



**Clear up the Mist: Contested Ecotourism Discourses in
Protected Areas in China**

A Research Paper presented by:

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(China)

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialization:

**Environment and Sustainable Development
(ESD)**

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The Hague, The Netherlands
November, 2010

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List of Acronyms

BGV: Beijing Global Village
CAS: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CBIK: Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge
CI: Conservation International
CNTA: China National Tourism Administration
CPPCC: Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment
GEF: Global Environmental Facility
GDP: Gross Domestic Product
ICDP: Integrated Conservation and Development Project
IMF: International Monetary Fund
IUCN: International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
MAB: Man and Biosphere Program
MEP: Ministry of Environmental Protection
MOHURD: Ministry of Housing and Urban and Rural Development
NCCCP: National Congress of Chinese Communist Party
NFMP: EU-China Natural Forest Management Project
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
NPC: National People's Congress
PA: Protected Areas
TIES: the International Ecotourism Society
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization...
WWF: World Wildlife Fund

Abstract

This paper discusses ecotourism discourses and realities in China. As ecotourism is always related with protected areas (PAs) in China, this paper will focus on the relationship between ecotourism and PAs. Although Government at various levels dictates the course of development of PAs, NGOs are another active force in PAs. Both Government and NGOs advocate ecotourism in PAs because ecotourism is a highly exemplary form of sustainable development. However, the implementation of ecotourism has displayed an unsatisfactory picture in China in PAs. Widespread environmental destruction is frequent. Through a comparative study of the ecotourism discourses, respectively that of the NGOs active in China and that of the Chinese government, using interview materials, internet news and various reports, this paper finds a highly contested ecotourism discourse in China's Pa, in which NGOs advocate small scale ecotourism along the line of international conservation, whereas the Chinese central government promotes mass ecotourism with the prime purpose of pursuing economic development; in addition, contradictions appear between central government and local government in that central government still recognizes the importance of environmental conservation, which is explicitly left out in local government. The case of Wanglang will illustrate the competition between contested discourses on ecotourism. Ecotourism still faces tough times ahead, because of the highly contested discourse on ecotourism, and, in the absence of compromises between the interests from all concerned parties, a confused and unsatisfactory picture of ecotourism picture will continue to prevail.

Keywords

Sustainable development, ecotourism, government, NGO

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my great gratitude to my supervisor and second reader, Dr Bram Buscher and Professor Max Spoor, for their thoughtful advice, and the support made by them. I am grateful to the faculty and staff at the ISS for enabling this experience and for the hard work they do to create an enriching opportunity for learning through this Master's degree program. Most importantly, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Netherlands Fellowship Program for this rare opportunity for me to study at ISS. I would like to acknowledge and thank my classmates for their wisdom, inspiration, and companionship. Finally, I give special thanks to my family and my parents, for their support and patience.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Ecotourism has become a hot topic around the world and is growing to become an important international tourism industry. It enjoys the fastest growth rate in the world tourism industry, with 25% to 30% annually; the World Tourism Organization predicts that ecotourism and nature tourism account for approximately 20% of the global tourism industry; the world market scale is about 300 million person/times and is on a gradual increase every year (Liu 2008).

Ecotourism was introduced into China since the late 1980s. “Although international tourism to China only began in 1978, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of foreign visitors” (Han et al. 2001:229). It increased from over 1.7 million in 1990 to 63 million in 1998 (Han et al. 2001). Domestic tourists also show growing interest in ecotourism (Xu et al. 2000) Protected areas are very important places for ecotourism and China’s rising number of protected areas provides a good base for ecotourism development. By the end of 2009, China had established 2,541 nature reserves at various levels, covering a total land area of 1.47 million hectares, occupying around 14.7% of the territory of the country (MEP 2010). However, the rapid expansion of protected areas exposed the problem of fund shortages and ecotourism is regarded as a good strategy to finance protected areas (Han and Ren 2001). 80% of nature reserves have started “ecotourism” (Yuan et al. 2008).

The Chinese government attaches great importance to ecotourism development. It organized a series of conferences and forums pertaining to the topic of ecotourism. The year 1999 was designated as the “Year of China’s Eco-tour” by the State Tourism Administration, with the theme of “Touching Nature, Understanding Nature and Protecting Nature” (Han and Ren 2001). In 2001, the State Council issued a *Notice about further speeding up tourism development*, which highlighted the concept of ecotourism for the first time by the government, with the purpose of guiding and promoting a healthy development of ecotourism and disseminating the demonstration effects of ecotourism model areas (Liu 2008). Eight years later, the year 2009 was designated as Chinese Year of Ecotourism again, with the theme of “Walking into Green Tourism and Experience the Ecological Civilization” (Song 2009). CCPCC Document No. 1 in 2010 explicitly puts forward the need to “actively develop recreational agriculture, rural tourism, forest tourism and rural service sector aiming for expanding non-agriculture employment opportunities” (CNTA 2010).

Following the central government’s ecotourism campaign, local governments are embarking on a boom of ecotourism development. Ecotourism development in localities are making headline news: after the launching of 2009 Chinese Year of ecotourism, YueYang takes the lead in starting Chinese Year of Ecotourism on 28 December 2008; Guizhou province starts “2009 Ecotourism Year” by promotion of 47 thematic ecotourism activities; Hubei starts “2009 Ecotourism Year” by holding a series of ecotourism activities to attract arrival of more tourists; in 2009, ecotourism activities with the theme of “Walk into Green Shanxi and Experience the Ecological Civilization”

formally starts, and 20 ecotourism products and 10 ecotourism scenic spots will be launched, etc. Some local governments have made plans to “construct 100 ecotourism programs, and launch 100 ecotourism promotional and marketing activities and attract investment of 10 billion Yuan”; Other authorities issues statistics that a certain “ecotourism golden triangle” has received tourists exceeding 30 million person/times (Song 2007a)

Besides Chinese government, NGOs are a new force in promoting ecotourism. China's ecotourism development cannot separate from the efforts made by NGOs. In China, international NGOs has involved in the efforts for promoting sustainable tourism for some years; though local NGOs emerged relatively late, but with the rich local knowledge and wide community basis, aiming for serving the grassroots interests, they have become active in tourism affairs. NGOs involved in ecotourism are mainly those specializing in environmental protection, community development, poverty alleviation and traditional culture preservation, consultation and research (Wu 2006).

1.1 Problem Statement

Over the last two decades, ecotourism has become fashionable in China as it has been in the world since its introduction into China. Protected Areas (PA) are especially campaigned vigorously to be a niche for inviting ecotourism by the Chinese government. More than that, NGOs have put ecotourism into practice by operating ecotourism projects in PAs. However, the reality of ecotourism in PAs is mostly displaying abnormal features. In most PAs, inviting ecotourism has led instead to catastrophic environmental consequences, and ecotourism has become a culprit for the degradation of the environment, deviating from its original purpose of doing good to environment. According to a report from the Man and Biosphere Program, among nature reserves where ecotourism has started, 44% have littering problems, 12% have problems of water pollution, 11% have noise pollution and 3% have air pollution. Some nature reserves, disregarding rules, start tourism activities in buffer zones, or even in core areas; some areas even build large scale infrastructure which undermines the appeal of the natural landscape (Yan 2007). Besides, media coverage of ecotourism is often misleading by equalizing leisure vacation with ecotourism; tourists' ecological awareness need to be enhanced. Some tourist areas are incapable of conducting environmental education which requires giving a scientific interpretation of the landscape and fauna and flora, on the contrary, they create fake legendary stories which degrades the taste of ecotourism. As far as marketing concerned, mass tourism marketing strategy is adopted for ecotourism, the same goes for the criteria for judging the performance of ecotourism: it still uses the criteria of visitation and earnings. Overall, there is a trend to take ecotourism as a fashionable brand (Song 2007a)

Therefore, before getting the practice of ecotourism back onto the right track, the question of what has led to this abnormality has to be researched.

1.2 Justifications of the research

As ecotourism is a relatively new field, literature about ecotourism is often dedicated to a few developing countries, little literature has focused on China's ecotourism development. While in China, some scholars are still preoccupied with clarifying the concept of ecotourism, even new concepts of "urban ecotourism", "nature ecotourism", "agriculture ecotourism", and "industry ecotourism" are raised; some scholars focus on the problem of ecotourism implementation, accusing green washing of mass tourism; others concentrate on effects of ecotourism, including environmental or social consequences. While they are useful in understanding the present ecotourism development situation and problems, they are not necessarily locating the root reasons for the present problems. An alternative approach is to do research on how ecotourism is perceived and interpreted by different actors, which can explain their motives in promoting ecotourism, so that a possible solution for the current, unsatisfactory situation can be identified.

1.3 Research Objective and Research Question

Research objective

As ecotourism is there to stay in China, through the analysis of different views of both government and NGOs, this paper attempts on the one hand to shed light on the confused state of ecotourism in China and, on the other hand, to identify a possible way out for ecotourism development in China and to contribute to ecotourism research as well. The ideology behind ecotourism- sustainable development –is shared across all advocates. It is this ideology that this study is going to deal with. The purpose of the study is to examine the advocacy of ecotourism as an example of sustainable development in China and come up with a critical analysis of discourse on ecotourism by different actors.

Research question

How has the international discourse on ecotourism been translated into China? And how is ecotourism perceived by different actors, particularly government and NGOs?

Subquestions

1. What is the international discourse on ecotourism? What is the current discourse on ecotourism in China?
2. How have the different discourses translated into reality and why?
3. What is the role of PAs in the development of ecotourism in China?

1.4 Operationalization of the Research

The choice made to limit the research to only two actors- government and NGOs- is based on the following considerations:

First of all, this writer's interest in research on this topic originates from observing the operation of an ecotourism activity by the (EU funded) EU-China Natural Forest Management Project. When the ecotourism agenda was set up in 2004, it was embraced in an all-round manner by all concerned parties. However, this project was suspended due to the May 2008 earthquake (so it is said). But even without this case of force majeure, the project's future was already not very bright. The hidden reason, as reported by some experts, is that the local government was not interested in the project, and even constituted an obstacle for ecotourism operation. Ecotourism is supposedly one of the good strategies for bringing about sustainable development by linking conservation and development, therefore it seems strange that local government was not interested in it: there must be some difference in understanding ecotourism between the project and the local government. This situation inspired the author's interest in investigating both government and NGOs' perceptions of ecotourism.

Secondly, central government in relation to PAs refers to government bodies making up or directly under the State Council responsible for PA and tourism affairs, including Ministry of Environmental Protection, State Forestry Administration, China National Tourism Administration, Ministry of Housing and Urban and Rural Development, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Land and Natural Resources etc.; local government in relation to PA refers to local government at county, regional and provincial level, including their respective functional units; NGOs particularly refer to environmental NGOs as the author was only successful in accessing them.

Thirdly, a limited scope of analysis will make this paper more manageable and operational.

1.5 Methodology

Area of study

This paper will focus on protected areas (PA) in China. But PAs in Southwest China will be given priority since a large portion of these areas has been designated by the Chinese government as PA and this is also the place where NGOs are active who perceive Southwest China as an environmentally fragile area.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews have been conducted to collect views and information from relevant government agencies and NGOs based in Beijing. The technique of semi-structured interview was used because it provided both structure and a degree of flexibility during interview. Only government agencies and NGOs based in Beijing were chosen because, being the capital of China, all central government agencies and many head offices of NGOs are based in Beijing. The actual interviews were conducted from

around 22 July to end of August 2010. Altogether eight interviews have been conducted. However, the interview process was not totally successful as not all targeted interviewees could be reached. Actually, only agencies already directly or indirectly known by the author could be accessed, for example the State Forestry Administration (SFA), WWF China and CI; other ministries contacted by telephone declined, with the excuse of being busy.

