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Gao, Yun

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Original Citation

Gao, Yun (2010) Xishuangbanna in Southwest China - a fantasized place and the lived experience of the place. In: IASTE 2010 Working Paper Series. Urban Utopias: Regeneration, Renewal, and Planning, 228 . International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments, Beirut, Lebanon, pp. 23-36.

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Xishuangbanna in Southwest China - a fantasized place and the lived experience of the place

Dr. Yun Gao
University of Huddersfield, UK

12th Conference of the International Association for the Study of Traditional
Environments
15-18 December, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract

Motivated by representations in popular culture, millions of tourists travel to Xishuangbanna in Southwest China to consume a place of an imagined exotic past. The study investigates the changes in the capital city Jing Hong and Dai Ethnic Park under the influence of tourism. It argues that despite of the rapid changes of the place, there is the close connection between the culture favoured and produced by the local people and the material transformations of the place. Different social actors will make meaning of this fantasized place rather than discover it as a fixed entity.

Introduction

“Xishuangbanna is a magic and beautiful place.” Whenever there is an introduction of the place, it almost always starts with the sentence. Xishuangbanna, where Dai ethnic group lives, locates at the Southwest borderland of China. Dai people is one of the 56 minority nationalities in China with unique culture. The popular images of Xishuangbanna in the media are the Dai golden Buddhist temples shining through the trees of the tropic forest (Fig. 1), Dai bamboo houses on stilts by the river; and beautiful Dai girls with their colourful dresses in the Spreading Water Festival. These are very different from the images in other Chinese cities and countryside that advertise the life in the modern times. In China’s reform era, hundreds and thousands of people have been drawn to Xishuangbanna because of those popular cultural representations. To both domestic and international tourists, this place is full of myth and fantasy.

To Chinese domestic tourists, Xishuangbanna is also another version of “Shi Wai Tao Yuan (世外桃源) – A Peach-Blossom Land outside This World” because of its tropic climate and exotic local customs. It is a utopia. The term Shi Wai Tao Yuan was used for the poetic imagery depicted in Tao Hua Yuan Ji (桃花源记) by the famous Chinese poet Tao Yuanming in the East Jin Dynasty (317-420). He told a story that a fisherman came upon a village that was called Peach-Blossom Spring. It was a paradise isolated from the outside world, without exploitation or oppression, and everybody was living and working in peace and contentment. However, after returning home, the fisherman could never find the way back to the village. The Chinese word “Shi Wai Tao Yuan” is used to denote an isolated, idealised world.

As Notar has argued that “both growth and uncertainty in a global market economy lead to quests for an imagined place of the past where tourists can perform their fantasies, nostalgia, and status for themselves and others.”¹ With the intensified consumer culture in China after the 1980s and the booming of the tourist industry, it is not surprise that ‘Shi Wai Tao Yuan’ has been

materialized as a real place in Guilin, Guangxi province. The advertisement for the place boasts 'a charming rural location, folk customs and fascinating minority buildings and architecture'.

To many Chinese, Xishuangbanna is a 'Shi Wai Tao Yuan', but a different one; because it is located in the remote borderland and full of the myth and fantasy of a culture that is different from the Han culture in China. This is demonstrated in the 1982 film 'The Peacock Princess', a story based on a Dai epic poetry. The film told a story that many years ago in the tropic rain forest; a Dai prince met seven Peacock Princesses by the lake and fell in love with the youngest sister. After fighting with the evil wizard and overcoming many kinds of difficulties, the Dai prince and the Peacock Princess could finally live happily together. The film is full of the images of the Dai colourful garments, exotic peacock dancing and golden palace. The myth and fantasy in the tropic Xishuangbanna have attracted hundreds and thousands of tourists since the 1980s.

Since the 1980s, the tourism industry in Xishuangbanna has gone through different stages. This study explores the design and construction of tourist parks in two distinctive stages. In the first stage, Feng Qin Yuan was constructed as a showcase for the traditional houses of six ethnic minorities in Xishuangbanna. It also included exhibitions for the traditional Dai daily life and their crafts and artefacts. This is a place that tourist can gaze and spectacle of the local cultural and natural environment². In the second stage, Dai Zhu Yuan (Dai Ethnic Park) was designed as a tourist park that has included five natural villages within its boundary and a nearly one thousand and five hundred-year old Buddhist Temple. Different from a typical tourist site, Dai Zhu Yuan is still the villagers' home and living space. As Notar has shown that tourists not only want to gaze and spectacle, they also want to experience for themselves others' lives³. MacCannell (1989:xi) also asked: "Does tourism and/or post-modernity, conceived in the most positive possible way as a celebration of distance, difference, or differentiation, ultimately liberate conscious or enslave it?"⁴, while Veijola and Jokinen have argued that tourism is for tourists to bodily perform for others one's fantasies⁵.

