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Kendall, P.

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Paul Kendall
Between Big City and Authentic Village: Branding the Small Chinese City

Abstract:

While recent academic research has already produced an impressive corpus on big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, the small Chinese city has been mostly ignored. In this article, I suggest that consideration of the small city can bring a new perspective on the wider urban fabric of which it is an element. Although small city governments have embraced urban entrepreneurialism with the same enthusiasm as China's big cities, different configurations of space, branding and the everyday have nevertheless resulted. My case study of Kaili in Guizhou province indicates that the small city exists in a complex relationship with the big city and the village; it is pulled towards large-scale urbanization while simultaneously attempting to construct a unique city image based upon the evocation of rural cultural practices. The perspective from the small city thus suggests the need to consider the rural-urban divide – long a dominant geographical imagination of China – alongside other geographies, including a triad of the small city, the village and the big city.

What exactly does a small city have to do in order to get noticed? Kaili, a city in southwest China, has tried all kinds of promotional tactics in recent years, such as staging a self-proclaimed 'international' festival of local minority customs, featuring in the torch relay of the Beijing Olympics, and serving as the site for the relocation of a pavilion from the Shanghai 2010 Expo. And yet while there has been a proliferation of scholarly interest in the big Chinese cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, small cities such as Kaili continue to receive minimal attention, despite their own efforts, and despite academic awareness of the need to look beyond 'paradigmatic cases' of the urban form (Amin and Graham 1997, 411; Bell and Jayne 2006, 2). 'What about Huddersfield?' went the critique of spatial studies fixated on Los Angeles (Elden 1997, 48). What about the Chinese Huddersfields, whose combined populations constitute a substantial slice of the global urban experience?

In this article, I argue that our understanding of urban China could benefit from some consideration of the small city. My classification of 'small city' relies upon considerations of administrative ranking, representational power, city dynamism, and citizens' self-identification.[i]

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In administrative terms, all Chinese cities exist within a sophisticated five-tier hierarchy. The first tier consists of the four direct-controlled, provincial-level municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Tianjin. The second-tier is also a select group, of fifteen sub-provincial-level cities, including the likes of Shenzhen, Qingdao and Xi'an, as major urban centres which are located within provinces but enjoy significant autonomy from provincial government. Cities in these two elite tiers not only possess substantial administrative power, but also a high level of representational power, as nationally or even internationally famous places, which hold mega-events and receive varying degrees of scholarly attention. These are big cities, where concentrations of people, institutions and enterprises have produced a cosmopolitan dynamism that has come to represent all of urban China, through fast-cutting montages of the futuristic Shanghai skyline or time-lapse filming of the ever-active streets below. The relationship between representational power and dynamism is also two-way; a well-known city attracts ambitious enterprises and people, who in turn contribute to the bolstering of the city brand.

The third, fourth and fifth administrative tiers contain the vast majority of Chinese cities: third-tier prefecture-level cities come under the direct jurisdiction of provinces; fifth-tier county-level cities come under the jurisdiction of prefectures; and a small number of cities are sandwiched between these two tiers as sub-prefectural-level cities.[ii] In the upper echelons of these less administratively privileged places, many prefecture-level cities possess the necessary dynamism and representational clout to be classifiable as big cities. Guiyang, for example, is a big city, as the capital of Guizhou province and therefore nationally well-known, even if knowledge of the city's characteristics may be hazy. Furthermore, as a provincial capital, it is the default location of provincial-level government organs, as well as major cultural institutions (e.g. Guiyang Symphony Orchestra, Guizhou University).