Besides interview materials, second hand data have also been collected for analysis, e.g. government and NGO papers, websites and speeches, internet and newspaper news.

Data analysis

First of all, comparative study has been used to analyse the contested ecotourism discourses in China, which is deemed a must; the Western model will be used as a yardstick, and by comparing it to the Chinese context, the inner/hidden truth may somehow surface; secondly, the triangulation technique was also used for the analysis of interview materials, cases and news.

1.6 Constraints

There have been several constraints regarding this research. First of all, the analysis is based on the general situation of ecotourism in China. As China is vast and has diversified geographical features, it has not been possible to gather every detail. Therefore, this study is only sketchy and suggestive. Secondly, apart from the limited time available for field work and the impossibility to access some of the targeted government bodies and NGOs, it must be recognized that, ecotourism being a highly complicated matter, the researcher's inexperience in the ecotourism field must have caused gaps in the interviews, as well as other inadequacies: for example, some questions left unasked for not having come to mind at the time or because of unfamiliarity with the topic.

1.7 Chapter organization

The Research Paper is organized as follows: the first chapter is an introduction to the whole paper, including problem framing, research motive, objectives, research questions and methodology and constraints; Chapter 2 lays out the mainstream trend of the conservation and development paradigms in the world, which is mainly the Western discourse, and then, under this context, the features of ecotourism will be brought out, as well as the debate about ecotourism and its criticism. Chapter 3 is a description of the historical development of protected areas and ecotourism in China, namely, a discussion of the specific Chinese context on how protected areas and ecotourism evolved and how they are linked to each other. Chapter 4 explores different actors' ecotourism discourse, and how different actors define ecotourism in their own interests, how their particular discourses interact with each other, thereby shaping the current reality of ecotourism. The case of Wanglang will be presented as an illustrative case of how different discourses interact with each other. The last chapter is the conclusion of the whole paper.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter serves as the theoretical framework of the paper. The central topic is how ecotourism unites conservation and development and brings about sustainable development. Thus a review of the conservation and development paradigms is necessary. Then discussions around ecotourism, as an exemplary form of sustainable development, are reviewed, including its definition, principles, and criticisms.

2.1 Conservation Paradigm Change from Fortress Conservation to Community Conservation

The perception of the value of nature prompted the idea of conservation. Adams (2003) argued that “the original meaning of nature in Western Europe was a wild place lacking human amenity and civilization: a place beyond settlement, of wild animals and wild people, unused and unusable (Schama, as cited in Adams 2003: 34). “Over this meaning was laid a new sense of wilderness as precious, unsullied, natural wonderland, a place of natural balance and wild order. During the 20th century, wilderness is valuable precisely because it is imagined as being free of human influence, uninhabited. Wilderness is ‘the Wholly Other opposite from man’ (Adams 2003: 34) Any human activity was perceived as a threat to this “wholly other”. Hunters become poachers. Related to this conception of nature, “Concern to secure wilderness” prompted the idea of conservation. “The foundation of the first US national parks” contains such important element (Adams 2003: 34) They perceive the threat to nature “as the US industrialized and urbanized, as the ‘open’ frontier of the West was progressively settled and harnessed to agriculture, as forests were progressively fed into the industrial machine(Adams 2003: 34).

“Western conceptions of wilderness had, by the end of the 20th century, become global in the sense that they were very widely recognized” (Ibid:36) and following the US, the western conservation mould secured its hold in the world in a sweeping manner. Following this conception of wilderness, parks were soon built all over the world. China is no exception. Chapter 3 will discuss the establishment of a PA system in China. However, the establishment of protected areas contributed negative social impacts - the so called “fortress conservation” , characterized by dispossession of the land of indigenous communities by means of eviction and relocation, which deprived them from the opportunity to engage with PAs for any economic activity to earn a basic livelihood. A tension between conservation and development ensued. If conservationists want to maintain the status of conservation, they have to incorporate the development needs of local people into their thinking, “at least they should be prepared to talk in the language of development” (Butcher 2007: 22). “As applied to rural areas, principally in the developing world” (Ibid) World Conservation Strategy marked a change from fortress conservation to community conservation, arguing that, “Development could be reconfigured to promote conservation and that, rather than local people paying a price for

conservation, they could benefit from it" (Adams, as cited in Butcher 2007: 24). Community conservation replaced fortress conservation and became a new dominant paradigm. Then the focus of conservation was shifted to how to engage communities to conservation efforts. In other words, conservation finally led to addressing the development issue. Thus, conservation and development are combined, with conservation also seeking a certain degree of development in order to ease the negative impacts of fortress conservation. The conservation paradigm changed from stressing absolute non-development to achieving moderate development. Thus, a potential conservation tool is called upon for addressing this need.

2.2 Development Paradigm Shift from Modernization to Sustainable Development

"From the 1950s to the 1970s, the modernization theory characterized much development thinking" (Preston, as cited in Butcher 2007:26), which sees development in an economic sense and in a linear manner, applied uniformly across all countries, the final stage being characterized by rich consumer goods. The key to development is large-scale production and industrialization (Butcher 2007: 27) with Rostow as the main representative. Though modernization was seriously criticized later, it remained a dominant development paradigm and was pervasively disseminated to developing countries.

However, "From the 1970s, the modernization paradigm was challenged" (Narman and Simon, as cited in Butcher 2007: 27). The emphasis on economic parameters like GDP per capita, and the perception that different countries should follow a common route, were increasingly questioned (McMichael, as cited in Butcher 2007: 27). Negative environmental effects of solely stressing economic growth from modernization have gained increasing public consciousness. Over time, the alternative paradigm of sustainable development emerged as a reaction to modernization. It emerged as a new paradigm that "all buy into, but on which there remains much disagreement" (Butcher 2007: 27).

The most common definition of sustainable development is the one that appeared in the Brundtland report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (WCED 1987: 43). It was criticized as following the same line of development as only stressing economic development. Sustainable development gradually changed its focus at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, which "marked the most important watershed for sustainable development, placing the view that development should have a greater emphasis on its environmental and socio-cultural effects at the center of the political debate" (UN, as cited in Butcher 2007:55). Therefore, over time, sustainable development acquired two interpretations. "The first interpretation is based on inter-generational equity" (Butcher 2007:55) and it is basically "a trade-off between the needs and aspirations of the present, and those of the future" (Archer and Cooper, as cited in Weaver 1998). "A second formulation is the oft referred to 'triple bottom line' ...by placing environment and culture alongside economy as

priorities for the new sustainable development" (Muller, as cited in Butcher 2007:56). In China, sustainable development was laid down as a national strategy from 1992 (Wen 2008).

Thus, the development paradigm changed from stressing one-sided economic development to taking into consideration environment and local community. It changed from an absolute development to moderate development.

In summary, the sustainable development formulated in "our common future" in the Brundtland report conceptualizes the two ends of conservation and development as "inseparable" or that "can be 'symbiotic', or at least brought into some sort of mutually supporting balance" (Butcher 2007:56). How to operationalize sustainable development by linking conservation and development requires a realistic tool. Considering the global nature of sustainable development, and linking it with a specific sector, sustainable tourism and ecotourism will come to the fore (Pforr 2001:69-70). Ecotourism is sustainable tourism taking place in natural areas (Ibid). The emergence of ecotourism is conceived as appropriate to bridge the two ends. Then what ecotourism is and how it is linked to sustainable development shall be discussed

In the following section, the tourism development course will be reviewed to see how ecotourism comes into shape and its link with sustainable development and sustainable tourism.

2.3 Perception of Tourism Changes along Development Paradigm Change and Emergence of Ecotourism

The tourism development course fits well with the development paradigm change. It witnessed a changing "platform" from being conceived as an "ideal and smokeless" industry in the 1950s and 1960s when the modernization paradigm was dominant to being regarded as a culprit leading to environment degradation and social-culture erosion in particularly vulnerable developing countries in the 1970s when modernization was questioned and sustainable development was hailed as a major paradigm. When mass tourism was infamous for "its large scale, externally controlled, high leakage, and concentrated in high-density tourist strips" (Weaver 2001: 107), a deliberate conceptualization of an alternative tourism was called upon in the 1980s and it would have to be "small-scale, locally controlled, conducive to the formation of linkages with other sectors of the local economy, and dispersed within low-density local neighbourhoods" (Ibid). As an exemplar of sustainable development in the tourism sector, ecotourism emerged as an alternative tourism stressing "natural attractions as opposing cultural attractions" (Ibid). Weaver (Ibid) pointed out that

"Although sustainable nature-based tourism had already been practiced for many decades within national parks and other protected areas, the application of the *ecotourism label* placed this form of tourism in an ideological niche that gained its identity from its conscious opposition to mass tourism".

2.4 Ecotourism Definition, Principles and Critiques

2.4.1 Definition

There is no universal definition of ecotourism, one definition given by the International Ecotourism Society is recognized by this paper as holistic and it is used here for the purpose of indicating the elements of ecotourism.

Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES 1990).

Weaver(2001: 105) interpreted three core elements from the definition of ecotourism: first, "the focus of attraction is natural environments" second, "ecotourism emphasizes learning as an outcome of the interaction between ecotourists and the natural environment"; third, "ecotourism should be sustainable". The second point differentiates ecotourism from nature-based tourism in that, for the latter, tourists are seeking a "hedonistic experience of relaxing" in the classic "3S vacation of sea, sand and sun" or having a certain degree of personal challenge in adventure tourism such as "trekking, climbing or rafting."

2.4.2 Principles

"Those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should observe the following principles" (TIES 1990).

- Minimize impact.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate (TIES 1990).

In summary, "Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities and sustainable travel" (Ibid). It thus also unites conservation with development, and therefore reflects the principle of sustainable development.

It is generally believed by national governments and NGOs alike that ecotourism can bring sustainable development in terms of economy, society and environment. The basic logic is that through ecotourism development, the economy can be developed, which means generate more income and employment opportunities; for underdeveloped countries, it also means increasing foreign currency reserves; socially, the development of ecotourism can contribute to the preservation of traditional local culture and the empowerment of local people; environmentally, the development of ecotourism shall preserve environment by non-consumptive and low impact activities and improve the environment by promoting environmental education.

2.4.3 Critiques

However, ecotourism is not as crystal clear as it appears. There are three points to be made here. One, the boundary between ecotourism and mass tourism is

not clear; two, ecotourism is neither politically, nor technically neutral.

