

**FROM HUTONG TO HOSTELS: CULTURAL TOURISM AND THE PROCESS OF  
COMMODIFICATION IN BEIJING**

by

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As Beijing develops into a global city, high-rise banking and apartment buildings appear almost daily, while historical *hutong* neighborhoods have been destroyed to accommodate this development. At the same time, *hutong* tourism has become popular with Chinese and foreign tourists. While some have advocated tourism in the *hutong* as a strategy to ensure preservation and economic development, others argue that attention from tourists will inevitably change the lives of *hutong* residents. As the *hutong* are reconstructed through tourism, new cultural forms are produced under the ideal of "authenticity." These forms both reflect existing cultural values and produce new cultural possibilities. This paper analyzes the development of cultural tourism in the *hutong* based on ethnographic observations, secondary sources, and email interviews with *hutong* tourism business owners. My argument does not focus on whether the commodification of the *hutong* is inherently good or bad, but rather on the production and uses of authenticity in the *hutong* as well as interpretations of that ideal by different people at different times. I suggest that the debates over *hutong* tourism development in the capital illuminate the lack of consensus in Chinese discourse about what modern China is and ought to be.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL TOURISM IN THE "RAPIDLY DISAPPEARING HUTONG"

As the capital of China and home to the Forbidden City and the Great Wall, Beijing is a must-see destination for both domestic and foreign tourists. While tourism during the Maoist era was taboo because it was labeled bourgeois, the tourism industry has taken off since Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Policy" was instituted in 1979 (Nyiri 2006:3). Part of that development includes the growing popularity of a new tourist hotspot in the capital city: Beijing's *hutong*.<sup>1</sup> *Hutong* are primarily residential narrow streets in the center of the city lined with *siheyuan* (courtyard homes). These *hutong* contain some of Beijing's oldest vernacular architecture and long-lasting local communities.

The *hutong* and *siheyuan* have a complicated history. The *hutong* were first constructed as part of Kublai Khan's reorganization of Beijing during the Yuan Dynasty in 1264. By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1643), Beijing's *hutong* numbered approximately 500. In their early centuries, the *siheyuan* lining the *hutong* housed court officials within the city gates and merchants and shops outside of them. By 1949 there were somewhere between 3,000 and 7,000 *hutong*, depending on whether the estimate included all small lanes or just the ones with *hutong* in the name. During the Maoist era (1949-1977), private ownership of *siheyuan* was abolished,

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<sup>1</sup> *hutong* is both the singular and plural spelling of the word.

and what was once a large courtyard home for one family eventually became a *dazhayuan*, or a large messy courtyard in which four to eight families crowded together.

After the "Reform and Opening Policy," high rises and other development projects began to spring up around the *hutong*. Many of the quiet lanes in the center of the city were destroyed for these projects, but others remain--some falling down, some restored to Ming Dynasty splendor by wealthy owners, local officials, or tourism entrepreneurs. Amidst this destruction and reconstruction, *hutong* fever has taken hold of both Chinese and foreign tourists. I had the opportunity to observe the development of tourism in the *hutong* first hand during a study abroad program in Beijing from August 2008 to May 2009.

According to one *hutong* resident I spoke to, an important difference distinguishes the *hutong* from other tourist sites in Beijing such as Tiananmen Square or the Forbidden City: people live in the *hutong*. On a stroll through the *hutong* one might see an old woman walking her dog or three men sitting on stools playing cards. If the schools have just let out for the day, the narrow alleys fill up with children and teenagers who stop at the convenience stores for a soda or snack, then walk home arm in arm. Turning a corner, one might happen onto a market street. There, breads, vegetables, tofu, and meats are stacked high at different vendors' stands and the sounds of hawking and haggling fill the air. Turn another corner, and you might happen onto Nanluoguxiang, one of the more popular *hutong* hotspots. Here, the grey bricks of the *siheyuan* remain, but the insides have been scooped out and remodeled into hip coffee shops, bars, modern clothing stores, and kitschy gift shops. And no matter where you are in the *hutong*, you might see a long red train of bicycle pedicabs pulling visitors two by two on leisurely rides through the alleys.



Nestled at the center of rapidly developing Beijing, the ancient *hutong* have become a symbol of "Old Beijing Culture" (*lao beijing wenhua*). However, the impermanence of this status is reflected in the ubiquitous tour book phrase: "disappearing *hutong*." These books advise tourists to make their way to the *hutong* quickly because they may not be around for long. Consider the following advice from a popular walking guide of the city: "Development still continues apace, however, and the hutongs are rapidly disappearing. Visit the famous ones while you can" (*Beijing by Foot* 2008). In this environment of destruction in the name of progress, some advocate tourism in the *hutong* as a strategy to ensure preservation and economic development (Zheng 1998). But the increased attention from tourists will inevitably change the lives of *hutong* residents, and it is the very lifestyle of these residents that draws many tourists to the *hutong* in the first place. Therefore, debates have arisen in Chinese and Western media and among academics, NGOs, tourists and locals over whether tourism development in the *hutong* is a good idea, what should be preserved, how it should be preserved, or for whom it should be preserved.

Regardless of these debates, the landscape of Beijing is changing quickly, and it may be impossible and even undesirable to preserve the *hutong* and all aspects of the way of life therein. However, just because everything cannot be preserved as it is does not mean that it must all be destroyed. As the *hutong* are reconstructed through tourism, new cultural forms are produced under the ideal of "authenticity." These forms both reflect existing cultural values and produce new cultural possibilities. Therefore, my discussion of cultural tourism in the *hutong* will not focus on whether the commodification of the *hutong* is inherently good or bad, but rather on the production of the ideal of authenticity in the *hutong* as well as uses and interpretations of that ideal by different people at different times.