In contrast, county-level Kaili – also located in Guizhou province – can be categorized as a small city. Not well known outside of Guizhou and neighbouring provinces – despite the branding efforts documented here – Kaili lacks the major cultural institutions that contribute to city dynamism. And most importantly, Kaili is home to inhabitants who tend to self-identify with a small-city lifestyle and to define this lifestyle – often positively – against that of big cities. This became obvious during the nine months of fieldwork which I conducted in the city, mainly during 2011 and 2012, and which consisted of participant observation in everyday leisure activities supplemented by 289 recorded unstructured interviews and textually-based research. Of the various themes, which emerged during participant observation,[iii] the most relevant to this article was local inhabitants' conceptualization of Kaili as a small city in relation to other settlement types. On the one hand, everyday conversation in Kaili referred to the slow pace of life,

cleanliness, and value for money of small cities in comparison to the stress, pollution and exorbitance of big cities. On the other hand, inhabitants described Kaili as urbanized, modernized and sinicized in comparison to the surrounding villages. The perspective from this small city thus suggests the co-existence of the rural-urban divide – long a dominant geographical imagination of China – alongside a triad of the small city, the village, and the big city.[iv] Moreover, this spatial triad can be detected not only in the everyday life of Kaili, but also wielded to analyze the city's branding and its conflicting relationships with both built environment and everyday life. In particular, it can help to explain why the promotional literature on Kaili – as the primary focus of this article – tends to oscillate, without warning, between the city proper and the official administrative boundaries of the city, which include huge swathes of rural territory.

If we live in an era of planetary urbanization, and there is 'no longer an *outside* to the urban world' (Brenner and Schmid 2014, 751), then perhaps it is unsurprising that branding might conflate villages with cities. Recent declarations of planetary urbanization (e.g. Merrifield 2013, Brenner and Schmid 2014) have been influenced by the works of Henri Lefebvre, including his notion of the urban fabric (see 1996, 71-3 [1968] and 2003, 3-4 [1970]), which is worth briefly revisiting. Not confined to agglomerations of goods, wealth, people and buildings, the urban fabric constitutes 'all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country', including vacation homes, highways and supermarkets in rural areas (Lefebvre 2003, 4 [1970]). While extending beyond urban centres, the urban fabric also erodes them, so that there can be no easily identifiable boundaries dividing the world into discrete urban and rural segments.

However, this urban fabric is also a 'net of uneven mesh' (Lefebvre 1996, 71 [1968]). Rather than constituting a single blanket category of urban homogenization to replace the discrete categories of rural and urban, Lefebvre's urban fabric suggests a complicated hotchpotch of settlement types. Old spaces do not usually just disappear in Lefebvre's geographical histories of the world, but are rather subsumed and dominated by new layers of space (e.g. 1991a, 164, 229 [1974]). Thus, a 'village' in this article does not indicate some pre-modern rural holdout, but rather a settlement, which still produces rural images and associations, despite having been permeated by urban processes. In the case of Kaili, the villages of its administrative periphery are part of the urban fabric for the very reason that their rural images and associations have been co-opted by urban-based authorities for branding purposes. With his notion of the urban fabric, Lefebvre does not specifically refer to this extension of urban branding into rural areas. However, it is unsurprising that a largely Europe-bound theory of the twentieth century might itself have to be extended in order to accommodate the conditions of a small city in contemporary China.

In identifying settlement categories within the urban fabric, I am mindful of Jennifer Robinson's (2006) postcolonial critique, which argues that we should simply treat all cities as ordinary, and condemns any categorization of cities. To replace the old Western/Third World city binary with a new form of disciplinary fragmentation based on considerations of scale is certainly not the intention here. But does actual discrimination end when conceptual categories are abolished? Following her critique of existing categories, Robinson (2006, chap. 3) outlines a more inclusive 'cosmopolitan urban studies' in order 'to decouple the modern from its privileged association with the West', with accompanying case studies of New York, Rio de Janeiro, Kuala Lumpur, Lusaka, and Johannesburg. Yet while this list successfully straddles the West/Third World divide, these cities are all national centres of economy, culture and/or politics. It might therefore require initial recognition of the categories of big and small city in order to produce a collection of case studies which better represents the diversity of settlements within the urban fabric: New York, Huddersfield, Huế, Liupanshui and Salvador, for example.