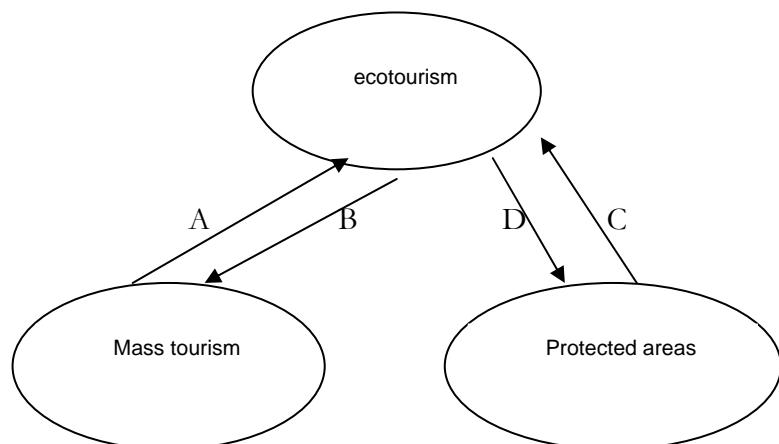
One, the boundary between ecotourism and mass tourism is not as clearly delineated as it shows. As a matter of fact, Weaver (2001) argued that mass tourism provides opportunities for ecotourism development and ecotourism is an upgraded product of mass tourism. Ecotourism itself can be mass scale. Weaver (2001) considered that ecotourism covers a wide spectrum stretching from hard ecotourism to soft ecotourism (See Figure 1). The difference between hard ecotourism and soft ecotourism reveals the differentiated degree of scale, responsibility, and reliance on services and facilities. Hence, scale does not matter. With “ecotourism as mass tourism”, the most obvious boundary between ecotourism and mass tourism melts away; and he goes further to argue that ecotourism and mass tourism can exist complementarily with each other in relation to PAs (See Figure 2).

Figure 1: Characteristics of hard and soft ecotourism as ideal types

Hard (Active)	soft (Passive)
Strong environmental commitment.....	Moderate environmental commitment
Enhancement sustainability.....	Steady-state sustainability
Specialized trips.....	Multi-purpose trips
Long trips.....	Short trips
Small groups.....	Large groups
Physically active.....	Physically passive
Few if any services expected.....	Services expected
Emphasis on personal experience.....	Emphasis on interpretation

Source: Weaver, D. and L.a Lawton, as cited in Weaver (2001: 106)

Figure 2: Mutually beneficial linkages between ecotourism, mass tourism, and protected areas



- **A (mass tourism to ecotourism)**
- Provides a large clientele(soft ecotourists) and revenue flow
- Brings economies of scale amenable to sustainability
- Provide lobbying clout in the face of competing resource users
- **B (ecotourism to mass tourism)**
- Contribute to diversification of a masstourism product
- Attractive to an increasingly “green” mass-tourism market
- Further exposure to sustainability principles and practices
- **C (protected areas to ecotourism)**
- Provides an attractive, high-quality venue for ecotourism activities
- Insulates ecotourism from incompatible activities
- **D(ecotourism to protected areas)**
- Revenue flow provided funds for enhancement and expansion
- Broad exposure increases public support.

Source: Weaver (2001: 109)

Two, contrary to the claim by international organizations that ecotourism is politically neutral and technical, Duffy (2006:1) considers ecotourism to be “a highly politicized development strategy in developing countries”. He gives a holistic review of the politics of ecotourism from the following perspectives: the definition itself; the link between ecotourism and its theoretical basis; the link between ecotourism and the politics of ecotourism at multiple levels ranging from community level, national level to global level.

First of all, the definition itself is contested: Who defines ecotourism, what is ecotourism and who are the ecotourists are political issues (Duffy 2006:2). “Defining ecotourism reveals its politics: can it be provided by global tour operators, luxury nature based resorts or is genuine ecotourism found in small scale local community run projects and campsites” (Ibid)? Ecotourism itself is an economic activity, thus the development of ecotourism is also driven by the market. The characteristics of ecotourists to a large extent determine the course of ecotourism development. Wheeller(as cited in Song 2007b) argues that the so called ecotourists will neglect the impact of their activities on environment for the sake of convenience. Ecotourism is highly centered on consumer needs, usually for pleasing the newly rising middle class, an alternative life style. Leslie(as cited in Song 2007b) thinks that it is the standard, belief and attitude of the western industrial society that drives the development of ecotourism, not the interest of the destination community. Therefore, the principle and ethics of ecological responsibility in ecotourism is hard to translate into reality.

Pforr (2001:69) considers that “definitions are always a matter of perspective, interests, and values”. In the chapter 4 analysis of different actors’ discourses on ecotourism, the different elements in the definition of ecotourism will be analyzed. He defined the different purpose between governments and environmentalists or conservationists. Governments’ support for the concept is based on “its potential as a job and income generator, particularly for local communities and therefore as an effective means of regional development....and adopts a narrow product-centred perspective only,

without accepting ecotourism as a paradigm for sustainable tourism development in natural areas" (Ibid). Environmentalists or conservationists adopt ecotourism as a means "to promote conservation and a sustainable management regime" in the hope of generating "a more green tourism industry and an increase in the ecological and socio-cultural awareness and behaviour of tourists" (Ibid).

Secondly, the contested nature of ecotourism can also be attributed to the theoretical basis it is linked with, namely, sustainable development. It can neatly fit with both the modernization path promoted by the World Bank, bilateral donors and private business and with critics of the development theory such as the dependency theory, the world system theory and the post-structuralist theory (Duffy 2006). In terms of sustainability, instead of challenging the current economic, social and political structure, it operates on the existing neoliberalism and stresses the role of the market. The core elements of neoliberalism are prescribed to be "privatization, deregulation, and liberalization, all encapsulated within political beliefs about democracy, entrepreneurship, and individual freedom" (Peet, as cited in West 2004:484). Ecotourism extends the "fictitious commodities" beyond land and labour to include the environment into the market system (Polanyi, as cited in West 2004: 484). Nature (landscapes, wildlife and even local cultures) has increasingly been neoliberalized (Duffy 2008). However, the critics of the market believe in small scale community-based ecotourism.

Ecotourism is often promoted as means for poorer communities in the south to generate income which they would not otherwise have; and for many communities that live adjacent to national parks or reserves, ecotourism is presented as the beneficial return for relinquishing rights over using the plant and animal resources within those reserves for subsistence purposes. Ecotourism then, is the catch all solution to the complex problems of reconciling the needs of poor local communities with the creation and maintenance of protected areas (Duffy 2006: 2).

Thirdly, ecotourism is political at multiple levels. This point can be further divided into three points. One, at community level, the assumption of a homogenous community is unjustified and the actual nature of community is stratified by "age, gender and income" (Duffy 2006:3). PAs represent a diversity of interests: tour operators regard it as capital to attract tourists; government-run parks are concerned with gate fees; environmental NGOs may take PAs and ecotourism as a means for fund raising; local communities depend on PAs for their livelihood. PAs thus draw together a multitude of social, economic and political processes that are often "hierarchically organized" (Ibid). This point will be used in chapter 4 when analyzing different discourses on ecotourism in PA. Two, at the national level, the allocation of land and infrastructure development for facilitating ecotourism development (for example, airport, roads) and allocation of funds are political(Ibid). "The promotion of a particular national image to market the country as a destination in the global tourism market place" jointly done by tour operators and the national government is a political decision too (Ibid). Three, internationally, ecotourism relies on mass transportation, thus, though ecotourism can locally contribute to environmental sustainability, it is not necessarily environmentally

sustainable at the global scale, since the CO₂ emissions can contribute to global warming. Ecotourism is also promoted by international organizations like UN, IMF, bi-lateral donor agency and international environmental NGOs, therefore, representing a north-south relationship (Duffy 2008).

In summary, ecotourism is highly complicated as it accommodates diverse interests and “speaks to numerous agendas: capitalist development, community development, poverty alleviation, wildlife conservation and environmental protection” (Duffy 2008), which leads to the result that the interpretation of ecotourism is too expansive to be meaningful. In order to pinpoint what discourse on ecotourism is perceived by each actor, and what agenda each actor speaks to, it is necessary to clarify who defines and what is ecotourism.

However, before moving to analyse the discourse on ecotourism by different actors, we have to learn facts about the PA system in China and how ecotourism has come to be linked with PAs. The next Chapter will embark on a discussion of these issues.

Chapter 3 Development of PA and Ecotourism in China

The Chinese government clearly stated that PAs are important venues for the development of ecotourism, and the evolution of ecotourism in China cannot be separated from the PA. Therefore, in order to understand ecotourism, facts about PA in China have to be learned. Thus, this chapter will start by showing how the PA system was established in China, what are the pros and cons of the PA system and how PA classifications in China diverge from IUCN standards. The second part will look at how ecotourism evolves in the setting of general tourism development and how it is linked with PAs.

3.1 The Establishment of a Modern PA System in China

The idea of nature conservation can be traced back to ancient China: from the Shang to the Qing, each dynasty prescribed laws and regulations regarding nature conservation (Elvin 1998). However, the modern PA system was not established until after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Reviewing the Chinese imperial history, Elvin (1998:755) concluded that the ancient Chinese philosophy of man and nature being one did not contribute to conservation in China. "This wisdom was powerless throughout the late pre-imperial and the imperial ages to stop the despoliation of the natural world" (Elvin 1998: 755). The imperial history left modern China with a legacy of degraded environment.

3.1.1 Process

China's rapid economic development during the past twenty years, largely adopting a conventional development strategy of "pollution before it gets clean-up" has resulted in widespread environmental problems. This has caused serious and often irreversible environmental consequences, like the degradation of natural habitats and rapid loss of biodiversity (Jim and Xu 2004: 39); one possible way to reverse the trend is to build a comprehensive network of protected areas across the country (*Ibid*).

"The first national nature reserve was not founded until 1956 (Harkness 1998: 912), when scientists made an appeal at the Third National People's Congress: "It is hoped that the government will designate specific areas in all provinces (regions) where the felling of trees is prohibited in the interest of conservation of natural plant life and scientific research"(Harkness 1998: 914). That year, the first nature reserve – Dinghu Mountain Nature reserve was established in Zhaoqing city, Guangdong province, with, as its purpose, the conservation of the South Asia tropical monsoon forest (Chong Qing Geography Teaching and Research Division 2006). In October of the same year, the Ministry of Forestry issued the Draft Plan for the Designation of Areas for National Forestry Reserves, and the Draft Plan for Hunting Management (*Ibid*). And "over the next nine years, a total of 19 reserves were set up, covering 650,000 hectares. Virtually no further expansion of protected areas occurred during the Cultural Revolution decade (1966-1976), and the

conservation of biodiversity did not regain prominence until the 1980s” (Harkness 1998: 914).

Systematic efforts to catalogue and preserve biodiversity only began in the 1980s (Ibid). As a matter of fact, “since the late 1970s, environmental conservation in China has been characterized by two diametrically opposed trends (Harkness 1998: 914). Rapid economic growth has greatly exacerbated human pressures on natural systems and meanwhile, concern for forest protection and biodiversity conservation activities has been growing among the general public and government bodies. “Opposing, and in fact preceding this trend has been a re-emergence of environmental concern in China. This began in the early 1970s when the then premier Zhou En Lai concerned himself about the die-off of fish in Beijing’s Guanting reservoir in 1971, although little was done in the area of biodiversity conservation until a decade later” (Ibid).

Conservation efforts across the globe also exerted an influence on China’s conservation expansion. In particular, “A Chinese delegation attended the 1972 United Nations Human Environment Conference in Stockholm, and China’s first National Environmental Protection Conference was held in 1973. “By 1979, an Environmental Protection Law and Forest Law were ratified, setting the stage for an explosive growth in the number of protected areas” (Harkness 1998: 915).

3.1.2 Advantages and Drawbacks

The establishment of a PA system is both positive and negative: for the positive part, it is to rescue species that are nearly extinct.¹ “The bottom-up approach rescued many threatened ecosystems and endangered species from immediate loss” (Pimm 2003: 1240). But it has been opportunistic.