The first section of this paper situates the development of *hutong* tourism in a larger narrative of Beijing's transformation from the initiation of the Reform and Opening Policy in 1979 through the massive reconstruction of the city in the decade leading up to the Summer Olympics in 2008. The second section examines how debates over the commodification of the *hutong* through tourism relate to theoretical debates regarding cultural tourism and the commodification of culture. This section focuses on two primary concerns about cultural commodification: whether commodification leads to a loss of local characteristics at the expense of outside values imposed by global capitalism, and whether the themed space produced in tourism sites in China leads to an atmosphere of state-guided social control (Hai 2007, Nyiri 2006).

The third section of the paper explores the production of authenticity as an example of the commodification of culture in the *hutong*. This section examines what authenticity as an ideal hides or erases and explores the ways in which produced authenticity creates new cultural forms. This analysis is informed by observations I made during my studying abroad in Beijing, secondary sources, and email interviews I did with *hutong* tourism business owners after my return to the United States. The fourth section turns to an analysis of *hutong* business owners as cultural mediators who play a crucial role in the production of authenticity, and asks how these business owners understand their role in the process of commodification of culture.

The final section discusses how the development of tourism in the *hutong* is different from other tourist sites and theme parks in China in that their uneven development has not completely enveloped the entire landscape, leaving a heterogeneous space open to multiple interpretations. My conclusion argues that the use of local forms in commodification and the cultural value attributed to the products of commodification challenge the notion that

commodification subsumes local difference. As commodification of the *hutong* has not encompassed the entire lived reality of the neighborhoods, my argument also questions the concept that the state controls the message in Chinese tourism. My argument suggests that the persistence of debates over *hutong* tourism development in the capital illuminate the lack of consensus in Chinese discourse about what modern China is and ought to be.

## **2.0 THE TRANSFORMATION OF BEIJING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF *HUTONG* TOURISM**

In 1980 and 1983, the Chinese government began initiatives to transform Beijing from an industrial center to a political, cultural, and economic center that would appeal both to the Chinese and the world (Broudehoux 2004: 37). Beijing's transformation is an example of the modern urban condition that forces cities to be more concerned with creating a positive image than with governance because of the need to attract international capital. In the contemporary global economy, cities must become business, consumer, and cultural centers to succeed (Strom 2002, Broudehoux 2004). A city with a successful image gains not only economic development, but also legitimacy and power for its leaders. As the state-guided theming of space encompasses more and more of the fabric of the city, it leads to an atmosphere of social control that influences everyday life at economic, social, and cultural levels (Wang 2001, Broudehoux 2004, Hoffman 2006).

In Beijing, this process of branding the city has had to incorporate Beijing's historical reputation as the traditional capital of China while also creating an image of a modern city which can accommodate modern commerce (Wang 2001, Broudehoux 2004). The emphasis on Beijing's traditional past has been a central part of its modern image-making process. Leaders saw cultural heritage as an important attribute of Beijing that differentiated it from other economic centers like Shanghai and Guangzhou (Wang 2001). In March of 1996, the city's

municipal government created a new development strategy called "building the capital through culture." This strategy was implemented through leisure campaigns, of which tourism was an important part (Wang 2001: 74). This culture-focused development was further motivated by multi-million dollar beautification projects to support Beijing's bid to host the Olympics in 2000 and later successful bid to host the Olympics in 2008 (Broudehoux 2004, Meyer 2008).

In the process of "building the capital through culture," conflicts have arisen over what "culture" to emphasize and how to use it. Broudehoux describes how one historical site in Beijing has been used for both commerce and nationalism in her study of Yuanmingyuan, also known as the Old Summer Palace. The palace was built with the help of Jesuit priests in a Western style by the Qianlong Emperor in the mid 1700s, then looted and destroyed by European and American soldiers during the Opium Wars in 1860. The ruins of the palace were converted to a mixed-use tourist site throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. Broudehoux's analysis questions the notion of universal Chinese acceptance of this commodification. She examines debates over the site's development between businesspeople, scholars, government officials, and locals over issues such as whether commercial activity such as rides for children in the park interfered with a nationalistic message denouncing imperialism, or how residents displaced from the park ought to be compensated for their move (Broudehoux 2004:43-88). This lack of consensus over the use of cultural heritage is also evident in the development of *hutong* tourism.

As Beijing remade itself in the years leading up to the Olympics, the *hutong* became a central part of Beijing's cultural tourism development strategy and a hot topic for debate. As part of the economic reforms instituted after the reform and opening policies of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the government overhauled the real estate market in 1992. These reforms opened the market up to private investors and enabled local governments to raise funds by taxing real estate

deals. Little regulation and high fiscal incentives for redevelopment led most local governments to ignore laws mandating cultural heritage protection (Yao 2008). The corresponding real estate boom led to rapid destruction of old buildings, including many buildings located in protected areas, leaving only 2% of the city's original urban fabric in tact (Broudehoux 2004:2).

The *hutong* and *siheyuan* were hit hard by these changes. Some residents voluntarily left the ancient, falling apart buildings for high-rises with modern amenities, but many were forcibly evicted and relocated far from the center of the city due to development projects that tore down whole rows of *hutong*. Residents complained about insufficient compensation for their property and relocation costs, and some protested by waiting to leave until the last possible minute. The development and relocation process was rarely transparent, and residents sometimes found out that their neighborhood was being razed as late as nine days before construction would begin (Meyer 2008). But at the same time that the *hutong* were disappearing, they gradually attracted more and more attention. In 2002, Beijing's government created 25 protected districts, putting millions of dollars into improving the infrastructure in these areas. Photographers documented the last days of the *hutong*, publishing books, blogs, and postcards ringing with nostalgia. Housing costs in the remaining courtyard homes skyrocketed as foreigners and rich Chinese bought and renovated them, while the scale of tourism development increased drastically.