In Tao Yuanming's story, "Shi Wai Tao Yuan" is a place that people can never go back again because it represents an idealized place or no place. With the global consumer culture and the modernized era in China, those ideas of idealized place have been materialized not only through cultural representation such as films, novels and other media images, but as real places that can be visited and experienced with both mind and body. This study aims to explore the close connection between the cultural representations of Xishuangbanna, the culture favoured and produced by the local people and the material transformations of this place. I will argue that despite the changes of the people's modern life, myth and legends still play an important role for Dai people in Dai Zhu Yuan.

The paper also briefly looks into the recent tourism development in Xishuangbanna, when a new development Gao Zhuan Xi Shuang Jin has been proposed to combine the local cultural experience with the leisure and consumer cultures. The design of this new development was aimed to go beyond the boundary of Dai culture to include a generic exotic culture in South East countries.

In the modern era, Xishuangbanna is competing with other tourist destinations. In the process of developing its own tourism economy, Dai faces the challenge to keep its own identity from popular medial images about Xishuangbanna, and a generic image of a tropic leisure park. The local communities have experienced the rapid changes of the tourism and influence of the urbanisation. The special identity of the place is not only shaped by the memories of the past, but also the desire for a contemporary life favoured by people. In the process of changes and

transformations, rather than discover the utopia as a fixed entity, people are make meanings of an idealised place.

Cultural representation of Dai people and Xishuangbanna before the 1980s

Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture, or Sipsong Panna in Dai language, is located in Yunnan province, Southwest China. It shares border with Burma and Laos in South-East Asia with a shared border line of 966.3km. There are 13 original ethnic groups live in Xishuangbanna with Dai people as the largest ethnic group in the region with 298,000 people according to 2000 census of population. There are altogether about 1,159,000 Dai people in China, majority of them live in Yunnan Province. Members of the same ethnic people, who are called the Tai or Thai, live in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Burma⁶.

Historically Xishuangbanna was a remote borderland in China; it was little known to the outside before the 20th century. The first systematic study of the place was carried out in the 1950s, when the Chinese administration sent several visiting groups, research groups and working groups to the borderlands in the South, the Southwest and the Northwest of China in order to gain more understanding of the culture and socialites of the minority nationalities. From 1954 to the early 1960s, the Nationalities Affairs Commissions and Party committees in Beijing, Kunming, and Jinghong and Menghai individually organised scholars, school teachers, and ethnic administrators to conduct investigations in Xishuangbanna in eight months under the direction of Fei Xiaotong, China's doyen anthropologist, in order to survey the social economic, religious, and political features of the state of the region. The data about the vernacular architecture and their built environment of the minority nationalities in Yunnan were collected for the first time by the researching groups of the Design Institute of Yunnan at the early 1960s. In the 1950s and the 1960s, a number of historical and newly written Dai epics were published in Chinese, such as 'Ga Long' (《嘎龙》), 'Son Pa Min and Ga Xi Na' (《松帕敏和嘎西娜》), and 'Lui Sha Zhi Ge' (《流沙之歌》), including the most famous story 'Zhao Shu Tun' (《召树屯》). Those documents have brought the Dai culture into the public attentions and are valuable record of Dai's social and cultural history. The story 'Zhao Shu Tun' was made into the film 'Peacock Princess' (孔雀公主) in 1982. In 1985, a dance drama named 'Zhao Shu Tun and Nan Mu Luo Na' (《召树屯与楠木诺娜》) was performed by Yunnan Song and Dance Institute which made huge impacts about Dai culture in China and in South-East countries.

