 2016). However, previous research has focused very little on the dynamic power relations associated with the rise and transformation of elites within each village. Hence, this study's focus on the formation and evolution of ethnic tourism elites should contribute to understanding rural Chinese mobility more broadly.

## Methodology

Data for this study come from long-term field research from 2013 to 2018 in the same three communities. Qualitative research methods included semi-structured interviews ($n$ = 66), in-depth interviews ($n$ = 29) and participant observation, all of which enhance understanding of the phenomenon under consideration, the stakeholders, and the driving forces involved. Field work was originally carried out from 2013 to 2016 by a research team comprised of two faculty and two graduate students (all from China), with follow-up interviews and queries carried out via two Chinese social media sites (QQ and WeChat), as well as phone calls, in 2017 and 2018.

A purposeful sample of 66 local residents from the three villages was originally identified based on maximum variation (e.g., place of residence) and phenomenological variation (e.g., working in tourism or not; Sandelowski, 1995). Of these, a representative sample of 29 ethnic tourism elites was selected for further in-depth interviews (Darbi & Hall, 2014), with each respondent further assigned to one of the four categories for tourism elites determined a-priori according to the attributes described above (i.e., political, traditional, economic, and educational). Categorization of respondents took into account a host of factors including respondent childhoods,

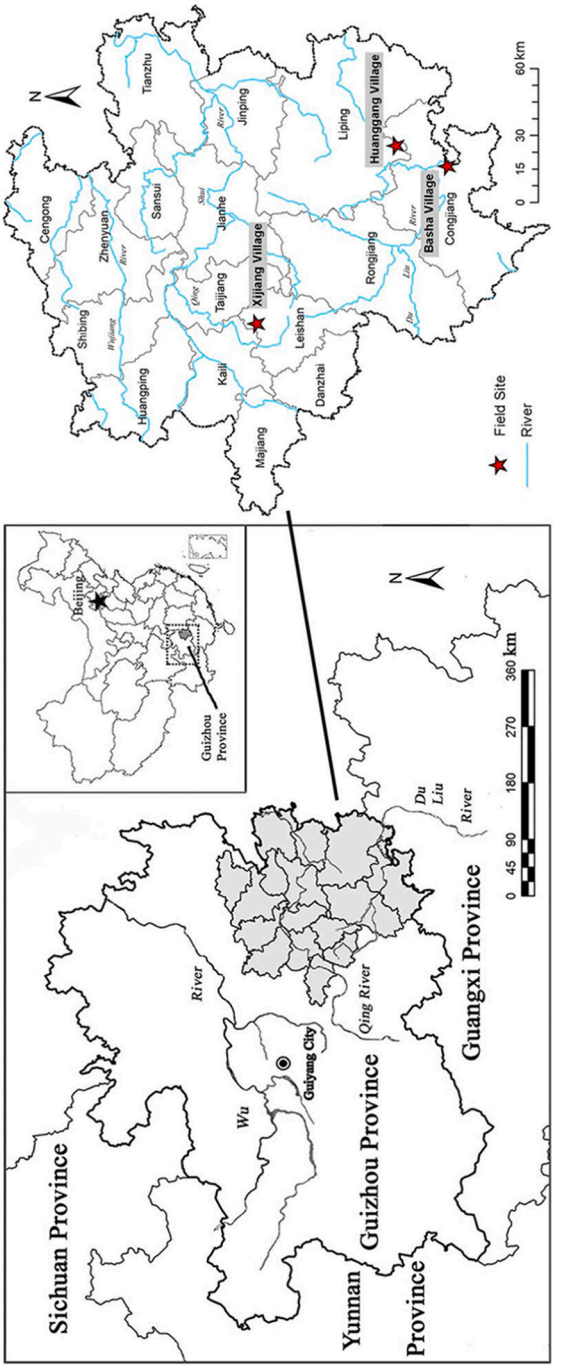


**Fig. 1.** Field sites.

**Table 1**
Field site characteristics (Qiandongnan Prefecture).
Source: Bureau of Industry and Commerce, Leishan and Congjiang Counties.

| Characteristic | Xijiang Village | Basha Village | Huanggang Village |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tourism start year | 2007 | 2007 | 2014 |
| Population | 9000 residents | 2248 residents | 1716 residents |
| Community entrance ticket | 150 RMB | 30 RMB (low season)<br>80 RMB (peak season) | No ticket |
| Annual visitation | 6.06 million | 180,000 | 10,000 |
| Annual tourism income | 4.99 billion RMB | 1.27 billion RMB | Not available |
| Tourism-related business | 378 guesthouses/hotels, 163 ethnic art shops, 74 restaurants, 272 shops, 15 tea clubs/bars, 311 booths, 3 museums | 9 guesthouses (3 outside merchants), 1 hotel, 1 ethnic art shop, 1 museum | 8 guesthouses, 3 restaurants, 8 BBQ booths |