The establishment of nature reserves was also accompanied by various problems. Three problems can be summarized as follows: inability to fund itself, pressure of resources exploitation from local government and from local communities as a result of replacing local institutions (Harkness 1998; Han 2001).

First, most reserves are located in poorer areas, according to an official from the Protection Division of the Ministry of Forestry in 1997 (Harkness 1998:918). The fact that 30 million poor people were living in and around China’s nature reserves is very remarkable compared with the then poverty population figure of 58 million. However, it is just the same isolation that has slowed the destruction of natural ecosystems by serving as a barrier to economic development (Ibid). With fiscal decentralization, management responsibilities of PAs shifted from central government to the administration of local government, therefore, whether there is enough funding to invest in the PAs became crucial.² Under such circumstances, it was unlikely for local governments to divert scarce funds to support conservation. As a result, “many nature reserves have no physical structures or signs delineating their borders, and one- third are “paper parks” that have been formally gazetted but

¹ Interview with the SFA official responsible for management of nature reserves, on 24th July 2010 in Beijing

² See ¹

have neither staff nor budgets” (Harkness 1998: 918); Unlike in the US where planning goes first before the establishment of PA. Thus, in China’s case, a physical boundary is designated first, and later the state will invest human resources and provide funding. Local government is responsible for the salary and operating cost of nature reserve, however, local government can only provide 70% of the needed fees, they have to raise fund for filling up the gap. Tourism is often carried out for filling up the gap.³

“Funding is still a big problem for the reserves. Investment from governments at different levels is about 200 million yuan per year. This is merely USD52.70 per square kilometre, as opposed to USD2,058 and USD157 in developed and other developing countries, respectively” (Yuan 2008: 1) therefore “It has become a popular view that nature reserves in China should initiate their own economic activities based on rational and sustainable use of natural resources in order to raise funds for supporting conservation and to cover management and development expenses” (Shen, as cited in Han 2009:233). For example, fishing, logging or tourism development rights are contracted out to third parties. Thus “the most perverse outcome of this fiscal crisis is that it spurs not just neglect, but active destruction of the resources that are supposed to be under protection.” (Harkness 1998: 918-919).

Secondly, (Jim and Xu 2004: 39) pointed out many problems in the designation process since deregulation and decentralization started from 1979, including: “omission of key biota and ecosystems, bypassing the scientific assessment stage, too much emphasis on non-conservation gains, ignoring the needs of local communities, escalating people-park conflicts, intensifying paper-park syndrome, and the conflicting role of experts.” According to the SFA official responsible for nature reserves, the designation of nature reserves without consulting and informing local communities caused local people to view the establishment of a reserve as a sudden expropriation of their land and resource rights, whereby forests that used to be at their own disposal could not be cut any more. Though both central government and local government provide ecological compensation for them, that can finally add up to 30-40 RMB/mu⁴ in total, the compensation is not up to their expectations. They demand more compensation: equivalent of 100 RMB/mu⁵. Since forest farmers cannot be satisfied from the compensation, they even demand withdrawal of the PA. Thus Harkness (1998:921) concluded that “setting up nature reserves facilitated resource degradation as relatively effective community management institutions (*xiangguiminyue*) are replaced by extremely weak state ownership, creating a *de facto* open access area and inviting over-use.”

Thirdly, the challenges facing the authority of the reserve managers are also coming from competition for rights to exploit resources within reserves from local governments and line agencies (Harkness 1998:922). “the establishment of a nature reserve often simply drops what is a fairly

³ See ¹

⁴ 1 hectare= 15 mu

⁵ Interview with the SFA official responsible for management of nature reserves, on 24th July 2010 in Beijing

circumscribed authority over protected species onto an already-complex pattern of political, economic and proprietary jurisdictions” “The problem of lack of authority and interference from other agencies was of primary concern to reserve managers”(Ibid). Take zhang as an example: it is a national nature reserve under SFA, a national park under MOHURD, and a 4A scenic spot under CNTA.⁶ Thus, each government agency has a right on it and if there is an interest at stake, those departments could possibly compete with each other for economic gains by using their separate departmental policies which will often be seen conflicting with each other. And once problems occur, it is very likely for them to evade their responsibilities and put the blame onto other agencies.

In summary, in China, the nature reserve system contributes to conservation to a limited degree and at the same time, it has created more problems.

3.1.3 PA Classification in China

China’s PA classification draws from the experience of IUCN “using buffer zones and sustainably managed harvesting to reduce negative impacts of nature reserves on local communities, but it does not completely correspond with it (Shapiro 2006:778).

First, nature reserves are the main type of China’s PAs and they are divided into three separate management zones according to law: “a core area, where no human use is permitted; a buffer zone, where some collection, measurements, management, and scientific research are permitted; and an experimental zone, where activities of scientific experimentation, public education, surveying, tourism, and raising rare and endangered species are permitted” (Xu et al., as cited in Yang 2010).

Besides nature reserves, PAs in China also include areas designated as scenic interest areas (often referred to as national parks) and forest parks. In terms of administration, PAs are divided into county, provincial, and national levels according to their degree of disturbance and ecological value; i.e., a site with a high disturbance and no flagship species would be designated at county level, whereas a relatively undisturbed site of national importance would be designated at the national level (Xu and Melick 2007).

Secondly, China’s PA system does not totally correspond to IUCN’s categories. China’s PA system is categorized by the targets protected, not by management type, therefore its categorization is very different from that of most other countries. Comparing Table 2 to Table 1, most PAs in China according to the Rules of Nature Reserves belong to category 1a of the IUCN standard. But such PAs are allowed to engage in productive activities in experimental zones, therefore their management should fall under category II. The same applies for national parks. Their management is based on the tourist spots, and no wildlife (for example local birds) can be watched there. Therefore, it shall fall under category V. While forest parks, since their precursor is forest farms and many of them are only plantations with a single

⁶ Interview with the SFA official responsible for management of nature reserves, on 24th July 2010 in Beijing

species, and although they are under protection, they cannot function as places of biodiversity or species conservation.

Table 1: IUCN's categories of PA system

1994	
Category	Definition
Ia	Strict Nature Reserve: Protected area managed mainly for science.
Ib	Wilderness Area: Protected area managed mainly for wilderness protection.
II	National Park: Protected area managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation.
III	National Monument: Protected area managed mainly for conservation of specific natural features
IV	Habitat/Species Management Area: Protected area managed mainly for conservation through management intervention
V	Protected Landscape/Seascape: Protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation.
VI	Managed Resource Protected Area: Protected area managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural resources.

Source: (IUCN 2004)

Table 2: The major types of PAs in China

Name of PA	Definition
Nature reserve	Such areas, on land, inland water bodies, or marine districts, which represent various types of natural ecological systems, or with a natural concentrated distribution of rare and endangered wild animal or plant species, or where natural traces or other protected objects being of special significance are situated, and so delimited out for special protection and administration according to relevant laws.
Forest reserve	Terrestrial nature reserve covered by forest
Wetland parks	Area for the purpose of conservation, education and tourism with typical and representative wetland features.
Forest parks	Forest areas with certain degree scale and good quality forest scenic resources, and environmental conditions that can conduct forest tourism and recreation activities, and are approved by the legal procedures.
National park	National-level scenic and historic interest area
Provincial scenic spots and historic interest sites	Areas with aesthetic, cultural and scientific value and concentrated natural and cultural landscape that can conduct tourism, scientific and cultural activities at provincial level.

Source: (Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Nature Reserves, 1994; State Forestry Administration, 2006) as cited in (Yang 2010)

Ecotourism has a natural link with PA in the sense that PA provide a good basis for tourism. How ecotourism emerges in relation to PA will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 History of tourism development after the founding of the PRC and emergence of ecotourism

3.2.1. Tourism Development

Tourism was not regarded as an economic activity until the reform and opening up policy was adopted (Bao and Ma 2010). When the People's Republic of China was founded, only occasional tours were "provided by the state as a political and diplomatic tool used to show hospitality to privileged foreign visitors who were friendly to China and to overseas Chinese dignitaries

who had political and economic influence in China and abroad”(Bao and Ma 2010: 3). The reason why tourism was not valued was that as a tertiary industry, tourism was incapable of delivering support to socialistic construction (Ibid). After the policy of reform and opening up was adopted in 1978, which aimed at creating a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, tourism as an economic activity developed rapidly and it was embraced by all local government as well for income generation (Ibid). Even Deng Xiaoping attached great importance to tourism development (Ibid). Tourism’s position has become increasingly higher with the further economic development and reform. Behind tourism is the change of life style and consumption structure, and rising citizen awareness as well.

Overall, it can be attributed to three factors that China’s domestic tourism develops rapidly: “growth of income per capital”, “increase of leisure” and “structural adjustment of the national economy” (Xu et al. 2000: 296). First, according to statistics, people will have a motive for travelling after GDP per capita has arrived at USD1000⁷. The steady growth of the Chinese economy enables the income of urban dwellers to increase, which facilitates the growth of domestic mass tourism in the country. Second, “the Chinese government is promoting a leisure culture, which was formalised as government doctrine when CNTA declared 1996 the ‘Year of Leisure and Vacation’, and in 1997 and 1998 the Central Government of the Chinese Communist Party made tourism development a priority for the first time” (Wang, as cited in Lu 2009: 360). Correspondingly, Chinese people have more free time owing to “the five-day week system and the new national holiday system, introduced in 1995 and in 1999 respectively. The two-day weekend, the seven-day holiday of the Spring Festival, National Day and some other short duration holidays occupies more than one-third of the whole year”(Ibid). Finally, out of the need to adjust an unbalanced economic structure, it is hoped that tourism can promote domestic demand to absorb the over production of manufactured goods (Ibid). All above-mentioned conditions prepared for the boom of domestic tourism.

3.2.2 Conditions of Ecotourism Evolvement

With the further development of tourism, new type of tourism such as ecotourism appears. The evolvement of ecotourism is based on the following four conditions: first, tourism in PAs. The close relationship between tourism and environment has been noted in the tourism field in the early 1970s in China, however, “the development of Zhangjiajie National Forest Park (1982) and other nature reserves established, for the first time in China, the importance of integrating tourism development and the protection of the natural environment”(Lu 2009:361). Besides, “changing domestic tourism policies opened previously restricted rural areas to tourism, thereby facilitating greater access to natural areas (Cheng and Wang, as cited in Lu 2009:361).

⁷ The title of this speech is “Development Ecotourism and Promotion of the Conservation of National Parks”. This speech was given by Vice Minister of MOHURD Mr Qiu Baoxing on August 29, 2006 at the first ecotourism conference attended by three government organs and published on September 22, 2006 in www.mohurd.gov.cn, accessed on 27th October 2010

Second, laws and regulations were issued for correcting the inappropriate development actions. For example, environmental impact assessment law was in effect and the investigation of cases of law violation. Third, a general environmental awareness increases among the general public⁸. And “growing domestic and international demand for diversified tourism products beyond the existing scenic experiences in landscape and the natural environment” (Zhang et al., as cited in Lu 2009:361). Finally it is the international recognition of ecotourism resources within the Chinese borders as “one of the world’s most highly valuable ecotourism resources” that has attracted increased attention from international tourists and ecotourism companies.” (Lu 2009:361).

The following are some details about tourism in PAs.