By most accounts, the *hutong* tourism phenomenon began around 1994. The number of tours and guesthouses grew slowly at first, but by 2002, *hutong* tourism had become *hutong* fever. For foreign tourists especially, visiting a *hutong* was added to the standard tour in Beijing that also includes the usual trips to the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and Tiananmen Square. Both Chinese media and foreign guidebooks exhorted that experiencing *hutong* life was essential to a foreign tourist's ability to understand "real Chinese culture" (Li 2008). Tourists could walk,

bike, or ride in a pedicab through the *hutong*, visit a courtyard home, have a drink in a courtyard bar, or stay in a courtyard hostel.

Strolling through the *hutong* also became popular with Chinese tourists. The appeal of the *hutong* for Chinese visitors included sites of former residences of famous writers, nobility, and politicians, the charm of "Old Beijing" life, the quiet of the *hutong* in the middle of the bustling city, and the growing number of bars and cafes in which to meet friends or business partners. However, they had to be careful about how they talked about it. The *hutong* south of the city gates were once as famous for the brothels they housed as they were for the merchants who lived and worked there. At that time, "strolling through the hutong (*guang hutong*)" in Beijing slang meant visiting a few brothels and gambling houses, something even emperors were said to do from time to time. The newspaper article that told this story suggested that visitors use the phrase "touring the *hutong* (*hutong you*)" instead, so as to avoid calling up unsavory memories (Hu 2005).

The development of tourism in the *hutong* has not always gone smoothly. In the 25 protected districts, different local management has resulted in drastically different results. A government survey in 2006 reported that half of the *hutong* tour companies operating in one district, Shichahai, were illegal. The report discussed how the unregulated nature of *hutong* tourism development saturated the once primarily residential neighborhood with shops and bars, while rows of pedicabs pulling tourists clattered through the neighborhood day and night, disrupting the peaceful atmosphere which was part of the attraction of the neighborhood in the first place (Guo 2006). A tourist street in another neighborhood, Nanluoguxiang, is lined with bars, shops, and coffee houses. However, the local government passed an ordinance limiting the amount of bars, so the atmosphere is much quieter than Shichahai. Some *hutong* neighborhoods

have still experienced very little tourism development, while other protected neighborhoods have been emptied out of residents, totally demolished, and rebuilt in a historical style (Meyer 2008). This uneven development demonstrates that even in the protected districts, what exactly to protect is still unclear.



### 3.0 COMMODIFICATION AND CULTURAL TOURISM IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA

*Hutong* tourism is an example of cultural heritage tourism: the subfield of tourism that describes visits made for the purpose of experiencing cultural heritage, or “the traditions, art forms, celebrations, and experiences' of a particular place or group of people” (NASAA). Though cultural experiences have always been a part of tourism, in recent years cultural tourism has become an increasingly profitable industry (Smith 2003, Richards 2007). Scholars have suggested that cultural tourism correlates with the increase in globalization because of increasing communication and cheaper travel between places, as well as increasing leisure time and increased levels of education (Burns 2005, Richards 2007).

The worldwide growth in cultural tourism has not in any way been overlooked in China. From rural villages to historical architecture to urban lifestyles, China has placed its culture on the market. And visitors are buying. In 2005, over 17 million tourists visited China (Nye 2005), and this number continues to grow. Since the reform and opening up of China, the Chinese government has actively promoted tourism development as an economic development strategy (Nyiri 2006). The Chinese premier Wen Jiabao recently released a statement that the Chinese government is making tourism development a "pillar industry in the national economy," with goals of increasing tourism revenues by 12% each year until 2015 (World Tourism Organization 2009).

Every place or group of people has its own “traditions, art forms, celebrations, and experiences,” and developing this culture into a tourist attraction seems on the surface to be a simple step toward economic health with results that benefit communities, culture, and tourists (Richards 2007). However, some scholars have criticized cultural tourism as a destructive force that through commodification hides or completely replaces the cultural characteristics it was based on in the first place (Smith 2003, Nyiri 2006, Richards 2007, UNEP). However, before I move too deeply into the nature of commodification in cultural tourism, I will first describe briefly the origins of thought on commodification in Marx's *Capital* and the way these theories have changed alongside of the progression of capitalist development.

As capitalism became the dominant social system in the west throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, political philosophers and economists attempted to create theoretical interpretations of the ways in which this new system affected social organization. The commodification theories essential to the argument of this paper have primarily been derived from Marx's *Capital*, one of the most influential studies of the workings and effects of capitalism in western thought. Marx described capitalism as a shift from production-based societies, in which people produced with their own labor only what they could use, to consumption-based societies, in which people produced goods to be exchanged for other products or money. According to Marx, a commodity is something that people value. All commodities have use-value and exchange value. The commodity's use-value is derived from its inherent usefulness to people, while its exchange value is derived from the amount of other goods or money that can be exchanged for the object. Exchange-value has no direct relationship to use-value. For example, a diamond's price is not determined by how useful the diamond is, but rather what people are

willing to exchange for it. Commodification is the process of attributing exchange value to something that previously only had use value (Marx 1978).