**Table 2**
In-depth interview respondent[a] profiles ($n$ = 29).

| Elite type | Distribution and representation |
|---|---|
| Political elites | Village headperson or secretary (3), Township governors (3) |
| Traditional elites | Zhailao members (4) |
| Economic elites | Owners of restaurants (4), souvenir shops (2), guesthouses (4) |
| Educational elites | School headmaster (1), other employment (8) |

[a] Selected from among semi-structured interview respondents ($n$ = 66), which included 26 residents of Xijiang village, 20 residents of Basha Village and 20 residents of Huanggang Village.

political career, educational experiences, economic situations, livelihoods, social relationships, and others. Pseudonyms were used in place of actual names to maintain respondent anonymity.

Focus of the current study was placed on the in-depth interviews with ethnic tourism elites (Table 2). In Western or urban contexts, these individuals might be characterized as little more than middle class. However, combined with previous research on elites in Chinese rural society (Cornet, 2015; Danley, 2018; Gao & Wu, 2017; Huang & Sun, 2017), the longitudinal ethnographic work carried out by the first author prior to the current study suggested that these individuals had gained from, and were continuing to influence, ethnic tourism far more than other residents.

Interviews with political elites ($n$ = 6) included government officials operating at the village level and covered policy orientations, decision-making and planning, and the distribution of tourism benefits. The remaining in-depth interviews included a purposeful sampling of traditional Zhailao[3] elites ($n$ = 4); economic elites comprised of local tourism business owners and practitioners running guesthouse, shops, café and restaurants ($n$ = 10); and educational elites comprised of a school headmaster, teachers, village clinic doctor, and individuals (including farmers) employed elsewhere in business who have had greater educational opportunity (e.g., in agricultural technology, or from recent stints in the cities) than other residents ($n$ = 9). These interviews covered respondent attitudes toward tourism, their roles within new ethnic tourism systems, village management structures, social relationships, and livelihood approaches. On-site activities, attitudes and behaviors of Zhailao elites, tourism practitioners, government officials and villagers were also observed. Meanwhile, documents related to tourism development within the community (e.g., local government reports) were collected to provide context for emergent themes.

Theory-driven analysis adopted an interpretivist approach in identifying key themes from interviews across the three villages (Dredge & Jenkins, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles, Trevorrow, & Sparrow, 2014). These themes centered around 1) vertical mobility as respondents' use of ethnic tourism to substantially increase resources and opportunities (i.e., political, traditional, economic, educational) – something which was not previously possible; and 2) horizontal mobility as respondents' use of ethnic tourism to maintain and diversify resources and opportunities – something ECT would suggest requires more exclusionary practices. This analytical approach rests heavily on the assumption that researcher positionality (e.g., as external elites themselves), while influencing the selection of in-depth interviewees and subsequent coding of data, was offset at least in part by the longitudinal/ethnographic nature of intermittent time spent, over six years, living and working with residents of Qiandongnan communities.

## Findings

### *The rise to power: vertical mobility*

In order to diversify their livelihoods, tourism pioneers in each community initially and actively participated in ethnic tourism

[3] Zhailao: Literally, it refers to the elders in the village who possess extensive knowledge about the community's history, its festivals and its rituals, and have the personal charisma to address disputes within and among communities.

development by providing basic services (food and lodging) to visitors. Early on, tourism activity was primarily viewed as a means for increasing income, given the low barriers to participation as described by one respondent from Huanggang:

> We run a BBQ booth in front of my house, hoping to make money by providing food for tourists during the Festival. I could not afford a restaurant. My booth is the best way for us to make money.
>
> –HBO-1 July, 2016

More tourists (predominantly Chinese) began coming to the region after 2013 with the construction of internal and external roads. Seeing that previous provisions of food and lodging were not satisfying tourist needs, ethnic tourism pioneers improved their skills – self-studying the culinary arts and non-local languages like Mandarin. As a result, some residents rose to positions of influence while driving others from the ethnic tourism system.

These pioneers could not yet be considered "ethnic tourism elites" because tourism income was still fickle and could not support their lives. However, growing rural–urban links encouraged livelihood diversification and enabled residents of each community to independently access tourism markets, although collective action (e.g., forming a village tourism association) remained difficult.