The Rural, the Industrial and the Urban in Kaili

In terms of China-specific literature, conclusions based almost exclusively upon big city experience are limited rather than irrelevant to the study of a small city. Most usefully, existing literature has noted China's policy shift from industrialism to urbanism (Hsing 2010, 19), including the interlinked emergence of city branding (e.g. Oakes 2000; Brownell 2001), staging of mega-events (e.g. Broudehoux 2007; Shin 2012), and transformation of the built environment (e.g. Ma and F. Wu 2005; Lu 2006; F. Wu 2009). Both big and small city governments have embraced urban entrepreneurialism with enthusiasm, while the industrialism-to-urbanism shift has been particularly pronounced in Kaili. Prior to significant urbanization, the Kaili municipal area experienced early development as a part of the Third Front, a massive industrial project which operated between 1964 and 1978. With the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership anxious about the vulnerability of coastal industry in the event of foreign invasion, the Third Front was established as a military industrial zone over some of the most inaccessible terrain of inland China. The small settlement of Kaili subsequently found itself surrounded by self-contained and centrally-directed 'rusticated factories' (Naughton 1988, 383), as industrial work units and their workers relocated from big cities to the Third Front region. The concomitant development of transportation infrastructure linked these factories together, as well as facilitating the construction of local-run factories (Gu 1989, 264; Ni 1997, 3). However, by the time of my fieldwork, many Third Front and local-run factories had already been swallowed by an expanding Kaili city, while other factories lay in ruins on the city outskirts, awaiting transformation into

private apartment buildings or other spaces of consumption. This industrial legacy is almost absent from contemporary city branding, given the nationwide shift away in emphasis from industrialism towards city-based consumerism, as well as the fact that the Third Front was once shrouded in secrecy as a military project, and is posthumously shrouded in shame as a wasteful failure.

Images of polluting and homogenous industrial spaces also conflict with Kaili's contemporary branding as a tourist destination where people can escape the stress of the big city and experience authentic minority culture rooted in rural place. Monikers attached to Kaili, such as the 'homeland of 100 festivals' and 'ocean of song and dance' (e.g. KSSX 2010, 60), refer to the festivals of minority groups, who have long been associated with the most remote and rural parts of China, rather than industrial production. The promotion of such festivals exploits a domestic, and even global, fascination with the cultures of China's 55 official minorities – especially those in the southwest – that anthropologist Louisa Schein (1997) has termed 'internal orientalism'. Within this discourse, the minority is depicted as young, female, rural and close to nature, in contrast to the modern, male urbanite of the Han majority. This depiction can be observed across a wide array of formats, from backpacker guides to televised national singing competitions, where minorities are celebrated for their supposed innate talent in the performance of authentic traditions.

In contrast, it was sometimes not so much a matter of celebrating minority cultures as absorbing them into a uniform factory culture during the later years of the Mao era. Despite the state's relatively tolerant approach to ethnic diversity in the 1950s, older perceptions of minorities as primitive remained socially embedded, producing the belief that the Han Chinese needed to help minorities 'catch up' on the road to socialism.[v] With the onset of the post-Mao era, these continued assumptions about the primitive authenticity of minority culture have been exploited by Kaili in its new guise as a tourist destination. At the same time, Deng Xiaoping's market reforms contributed to the terminal decline of once crucial industrial units, whose inaccessibility became a hindrance only to economic efficiency rather than invading enemies. The post-Mao era has thus seen something of a reversal in the fortunes of minority and industrial cultures, as well as their representation, so that the contemporary branding of Kaili stresses rural minority customs while eliding the region's industrial history.

Figure 1: An abandoned Third Front factory unit behind ethnicized walls.
Photograph: Paul Kendall

Comment [ar1]: shouldn't this be plural? or 'in such a rural place'

Comment [PK2]: I have used the singular to indicate that this is an idealized and abstract rural place which cannot possibly exist in modern China.