In the twentieth century, advances in machine technology led to the rise of mass production and consumption of goods, as well as the rise of the advertising industry that created mass demand for these goods. In his analysis of the development of advertising, Wolfgang Haug has argued that in advanced capitalism the importance of exchange value is primarily derived from images, and images are used to play to what the customer wants (1987). According to Haug, this inevitably leads to a decline in the use value of a product, as resources are taken away from production and put into marketing. The movement toward the 'image-commodity' is exemplified in the process of branding, where ideas and images came to stand for products in advertising. "For the ideal of commodity aesthetics is to deliver the absolute minimum of use value disguised and staged by a maximum of seductive illusion" (Haug 1987:54). This process has led to a shift from a focus on the production of goods to an emphasis on the production of images and feelings through advertising.

By the late twentieth century, improvements in communication, travel, and information technology led many theorists to declare a new age, that of globalization, in which people from all parts of the globe are connected closer than ever. Alongside of the development of globalization, postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard and Jameson argued that the elevation of the image that occurred throughout the twentieth century took on a new level of importance in which the feelings and images created in advertising completely subsumed the use-value of the things they were selling, separating them from the concrete situations and spaces of their production (Mazzarella 2003, Meethan 2001). Theories of "cultural imperialism" went further to say that these images were primarily Western and would continue to be so, for example, that

restaurants like McDonalds were replacing local restaurants, or that Hollywood movies were replace local artistic production. These theories assumed a unidirectional flow of cultural information from economically powerful cultures and areas of the world (i.e. America, Europe) to economically weak cultures and areas (Tomlinson 1997).

However, there was almost an immediate backlash across the social sciences against theories that argued increased global economic interaction would lead to global cultural homogenization--McDonalds was not always replacing local restaurants. Researchers have found examples over and over again that complicate postmodern and cultural imperialism narratives, from the ways that international corporations must localize themselves to make money in new markets (Mazzarella 2003), to the ways that localized products have found their way to global markets as a result of increased mobility, migration, or niche marketing (Appadurai 1996, Ateljevic and Doorne 2003). These theoretical approaches to the problems of commodification of culture have examined the complexity of commodification, acknowledging its homogenizing elements while also examining how imported culture is localized.

Because cultural tourism attempts to highlight and preserve local culture while simultaneously packaging it for tourists, cultural tourism is an important issue through which to study the commodification of culture. In cultural tourism initiatives, commodification occurs when material culture, people, and places are turned into a marketable product for tourists. Material culture, people, and places have complex histories and associations, but they must present a clear message in order to attract capital. This does not necessarily mean total cultural homogenization or that all cultural products will look the same (i.e. McDonaldization). However, it does mean that the heterogeneity of places, ethnicities, or traditions need to be cleaned up to be presentable.

Commodification has been lauded as a way of preserving cultural heritage that has increasingly fewer other methods of support. This argument is present in proposals for cultural tourism initiatives from those that highlight rural lived culture to urban arts and heritage tourism (Smith 2003, Strom 2002, Wells 2006). The desirability of the economic benefits of tourism have led many critics to call for an approach that acknowledges cultural difference in the process of commodification. Burns argues that it is possible to make compromises between “antiglobalization” proponents that completely despise tourism and “unfettered markets as salvation” theorists who see tourism as a panacea, so long as we address the conflicts that tourism commodification may cause (2005:400).

One of the primary concerns about cultural commodification through tourism is that local cultural differences may become homogenized in the process of catering to the desires of outside consumers. This leads to problems of which “culture” a cultural tourism project decides to market to tourists and concerns over what kind of things this cleaning up hides (Meethan 2001, Smith 2003). For example, problems might arise when local communities are stereotyped or when tourists in their search for authenticity intrude upon locals’ private lives (Burns 2006:400). In historical neighborhoods, buildings are refurbished or “preserved” to create a cleaner image of history. Many theorists refer to this process as Disneyfication: “such locales are normally rebuilt to project an overtly nostalgic and idealized version of city life. They are intended to summon a non-threatening past evoked by “authentic reproductions” of a working harbor, main street, frontier town, or colonial village—not unlike parts of Disneyworld” (Judd 1999:38). In this way, “Disneyfication” is often used in a derogatory manner to describe a beautiful facade that might have economic value but is devoid of any cultural value.

"Disneyfication" may be disparaged by Western tourists and even tourism scholars as presenting a false front that hides a more "authentic" reality, but in reform-era China, touristic commodification is often associated with modernity, which is seen in a positive light (Oakes 1998, Nyiri 2006). The modern buildings and amenities that tourism development brings, not to mention the tax revenue, make commodification a welcome process to many developing areas. However, the commodification of space in East Asian tourism has more than economic ramifications: researchers have described the ways in which tourism theme parks in China and Japan are used to create national unity *and* develop consumer culture (Yoshimoto 1994, Oakes 2006, Ren 2007). In his discussion of the development of mass tourism in post-reform China, Nyiri describes the historic role of travel in Chinese culture and how recent tourism development promotion has been scientifically carried out and managed by the state in order to create a coherent national culture based on "5,000 years of history." He demonstrates how this control works through the structure of tourism attraction ownership and funding, varieties of attractions, and institutionalization of tourist guides (2006: 54).

In Western discourse, "Disneyfication" is primarily used to describe commercialism, or the commodification of culture primarily for economic benefit. This is not to say that the actual Disney theme parks do not have additional messages promoting national unity or other cultural values in addition to their commercial nature, but "Disneyfication" usually implies western cultural imperialism--that is, that the production of space in tourism, or theming, is being done in the image of Disney for the purpose of making money. However, the above description of Chinese tourism development is just one example of the ways that cultural commodification is not only used for the purpose of adding economic value.