(1) Tourism in nature reserves

Tourism in nature reserves is only allowed in experimental zones. 28 nature reserves have been listed by UNESCO as Man and Biosphere Program, more than 20 nature reserves have made up the component of world nature heritage. The official responsible for nature reserve said presently, 60%-70% of nature reserves have carried out productive activities, because of geographic advantages and high quality scenic views, for example, Jiuzhaigou, Hubei ShenNongJia, YunNan XiShuangBanNa, Changbaishan and WuYishan have carried out ecotourism. All these nature reserves enjoy multiple titles as nature reserve, national park and world heritage, for example, Jiuzhaigou is a nature reserve for preservation of Panda. Only 3 national nature reserves are under the direct administration of SFA, other nature reserves are under the local administration at different levels from provincial, regional to county government⁹.

(2) Tourism in national parks

As early as in the 1920s, the Chinese government authorized local governments to enforce a strict management of some areas of scenic interests like Lushan Mountain, Huangshan Mountain, which represent the early form of national parks (Song 2007b: 161). As tourism was only in its early development phase, sightseeing was the main form of the tourist market, mostly taking place in national parks (Xu et al. 2000: 297).

(3) Tourism in forest parks

In the 1980s, forestry tourism appeared quietly and developed quickly. The intention of establishing forest parks is to develop tourism on the basis of protecting and enhancing forest resources. By early 1999, China had established nearly 900 forest parks (Song 2007b). The SFA official responsible for forest tourism gave the reasons for starting tourism in forest parks.¹⁰ For forest parks, their predecessor is state-owned forest farms, featuring a single species. The major purpose for establishing forest farms was to provide wood for support of socialist development during 1950s to 1960s. In 1980s, forest

⁸ See⁷

⁹ Interview with the SFA official responsible for nature reserves on 28th July 2010 in Beijing

¹⁰ Interview with the SFA official responsible for forest parks on 28th July 2010 in Beijing

tourism started due to two reasons. The first, in the 1980s, few harvestable resources left and forestry need change its production mode. The Second, tourism just started after reform and opening up and forests have the best resources and its development intensity is a bit stronger than nature reserve. China has 730 national level forest parks and has tourist products like forest trekking, forest health tourism and outdoor health tourism. The third, from the more important perspective of ecological construction or ecological preservation, after the establishment of forest parks, forests are forbidden to cut and through operation of forest tourism, the maintenance costs of forest parks can be compensated and shortage of capital input can be solved as well. Without cutting trees can also become rich, ecotourism is a good combination of the two poles of resources preservation and economic development.

3.2.3 Facts of Ecotourism in China

Two events- the Horticulture Exposition held in Kunming and the Chinese Year of Ecotour in 1999- greatly pushed the practice of ecotourism. In 1999, Sichuan province promoted some scenic spots like Jiuzhaigou, Huanglong, Emei Mountain, the Big Buddha in Leshan and developed ecotourism products. Following that, Zhangjiajie National Forest Park in Hunan Province held an International Forest Protection Festival and promoted the ecotourism spot of Wulingyuan. Starting from Hunan and Sichuan, ecotourism has developed gradually all over the country (Ma 2002)

Areas of relatively early and mature development of ecotourism sites include Shangri-la, Zhongdian, Xishuangbanna, Changbai mountain, the Lancang River, Dinghushan, Zhaoqing (in Guangdong Province), Hanasi in Xinjiang. Famous ecotourism scenic spots can be divided according to the following 9 types: first, Mountainous ecological scenic areas, their representatives being the five mountains, renowned Buddhist mountains and renowned Taoist mountains; second, lake ecological scenic areas, represented by Tianchi in Changbai Mountain, Xinghu in Zhaoqing, Qinghai Lake etc; third, forest ecological scenic areas, with Changbai Mountain in Jilin, Shennongjia in Hubei, Xishuangbanna tropical rain forest in Yunnan; fourth, grassland ecological scenic areas, with Hulunbeier grassland in Inner Mongolia; fifth, sea ecological scenic areas, and Mangrove forest with Beihai (Guangxi) and Wenchang (Hainan) as examples; sixth, bird watching ecological scenic areas, and migrant birds, with Poyang Lake in Jiangxi and bird islands in Qinghai Lake; seventh, ice and snow ecological scenic areas, Yulong snow mountain in Yunnan and Changbai Mountain in Jilin being typical examples; eighth, river rafting, with the example of Shennongjia in Hubei; ninth, trekking and adventure ecological scenic areas, their representatives being the Everest (Qomolangma) in Tibet, Lop Nor desert, the great valley of the Yalu Tsangpo River (Ibid)

Xu (as cited in Lu 2009:361) argues that “ecotourism has become and remains an established priority on tourism and sustainable development agendas in China.” However, “the relative youth of ecotourism research and policy in China complicates the process as Chinese policy-makers are forced to look abroad for guidance” (Lu 2009:361); and further complicating matters is the fact that Chinese values are ‘diametrically different from those associated with the Western paradigm of ecotourism’ (Lu 2009: 361). Thus, there is a

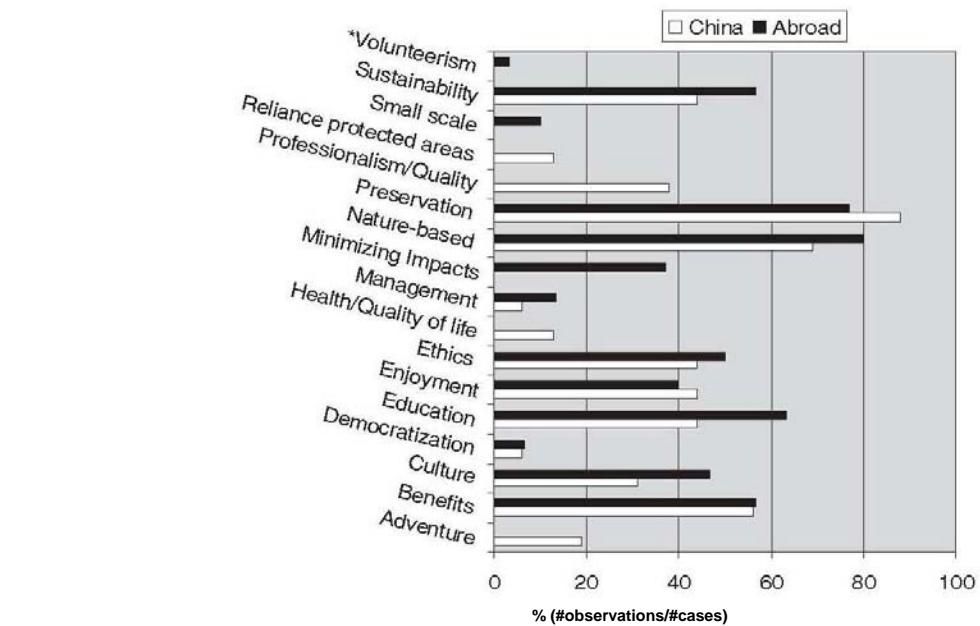
need to localize ecotourism to make ecotourism fit Chinese circumstances. How has this localization taken place? That is to say, how has ecotourism been translated into China, and how do different actors interpret ecotourism? Is it true that “ecotourism is rooted in and is greatly influenced by Western ideology and values” (Fennel and Cater, as cited in Lu 2009)? This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Different Actors' Discourse on Ecotourism in China's PAs

As discussed in Chapter 2, ecotourism speaks to different agendas, then what agenda is ecotourism speaking to in China? Is it a single agenda or multiple agendas? This chapter will analyze the contested discourses of NGOs and government in China's PA and how they interact with each other. Discourse here means each actor's conceptualization of ecotourism model, it involves what is ecotourism, who are ecotourists, and which principles are followed. Interaction means: how well one model advocated by one actor is received and recognized by another; and on that basis, how the different discourses meet one another during implementation of ecotourism projects in reality. The case of Wanglang will be presented as an illustrative case on how the NGOs' advocacy of ecotourism competes with the local governments' economic development imperative.

The analysis starts from the definition of ecotourism, different elements stressed by the West and China in their definition. See the following chart presented by (Lu 2009:366)

Figure 3. Comparative analysis of ecotourism definitions from China and abroad



Source: Lu (2009: 360)

(Lu 2009:367) concluded after analyzing various definitions from China and abroad that "ecotourism in China is defined in much the same way as it is in other nations and contexts", consequently, "the general trend is "a consensus towards ecotourism or a universal understanding".

We can see from the chart that Western standards stressed are "volunteerism, small scale and minimizing impact," while the Chinese

standards stress “reliance protected areas, professionalism/Quality, health/quality of life and adventure”.

4.1 NGOs Discourse on Ecotourism

This paper argues that no matter whether international or local, E-NGOs adopt the Western standard of hard ecotourism and the most salient feature of it is small scale. Small scale means that it targets a market niche: hard ecotourists who have particular preferences different from regular tourists, because this segment of the tourist market accounts for only a small proportion among tourists, therefore, it is called small scale, although the real number of hard ecotourists is absolutely big across the world and is growing each year. Besides, based on tourists’ preference, ecotourism products provided have to be personalized, service oriented and knowledge based, therefore, it is required that working staff have to be of the high quality “expert” type, which also implies scarcity and justifies “small scale”.

However, small scale management model doesn’t mean low economic returns; on the contrary, based on the marketing strategy of niche products, high price and high service quality guarantee high returns for investors, while it can also satisfy to the maximum the needs of the tourists (Li and Lian, as cited in Cheng 2008: 226) A WWF ecotourism official acknowledged this point by giving the example that the economic return of 500 dollars per person spent by 50 persons is equal to 50 dollars per person spent by 500 persons, but the impacts on environment are different.¹¹

Small scale also means advocacy of the local community’s role in ecotourism development in opposition to the state. The local community shall participate in ecotourism development and benefit from it. Therefore, small scale requires that developers encourage local communities to participate in the formulation of tourism planning and management. However, the NGOs’ work focus is different - ecotourism is part of ICDP project implemented by WWF for conservation¹²; CI aims for capacity building of the local community by establishing a community school¹³; Beijing Global Village¹⁴ is doing ecotourism for community development.

As discussed in Chapter 2, “small” is gaining ideological recognition in opposition to “mass” or “big” (Weaver 2001): while the latter is inherently bad, the former is by nature good. Because small means minimizing impacts on environment, aligning itself with neoliberalism’s agenda against state, “small” means highlighting the community’s role and local knowledge.

The reason for NGOs to embrace such ecotourism is not hard to understand: international environmental NGOs active in China, for example,

¹¹ Interview with WWF China Ecotourism Official on 7th August 2010 in Beijing

¹² See ¹¹

¹³ Interview with CI Ecotourism Official on 10th August 2010 in Beijing

¹⁴ Interview with Community Development official of BGV on 11th August 2010 in Beijing. Beijing Global Village, a domestic environmental NGO, have engaged in ecotourism first in Beijing and now is operating ecotourism in Daping village, Pengzhou, Sichuan province after the earthquake in Sichuan, this ecotourism project is part of disaster relief work.

WWF China, CI, have to align themselves with the international discourse on ecotourism in order to retain their international E-NGO identity, therefore the shift of conservation paradigm from fortress conservation to community conservation dictates their course of action. Domestic NGOs align themselves with this paradigm too since “southern (Indigenous) NGOs have often been generated by, and depend upon, northern ones” (Princen and Finger, as cited in Butcher 2007: 13).