Local-level influence of these residents grew, however, with the rise of ethnic tourism in each community. Such influence was tapered by varying degrees of government control. While Huanggang and Basha Villages had limited government involvement in tourism, for example, Xijiang Village witnessed an almost complete usurpation of ethnic tourism development by government since 2008. As a result, local owners of the first guesthouses in Xijiang Village have faced extreme competition from ~350 new, government-backed guesthouses constructed in their midst.

As the government began intervening further in ethnic tourism development after 2013 (Li et al., 2016), opportunities increased across the communities. In addition to basic skills, the so-called pioneers needed financial capital to improve existing tourism facilities. By 2014, several individuals in Basha village attained elevated status through access to external capital, which they used for tourism development. One interviewee described the process of acquiring new skills and finances to expand his influence:

> When we worked in big cities [before returning to the village], tourism activity had only just started here. Our village has become famous now, with many tourists visiting. So we investigated many guesthouses in big cities and invested all our money into running a guesthouse. Look at all the facilities – it is very modern, and I believe tourists will like it.
>
> –BGO-1, July, 2016

Similarly, a teacher in the Huanggang primary school was running a small guesthouse mainly for university students who came from big cities to help teach in the village. With government calls to increase tourism after 2013, the teacher and his wife (a village clinic doctor) expanded their guesthouse using bank loans. By the end of 2015, they'd built a new, all-wood guesthouse in a better location, with three floors, a restaurant, and bedrooms equipped with fans, showers, and indoor flush toilets. Meanwhile, ten other guesthouses in Huangang – established and promoted by local government since 2009 – have since closed (HVH, July, 2016).

Leading up to and following the 'Targeted Poverty Alleviation Through Tourism' policy of 2013, there was an increased demand for young intellectuals majoring in management among village governments. One resident of Xijiang Town passed the Selected Graduates Examination[4] in 2011 to become a new government official in the County Tourism Bureau, after graduating from the best university in Guizhou Province. He stated:

> Xijiang village is a popular tourism destination in Qiandongnan Prefecture, and our county prioritizes tourism development by increasing financial, human and institutional capital. I have worked here for three years and I can see the bright future of our hometown.
>
> –XL-2, April, 2014

With the government push for increased tourism, some residents began renting their houses to outsiders and running guesthouses and artwork shops in Xijiang village. Individuals who lived along the river or ran businesses in major tourism corridors became disproportionate beneficiaries of ethnic tourism activity. Still, even residents whose homes and businesses were geographically positioned less advantageously benefited substantially more (economically) from ethnic tourism than other residents. By the end of 2017, around 36% of households in Xijiang were renting out their houses, generating between 50,000 and 500,000 RMB, or 7500 to 75,000 USD, per household (XP-1, 2018).

While China's rising focus on ethnic tourism has influenced the rise of elites in each community considered here, relations of power characterizing these individuals have continued to evolve. In disproportionally engaging and benefiting from ethnic tourism activity, such individuals have seen their horizontal mobility grow across political, traditional, economic and educational spheres. These shifts are the focus of the next section.

### *Shifting power: horizontal mobility*

#### *Integration of political and economic elites*

Political and economic elites have been characterized as integrated and mutually reinforcing in urban settings (Birtchnell & Caletrio, 2014). A similar phenomenon was observed in the current study, as individuals with the greatest political influence (e.g., the

[4] Selected graduate: The selected graduate system traces back to 1965, and restarts in 1980. The government selects excellent graduates for grassroots work, in the hope of cultivating high quality government officials (Xiao, Lu, & Wang, 2015).

village headman, village secretary of the party committee and other government officials) converted ethnic tourism resources and opportunities into considerable economic power.

Ethnic regions in China are given considerable autonomy such that local government officials tend to be villagers elected to serve in the town they are from. In Xijiang, for example, over 60% of village-level government officials were from Xijiang (XL-1, 2016), possessing tourism planning information about the exact location where land premiums would increase and how tourism activity might grow, generating considerable economic advantage.

Over the last five years, real estate along one area of the Baishui River of Xijiang has skyrocketed in value, with home rentals generating upwards of 300,000 RMB per year (around 45 thousand USD). While external businesspeople have invested heavily in some riverfront sites, much of the ownership of these and other core tourist zones can be linked directly to government officials and their families.