Given that cultural commodification is not simply the marketing of cultural characteristics for economic gain, studies of tourism have suggested that one can read commodified space to understand the constructed nature of cultural values (Meethan 2001, Lacy and Douglass 2002). In their study of the development of tourism in the politically charged Basque regions of France and Spain, conflicts over how space ought to be commodified lead Douglass and Lacy to argue that tourism is an excellent place where "opposing visions, alternative versions of culture can be asserted, challenged and enacted" (2002: 7). They suggest that the anthropology of tourism can give us insight into how cultural identities are "formulated and modified, reified and negotiated, projected and conditioned" (2002: 18) In this way, the commodification of culture does not destroy culture, but rather participates in its production.

It is too simplistic to dismiss the commodification of culture as the loss of some "authentic" element when cultural characteristics are commodified (Meethan 2001, Shepherd 2002, Lacy and Douglass 2002). In his discussion of how to study cultural change in the era of globalization, Mazzarella argues against "distinctions between 'inauthentic' (commodified) and 'authentic' (organic) cultural forms," and the "assumption that culture could somehow be a finite resource, threatened with extinction by commodification" (2003: 44). It is much more important to look at how commodified culture is used. Meethan argues that there is a "spectrum of values" in the process of commodification, therefore, commodification is not inherently false or alienating (2001: 86). Although cultural tourism gives us a situation in which locality and difference are commodified, local case studies demonstrate ways in which commodification does not subsume the concrete.

The following analysis follows Mazzarella in studying the "process of commodification" (2003: 45) in the *hutong* in order to understand the role of the concrete within commodification.

The following analysis also follows Tomlinson's suggestion to avoid "the tendency...to read culture – specifically identities, attachments to localities – as doing ‘work’ in the instrumental sense; not as ends in themselves but as contributing to political-economic outcomes" (Tomlinson 1999: 317). The development of cultural tourism in Beijing's *hutong* neighborhoods specifically walks the line between political-economy and culture that Tomlinson describes. While tourism does not encompass the entire lived culture of the *hutong* neighborhoods, its development plays a role in the production of new cultural forms. The next section explores the process of commodification in the *hutong* to understand how meanings can be constructed in political-economic activities like tourism development that extend beyond political and economic uses. The section focuses on authenticity as an ideal that is produced in the development of *hutong* tourism, and then examines how the production of authenticity both relies on old cultural characteristics and creates new forms that help to construct local identities. It then looks at the role of cultural mediators in commodifying culture, and explores interviews with *hutong* tourism business owners to understand their role in the production of authenticity.



#### **4.0 THE PRODUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES**

The term "authenticity" is commonly used by tourism developers and sometimes by critics of tourism (or tourists themselves), especially in heritage tourism like that found in the *hutong*. While tourism scholarship has come to conceive of authenticity as "subjective," "socially constructed," and "negotiable," (Smith 2003:20), it is still an ideal that many tourists look for. As Schouten explains, "many tourists wish therefore to experience what they are happy to believe to be the authenticity of a place, but not necessarily its reality" (2007: 31). In the marketplace of cultural tourism, invoking the term "authenticity" can be used as brand content to attract affluent, educated consumers to a destination (Smith 2003, Schouten 2007). This value is reflected in the attitudes of guidebooks like Lonely Planet, which highlight the exotic nature of everyday experience in foreign places (Richards 2007).

Understanding authenticity as a product of commodification demonstrates how the term can construct a clear, coherent, meaning, while also obscuring the things that do not fit its meaning. Michael Dutton describes how the trope of "Old Beijing" has arisen to describe many of Beijing's cultural heritage sites and traditions, including the *hutong*, traditional snacks, and temple fairs during the Chinese New Year. This construction presents an identity that is both proposed as specific to Beijing (when Chinese people speak of it) but also a part of Chinese identity (when Chinese speak to foreigners). One part of Beijing's history that gets hidden in this

trope is the Cultural Revolution--in the sense of "Old Beijing" traditions, there is only the ancient past and the modern present--people rarely discuss or display the events that happened in between (Dutton 2008).

Another thing that is hidden with the "Old Beijing" construction of the *hutong* is the diversity of the population. Very few current *hutong* residents were born and raised in Beijing. Especially before the popularity of *hutong* tourism, cheap rent attracted migrant families (*waidiren*) from the countryside to some of the most rundown residences (Meyer 2008). However, the "Old Beijing culture" represented by the *hutong* is also ideally represented by "Old Beijing" people--that is, locals, not migrants. A local *siheyuan* owner hinted at this differentiation when describing the photos in a western tour book of a *siheyuan*: "The pictures in the tour book were all negative, for example a clothesline in a *hutong* with women's underwear and dried meat hanging on it. It also had snot-nosed crying children. Actually these things are not the content of Beijing--'Old Beijing' people would never hang dried meat outside, let alone women's underwear! According to 'Old Beijing' thought, this is bad luck!" (Li 2008). However, I often saw clothes and drying meat hanging on clotheslines during my walks through the *hutong*. They may not have been part of "Old Beijing Culture," but they were certainly part of the landscape of the *hutong*. Implicitly, these negative images are coming from outsiders, not "Old Beijing people."

While "authenticity" in the form of the "Old Beijing" trope can be used to differentiate *siheyuan* owned by Beijing families from those occupied by *waidiren*, it can also be used as a way to criticize some *hutong* tourism development. For example, the alley I mentioned earlier that was lined with shops and coffee houses, Nanluoguxiang, was just a small, quiet *hutong* ten years ago. Now, it has become a popular shopping district for both foreigners and upper-middle-

class Chinese. While the development of Nanluoguxiang has maintained Chinese characteristics in its architecture, it has also been influenced by foreign culture. Of the Chinese visitors to Nanluoguxiang I spoke with, some felt that the street was a good merging of Chinese traditional culture and modern commercial culture, but more visitors took a critical view. They thought Nanluoguxiang had almost no "Old Beijing" characteristics aside from its architecture, and disregarded it as too commercial or too westernized.