During the revolutionary period from the 1960s to the 1970s, however, the special Dai culture was not recognized and encouraged by the central government politics. The minority nationalities problem was considered simple a class problem. It was not necessary to distinguish one minority people from another in Socialist or Communist society, because all exploiting class had been eliminated⁷. During this period, it was another movement that brought Xishuangbanna to people's attentions. From the 1950s to the 1970s, following the central government's policy to send educated youth to the countryside to learn the countryside life, about 140,000 people move into Xishuangbanna to open up wasteland for rubber farming, many of whom were graduated students from big cities with the ambition to transform the countryside into new socialist farm land. These young students experienced the difficulties of survival and painful disillusion of the ambition. After returning home towns in the 1970s, they have written and published many books on the youth life in the borderlands of China. Those novels investigated personal experiences in different borderlands during the period of the special social movement. After the development of the tourism in Xishuangbanna, many educated youth re-visited the place. Their experience as tourists will be shaped by their past memories of the place.

After the communal culture in the revolutionary era between the 1960s and 1970s, researches on the ethnic culture was revived in the 1980s. A number of Chinese books are published on historical Dai epic poetry, poems, and folklores, such as Dai epic poetry “Lan Ga Xi Hou” (《兰嘎西贺》) and the historical Dai story of creation “Ba Ta Ma Ga Pong Shan Luo”(《巴塔麻嘎捧尚罗》). Those publications have contributed to the recognition of the unique Dai culture in China. In 1982, Xishuangbanna was listed among the first group of 44 national nature heritage sites in China. In 1985, Jinghong, the capital of Xishuangbanna and Monghai opened to national and international tourists. In 1986, Xishuangbanna became national nature reserve, and in 1993, it was accepted as the member of the international Biosphere Reserve Network. Dai Peacock Dances became the symbols of the Dai culture, and were listed as one of the first batch of National Intangible Culture Heritage in May 2006. All of those are cultural representations that have attracted tourists to this fantasized place.

In the 1980s, tourism started to take off slowly. To meet the requirements, Feng Qing Yuan was built as a tourist park. It was constructed on a previous farm for tropic plants. Apart from the unique natural environment, the main focus of the park was to rebuild six stilt-houses types that used by six ethnic minority groups living in Xishuangbanna. In the houses were exhibitions for those ethnic people’s daily life, festivals and their arts and crafts. Many visitors to the park were anthropology and social science researchers and students who are interested in ethnic people’s cultures.

Jing Hong – tourism developments and urbanisation

Apart from the officially constructed tourist park, when the tourism took off slowly in the 1980s, individual Dai families started to provide food and accommodations for scattered tourists and students and scholars who doing research on Dai cultures (Fig.2 & 3). Eventually the tourism industry developed into larger scales with the involvement of local government and invest companies. Especially after the 1990s, the development of tourism was promoted and encouraged by both the provincial and local governments. In less than a decade, the tourism industry in Xishuangbanna grow rapidly, with national tourists growing from 600,000 in 1991 to 2.552 million people in 1999, and transnational tourists from 6100 people in 1991 to 53,900 people in 1999⁸. Following tourism, infrastructure construction has also been booming. More than 10 tourist sites have been built together with 140 hotels including 39 of which are above 3 star hotels. Tourists visiting routes also extended to Burma and Laos. According to Chunchen Evening Newspaper, the national tourists visiting Xishuangbanna in 2008 reached 62.4million people. There have been nearly 50 star hotels, five national AAAA visiting sites, eight AAA visiting sites and five visiting routes extending to Burma, Laos and Thailand⁹.

In the 1990s, tourism locally has led to the large projects to build up the infrastructure, which required central organising from provincial and local governments, developers and investors, travel agencies and scholars who study local culture etc. Hotels, restaurants, Ethnic park, and tropic forest parks have been built as the tourist visiting areas. Local communities are more and more involved in the tourism industry in addition to their traditional agriculture activities. With more incomes, people’s life styles have been changed too. Brick and concrete houses replaced the traditional timber houses. Wide pavement roads replace the previous narrow mud lanes to accommodate the increasingly car using in the area (Fig. 4). People’s daily dress changed too. Jing Hong has been urbanised as other Chinese cities. However, the advertisement of the tourism in the area is to attractive people to visit a unique place, not only with different

tropic climate and tropic forest but also with different local customs, and exotic Dai culture. Dai Zhu Yuan was therefore built under this requirement.