This speaks to the importance of social networks in Chinese ethnic tourism, extending well beyond rural communities and constituting what is known as *guanxi* – a form of social capital interwoven into all aspects of Chinese society. To be sure, the relational power of clan-based (familial) networks constitutes the basic rural communication relationship throughout China. These socio-cultural networks are built on inner trust and can stimulate shifts in power among individuals wishing to "get ahead." So-called secrets of tourism development along the river in Xijiang, for example, were exclusively held by select few within certain elite circles.

One government official living near the scenic Baishui River alluded to these familial ties in an interview, telling the research team that, if they wanted to buy tea, they should visit his brother's large shop located in a core tourism area across the river (XL2, 2016). He went on to recommend a restaurant, also run by his family, located in a more peripheral area. Not surprisingly, an estimated 80% of village-level and county-level government officials and their families in Xijiang Village were making money from tourism activity. With ties to the political sphere, the official noted that, "*In 2007…I recognized the huge potential for locally-owned [tourism] businesses. So I encouraged my relatives and friends to grasp this policy opportunity*" (XL2, April 2014).

A similar phenomenon was observed in Basha and Huanggang Villages. Of the nine guesthouses in Basha village, four of them were run by local political elites, three were externally-owned, and two were run by residents who had lived in big cities prior to moving back home. Those with political ties have become tourism practitioners, with one respondent stating:

> As a member of the village committee, I hope to develop tourism to eliminate poverty in our village…With increases in visitation, we need to attract tourists to stay for a night, so I organized a dance team and run a guesthouse with my family in the hope of developing tourism.
>
> –(BL-1, Nov., 2014)

Individuals like these – benefiting from tourism while acting in (or shifting away from) official governmental roles – were representative of increased horizontal mobility linking political and economic spheres in each community.

Conversely, some respondents alluded to considerable constraints related to the (tourism-linked) conversion of economic into political influence. Basha, for example, is comprised of 45–50% migrant workers (i.e., opportunists from elsewhere), and the guesthouses run by such outsiders sustained higher occupancy rates year-round (BGO-2, 2016; BGO-3, 2018). A local guesthouse owner who had worked in the city for over five years, but who had no political or traditional status, stated that local officials had a preference for external businesspeople:

> …these outsiders can bring extra income and benefits to the village. So government officials welcome their participation and give them favorable policies. But when we started [our hotel] and needed support from the village committee, it was so hard... even though we are locals. You have to be a village committee [member].
>
> –BGO-1, July, 2016

When asked about political pursuits, the guesthouse owner went on to describe his personal need for political power to increase opportunities for locals:

> If I could [be on the village committee], I would let many local residents working in big cities come back to do tourism business in our village. But here…it is also hard to gain political power to have the right to influence who benefits from tourism.
>
> –BGO-1, July, 2016

Such constraints were also observed in both Huanggang and Xijiang village, stemming in part from the Chinese socio-political structure which necessitates complete dependence on government approval for everything from booth, guesthouse, or store ownership to taking part in performances. Restricted transformation of economic into political power was exemplified by the creation of government concessions (via a lottery system) assigned to just 34% of Xijiang households interested in booth ownership (Li, 2018). According to one resident, this generated a sense of political marginalization among other residents, pushing some families – particularly from higher elevations – to leave and look for work in the big cities (XR-1, 2016).

*Transformation of traditional and educational into economic elites*

Traditional elites with charisma have maintained significant social status in the Zhailao system (Li et al., 2016), the interviewed ones in this research have rich experience working in the village committee before. With strong ties to both tourism and local government, many of these elites have experienced a transformation of traditional into economic power through tourism. A telling

**Table 3**
Tourism livelihoods and average income by village for traditional elites[a].

| | Guesthouse | Restaurant | Shop | Exhibition hall | Performance | Annual tourism income |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Xijiang | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ~150,000 RMB (22,000 USD) |
| Basha | ✓ | ✓ | – | – | ✓ | ~50,000RMB (7500 USD) |
| Huanggang | – | – | – | – | – | Negligible |

[a] ✓ signifies involvement of at least one Zhailao leader in that livelihood activity; annual incomes are averages of reported earnings per elite, derived from all data sources.

example is the way houses of three kinds of Zhailao leaders – the *Guzangtou*, *Huolutou* and *Guishi* (focused on religious traditions, agricultural activities, and sacrifices respectively) – have become tourist hotspots, with local government officials building an exhibition hall and creating Zhailao festivals around these traditional living spaces to attract visitors. One official described this dynamic:

> Look at the new tourism sign "leader of villagers" for our Guzangtou – his house has become a famous tourist spot in our village…Our government has built a museum in front of his house in the hope of attracting more tourists. He can charge a fee and gain additional income.
>
> –XL-3, July, 2016