The production and uses of authenticity in *hutong* tourism are complicated by the fact that there are multiple audiences--Beijing residents, tourists from other parts of China and East Asia, and tourists from other continents--who come to the *hutong* with different expectations and leave with different impressions. In China, the rapid growth of the domestic tourism market adds another difficulty for those trying to create a coherent message through commodification. Much of the research on tourism in China has discussed the widely different tastes of Chinese and foreign tourists. In his research on rural villages, Oakes discusses how western tourists tend to look for less-developed villages in their search for exotic authenticity. Chinese tourists tend to enjoy more overtly commodified villages with performance stages in which the performers sing both "local" folk songs and national patriotic songs that the tourists can join in on, emphasizing solidarity between rural minorities and the urban majority (2006: 84). In his description of standardized tours in Beijing, Dutton describes how the standard Western tour centered around the Forbidden City and the Great Wall embodies the Westerner's desire to tour the exotic glories of past civilizations, while the Chinese tour that begins with the flag raising in Tiananmen Square and makes stops at Communist monuments and Yuanmingyuan creates a narrative of a rising nation built on a strong past (2008: 204-208). Nyiri's discussion of the commodification of tourist sites in China defined by standardization, homogenization, and overt commercialization

welcomed as a sign of modernity by Chinese tourists and disparaged by western tourists signifies the Chinese desire for modernity and the western nostalgia for the pastoral, non-modern past (2006).

As the production of authenticity in *hutong* tourism hides some identities (e.g. experiences of cultural revolution, migrant experiences) it creates a value system that helps to construct other identities. In tourism development, produced authenticity often takes its form in space--particularly architecture (Meethan 2001). For example, an "authentic replica" of a building might not have a shop in it, but creating the replica might also mean evicting four of the five families who lived in the building over the past few decades. As I discussed earlier with respect to Beijing, cities have to both highlight their differences and conform to global standards to attract outside capital and gain legitimacy with their own citizens. In her discussion of the ways in which the state-guided theming of Dalian as a global hub of commerce has influenced the professionalization of Dalian's middle class, Lisa Hoffman elucidates how this production of space in modern cities "produces new spaces in which subjectivity is constituted" (2006: 125). She writes, "the connections between subject formation and the emergence of places that have a translocal character offer concrete and situated examples of how state and market rationalities (self-management, entrepreneurial ethics, and professional ambition) are integrated in to people's material and symbolic worlds" (2006: 131). Hoffman focuses on state and market rationalities because the specific place she is talking about, Dalian, has taken a commerce-oriented route to theming itself. However, as mentioned earlier, the cultural history of Beijing as the capital of China makes cultural identity a much more important part of being a "true Beijjinger," both as a model for "outsider" Chinese and as a representative of Chinese culture to the outside world; "Old Beijingers" are authentic, while *waidiren* are not.

Through courtyard hostels and *hutong* tours, authenticity is being produced in search of profit, which is the most basic description of the commodification of culture. However, the above discussion demonstrates how this production of authenticity also influences the production of local identities. This process is complicated by the diversity of the tourism audience and the intersection of cultural, economic, and political values. Therefore, commodification is understood as a process that not only creates wealth, but also relies on cultural values and produces them. In this way, we can talk about how the essentialization of identity can be exclusionary by silencing cultural diversity, but we can also study the ways in which commodification can be a resource for constructing identity by which even foreign residents of Beijing can in some sense become Beijingers by participating in it. The next section will take a deeper look into the processes of producing authenticity and constructing cultural identity through an analysis of *hutong* business owners as cultural mediators.

## **5.0 HUTONG BUSINESS OWNERS AS CULTURAL MEDIATORS**

Tourism research has primarily focused on the difficulties of balancing the needs and values of hosts and guests in the commodification of culture. Commodification is problematic for local cultures because it relies on the whims of the consumer, while cultural producers' needs are usually secondary (Wells 2006). In her description of the creation of a driving tour of Pittsburgh's industrial heritage, Doris Dyen discusses problems in developing heritage attractions such as whose needs to emphasize—the locals or the tourists (2006). One way to sort out these problems is to look at forms of agency--who is involved in creating the message in tourism projects, and according to what rules? Who commodifies culture by producing authenticity? People commodify spaces, but which people? Government officials? Locals? Outsiders? Some combination of all of them? Why are they doing it? Who does it benefit? A useful term in the production of authenticity through the process of commodification is the mediators of culture.

For Wells, folklorists can play an important role in mediating goals between the host cultures they study and represent and the institutions which often support public folklore products. In order to do this, folklorists must have an understanding of the ways in which culture can be commodified (2006:7). Although some folklorists may not approve of any sort of commodification, Wells argues that it may be necessary for some communities to survive (2006: 11). Her argument that folklorists should participate in the tourism production process by

championing the needs of local constituents is reflected in the concerns of Doris Dyen in her project.

Although Wells' article focuses on folklorists as mediators in American tourism, these mediating agents can also be people who write regulations, NGOs and preservationists, academics, business owners, and tour guides. These actors both make decisions about what to keep and what to omit in preparing culture for commodification, and are influenced by these constructions of culture themselves. In China, this process involves constructing meaning between UNESCO, local authorities, books, guides, and tourists (Nyiri 2006). Oakes argues that rural villagers also participate in mediating culture in rural tourism by "engaging currency of authenticity in self-conscious ways" (Oakes 2006: 169) Their roles are important to translating local culture for tourists and re-constructing their own experiences of locality. While this mediation is a form of commodification, it is also a form of the production of culture.