In its preservation and depiction of rural minority customs, the small city of Kaili largely departs from trends of heritage and place promotion found in the big cities of China. Significant scholarly effort has been devoted to documenting urban heritage in cities such as Beijing and Xi'an, including critiques of urban heritage as piecemeal and powerless in the face of marketization and modernization (Wang 2000), as a strategy for gentrification and the promotion of real estate (Shin 2010), and as a means towards the inscription of nationalistic fervour on to the built environment (Broudehoux 2004). In contrast, Kaili is notable for the absence of local efforts to preserve and promote actual city districts. This is not only because it lacks the ancient alleyways and walls of a Beijing or Xi'an, or the colonial architecture of a Shanghai or Qingdao, having been largely constructed from the 1950s onwards. Rather, the very presence of a substantial city area poses a problem for the ethnic-oriented tourist image of Kaili, since minority culture in China is typically associated with the village rather than the city.[vi] Branding therefore attempts to convey a certain rural flavour. Yet at the same time, local government has striven to transform Kaili into a big city – and discredit the association of minority regions with rural backwardness – with the aim of constructing an urban area of 800km^2 by 2015, to be inhabited by a population of 600,000 (Y. Yang 2009, 1; D. Wu, Z. Yang, and G. Wu 2011, 1). This process of urbanism began during the mid-1990s and gathered pace during the early 2000s, with the instigation of a 'civilizing project' geared towards the facilitation of traffic, the development of urban infrastructure, the ordering of the populace and the sanitization of streets. In a sense, this process has been coherently aligned with the desire to create a clean and well-ordered tourist destination. However, it has also created a dense city environment at odds with the rural qualities associated with minority customs, which constitute the main tourist attraction. During fieldwork, I also found the urbanized environment to be inhabited by many individuals who declared themselves sinicized 'fake' minorities, and who insisted that there were no minority practices of note within Kaili itself, as a consequence of urbanization. For local residents, the city produced modernity rather than ethnicity.

The attempt to develop unique city images alongside a relatively homogenous urban infrastructure is perhaps the key contradiction of urbanism for many up-and-coming cities in China. In a welcome article on another small Chinese city, Marc Blecher (2008, 177) noted the desire of a local official for the attainment of 'middle-sized city' status. While a county-level city such as Kaili has no realistic expectation of obtaining 'global' or 'world' city status, climbing a rank within China's administrative hierarchy is a more achievable goal, which brings political prestige to local leaders as well as economic gains. However, for a city which relies on the promotion of ethnic tourism for development, attempts to improve economic and administrative

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status create profound conflicts between branding, the built environment and everyday life. As befits a tourist destination, the branding of Kaili has stressed minority customs located in rural place. As befits an ambitious and competitive city, the increasingly modern built environment of Kaili has been mostly antithetical to such branding portrayals.

A Strategy of Synecdoche: Ethnic Spectacles

Kaili's branding produces associations with rural minority customs despite ongoing urbanization through the combination of at least two strategies, only one of which has received extensive analysis in existing academic literature. The first strategy is the physical branding of absolute space, which is somewhat comparable to the 'strategy of synecdoche' outlined by Doreen Massey (2007), but with a particular focus on the construction of ethnicized public spaces. The second strategy is an altogether more curious affair, as a blurring of urban centre and rural periphery in promotional literature which has been facilitated by linguistic vagueness and the spatial-administrative qualities of China's municipalities.

When Massey wrote about a strategy of synecdoche, she was mainly referring to the branding of the city economy, and specifically the promotion of the financial industry as if it was London's *only* industry (2007, 41–2). Although the relevant book, *World Cities*, did not devote significant consideration to how this strategy is also extended to the built environment, the process is clear enough; financial sites (e.g. the Bank of England, Canary Wharf) and tourist attractions (the Tower of London, Millennium Bridge) are separated from their surroundings and fused together to represent the whole. These spectacles are all located within the centre of London, or constructed close to the centre in a way that their location may slightly reposition the centre in popular imagination. Outer suburbs such as Bromley and Bexley, meanwhile, are as invisible as the less affluent inner city areas of Lambeth and Southwark.

Kaili's relationship with its periphery is an entirely different matter, but it is first worth considering how a local government can exploit the relatively low built density of a small city to construct central public spaces which bolster the city image. In order to facilitate the presentation of Kaili as a tourist destination, public spaces have been constructed in a style intended to evoke minority culture. These spaces are photographed, separated from their immediate, ordinary surroundings and then assembled alongside each other in promotional literature, to convey the impression of Kaili as the homeland of 100 festivals. In the next few paragraphs, I describe some of these spaces, the impetus for their construction, and their operation in conjunction with occasional government-led festive events.