One common feature that can be summarized from their practices is that their first concern is environmental integrity, and it is out of conservation concerns that communities shall be co-opted into conservation by ecotourism. Therefore environment takes precedence over economic development.

The following section will discuss the central government’s discourse on ecotourism.

4.2 The Central Government’s Discourse on Ecotourism

As described in the previous chapter, ecotourism in China is promoted by the Chinese government and academics together, and it is not a self evolvement process. Perceiving ecotourism as a new tourism product, government’s purpose in the promotion of ecotourism is first of all to promote economic development, though environmental protection is also stressed. The Deputy Director of the China Tourism and Culture Resources Development Promotion Association, Mr Wei Xiao’an puts the Chinese situation in relation to ecotourism thus: “the precondition of ecotourism is protecting and respecting nature, but it has to be transformed to become a productive force, to become a motivation for local economic development and the improvement of the local people’s livelihood. Without this transformation, many things cannot be done, environment is one of the rarest resources, but we haven’t reached the stage when the resources can be left untouched. Developed countries can do this, for example, government provides funds to farmers for leaving land free aiming at protecting nature, China cannot follow the same route. Many places are supposed to be absolutely restricted from development. However, without development, farmers cannot survive and government cannot feed them either” (China Youth Newspaper 2007). His perception of the Chinese reality is that scarce resources and the struggle for their livelihood by local people do not allow for environment alone to be reflected in the government’s view, which sets the tone for development of resources and points at the prime purpose of the economic value of ecotourism resources.

Unlike Lu (2009) who asserts in his paper that Chinese values have been submerged by western values, this paper argues that western ecotourism has been co-opted into the Chinese discourse of ecotourism which is in effect a continuation of conventional tourism; the parameters presented by (Lu 2009) will be used to verify this argument. Before we come to the analysis, characteristics of conventional tourism have to be examined.

Conventional tourism is characterized by mass scale package tours to well-known historical scenic interests featuring a mix of nature and culture, Tourists’ motives are leisure and holiday making. The interpretation of scenic

beauties is often seen in a legendary manner without particularly stressing the environmental element.

The analysis will start from the differences in the graph, why several Western standards are missing in the Chinese standards and why Chinese standards have their own particular features. Then this paper goes further to explore the duplicating (i.e. overlapping, present in both standards) parameters: do these duplicating parameters have the same substance?

(1) Why differences?

Two differences will be analysed from the graph, namely, *scale and minimizing impacts*.

One obvious difference is the *scale*, while the Western definition emphasizes small scale, it is dismissed by the Chinese standard. That is to say, ecotourism here can be large scale or small scale. The interview with the CAS scholar showed that scale is not the prime criterion to decide whether a tourism activity is ecotourism or not.¹⁵ In reality, large scale is preferred to small scale. Then why is large scale preferred?

A survey done in the Bita Lake natural reserve, Yunnan discovered that “the majority of tourists showed no special responsibilities for the environment and behaved just like other mass tourists” (Xiao, as cited in Ye 2008:580) A survey done by Zhang (as cited in Ye 2008:580) showed that “soft ecotourists accounted for 90.4%” and “the motive of 62.5% tourists was to go sightseeing and their average prospective expenditure was only about 500 yuan RMB”, Zhang(ibid) also pointed out that “most ecotourism products developed for the Chinese must be of low price”

“mass has three meanings, the number of tourists involved is much larger; the types of tourism products they choose are varied-including either mass tourism products or ecotourism products; Chinese ecotourists are similar to mass tourists in motive and expenditure” (Ye and Xue 2008: 581).

Ecotourism is also market driven, and ecotourism developed in China has to correspond to the characteristics of the market. This tourism market demands a large supply of tourist products. Government argues for *mass* scale just for catering to this mass market, and still regards ecotourism as an important developmental tool. The government’s justification of the *mass* goes like this: First of all, “The present major contradiction in China’s development is still the increasing material and cultural needs of the people with a backward production force.”¹⁶ Other purposes for the development of ecotourism such as “promoting West Great Development in China” and “provision of ecological compensation for local people residing in ecologically fragile areas” also relates to the economic dimension of ecotourism. Only *mass* can produce economies of scale, and can promote economic development rapidly. Secondly, for defending *mass* ecotourism, vice minister of MOHURD Qiu Baoxing

¹⁵ Interview with a scholar from Institute of Geographical Institute of Chinese Academy of Sciences(CAS) on 24th July 2010 in Beijing. He was recommended by MEP as representing Chinese government’s view on ecotourism.

¹⁶ See Vice Administrator of CNTA Mr Shao Weiqi’s speech on ecotourism , made on 29th August 2006, www.cnta.org.cn accessed on 27 Oct. 2010

denounced small scale ecotourism in his speech¹⁷, “Some radical ecologists don’t support the public to engage with nature, and consider conservation of nature as the actions of a small number of specialists, which cannot be. Nature belongs to the whole mankind and protecting nature cannot be separated from the conscious actions of the general public.” Similarly, in the National Ecotourism Development Guideline¹⁸, it is proposed that ecotourism development shall aim for the grand market and supply on a mass scale. It argues that ecotourism shall not be limited to tourism experiences of a small number of tourists in limited areas. Contacting and enjoying ecology is the basic right of mankind, and it is only when ecotourism targets, serves and educates the general public that environmental security awareness and ecological conservation awareness can be carried out in practice and produce practical results. Development is still the first task.

The second difference from the chart is that *minimizing impacts* is absent in the Chinese standards, this is also in line with conventional tourism, usually mass tourism. And the Chinese government legitimates this by asserting the dynamic balance of the ecosystem, the Chinese government considers that, since the ecosystem has a sufficient resilience capacity, if ecotourism operates within this limit, even it is impaired sometimes for a while, the ecosystem is capable of rehabilitating itself. But the key point of the identification of this limit is not an easy one.¹⁹ And the protection measures adopted are only “not stressing artificial structures and man-made sceneries”²⁰.

(2) How Distinctive are the Chinese Standards?

This author will explain two parameters that show distinctive Chinese characteristics: one is *reliance protected areas* and the other is *Professionalism/Quality*.

“*Reliance protected areas*” designates the venue for carrying out ecotourism; protected areas include historical scenic interests, where conventional tourism has been carried out since the 1920s (Song 2007). The scholarly argument that China should have its own distinctive form of ecotourism laid the foundation for this co-optation. Ye (2008) presented the difference in ecological values between the West and China, namely, the division of nature and culture in the West and the unity of man and nature in China. The concept of nature is located in Confucian and Taoist thought, regarding nature is “one that encompasses all things, living and inorganic” (Ryan et al. 2009: 22). It’s both “anthropocentric and anthropomorphic” (Ibid), considering that human intrusion enhances the natural especially when consistent with a valued heritage and cultural inheritance (Ibid). It can be further explained by shan shui (Mountain and Water). “Shanshui is a literary aesthetic shaping perceptions of nature and human harmony through concepts such as tranquillity as in, for example, the building of places for meditating on the nature or the shaping of

¹⁷ See 7

¹⁸ National Ecotourism Development Guidelines

¹⁹ See 15

²⁰ Interview with the SFA Official responsible for forest parks on 28th July 2010 in Beijing

tree forms through bonsai”(Ibid). It still filters the Chinese planning mind when considering the scientific value a national park (Ryan et al. 2009: 22).

This value endows Chinese ecotourism resources with a profound sense of culture, represented by famous mountains and rivers, usually designated as national parks in China and enjoying a long popularity among tourists, for example, Mount Tai. The other legacy being that the Chinese mass ecotourists' major purpose for ecotourism is in experiencing and enjoying natural landscapes and looking for experiences to connect themselves with history, but paradoxically, this does not contribute to the building of environmental awareness among Chinese tourists: on the one hand because “the essential view of unity of man and nature” was concealed under imperial politics and folk utilitarianism” (Ibid:582), and on the other hand because Chinese tourists are dominated by desires for “creature comforts” under the influence of the Western industrialization (Ibid). Thus “the view of ‘the unity of man and nature’ only exists as a thought in China today and is seldom put into social practice, not even to evolve into an effective discipline of environmental ethics” (Ibid). If the majority of tourists have no or little environmental awareness, there remains little ground for argument about indigenous ecotourism. Moreover, the operation model of national parks is typical mass tourism and has been going on for long. If those culturized landscapes are presented as examples of Chinese characteristics of ecotourism resources, is highlighted as indigenous ecotourism resources, it amounts to considering conventional tourism as ecotourism.

This point can be further justified by Ryan (2009) who found that the major difference of national parks between China and the West is that, in the west, national parks have the two objectives of preservation and recreation; more than that, Chinese national parks also serve as “an asset in tourism policies directed by centrally determined economic objectives of income and employment generation”(Ryan et al. 2009: 22), that is to say, “national parks serve as important nodes of economic growth” (Ibid). Often in China this translates into a purpose of creating products to satisfy tourism demands as a subset of economic policies. They operate on principles of generating desired rates of monetary return with little investment put back into conservation. Indeed, many national parks are now managed by private sector corporations, consequently, profit motives, the need to achieve economic objectives are much bigger for Chinese national parks than for their counterparts in the West(Ibid). Therefore stressing national parks as the ideal venue for conducting ecotourism also indicates the intent of economic development from Chinese policy makers.

For the parameter “*Professionalism/Quality*”, this author argues that it instead shows the Chinese recognition of the difference between the existing tourism practice and Western style small scale ecotourism. During interview, both scholars and government officials used the word “professional” very frequently. For example, they consider NGOs' practice of ecotourism as professional, and name it professional tourism, to intentionally avoid using the term ecotourism. This indicates that the central government does not reject small scale ecotourism. As a matter of fact, there does exist some hard ecotourists in China, including “many foreign hard ecotourists and some

educated elites at home. The diverse tourist market demand diverse supply of products (Ye and Xue 2008: 580). Therefore, the small scale ecotourism is not rejected by Chinese government. The national ecotourism guidelines recognize the necessity to develop a hard ecotourism model which is in line with the model of developed countries, namely, pristine nature, low capacity, small scale and high price. Thus, Western ecotourism was co-opted into and became a subtype of the government model of ecotourism. This view can be confirmed from the SFA official responsible for forest parks. He considered that tourism in forest parks can be regarded ecotourism, but he did not think the tourism carried out in forest parks were strict ecotourism compared to international standard.

(3) Question of the Overlapping Parameters

From the graph, we can also see that most parameters are overlapping, and the scholar from CAS also commented that the Chinese government's definition of ecotourism is in line with the popular international definition as it includes the four elements: nature area, environmental education, environmental protection, and community development.²¹ However, we have to question the contents of those overlapping parameters, are they really the same? Due to the limited length of this paper, it is not possible to cover all overlapping parameters, the author only chose two parameters- *environmental education* and *benefits* for analysis, since these two are highlighted in Western ecotourism and are usually missing in Chinese mass tourism operation.

Take the parameter *environmental education* as an example: the Chinese measure of environmental education means “public education” and education of school pupils in the form of summer camps, a kind of general education to the significance of environment protection, which will mostly be regarded as empty words (IUCN 2004). It is definitely far removed from the measures of Western ecotourism standards, for example, sign installation and educating tourists in how to identify fauna and flora and impart knowledge of nature to tourists.