In Basha, the Zhailao system represents a similar avenue for gaining economic power. Traditional elites in Basha have become akin to community spokespeople – local celebrities involved in tourism performance while working closely with government leaders. This activity has led Zhailao leaders in Basha to become performance captains and guesthouse/restaurant managers. All money from a performance goes to the performance group if booked directly with the Zhailao, but local government takes a 25% cut if booked through the local Tourism Bureau. A traditional elite in Basha can thus earn a performance income of over 3000 RMB (451 USD) every year in addition to other tourism-generated income (BZ-1, Nov., 2014).

Across the three communities, notable differences exist in the degree of transformation of traditional into economic power, with interviews revealing highly varied livelihood opportunities by village (Table 3). In Xijiang, traditional elites were involved in running guesthouses, restaurants, shops, exhibition halls, and tourism performances, with the annual tourism income for traditional elites reaching close to 150,000 RMB (22,000 USD) on average. In Basha, traditional elites were similarly running guesthouses, restaurants and tourism performances, with annual tourism income reaching close to 50,000 RMB (7500 USD) on average. In Huanggang, traditional elites have gained political more than economic power through tourism, with most tourism income earned by non-Zhailao residents.

Educational elites, meanwhile, are comprised of teachers but also of business owners (including farmers) who have had greater educational opportunity (e.g., in agricultural technology, or from recent stints in the cities) than other residents. In Xijiang, the headmaster of a middle school, whose guesthouse was far from the main river corridor, was working in ethnic tourism with his wife, who ran a souvenir shop. He talked about his guesthouse business with the research team:

> *Because of my job, I've been interviewed by many researchers and journalists and became good friends with them. I like welcoming these friends to live in my guesthouses instead of attracting tourists for money…*
>
> -XGO-1, Nov, 2014

In Huanggang, one educational elite, in particular, benefited significantly by providing educational (ethnic) tourism services to students and teachers. Because of his success as an educator and educational/ethnic tourism business professional, this teacher in Huanggang became a consultant for business professionals and village leaders from other towns. He stated that his tourism development strategy included organizing tourism associations to offer residents more tourism business and training opportunities. Recently, he has created programs to teach children Mandarin, taking care of volunteer teachers and organizing other (educational) activities for local children and teachers in his guesthouse. He described his efforts to establish Huanggang as a destination for educational travel during the summer holiday, stating:

> We broke the bank to build this guesthouse (without financial support from government), and we hope to recover the cost of tourism development. But we also want to expand educational opportunities for our students to provide good facilities for all friends from the outside.
>
> -HT-1, July, 2016

Parlaying educational and even political ties to make economic gains does not happen without creating some conflict – observed in acts of covert or overt resistance to ethnic tourism dynamics. The headmaster in Xijiang (XGO-1) is famous for his successful 2014 negotiation (overt resistance) with local government and tourism enterprises to keep the middle school within the village, overturning the government's original plan to relocate the school in the name of tourism. Similarly, something as innocuous as Huanggang government officials telling the research team to stay in their guesthouse turned quickly sour when the researchers decided to stay in the teacher's far more comfortable accommodations instead. The teacher expressed immediate concern upon learning of the team's decline of the officials' recommendation:

> You know, it looks like I'm robbing guests…We live in the same village, even though we have different operation ideas – one based

on relations with government, and the other on market rule. I really do not want to cause misunderstandings with them.

-HT-1, July, 2016

Similar dynamics were observed among educational elites in other villages who were involved in a kind of side-stepping of government expectations (covert resistance) to grow their ethnic tourism businesses without government support. In each case, however, these individuals maintained that they had little interest in fomenting conflict with government officials, and were more generally concerned about pursuing entrepreneurial tourism innovations under (ideally) a less restrictive regulatory environment. This phenomenon represents an observable shift in (political) resource exploitation to sustain elite control and unity over ethnic tourism through unofficial compromises and deals (Pakulski, 2017).

## Discussion

This study aims to conceptualize subtleties in the relations and transference of power characterizing ethnic tourism elites in southwest China. In addressing the first two research questions, findings uncover processes of elite circulation in terms of elites' rise to positions of influence and subsequent shifts in power across diverse elite fields.

The first research question concerns vertical mobility. In particular, the emergence of tourism pioneers constituted an elementary configuration of ethnic tourism elites who appeared to gain from tourism substantially faster than other residents. This was observed in terms of respondents' ability to use ethnic tourism in earlier stages of its development as a means for increasing resources and influence (pre-existing or otherwise).