Since Kaili's designation as a prefectural capital in the 1950s, the busy junction of Dashizi has constituted its infrastructural heart. As recently as the 1980s, its roundabout island doubled as a small garden, with a white pagoda at its centre. However, a local newspaper contributor in the mid-1980s considered this pagoda a blemish rather than an adornment, on account of its toy-like size; 'Could the pagoda not be transformed into something bigger, which also reflects our homeland's special [i.e. minority] characteristics?', asked the contributor (Pan 1985, 2). This question was not properly answered until 1996, by which time small inland cities had become far more aware of the need to brand themselves, with the construction of a giant statue of a musical instrument in place of the pagoda. The instrument depicted was a *lusheng*, a free-reed wind instrument described by academics, tourist organizations and Kaili residents as a cultural marker of the local Miao minority. This giant *lusheng* was additionally encircled by a grey-white band and three slabs designed to represent bull horns, since water buffalo fighting is also associated with the Miao minority. The statue's location at the heart of the city was attributed to its status as the 'soul of the highlands' by local literature, which declared that it encapsulated the essence of the city and the wider prefecture through the representation of minority culture (Long 1996, 2; *Qiandongnan ribao* 2009, 8).

Figures 2 and 3: The Dashizi lusheng statue occupied the city centre during fieldwork, but sightings of actual lusheng were relatively rare. Photographs: Paul Kendall

Despite the central prominence of this giant *lusheng*, an article in a provincial CCP journal at the turn of the century criticized the general lack of minority-style architecture in Kaili and other nearby cities (Zhou and Xia 2002). The article complained that buildings were grey, simplistic, cheap, multi-storey affairs, with a lack of 'landmark architecture', while the air was saturated with the smells of industry: 'Apart from Kaili's Dashizi, with its *lusheng* statue carved out of marble, there are basically no buildings or statues in these cities with special characteristics, and it is even harder to find a trace of minority culture' (Zhou and Xia 2002, 72). In order to remedy this situation, the writers stated the need for the creation of leisure spaces which could reflect minority customs (Zhou and Xia 2002, 74).

Subsequent years saw the construction of a number of public spaces with minority characteristics, including squares, a stadium, and even bus stops. The surfaces of squares were embellished with a pattern of circles within circles, in depiction of a Miao copper drum, while bus stops were topped with representations of Miao silver head-dresses. Most spectacular of all was the Nationalities Stadium, whose scale made the older areas of Kaili look like those of a

matchbox city, and whose structure incorporated the architecture of a 'wind-and-rain bridge', a covered construction associated with the Dong, another local minority.

Therefore, within just a few years of the critical assessment of the CCP journal, Kaili could claim to possess a number of central leisure spaces with ethnic flavour (SB and SRZB 2007, 3; KSSX 2010, 61). Local government conceived of these spaces as both providers of leisure facilities and marketers of the city (KSGGJ 2008, 4; *Qiandongnan ribao* 2008, 6). A building such as the Nationalities Stadium subsequently operates within two spatial dimensions: surrounded by the traffic, pedestrians and leisure activity of everyday life; and surrounded by other examples of branded space in promotional photomontages of the city. In the latter dimension, these buildings and their images have conveyed a misleading impression of everyday life in Kaili. No-one viewing these photos without supporting knowledge could guess that the local pastimes are *mahjong*, line dancing, ballroom dancing, karaoke, night markets, and drinking, rather than *lusheng* dancing and antiphonal singing. This distortion has been achieved through synecdoches of both space and time; photos of ethnic architecture function most effectively when these buildings serve as the backdrop for temporary and occasional performances of ethnicity during organized performances.[vii] Extracted from clock-time by photography, these costume-led spectacles become permanent to give the impression that life in Kaili is just one long ethnic festival.