To understand more about the process of producing *hutong* culture, I interviewed four *hutong* business entrepreneurs: a hostel owner, a coffee shop owner, a t-shirt designer, and the author of an English-language guidebook to Beijing. None of the business owners were native to Beijing. The hostel owner and the coffee shop owner were both from Zhejiang, a province near Shanghai, the T-shirt designer was from England, and the guidebook author was from the United States. All of them had lived in Beijing for at least ten years. I asked questions such as what the business owners' attitudes towards the changes in the *hutong* were, why they decided to open their businesses in the *hutong*, and how they saw their own relationship to the changes in the *hutong*.

Why did these entrepreneurs decide to open their businesses in the *hutong*? Was it simply to make money? Or were they attracted by the *hutong*'s charm? From my interviews, I learned

that both were important factors. Even though none of the managers I interviewed were from Beijing, it seemed as though they all respected *hutong* culture. Although they admitted admiration for the *hutong* culture, environment, and history, they also acknowledged that their actions will definitely change these "traditional" characteristics. The following discussion will explore how these businessmen understand their role in the conflict between *hutong* preservation and development on the one hand and the changes caused by that development on the other hand.

The interviewees emphasized that "*hutong* culture" was an essential part of Beijing's culture. Some interviewees used colorful metaphors to explain their ideas. Many of them said "*hutong* are the soul of Beijing." One interviewee gave me a more descriptive metaphor: "the *hutong* have been called 'Beijing's bones,' while the *siheyuan* have been called 'Beijing's meat.'" He meant that throughout Beijing's history, the *hutong* have been the foundation of Beijing's structure, while the *siheyuan* have been the source of Beijing life. Another said that the *hutong* were important because throughout history many important things have happened there. Over time, the *hutong* have inspired the creativity of artists and writers. Many important people in Chinese history have lived in the *hutong*. In addition to their abstract and historical value, the business owners brought up present-day benefits of living and working in the *hutong*. One that all interviewees mentioned was that in the middle of a busy city, the *hutong* protect a certain quietness and peace (*naozhongqujing*). In addition, *hutong* culture includes the common person's daily life and relationship with his neighbors. One interviewee said that to him, authentic *hutong* culture resides in this daily life and customs, for example, the way in which a door should be opened for guests, or the specific foods that should be eaten on the Lunar New Year's Eve.



Another interviewee said he moved to the *hutong* to raise his children because he thought that the *hutong* were filled with the spirit of human life.

Many of these concepts echo both newspaper articles' and tour books' descriptions of traditional *hutong* culture. But how do these businessmen see the current development and changes in the *hutong*? They all acknowledged that *hutong* tourism has changed many of the *hutong*'s traditional characteristics. One said, "because many non-Beijing residents have opened stores, and many Beijing residents are no longer willing to live in the *hutong*, 'Old Beijing' cultural elements are fewer and fewer." But they all had different attitudes toward this problem. One interviewee emphasized that the *hutong* have already undergone many changes. Courtyards went from wealthy people's homes to near-slums where eight families crowded, five or six to a room over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, one might say that the current phenomenon of many rooms once again being occupied by a single wealthy family is just part of this process. A coffee shop owner told me he especially enjoyed the peace and quiet of the *hutong*, but Nanluoguxiang was getting noisier and noisier, so he decided to open a new coffee shop in another, more undeveloped *hutong*. However, his first coffee shop's popularity was one of the reasons Nanluoguxiang became so lively in the first place, while the *hutong* where his new shop is located has almost been completely gutted for the construction of new stores. If the new Beijing is lacking its "meat", but retains its bones, is it still the same Beijing?

Perhaps the current situation isn't that Beijing lacks "meat," but that the meat's flavor is changing. For example, the coffee shop owner said that he sees coffee shops as one form of culture, so that customers in a *hutong* coffee shop can experience China's traditional culture and coffee shop culture at the same time. A *hutong* hostel owner said that making dumplings and playing mahjong with guests is similar to the human feeling between people once created by

neighbors who all knew each other, sharing food and assistance when times were rough. He believed that tourism could help outsiders better understand China and Beijing's history, actually, this was another reason he opened a hostel in the *hutong*. The T-shirt designer used his own designs to create products with Beijing characteristics. From these business development examples, we can perhaps understand how while the flavor of the *hutong* has changed, some characteristics have been protected, while some characteristics have disappeared.

But this kind of compromise is beginning to replace the everyday life of common people. *Hutong* residents said young people are often unwilling to stay in the *hutong*, while more and more older people want to sell their homes, utilizing *hutong* tourism fever to make money. While the government has created *hutong* preservation districts, more *hutong* are being destroyed every day. As the number of *hutong* grows fewer and fewer, there is little chance of guaranteeing the lifestyle of current *hutong* residents. Therefore many people predict that the *hutong* will inevitably die out completely, but this isn't the whole story. Wealthy families buying refurbished courtyard homes and the development of *hutong* tourism all demonstrate that in some respects, the *hutong* are increasing in value.

No matter what, in the process of developing the *hutong* and their changes, businesspeople play an important role in redefining local cultural values. But on one hand they use the destruction of traditional *hutong* culture to make money, on the other hand they work hard to protect those elements of *hutong* culture that they see as important, for example, a neighborly feeling between people, architecture, a peaceful atmosphere, or the history of *hutong* residents. While *hutong* tourism to some degree will destroy the traditional culture of the *hutong*, at the same time it creates new cultural traditions. When it comes to developing tourism and

respecting *hutong* culture, the most important thing is to pay attention to the current situation of the *hutong* and how they are used.