The expansion of vertical mobility among ethnic tourism elites shared similarities across field sites, with several notable characteristics. In early stages of tourism development, the elite configuration (i.e., power structure) appeared amorphous, with few ethnic tourism resources available. At that time, community members faced proportionally minimal access to ethnic tourism benefits. As tourism development increased, elites gained power with an obvious precondition at play – namely, those more capable of exploiting political and economic resources were able to increase gains from Chinese ethnic tourism more effectively but disproportionally.

Also related to vertical mobility, the findings here suggest that ethnic tourism elites overcame diverse barriers in their rise to power. Complex factors, interests, and abilities influenced each choice – whether to run BBQ booths on their own, or to obtain university degrees, or to accumulate and then invest financial capital from big cities into a guesthouse. While the initial threshold for participation in ethnic tourism was low, it became gradually higher as “survival of the fittest” principles began to permeate each village, funneling resources toward a newly formed and now mobilized group of ethnic tourism elites.

The second research question concerns horizontal mobility. As ECT would suggest, respondents appeared highly capable of exploiting ethnic tourism opportunities to maintain and diversify a range of elite resources (political, economic, traditional, or educational), often through exclusionary practices. These processes appeared to coincide in villages with more substantial tourism development and increased government control (Li et al., 2016), which complicated power relations and stakeholder roles (cf. Ellis, 2000; Rigg, 1991).

In response, residents in general appeared to employ a range of ‘everyday politics’ to negotiate changes brought about by evolving tourism activities and interventions (Kerkvliet, 2009). Moving past earlier (embryonic) configurations of power, relations shifted such that ethnic tourism elites were able to retain power while marginalizing others. The complicated and subtle process of elite circulation may thus be conceptualized as a revolving door, turned by increasingly exclusionary interests and attributes of individuals and groups competing for increased rights and capital within the Chinese ethnic tourism system (Fig. 2).

While the expansion of horizontal mobility may *exclude* other residents, it is worth noting these processes do not necessarily occur at others' *expense*. This is an important point, as some residents carry no interest in, or may only passively engage, ethnic tourism activity in their community. It helps in determining who benefits from ethnic tourism and the extent to which generative or non-generative empowerment may be at play (Knight & Cottrell, 2016).

Such nuances relate to the third research question in this study concerning whether ethnic tourism elites may actually contribute to (rather than detract from) tourism governance and poverty alleviation efforts in rural China. From a political power perspective, China's three-pronged approach to tourism development (i.e., government dominance + enterprise assistance + resident participation; Li et al., 2016) often results in excessive government intervention and merely passive participation of local residents. At the same time, the autonomy of ethnic groups in places like Guizhou Province represents a significant source of political power for ethnic elites overseeing tourism development and resource allocation in those areas. Confrontations thus occur with external government officials and businesspeople, as well as with village residents resisting tourism or other local elites. These confrontations give rise to frequent compromises, shifts in power relations, and even marginalization of non-elite residents.

Such processes may discourage lasting benefits and widespread agreement and social cohesion in ethnic communities in rural China (Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Farrelly, 2011), detracting from national poverty alleviation and rural revitalization targets. By straining local governance and community relations, the rise and transformation of ethnic tourism elites in rural China appear, at the very least, to threaten governance and poverty alleviation efforts.