By itself, this construction of attractive central spaces for the purposes of branding does not entirely distinguish Kaili from big Chinese cities. Similar to the likes of Beijing, small cities are also starting to suffer from constraints of space in their centres, so that new spectacles can only be constructed through land grabs, the destruction of older monuments, or the creation of new urban districts. The effects of a tightening built environment was seen in Kaili in early 2014, with the demolishment of the *lusheng* state at Dashizi, as what once seemed like an immovable object of branding yielded to the irresistible force of infrastructural demands, with crippling traffic jams in recent years facilitating the need for a larger intersection. This occurrence demonstrates that even synecdoches are fluid; newer ethnic spectacles have mostly been built in the relatively new southern district of Kaili, as the city expands to the south and west. However, as the following section argues, the branding of Kaili does not only rely upon ethnic architecture in the city centre, but also draws upon the villages of a rural periphery. The result is a somewhat confusing blurring of centre and periphery, city and village.

The Blurring of Centre and Periphery

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The strategy of synecdoche outlined in the previous section has been an intentional effort to create a specific image of Kaili through the construction of ethnicized public spaces. In contrast, the accompanying blurring of periphery and centre is perhaps more a consequence of linguistic and administrative idiosyncrasies than intentional manipulation. I illustrate this branding strategy through reference to a short article written by the propaganda department of the Kaili city party committee (KSSX 2010). The two-page article adheres to a spatial template common to much of the promotional literature on Kaili. It begins by situating Kaili geographically and listing official titles, for example mentioning that Kaili is a prefectural capital and an outstanding tourist city/town.[viii] Following this introduction, the article focuses on minority customs, with sections on festivals, the *lusheng*, and bull-fighting, all of which are located in Kaili. But what is this Kaili in which these customs are located? The first section to follow the introduction, entitled 'The homeland of one hundred festivals', begins by describing Kaili as a 'multi-*minzu* city/town'; the Chinese word '*chengshi*' is even more nebulous than the concept of 'city', but it does unequivocally denote an urban settlement. There are no population statistics in the introduction, so it is difficult at this point, assuming no prior knowledge on the part of the reader, to deduce the spatial specifics of Kaili from the text alone. However, a fuzzy panoramic photo of Kaili, surrounded by mountains, appears at the top of the page, carrying the caption 'highland style' (*gaoyuan fengcai*). Scrutiny of both text and photo should therefore lead to the tentative conclusion that Kaili is a small city.

In many ways, this conclusion is correct, Kaili *is* a small city. However, it is also a municipality (*shi*). Specifically, it is one of many municipalities created during the 1980s, when changes to administrative rules meant that the boundaries of new municipalities encompassed the entire county areas that they replaced, rather than just those of an existing urban centre (Chan 1994: 26–7). As a consequence, Kaili municipality came to include not only a small urban centre, around Dashizi, but also a huge rural periphery. This process of urbanization through administration contrasts sharply with that of early post-socialist Russia, for example, where many small urban settlements were downgraded to rural status in order to circumnavigate restrictions on the privatization of urban land, as well as benefit from lower prices of electricity, gas and other commodities (Molodikova and Makhrova 2007, 55).

According to official terminology, 'Kaili *shi*' refers to Kaili municipality. However, the '*shi*' may also be dropped, so that a reference to 'Kaili' could refer to either the city proper or the entire municipality. Following initial references to Kaili as a 'city' (*chengshi*), the text draws attention to Kaili's reputation as the homeland of 100 festivals, and in doing so, shifts its scope from the city to the 1,306km^2 of the municipality, across which is a claimed average

of one festival every 10km^2. The space of the municipality is homogenized with this statistic, with no indication of any disparity between city and village. There is no direct announcement to indicate that the article has shifted from city proper to municipality; no usage of the word '*shi*', just a reference to 1,306km^2, which would seem far too large (if read carefully) to be a city.

A couple of sentences later, the article does refer to the fact that different *villages* hold their festivals at different dates. This is a more spatially specific statement, and yet it is made primarily to assure tourists that there is a good chance of encountering a festival no matter when they come to 'Kaili'. This statement could refer to either Kaili municipality or city. The reference to villages makes the former seem more likely, yet the fact that the article labels itself as an introduction to the 'city/town' (*chengshi*) of Kaili – carrying the subheading 'city soul' and without a single reference to 'Kaili *shi*' (municipality) – also makes the latter a coherent possibility. The article then mentions the most famous local festival, the 'China: Kaili Gannangxiang International Lusheng Festival'. The article does not immediately explain where this festival is held, but the answer is contained in the name: the festival is held simultaneously in both Kaili city *and* Gannangxiang, a *lusheng* arena in Zhouxi town (*zhen*), located in the wider Kaili municipality.