## 6.0 THE *HUTONG* AS HETEROGENEOUS SPACE

The final section of this paper relies on the above analysis in arguing that the commodification of culture in the *hutong* has not been dominated by a homogeneous message that is the product of either western taste or national propaganda. Rather, the development of *hutong* tourism has been a complex process in which many different agents, from business owners, to residents, to media, to tourists have participated. The result is a heterogeneous space in which these multiple influences have all left a mark.

In studies of urban cultural tourism, critics have described the nature of marketing as remaking an object to conform to the expectations of customers (Holcomb 1999, Strom 2002). However, Holcomb emphasizes that when it comes to cities, marketers cannot totally control the nature of their product, explaining that “the climate, geography, topography, history, culture, and traditions are all inherited. The product can be modified...but the marketer...has little control over the product” (Holcomb 1999:55). Echoing Mazzarella's argument against the totalization narrative, Feinstein and Judd explain the problems inherent in studying the interaction of commodifying forces and local realities:

Tourist locales are occupied by real people leading their daily lives. As such, they retain a subjectivity that cannot be reduced, in the end, only to objects of the tourist gaze or products of the tourist industry. As a consequence of the intermixture of the global and the local, any attempt to capture the essence of urban tourism is difficult. The structure of

the industry and the types of tourism can be described in broad terms. The standardization of the tourist product likewise allows generalization. But the variation in the impacts of tourism and its multiple meanings, depending on type of tourist and context, call for an examination of individual cases (Feinstein and Judd 1999:16).

Feinstein and Judd do not ignore the potential negative or positive social consequences of urban tourism, but they emphasize the need to understand both global commodifying structures and local difference in order to understand the real effects of tourism.

Literature on commodification and tourism has struggled with a way to talk about Feinstein and Judd's local realities. In his 2001 analysis of the tourism studies field, Kevin Meethan uses Henri Lefebvre's concept of "representational spaces" to describe what he calls "space as directly lived and experienced which draws on, and is also informed by, particular forms of localized or indigenous social knowledge" (Meethan 2001:139). Mazzarella talks about the "ethnographic challenge of how to portray the construction and experience of locality" . He writes that the translation of local to global and back is not smooth, it has remainders (2003:17-18). In the commodification of culture in *hutong* tourism, one of these remainders is heterogeneous space--it is not completely unthreatened, but it is also not gone yet.

As I walked among *hutong* alleys, it was the stacks of rainbow-colored plastic tubs--products made for and sold to locals, the meat drying on clotheslines, and high school students horsing around that hinted that life in the *hutong* accommodated tourism without being dominated by it. Whether or not these things signified "Old Beijing Culture," they certainly seemed to be a part of current Beijing culture. When I celebrated Chinese New Year in a courtyard hostel by setting off fireworks with the hostel's next-door neighbors, I felt that *hutong* tourism also accommodated life in the *hutong*. However, one of the neighbors that night told me

she was planning on selling her courtyard home soon--the rising value of the property was too good to pass up. Recently, there were rumors on one expat blog about one diverse *hutong* area being razed and remade (with a ticket) as a tourist site (*The Beijinger*). When Mazarella says "only certain kinds of locality turn out to be congruent with global dreams," (2003:149) he is talking about the tendency of global capitalism to homogenize even as it celebrates difference. Political and economic forces will always influence the messages produced in commodification. However, sometimes the new cultural forms that are produced live in precarious harmony with the old, which takes us back to heterogeneous space.

The massive reconstruction of Beijing has all happened in the name of creating a coherent image for the city. However, the conflict over sites such as Yuanmingyuan and the *hutong* and the lack of a clear resolution on how these places should be developed suggests that this message has not yet been solidified. Dutton notes that Beijing's diversity distorts the narratives of tourism in both Chinese and western guidebooks (2008:209-210). Wang has a similar argument: "Beijing, because of historicity and rich cultural memories, is populated with spots that cannot be closely monitored or willfully homogenized...Beijing is replete with spots where the encounter between historicity and urbanity generates alternative forms of leisure communities that cannot be easily contained in officially designated spots" (2001:77, 81). As of now, many of those spots can be found in the *hutong*.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

The hostel owner I interviewed told me an interesting metaphor. "Before, *siheyuan* were like a closed-off box, and China was like a big closed-off box, with the inside full of secrets, unwilling to open up to the outside. But now, both the *siheyuan* and China are facing inevitable changes. They must open up, and what's more, this isn't necessarily a bad thing." I thought this idea was very interesting. According to this concept, the development of *hutong* tourism may be a part of the process of globalization, but it does not necessarily destroy *hutong* culture. But at the same time that we accept the development of tourism, we must pay attention to how tourism is developed and the influence it has.

*Hutong* tourism is a special case among tourism sites in China. It caters to both domestic and foreign tourism, and it has developed piece by piece, not as a closed-off site developed under an economic or political authority. While many studies of commodification in Chinese tourism have diminished the difference between theme parks and themed spaces (Nyiri 2006, Oakes 2006, Ren 2007), this paper has attempted to highlight it. Tomlinson argues that we need to study the commodification of culture as a dialectic between the local and the global (1999). Tourism in China, and *hutong* tourism in particular, have demonstrated that the dialectic is not just between local and global values, but is negotiated between local, national, global, economic, social, and cultural influences. These influences often result in heated debates and postponed

solutions, leaving us with messy, sometimes embarrassing, and always hard to define heterogeneous spaces.



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