The parameter of *benefits* is emphasized in both Western and Chinese standards. The Chinese government equates local economic development with improving the welfare of the local community, without particularly stressing that the local community shall retain the major profits of the ecotourism enterprises. This view is in compliance with the view of the official responsible for forest parks; he said local people²² could participate in some forms of tourism, lift sedan chairs, operate homestays, etc.; this shows no difference from the past in operating tourism and the reality shows that most of the benefits of ecotourism in PAs belong to government.

(4) Discussion

One may argue that in the government officials' speech and in the national ecotourism guidelines, central government is also concerned with the environmental dimension of tourism: it does not overstress a unilateral dimension of economic development, thus it is a departure from the past overtly stressing economic development. But this environmental problem is

²¹ Interview with the Scholar from CAS on 24th July 2010 in Beijing

²² Interview with the SFA official responsible for forest parks on 28th July 2010

not new either. The relationship between environment and tourism has been noticed in the 1970s in China, therefore it is still an old issue of mass tourism before the introduction of ecotourism in China.

If the 2006 joint conference jointly held by MOHURD, MEP and CNTA can be regarded as a precautionary call for ecotourism development in localities, then the prominence of the MEP speech in 2008 indicated the problematic implementation of ecotourism in localities. However, as discussed in the previous section, dealing with the environment problem in China is always a post-reaction or a rescue measure, following the earlier occurrence of problems. The environmental measures adopted in “ecotourism” are no exception. Jiuzhaigou is presented as a model of ecotourism by the central government because of the measures it has taken to limit the number of tourists allowed to enter and its control measures for an even distribution of tourists with 3s techniques. However, the seemingly healthy development of “ecotourism”(it contains some potential environmental problems too) is a reaction to the consequences of earlier environmental degradation by uncontrolled mass tourism. Even the then premier Zhu Rongji ordered the suspension of boat commuting in one of the valleys as it was polluting the valley. If one is told that Jiuzhaigou is one of the nature reserves for giant pandas, he will be surprised, because, let alone giant pandas, even regular wild animals are hardly seen. The quality of some of China’s nature reserves is so poor that they host no wild animals, and WWF has recommended that such nature reserves be degraded to scenic areas (Harkness 1998). This comment applies to Jiuzhaigou, too. The advocating of environmental integrity by the central government remains as empty government political rhetoric as sustainable development.

From the above discussion, it seems that the Chinese government is comparing the Western ecotourism with the existing tourism in China, particularly in national parks; the result of the comparison is that there are common points but differences too, for example the debate about ecotourism resources and the scale, however these differences may be argued to support an indigenous form of ecotourism. Unfortunately, the soil for this indigenous ecotourism- the traditional value of the green paradigm of unity between man and nature- is lost to Chinese tourists, the current Chinese tourists being more the products of modernization, with little or no environmental awareness.

In summary, the Chinese government is using the trendy Western “ecotourism” concept to re-label the existing tourism and use it to promote tourism industry to address economic development needs. China’s ecotourism is more of mass tourism, which is confirmed by the SFA official responsible for forest park again. “As far as forest parks concerned, they feature strong nature attributes, China is basically conducting mass tourism, advocating leisure tourism. And only a few outdoor clubs are engaged in ecotourism. Forest parks depend on good natural environment to attract tourists.”²³

For a clearer picture, the following table summarizes the differences between the government’s ecotourism model and the NGO model.

²³ Interview with the SFA official responsible for forest parks on 28th July 2010 in Beijing

Table 3: Comparison of Ecotourism between the Chinese government and NGOs

	Mass ecotourism	Small scale ecotourism
Tourism products	Little knowledge, and low standardization level	Personalized tourism products and high level knowledge
Community participation	Passive participation from community, its will and opinions cannot be expressed fluently	Community participating in development management and decision-making
Environmental protection	Concept of Environmental protection has been carried out to some degree but lack deep investigation and monitoring of scenic spots	Relatively well developed environmental monitoring system, products design and landscape management follows ecological principles
Tourism marketing	Well developed brand awareness, stress media application, no well classified market or target at mass tourism market in the classified market.	Better developed brand awareness, marking small scale, targeting at small number of high end tourists
Scenary management	Professionalized landscape management and high degree of market	Low level professionalism in landscape management
Investment model	High investment, high return	Small scale investment, periodic return
Required conditions	Highly attractive of tourism resources; huge effective market need; well developed basic infrastructure and easy accessibility; powerful investors	Complete and unique ecosystem; advanced products concept of developers, for example, environmental awareness; strong research base; and external support

Source: Wanglang's Ecotourism Model Ending or Surpassing? (Lian and Li 2008)

In the following section, this paper will discuss the local government's discourse on ecotourism.

4.3 Local Government's Discourse on Ecotourism

This paper asserts that what local government implementing is actually extensive nature tourism in PAs but in the name of ecotourism. "Extensive" means that most nature reserves are carrying out extensive mass tourism with little concern for the environment. This type of "ecotourism" lacks environmental measures, so that, strictly speaking, it is only extensive nature tourism (Lian and Li 2008). "eco" in this sense is only a label for masking its extensive nature, just like Han (2001: 232) observes that most nature reserve managers literally interpret the concept of ecotourism at their own will and "without associating conservation or other related aspects." To be specific, "extensive" means misleading planning of ecotourism resources disregarding the vulnerability, non-renewability and ecotourism resources, so that not only does local government not monitor and supervise malpractices by business, - Some tourism enterprises, after getting hold of cheap ecotourism resources, develop them in the manner of regular tourism resources; they even develop illegal projects of pornography, gambling and drugs, - but, more than that, they are trying to capture a share of the economic returns of ecotourism development by setting up their own businesses and enforcing favorable policies to support their business. Local government acts based on their own perception of local interest. But why are they acting this way?

There is also a strong preference among local governments to get investments from business. Though privatization of environmental resources has been opposed by many scholars because of the nature of common property of PAs (Cheng 2008), it is now the norm in most PAs in the west China.

The scholar who just returned from the field work commented gravely that “all is economic driven; they are always determined to attract business investment and do ecotourism marketing.”²⁴ He particularly mentioned two words, “zhaoshangyinzi” and “dazao”. Local government regards it a big thing if business is interested to invest in the place. A very common word frequently appearing in local newspapers or media is “zhaoshangyinzi (招商引资) (Xiao 2010)”, which means attract investment, zhaoshangyinzi is regarded as big: even if there is only an intention expressed by business for investment, the local government becomes very excited and it is as if the local place will become rich overnight. Another trendy word used in the development of ecotourism is “dazao(打造)”, for example, “dazao competitive ecotourism county (Pu 2010)”, “dazao ecotourism brand”(Guan 2010). Originally “dazao” means “make (metal works), forge’, if it is used in government planning documents, it means the determination of the local government to make the place better for attracting tourists. It indicates grand scale infrastructure investment for facilitating the development of ecotourism such as building roads, hotels and restaurants. “dazao” indicates human interference with nature, which is away from the original meaning of genuine nature in ecotourism. Both words are related to private capital, which illustrates the local government’s preference for cooperation with it. As a matter of fact, there is a convergence of interests between local government and private capital. As the local government’s official’s term is five years²⁵, this dictates that he has to aim for impressive political achievements determined by GDP growth within that short term, this is corresponding to the private capital’s interest in the maximization of profits in the short term (Private capital can lease land from local government for the development of ecotourism resources for a maximum of 40 years²⁶), namely, exploitation of natural resources to the fullest extent. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that power will happily marry with capital and clear “obstacles” getting in the way of capital such as environment and local people. Fengyangshan nature reserve was administered by Longquan City four years ago: in order to attract investment from the Song Cheng Group, it built a road stretching to the core area.²⁷ The SFA official remarked that “if nature reserves belong to local government, they belong to economic development. Then there will be tourism development and attraction of investment”²⁸.

²⁴ Interview with a scholar from BFMSC on 27th August 2010 in Beijing who undertook a research entrusted by SFA to do a field research about ecotourism in some PAs

²⁵ RPC Local People’s Congress and Local Government Law, passed on 27th October 2004

²⁶ PRC’s Land Law, passed on 25th June 1986 at the 16th session of the 6th People’s Congress standing committee meeting, the second amendment was made on 28th August 2004 at the 11th session of the 10th People’s Congress Standing Committee Meeting, <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/fc3fb969a45177232f60a210.html> accessed on 27th October 2010

²⁷ Interview with the SFA official responsible for nature reserves on 24th July 2010 in Beijing

²⁸ See ²⁷

Then why are local government so keen on economic development without concern of environment?

After Deng Xiaoping's visit to South China, the radical internal reforms boosted the fast development of the Chinese economy. One significant reform Chinese government embarked on was the fiscal decentralization in 1994, which had double impacts: on the one hand, it has been very effective in motivating local governments to develop the local economy (Jahiel 1998: 757): but it also prompted the growth of "commodity fetishism" among local policymakers. With low economic growth rates, they are eager to take advantage of the local rich natural and cultural resources to stimulate economic growth. Thus, economic development often takes priority at the local level (Feng 2008: 215). On the other hand, decentralization leads to the disintegration of the once centralized discourse. "The state isn't calling all the shots anymore, and so developing an Agenda 21 doesn't automatically lead to implementation. The kind of centralised control that characterised China for so long is not really the case any more" (Young 2003). Local governments have thus gained sufficient autonomy to dismiss any guidelines, policies and strategies from central government if they deemed them against local economic growth. Though central government advocates a sustainable development strategy- China is one of the first countries who formulated Agenda 21-, apparently it failed to be embraced by local governments as they perceive environmental protection is against GDP growth (Yan 2007: 42) and "unfavourable to growth" (Jahiel 1998: 757).

Thus, in terms of environment, as local government thinks environmental rules or regulations constitute an obstacle to economic development, they would not implement the "eco" measures. One statistics from the environmental department shows that by 2007, 70% of provincial programs carried out EIA, with 40% at municipal level while only 20% of county projects carried out EIA(Lu et al. 2010). China's environmental forces are still weak although growing, and the implementation of environmental measures is solely the responsibility of environmental government bodies, which keeps them constantly on the run for dealing with environmental problems. MEP and CNTA join hands again: an examination of the destruction of the environment in the name of ecotourism exposed the severity of the situation.²⁹

In terms of community, local community is either neglected or pushed to develop mass tourism. Two cases can confirm this point. Ecotourism in Jisha village, Shangri-La of Yunnan province is a case in point. When CBIK arrived after raising funds of RMB 300, 000 for starting ecotourism, local government was not interested, it was instead inclined to sign contract with a big business group- Qianfoshan Business Group - for building a cable way to Yulong Snow Mountain, a sacred mountain in the mind of the local Tibetan people. During the whole process for contract signing, local people were not informed. But for the extensive media coverage and the notice from central government, the Yulong Snow Mountain would undergo a tremendous change of landscape

²⁹ This author tried to make an appointment for interview with a MEP official on 28th July 2010 but was rejected, and the reason given was very busy. Nevertheless, MEP disclosed this information.

too(Li 2005). In a society dominated by strong power, the interest of the disadvantaged group- local residents- tends to be neglected and their traditional culture and livelihood marginalized; local government pushes local people to operate mass tourism, so that it can levy tax and increase government revenue. e.g. the community based ecotourism in Jiaju Tibetan village: when the village tourism became prosperous, local government began to set up a post at the gate of the village to collect an entry fee from tourists, which aroused dissatisfaction from them (Jiaju' 2006).