2nd stage – Dai Ethnic Park – a preserved utopia

In the first stage of tourism in Xishuangbanna, Feng Qing Yuan was designed and constructed to show people a unique place in the 1980s. However, in the 21st century, the tourists' needs are different. As Appadurai has argued: "More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice."¹⁰ Tourists are to experience the life in this fantasized place not only with visual images, but also including bodily experience. As Game has suggested that "my desire has indeed been to know the place, to be able to read the codes of, for example, public footpaths and birdle ways; to have a competence with respect to this landscape, as I do in body surfing at Bondi; to be local and party to local stories. In a sense this is a desire to "know" what cannot be seen."¹¹ People try to 'know' those unseen. This has led to the 2nd stage of tourism development in Xishuangbanna when the visiting park is built within the natural villages. To transform natural villages into a tourist park; the intention is for people to see and feel and involve themselves in the real village life.

To develop the Dai traditional built environment for the tourism, the Park Management Company signed the contracts with the villagers through the village committee to rent the village land for the tourism development. In exchange, the villagers can be recruited as waged workers working in the park. Dai Zhu Yuan contains five traditional Dai villages, covering an area of 3.36 square kilometres. The total investment for developing the park will be 150million RMB (around £15million pounds) in three phrases. The first phase cost 42million RMB on renting the land from the villagers, building the roads and laying the electrical and drainage lines. Other projects completed in Phrase one include the main entrance gate, the public squares, amphitheatre and decorations of the old houses etc. The park opened to the visitors on 1st August 1999. The second phrase will include projects such as the holiday resort and amusement park etc. costing around 60million RMB.

In Dai Zhu Yuan (Fig. 5), in order to preserve the traditional houses for the tourism, a number of policies were set by the management company to give villagers bonus if they refurbish houses with traditional materials. Any new house plans also need to be agreed by the company and the village committee. Traditionally, constructing a house is considered by the Dai as a crucial step towards an idealised order. The ritual of building a new house, locations of the sitting area, beds and doors for different family members and various heights of the platforms in a house confirmed the relationships between the household and nature, the supernatural, and the Dai society. These house categories which refer to the physical arrangement of the rooms and floor space all carry social meanings. They also derive meaning from certain features of social structure: the custom of initial uxorilocal residence and the frequent habitation of married daughter and son-in-law in the parental house¹². The preserved built environment will provide the physical environment for the meanings and symbolisms of the space to evolve for local residence.

Rojek has argued that "myth and fantasy play an unusually large role in the social construction of all travel and tourist sites"¹³. In the Dai society, myth and legend have already played important roles. For example, names of five natural villages in the park are still related to their own history and legends. The first village is called Man Jian, meaning a village that is good at bamboo collar. The story for the village name tells that Buddha was passing by the place, he wanted people to move some huge stones up to the hills in order to be seen by others. After a

number of failed attempts, the villagers finally found the way to pull the stones with bamboo collars up to the hill. The second village is called Man Chunmang, which means a village with gardens of flowers. Another village is called Man Za, meaning the chef village, because this village was responsible for playing the host for previous Dai king's guests. From 1180 to 1955, there were 44 hereditary *Chao Phaendin* in Xishuangbanna. *Chao Phaendin* connotes the Dai kings. The fourth village is called Man Ga, meaning marketing. The story tells that the village was set up by a Han Chinese from Hunan many years ago. Following him, other Han people moved into the village and brought with them the new cultivate methods, ways for doing businesses and other Han customs. Eventually the village set up regular markets for the surrounding villagers, and this was the reason that the village has been called marketing village. Man Tin was the village for growing flowers for the previous Dai Kings. Tin means stop. One of the stories about the name of the village tells that there used to be a large number of peacocks in the village that attracted people to stop and watch them¹⁴.

In the history, based on their social statues, villages assigned duties and co-operatively developed a model of interaction within a Mong, a larger district beyond the village. Egalitarianism within the social context of the daily life was a rule in the village. Members of the same class enjoyed identical benefits. They shared the same level of payment, land taxes, or labour service to their masters within the village level. A village thus was the basic local unit. Similarly, in Dai Zhu Yuan management system, despite of the commercial management system that tourism brought in, responsibilities for catering for tourists are still shared among five villages. For example, villagers in Man Chunman are responsible for guiding the tourists around the visiting routes and managing exhibitions of the Dai's daily life in bamboo houses. Man Za, the chef village, is responsible for home restaurants in villager' houses. Man Jian organise fruit and barbecue stores; Man Ga is responsible for performance and organisation of the Water Spread Event, and Man Jian villagers perform singing and dancing.