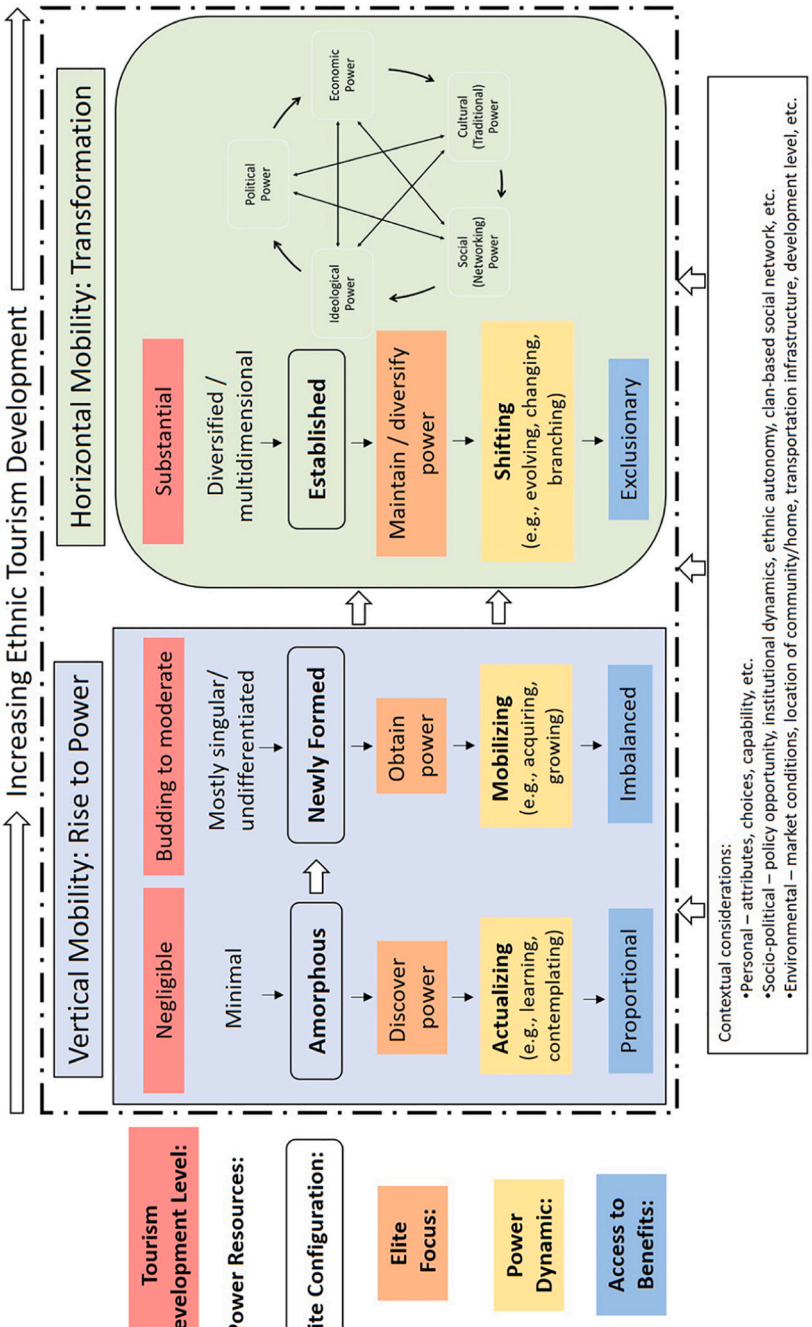


**Fig. 2.** Conceptualizing elite circulation in Chinese ethnic tourism.

## Conclusions

Drawing on elite theory in ethnic tourism studies, this paper analyzes elite mobility in three rural communities of southwest China. Findings highlight vertical mobility as a differentiable conversion (or exploitation) of ethnic tourism and other resources fueling individuals' rise into elite positions of influence at the community level. Additionally, findings draw attention to shifts in power characterizing horizontal mobility along a spectrum of elite categories (political, traditional, economic, and educational) which have emerged in recent decades amid China's move toward modernization and its increased focus on tourism as a tool for poverty eradication, particularly in rural areas. Both forms of mobility depend on myriad personal, socio-political, and environmental attributes shown elsewhere to influence power relations in ethnic tourism or CBT contexts (Knight & Cottrell, 2016).

Three research questions were addressed in this study. Regarding the first, findings suggest that elite status in a single, dominant category represented a doorway for gaining more from such tourism-based development than ordinary residents, resulting in inequality. Regarding the second, findings also suggested that elites with considerable power in more than one category (e.g., both traditional and political influence) were even more likely to benefit from tourism activity. This underscores the importance of having access to a spectrum, or range, of elite fields as a crucial attribute for retaining rural power in the communities considered here (Bourdieu, 1994; Martin & Forest, 2015).

At the same time, the observable shifting and jockeying necessary for elite groups to access and maintain power appears to restrict access to ethnic tourism benefits for ordinary residents, as was the case in Xijiang with residents unable to claim riverfront property or actively engage in booth distribution. In this way, the four elite categories considered in this study are not separated, but largely united by intergenerational exclusivity and mutual transformation around similar interests (Zheng & Li, 2009).

Regarding the third research question, the potential effects of expanding elite mobility (vertical and horizontal) through ethnic tourism call into question current top-down approaches to tourism governance and poverty alleviation in rural China. In particular, while ethnic tourism is not only the force in these communities, it represents an initial catalyst for vertical mobility among tourism pioneers, leading up to a diverse and increasingly exclusionary elite configuration. Such exclusion can hinder long-term, poverty eradication goals to equitably improve quality of life for community residents through tourism.