In order to secure a favourable political space for survival in “China’s semi-authoritarian context” Ho (2007: 300), both international and domestic NGOs would not challenge their direct counterparts- local government (Ibid). The following case shows how NGO’s hard ecotourism had survived and finally lost out to the local economic development drive. The choice of this case as an illustrative one is based on the following considerations: one, because this project is already finished, it can provide a holistic picture of how this small scale ecotourism started, developed and lost in the face of the rapid economic development imperative. Secondly, the giant panda, the unique rare species that only China owns, which earns it a special status both in China and in the world, is valued so much that it was chosen by both the Chinese government as a national image representing China and by WWF as its logo. The selection of this case thus is highly representative.

4.4 Show Case of Wanglang Ecotourism

The giant panda is known and cherished around the world. The panda, one of the most rare and beloved animals in the world, is threatened with extinction - only about 1,000 pandas live in the wild. Wanglang Nature Reserve, north of Chengdu, established in 1963 by the Sichuan Forestry Bureau, is located in the Minshan Mountains in some of China's most important panda habitat. Wanglang, whose purpose is to protect the giant panda and its habitat, and the 10 other nearby reserves in remote areas of northern Sichuan are critical to the continued survival of the giant panda('Wanglang' n.d.).

In 1997, WWF, together with the Chinese government, launches an Integrated Conservation and Development Project in Pingwu to address the conflicting needs of the pandas and the people (WWF 2004). The duration of the project was from 1997 to 2002. Ecotourism was part of the ICDP, “Designed to integrate panda habitat conservation with ecotourism development, and benefit local communities”- Baima (Allan 2008:181). “In March 2005 Wanglang National Nature Reserve became the first organization to register for the Green Globe 21 International Ecotourism Standard(IES) in China” (Allan 2008:182); The Wanglang Reserve and Baima Community received a group of the Discovery Initiative from UK (WWF 2004). With changes in the international market for hiking and trekking, ICDP helped Wanglang and Baima attract more international tourists to hike and experience the giant panda habitat in Sichuan (Ibid)

Two tourist routes was developed based on primitive forests in Wanglang, one is for watching water, the other is for watching mountain. An Advertisement shows the appeal of Wanglang’s ecotourism:

There are estimated to be about 30 wild pandas living in Wanglang. At Wanglang you have a unique opportunity to experience the lush forests, beautiful mountains, and thick bamboo groves of the panda's home.

Additionally, you can visit the colorful Baima people who have lived in the area just outside the reserve for hundreds of years.

View wildlife and watch birds. Note: it is rare to see pandas. Takin, musk deer, blue sheep as well as other animals can be seen occasionally. Birdwatching is excellent, especially during the spring and fall migration seasons. To increase your chances of seeing and hearing the wildlife and birds, be quiet and wear muted colors ('Wanglang' n.d.)

Wanglang's target of tourists is science researchers, international ecotourists, conference tourists and students. According to the scholar who just finished field visit from Wanglang, "in wanglang, one can hardly see any infrastructure. Tourists have to walk a lot."³⁰ The intention of Wanglang was to attract tourists interested in ecotourism and willing to pay at high cost, which on the other hand, can restrict the arrival of mass tourism. In its prime time, revenue generated by tourism in Wanglang was 250,000RMB in 2001 and 460,000RMB in 2002(WWF China n.d.). Proceeds from tourism were used for monitoring and patrolling the reserve. The fact that Wanglang could remain intact for some time can be attributed to the reputation it enjoyed, according to Chen, director of Wanglang nature reserve (Fu 2005). To be specific, Wanglang's ecological conservation model has been widely recognized by SFA, the provincial forestry department and international organizations. In July 2002, Wanglang was upgraded to national nature reserve subject to the collaborative management of central and local government. All these factors had formed an effective leverage to local government. On the other hand, Pingwu County government had the intention to build an ecological county and the reputation of Wanglang was no doubt an invisible asset. Moreover, Wanglang contributed 100,000 RMB of tax revenues to local government. Meanwhile, Wanglang had attracted large sums of investment in ecological and community development from international organizations like the EU and GEF. But still, Chen said, he felt an invisible pressure from outside. Chen hoped to make it clear to local government that though the Wanglang model was slow in generating economic returns, it was sustainable and would generate long term local benefit (Fu 2005). However, the situation around Wanglang was very grave. Scenic areas at Jiuzhai and Huanglong as flagships had been well connected by a network of highways and 5-6 nature reserves had been divided into isolated islands. Jiuzhaigou airport was put into operation, power plants and mines under or to be put under construction were scattered around. The increasingly diversified interest groups encroached into the giant panda's habitats. And the planning section of the Pingwu government was ambitiously planning a tourism railway to Jiuzhaigou. Everywhere was full of strong economic desire: now the pressure had thus finally materialized. The small scale, high end ecotourism focus was suspended, the local government established a tourism bureau which tried to capture the tourism from Wanglang. But due to the specialized

³⁰ Interview with one scholar from BFMSC on 27th August 2010 in Beijing, who just completed field visit from Wanglang

knowledge required, they were incapable of operating the ecotourism³¹. Just as Simon observed: “the tension that exists between the responsibilities of protected area management to protect, maintain and restore conservation values, and the development agendas of others who wish to exploit these values for short-term gain is big” (Simon 2008).

As to the ecotourism being operated in the Baima community, a study showed that, “with high-speed development, and actual encouragement from the Pingwu local government,” (Luan as cited in Allan 2008:183) under the impact of the market, the guidance from the project became powerless. “The Baima ecotourism project is undergoing a transition from ecotourism to mass tourism. Large numbers of domestic tourists far outweigh foreign visitors and local people are leaving farming to make profits from tourism” (Luan as cited in Allan 2008: 183). Other negative impacts include a distorted tourism order(suicidal competition for tourists by lowering prices, degraded service and forceful consumption, increasing discharge of solid waste and direct sewage discharge into the river without treatment; increasing use of timber for fuelwood consumption of tourists and for building guest houses which accelerate the destruction of the forest vegetation; the disintegration of the traditional culture, disco joints appearing instead of the traditional dancing; lack of effective management spurring illegal trading of wild flora and fauna; and the widening gap between the rich and the poor.³²

The Wanglang case is highly illustrative: under the economic development drive of the local government, Wanglang’s hard ecotourism model was doomed to end. The reputation of the giant panda and relatively long-standing history of the Wanglang nature reserve earmarked for Wanglang the attention from all concerned parties, the Chinese government at all levels, the international community and environmental NGOs, still they could not resist the economic development drive from the local government for mass tourism development, let alone other not-so-famous nature reserves. Presently, most of China’s PAs are under the pressure of economic development from the local government (Fu 2005).

For the moment, WWF is operating ecotourism in the Changqing Nature reserve, with a WWF official indicating that the project has a certain duration and will be over some day: what will be the future of ecotourism in Changqing Nature Reserve when the project ends? Will it be facing the same fate as Wanglang?

³¹ Interview made with a scholar from BFMSC on 27th August 2010 who just finished field visit from Wanglang.

³² Jiang Shiwei, case study of Baima Community Tourism Development, presented in Community Development workshop by EU-China Natural Forest Management Project held in 2006.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

The supposed sustainable development that ecotourism can bring about makes it very popular in the world. The introduction of ecotourism into China is well regarded by all concerned parties too. The zeal for ecotourism has swept across China. However, the implementation of ecotourism has led to abnormal features, even intentional environmental degradation in the name of ecotourism, and a real picture at the total opposite of the ecotourism rhetoric. This paper has sought to address the issue of this unsatisfactory reality by trying to identify the different actors' understanding of ecotourism, particularly NGOs and government. In other words, what is the discourse of the different actors on the scene of ecotourism?

This paper has presented the contested ecotourism discourses of government and NGOs in PAs in China with their implications for PA development. This survey has been sketchy, suggestive. Broadly speaking, it has looked into the contested discourse of ecotourism in China.

The international trend of convergence of the two paradigms of conservation and development serves as background for the emergence of ecotourism. Ecotourism unites conservation and development, which is universally recognized by all actors across the globe. However, it is not neutral but political and contested; confronted with the two lines of conservation and development inherent in ecotourism, some may align themselves with the conservation line, that is to say, perceive ecotourism as a conservation tool. Others will align themselves with the development line, consider it as a developmental tool. The two different perceptions will result in different ecotourism operation models in the PAs. It is no exception for China that, when ecotourism entered China in the 1990s, it has been translated differently by different actors into PAs in China, particularly government and NGOs. China's PA system was born endogenously but its expansion in terms of numbers and areas shows the signs of the international influence. Though PAs have contributed to nature conservation to some extent they are however laden with many problems. They themselves are underfunded and their establishment has been seen by the local communities as expropriation of their land, while the fiscal decentralization in 1994 left them subject to local government's administration. Ecotourism was introduced in this contested situation and the resulting perception of ecotourism by different actors is as follows:

Environmental NGOs align themselves with the international discourse of ecotourism, which is small scale with an orientation towards environmental conservation and community empowerment. By comparison, the central government advocates mass ecotourism, which was practiced before the term "ecotourism" was coined and introduced into China. As a developing country, the prime purpose of the Chinese government in initiating ecotourism is economic development, but central government recognizes the importance of environment, too. Though their prime purpose in advocating ecotourism is different, overall, NGOs and the central government adhere to the principle of sustainable development, taking into consideration the coordination of the

present and the future, and the three dimensions of economy, environment and society. However, both discourses failed to be recognized by local government. In contrast with the two ecotourism discourses, unrestricted modernization thinking is dominant among local government circles, without any change, i.e. what local government favours is extensive mass tourism to achieve the goal of maximization of profits in the short term. Often, environment and even local communities welfare are ignored, if not even undermined. The principle of sustainable development is broken. The local government focus on economic development at the cost of environment shows the failure of the central government's attempt to construct a sustainable development discourse by advocating a balance between economic development and environmental conservation. The NGO's construction of the conservation discourse through ecotourism has also been unable to compete with the local government's economic development drive. The Wanglang case exemplified the actual confrontation of the conservation with development and the outcome of that confrontation.

PAs have a unique role to play in conservation and there are series of laws and regulations to guarantee their conservation status. However, all these can be easily overrun by economic development as implemented by local governments. The current reality of ecotourism in PA shows that ecotourism failed in its attempt to link conservation and development. The NGO's demonstration of small scale ecotourism has not shown much, if any, effect. Ecotourism has been submerged by mass tourism. And sustainable development is losing out to economic development. Too much has not gone past the threshold of political rhetoric.

However, considering China's ecotourism state of confusion, the NGO discourse of ecotourism is still constructive; the advocacy of respecting nature and local cultures has a value. In terms of ecotourism development, NGOs have an undeniable role to play. They need to establish a more effective communication platform to exchange ideas and to strengthen understanding from each other.

For the solution of the problem, it needs the transformation of views towards tourism from viewing just as a market behaviour aiming at boosting industrial development to taking it as a social endeavour and public service. Local governments shall function as monitors of market instead of players. The most important is that if "the state becomes better able to fund Parks and reduce dependency on capital intensive development of PAs, the nature of the discourse will change" (Ryan et al. 2009:28). Certainly cases of 'de-urbanization', can now be found as the state of the local economy changes. For example, in Wuyi Mountain in Fujian province in east China, local government has stopped mass tourism. And for changing of the discourse from government, it also "largely depends on government initiative, external pressure, and the ability of academics, citizens and NGOs to influence the shape and success of government strategies" (Carlarne 2007:213).

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