Authenticity, Interpretation and the Tour Dongba

Abstract: Questions of authenticity often dominate discussions of ethnic tourism, and the presentation of Dongba pictographic writing in Lijiang, China, provides a context where language barriers play a central role in the negotiation of meaning and authenticity. The Naxi people, one of China’s officially recognized minority ethnic groups, have become known internationally for a system of pictographic writing used in religious ceremonies by an elite priesthood of shamans known as the Dongba. In Lijiang, this outside interest has been cultivated by the developing tourist industry, transforming the Dongba writing into a salable tourist artifact and creating a new economic niche for the Dongba priest. My paper focuses on ethnographic research conducted at a municipal museum which featured Dongba pictographic writing and its role in traditional Naxi culture. The government shop attached to the museum hired a Dongba priest who dressed in the priestly costume and demonstrated his writing ability for tourists. The tours provided for foreign visitors included an introduction to the Dongba and an interpretive explanation of the writing that he produced. However, this interpretive explanation provided by the tour guide does not mediate the Dongba’s own interpretation of his work. The languages used and the structure of the performance suppress the Dongba’s communicative agency, resulting in misrecognition of the iconic reference of some of the characters. Although final translation of characters remained constant, the explanation which connects the pictographs to their semantic value differed. For example, the character for "peace" depicts a woman weaving, but is described by the tour guide as a hunter with a bow. Ultimately, these misinterpretations make little difference to the performance which functions to ideologically position the Dongba pictographs as an index of Naxi culture and allows a commodification of Naxi ethnicity. Because the language barrier prevents direct communication between the Dongba and the tourists, other measures of authenticity must be used to determine the credibility these performances have for the tourist as consumer of culture.