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Chinese Tour Groups in Europe, Chinese Tour Groups in Yunnan: Narrating a Nation in the World

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By Tami Blumenfield

The first winter I stayed with a Moso (sometimes spelled Mosuo) family in southwest China, my weeks of Nahu language tutoring did not help me get very far in understanding their conversations. I had trouble sorting out the names and relationships of the ten to eighteen family members who ate meals together and lived in that household. The apu (grandfather) joked to me that I, an American citizen who had been living in China, was now in the foreign country's foreign country; no wonder I was disoriented. Their corner of Yunnan was culturally and linguistically distinct from other parts of the country, which was also foreign to me. While this presented some challenges, it also offered the attraction to learn about a new and different place. I have never heard the Chinese tourists who seek adventure within the bounds of their own nation's borders describe these areas as foreign countries, but the orientations and conversations they relate are intriguing all the same. Through touring, they are developing and deepening a kind of state-approved narrative. This is most evident when travel agencies guide them and literally narrate their experiences.



Moso guides rowing tourists on Lugu Lake.

This narration takes on new importance when groups go beyond the borders of the Chinese state, venturing to unfamiliar territories like Europe. The *New Yorker's* Evan Osnos [recently wrote](#) about his experiences traveling with a Chinese tour group to Europe during the 2011 Spring Festival holiday period. The members of his group spent lavishly on gifts but ate nothing but Chinese meals the entire ten days they traveled through Europe. Beyond the expected descriptions of fast-paced touring and minimal time per city and per attraction, the interesting part of his story was the way that the tour leader, Guide Li, narrated China's role in the world, and the way the other travelers accepted and developed this narrative. To summarize it briefly, this involved frequent criticisms of the 'European' lifestyle for its slow

pace and propensity to protect workers' rights. (Among the horrors Guide Li cites are having to endure a five-hour meal in Spain, and getting stuck for four hours in traffic because striking police failed to control the vehicles.) The tortuous process of battling local opposition to construct highways and the lackluster European work ethic are lauded by Guide Li as proof that hard-working Chinese, never mind farmers' struggles to retain their land or workers' needs for better rights protection, will soon surpass Europeans and regain their rightful place in the world order.

Osnos also pointed out the slightly hopeful, if fleeting, moments of group members questioning official narratives: perusal of a *Wall Street Journal* and discussions of the learning that resulted; attempted deviation from the tour itinerary to linger a few more minutes in Florence at the end of the trip; and a futile effort by group members to eat, just once, somewhere other than a Chinese restaurant. It's not clear whether these moments actually indicate the nascent shoots of change that Osnos and many other Euro-American observers of China seem to hope for in Chinese citizens set free of the constraints of the Chinese regulatory regime—after all, Chinese students in left-leaning Seattle [have demonstrated](#) in favor of state policies even without direct inducements, showing that it's not merely a lack of information through state censorship that influences or determines behavior—but these moments were posited as the potential openings that could act as a wedge toward broader transformation.

Reading this account of a Chinese tour group—fast paced, with narratives controlled carefully by the guides, and with a strongly educational content approved, no doubt, by official sources—reminded me of the groups I have seen in southwest China's Yunnan Province. For several years I lived, studied and worked in the Lijiang and Lugu Lake areas, where flag- and bullhorn-toting guides leading upwards of 30 tourists from other parts of China were a frequent sight. Often, these people had not known each other before the tour began: many small groups (usually 2 or 3 people) who had purchased tours separately were quickly brought together and formed into visually cohesive units through the provisioning of matching gear, most often brightly colored hats and visors. In other cases, entire work units ventured out *en masse*, leaving families and partners behind at home and engaging in the sort of enforced leisure that I often heard described as requiring exhausting effort.



A tour guide wearing a stylized version of another ethnic group's vest waits for her group to return from their boat ride, rowed by an older Luoshui woman (not a tour guide).

Tour guides joked to me that they called themselves *gaoji baomu*, or high-level babysitters, as they shepherded people from one site to another and took care of their basic needs for food, drink, entertainment and rest just as one might do for a small child. This notion of requiring the care of a guide is often disdained by more independent travelers, but others appreciated the security of touring with others. For example, two twenty-something unmarried women whose tour group stayed in the same guesthouse as I in Luoshui, a village of around 700 people that receives half a million tourist visits per year, explained one evening as we sat at the hearth that their families would not have permitted them to travel independently, but they

worried less with them safely ensconced in the protective cocoon of the tour group. (I suspect that their families would have been even more reassured to learn that they were in the hands of high-level babysitters.)

Osnos explained in [an online chat forum](#), “Travel, in a sense, is now part of the basket of middle-class goods that the government tries to make available to people as a way of maintaining satisfaction and stability.” Part of this provisioning involves a continual effort to lower costs and make travel more affordable. Thus the travel agencies that sent out tour groups constantly sought bargains and pushed down prices through relentless competition. The PBS *Frontline* program *Is Wal-Mart Good for America?* describes the reverse auctions used by the retail behemoth to pit suppliers against each other in order to obtain the lowest possible price. Similarly, agencies heading to Luoshui pit family-run hotels and guesthouses against each other in an effort to obtain the lowest possible room rates. For Moso people, who value hospitality to the extent that visitors were sometimes barred from leaving until they stayed longer or accepted additional parting gifts, adjusting to this more competitive environment has not been easy. At times the travel agencies have demanded room rates so low—15 yuan (about two dollars) for a standard room—that family guesthouse operators would hardly even earn enough to cover the electricity bills.



Aba Luzo, a village leader who keeps track of boat rowing income and coordinates rowers so that each household representative receives a turn.

Where tourism remained profitable for Luoshui families, though, was in an area that the travel agencies could not control, because the village had collectivized several activities and standardized their prices: leading tourists on horseback rides, rowing them on boat rides, and dancing for them (and with them) at the nightly bonfire parties. Income from these activities was divided collectively among every household that sent a representative to the designated team, which many of them did. Thus even without the lodging income, families could still earn healthy proceeds from the tour groups that poured into their village like clockwork.

Much like Europe's Tour Guide Li, the guides I observed saw themselves as positioning the narrative. They studied texts and memorized scripts to pass the exam certifying them as tour guides. Standing at the front of the bus with a microphone or walking through fields with a bullhorn, they emphasized certain features that they knew would engage their captive audiences. In Chen Weijun's 2005 documentary *Observing Mosuo*, the camera documents the journey through the tour group's perspective. In this complex society that has inspired intense debate among researchers from several academic disciplines, everything from marital customs to household architecture receives a firm and indisputable explanation from the mouth of the tour guide. Intriguingly, what tourists hear is not exactly the official version. The Moso are a group whose bid for national-level minority-nationality status was rejected, leaving only a provincial-level compromise designation as a 'ren,' not a 'minzu' (that is, a 'people,' not a 'nationality'). Nonetheless, in the parlance of many visitors, if not necessarily their guides, they have become a de facto 'minzu': Moso-zu. No one bothers to correct this slippage.

Will this different, if unofficial, status and the economic benefits that tourism brings suffice to overpower official state narratives? Perhaps. Regardless of the outcome, however, the droves of tourists and their guides play an important role in reconfiguring the landscape that deserves the attention of even the most cynical observer. Beyond those bullhorns lie layers of narratives to decipher.

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