For tourists, the tropic natural environment is the most attractive experience that won't be found in other places. Within the preserved village environment, the exhibitions and performance have provided the popular mediate images of this different culture, however, the tourist services may have had no difference from those in other tourist destinies. When Snodgrass and Coyne wrote about otherness, they argued that "Architecture can deliver the unexpected, contradict its apparent intentions, defy customary typologies, render familiar, haunts strange, and provide non-places that are strangely familiar."¹⁵ The tourists who follow the guide around the fixed travelling routes and fixed times for different events will find that their experience do not relate to the built environment as much as those of villagers who live in the place. To know what cannot be seen will need their interpretation of the place that link to their own memories and nostalgia. Notar has argued that: "To reminisce means to remember something that one has experienced, whereas nostalgia, as it has come to be used, does not need to be based on actual experience."¹⁶ The various visiting groups, such as tourist groups, self-driven groups, researcher and student groups and the old educated youth groups, would have their own interpretations of the place, but will not gain unified final answers; that all the images and feelings will need to be interpreted in context; that people make meaning of utopia rather than discover it as a fixed entity. People understand a local setting through making links, interpreting contexts, and perceiving; and their understanding of the meanings of utopia could be differently interpreted in different times and places by different people.

Similarly for villagers themselves, it is more than merely providing popular media images of what Dai villages should be. They are living in the context of a tourist place. Veijola and Jokinen have argued about: "being-in-context, being-in-configuration, when you hear, see, smell, sense and taste, you are in a context, connected. Thoughts may wander around and emotions vary,

but a person has become a part of the unity, become a participant. You can even critical about the actual events taking place, but if you don't question the configuration itself you are part of it. You're not a tourist."¹⁷ The villagers are not visitors of the tourist park. They are part of the new development. When the tourists want to be local and party to the local stories, the villagers are not passive acceptor for the external influence. As Zheng and Feng have stated that "Today's Xishuangbanna will achieve the better off life at the same time as those in other parts of the country."¹⁸ In Dai Zhu Yuan, many young villagers were actively attending workshops to learn how to speak in Mandarins, to learn the ways to communicate with the tourists and basic accounting skills for managing a home restaurant.

Social changes may result in shifts in the perception and control of cosmologies. These changes brought by the tourism are not the only changes to the Dai society. In the Dai history, both Buddhism and Han culture from the central China has influenced the transformation of the Dai societies. Chinese scholars believe that the Theravada Buddhism entered China from the south during the eighth to ninth century. In the fifteenth century, during the Ming dynasty, the Buddhism became the fully established religion in its present tenets of all the Dai societies¹⁹. As early as the Yuan dynasty, Chinese imperial court adopted the method of appointing chiefs, headmen, and other kinds of aboriginal leaders of non-Han peoples to be officials on behalf of the Empire to rule their own people. According to Jiang, the ninth *Chao Phaendin*, Dao Kang, showed his obedience to the newly founded Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and was appointed as the indigenous official to rule his own people. In 1911, Xishuangbanna was set up as a prefecture by the central government in China; the 36th *Chao Phaendin*, Dao Enxi, was also appointed as the indigenous official²⁰. When Han culture and Buddhism entered into Xishuangbanna, they affected ruling class first, and then eventually refined and filtered into the village level²¹. Similar to the traditional religious beliefs, the contemporary interpretations and perceptions of the tourism influence can affect real social relationships within the society. It will be a long term research interest to look into the tourism impact in the preserved traditional houses and built environment in Dai Zhu Yuan and those in capital Jing Hong.

New development in Xishuangbanna

While visitors can embedded themselves in the dreams of exotic place, local people and local government are experience the extraordinary transformation of tourism industry. From 2000, Xishuangbanna is competing with other tourist areas in the province and those in the adjacent countries. It dropped to the fourth popular tourist site in the province. New plans have been made to developed a new district as a Dai and Tai culture park in Jing Hong to encourage tourist not only consume material goods, but to consume leisure experiences. Gao Zhuan Xi Shuang Jin is the name of the proposed new park, means 9 pagodas and 12 villages. According to Chunchen Evening Newspaper, it provides consumers with experience of not only Dai culture but a general Tai cultural in South East Asia. It will also provide leisure and holiday experience, and will act as a transfer station for passengers and business²² (Fig. 6).