### *Limitations and future research*

The complexity of ethnic tourism systems gives rise to several limitations worth noting in the current study. First, it is dangerous to demarcate explicit categories separating ordinary residents from elite groups. To be sure, the aim of this study was not to create a deterministic outline of elite attributes or resources, but to employ *researcher interpretations* of observable traits characterizing study participants to conceptualize tourism-linked transitions of power in rural China.

Another limitation relates to the contentious nature of elitism, both conceptually and in practice. Conceptually, while built on previous research, this study was not exempt from reifying an abstract process (i.e., elitism) as the cultivation of greater political, traditional, economic, or educational power – singularly or in tandem – for personal gain.

This relates to contentions about elitism in practice, as well, which question whether the processes of elite mobility and transformation observed here can be viewed as normatively (ethically) bad. To be sure, while newfound or changing power came, in certain cases, at the expense of others' well-being, this was not the case in every instance. As alluded to in the literature review, some cultures characterized by greater power distance appear more inclined to not only accept but even welcome elites as both natural *and* beneficial, although resident views may differ considerably by category (e.g., economic versus traditional). Such questions highlight areas for future research.

Finally, elite mobility appears to depend considerably on recent, national poverty alleviation policies targeting southwest China, where minority groups reside. To date, the Chinese government has assessed and developed countless ethnic tourism villages to eliminate poverty (Donaldson, 2007). In most cases, as in the communities considered here, residents' economic situations have improved, although consideration of the impacts of COVID-19 on Chinese ethnic tourism will require further study.

Before the pandemic, however, some villages had expressed violent resistance to change and to the widening gap between rich and poor presumably linked to a tourism-based way life (Cornet, 2015; Devine & Ojeda, 2017). What is more, there are few non-governmental or non-profit organizations offsetting these inequalities, leaving the realization of less exclusionary ethnic tourism activity difficult to achieve. Future studies would do well to compare ethnic tourism outcomes in government-oriented arrangements (e.g., Xijiang) against related outcomes in other areas where the government has been less involved (e.g., Basha or Huanggang).

Overall, then, the findings here draw attention to two hypotheses worth exploring further. The first is that elite mobility (vertical and horizontal) *in rural China* may be accelerated in communities with both 1) more extensive tourism development, and 2) greater government involvement. This apparent contradiction concomitantly criticizes unfettered tourism development alongside excessive government control. It rests on the observation that ethnic tourism elites rise and evolve fastest in whichever fields (including political) afford the most differentiable access or opportunity to exploit resources for personal gain, and that this access remains heavily linked to government investment in, or promotion of, ethnic tourism in rural areas.

The second hypothesis is that, the greater the elite circulation observed within Chinese ethnic tourism, the greater the potential that other residents will be left on the outside of the revolving door, looking in. Whether such marginalization stems from coercion or from personal choice, many residents are likely to feel increasingly distanced from or denied opportunity to enter the ethnic tourism market themselves, resigned to gain very little from the rise and evolution of power within those elite circles.

## Statements of contribution

1. What is the contribution to knowledge, theory, policy or practice offered by the paper?

Studies analyzing the tourism-power nexus in rural China have yet to clarify and conceptualize a process that we argue is foundational to understanding elitism in Chinese ethnic tourism: elite circulation. Addressing this gap, the study proposes a framework that orients theorization of community elites' rise to power (i.e., vertical mobility) and their subsequent shifts for position within ethnic tourism systems (i.e., horizontal mobility, or transformation). Conclusions drawn from study findings link these processes to increased marginalization of ordinary residents, giving rise to new questions about who benefits most from tourism, and the extent to which ethnic tourism elites may deter tourism governance and poverty alleviation efforts in rural China.

2. How does the paper offer a social science perspective/approach?

This study considers data based on long-term field research from 2013 to 2018 in the same three villages comprised of Chinese ethnic minorities. Qualitative research methods included semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and participant observation, all of which enhance understanding of the phenomena under consideration (i.e., elite circulation in Chinese ethnic tourism). The current study focuses on the in-depth interviews ($n = 29$), exploring respondent attitudes towards tourism, their roles within new ethnic tourism systems, village management structures, social relationships, and livelihood approaches. On-site activities, attitudes and behaviors of traditional elites, tourism practitioners, government officials and villagers were also observed. As a whole, the paper adopts a constructivist and predominantly theory-driven approach to identify key themes across the three villages centered around 1) the nature of each respondent's rise to power, and 2) the evolving focus of their eventual role.

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