The proposal for Gao Zhuan Xi Shuang Jin is to combine the consumers culture with local cultural experience, leisure and holiday, and transfer station for passengers, and shopping. Gao It extends within 1200 mu land in the new area of Jinhong, will cost 2000 million RMB, takimng 3 years to build the totally three phrases. It will include 6 villages and build a culture, tourism, leisure, and holiday and entertain park. The popular images of the park will go beyond Xishuangbanna to include those in other places of South East Asia countries. Newly established

tourist travelling routes have included tourist sites in those countries along the Lanchang River and Mekong River based on previous commercial and tourism cooperation in the region.

Airlines have long been established between Jing Hong in Xishuangbanna to Bangkok in Thailand and Luang Phrabang in Laos. In 2004, two tourist ferries carried out their first journey in the Mekong River to establish the visiting routes connecting four countries. The highway from Kunming to Bangkok was constructed in 2008, covering a distance of 1807 Km. On the first day of 2010, the China-ASEAN (China and Association of Southeast Asian Nations) free trade area came into effect. As the gateway from China to South Asian Nations, Xishuangbanna will take even more important role not only as a tourist area, but also as a business and trade centre. According to the Chunchen Evening Newspaper²³, the tourism projects has opened opportunities for other developments. In Xishuangbanna, during the first half of 2009, property investment account to 815.9million RMB, increased 52.33% compare to the same period in 2008. The increase of the property investment ranked number 4 within 16 prefectures and cities in Yunnan, according to government statistic numbers.

In this new development, a general culture of leisure and consume is promoted to connect to luxury hotels, cafes and tropical sun lights. It shares many common images with other tourist destinations in the world. This is very different from the cultural representations in publications of Dai myth and legends from the 1950s to 1980s.

Conclusion

In the first stage of the tourism development in Jing Hong, Feng Qing Yuan was built to exhibit the houses and lives of six minority nationalities living in the region. This is primarily for visitors to gaze and spectacle the local cultures. In the second stage, Dai Zhu Yuan has included the built environment of five natural villages that aims to provide visual and bodily experience for tourists. The Dai cultural representations entice millions to travel to Xishuangbanna; they portray Dai in different ways. The various visitors, including tourist groups, self-driven groups, researcher and student groups and the old educated youth groups, would have their own interpretations of the place, but will not gain unified final answers. All the images and feelings will be interpreted in context; that people make meaning of utopia rather than discover it as a fixed entity. People understand a local setting through making links, interpreting contexts, and perceiving; and their understanding of the meanings of utopia could be differently interpreted in different times and places by different people.

For local residence in Dai Zhu Yuan, the village remains the basic unit of the society. Some equal responsibilities are distributed within the five villages through the village committees. Village names are also maintained as a link to the myth, legend and history. In the development process, villagers are not passive acceptors of external influence. Villagers, who used to be farmers, are increasingly giving up the farming and working in the tourist industry as contract workers. Under the tourists' gaze and spectacle, villagers in the park organise the local performance for tourists, make the Dai handicraft for sell and cook the Dai food for visitors who live in their houses. At the same time in the same space, they are also carrying on with their own daily life. As Notar has argued in the case of another tourist area, Dali, in Yunnan province where "the boundaries between "mass culture" produced for the people and "popular culture" favored and/or produced by the people are often blurred."²⁴

At the third stage, the new development in Gao Zhuan Xi Shuang Jin has embedded the experience of local culture into the consumer culture. It has been designed with universal

recognizable luxury hotels, cafes and topical natural environment. When the economy developed in the region, it will be an even big challenge for Dai people not only to differentiate the traditional Dai culture in Xishuangbanna from its popular medial images, but also to keep its own identity from a generic consumer and leisure culture that has been advertised in many tropic tourist destinations.

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Figures and Illustrations:



Fig. 1. Buddhist Temple in Dai Zhu Yuan, built in 538.



Fig.2. Jing Hong in 1990.



Fig.3. Dai family restaurant in Jing Hong, 1990.



Fig. 4. Jing Hong in 2009.



Fig. 5. Dai house in Dai Zhu Yuan, 2009