As the article progresses on to a second page, there is a clearer focus on the visually rural spaces of Kaili municipality under a section entitled 'Rural tourism overflows with *minzu* flavour'. There is even mention of a specific space, Nanhua village, as a popular tourist destination. Finally, the article returns to the city itself, with references to centrally located architecture such as the Nationalities Stadium. The article clearly situates these buildings within the main neighbourhood districts of Kaili city (*Kaili chengqu zhuyao jiedao*). This section also contains a sentence referring to the 'authentic ethnic culture' of 'Kaili'. This would seem to be a reference to the wider Kaili municipality, yet the context suggests otherwise: the section is entitled 'City architecture embodies Miao and Dong culture'; and the specific sentence states that authentic ethnic culture is one of the reasons why Kaili deserves the name of 'international tourist city'. The section then stresses the need to increase the pace of city construction by fusing economic development with cultural tourism. In spatial summary, the article begins with the city, expands to the municipality to include various rural minority customs, and then returns to the city.

Photographs accompanying the article include pictures of the Nationalities Stadium and a picturesque village, to offer a good example of how the strategy of synecdoche works alongside the blurring of centre and periphery. The photo of the ethnicized city stadium conveys a definite impression of minority culture. However, a more convincing representation of Kaili as the location of rural minority customs is offered by photos of Miao villages in the wider municipal area. Combine the two, and Kaili begins to look like the homeland of 100 festivals.

This blurring of centre and periphery is not confined to a single article and its photos. For example, an article in the publication *China Place Name* unequivocally describes Kaili as a 'city which possesses thick ethnic flavour, with a rich abundance of ethnic craftsmanship, festivals and song-and-dance' (Xiao 2008, 38). In a further example, an article in a party journal uses a stock phrase for texts on Kaili, describing it as 'a Miao-dominated multi-ethnic city, thick with ethnic customs' (Chen 2003, 32). And yet this is also a text which celebrates the transformation of Kaili into a 'civilized city' through the imposition of orderly urbanization, that is, the imposition of qualities which are at odds with the common assumption in China that minority customs exist in pre-modern rural place.

The blurred wording of many such descriptions contributed substantially to some of my own confused expectations about Kaili, which were later resolved by the direct experience of urban space. Having seen photos of villages and Miao-style public spaces, I was somewhat nonplussed by the environment I encountered upon first arriving in Kaili for fieldwork, first at the train station, in a gritty part of the city, and then as I travelled through the centre by taxi. Superficially, Kaili looked, sounded and smelled like just any other Chinese city, with an excess of traffic, piped music and high-rise buildings. On the one hand, I had anticipated this, having already collected a fair amount of statistical data which indicated that references to the city as 'thick with ethnic customs' might not be accurate portrayals. However, I had still somehow simultaneously harboured the expectation that Kaili would have maintained a certain rural ethnic flavour.

Figure 4: Looking down on Kaili city, approximately five kilometres from Dashizi.
Photograph: Paul Kendall

Beyond being spatially elusive, promotional literature also plays tricks with time. *Lusheng* festivals, also known as *lusheng* meets, are an essential part of Kaili's tourism promotion. Such festivals combine all of the exotic cultural activities associated with the Miao into one spectacle, with *lusheng* dancing, unaccompanied singing, courting, costume ritual and bull-fighting. Henri Lefebvre (1991b, 202, 207 [1958]) argued that festivals are intensifications of everyday life, rather than operating outside of everyday life. The difference between festivals and everyday life is therefore a partially relative one. If there was a festival every day, then there would be no detectable variation in the intensity of life, and thus no day would be identifiable as a festival day. For Lefebvre, a festival everyday would be akin to a 'permanent cultural revolution' (1971, 38, 194 [1968]),[ix] but this is not quite the notion the branding of Kaili wishes to convey! More prosaically, a travel destination needs to attract tourists all year round, rather than for just one or

Comment [ar11]: again: placeS (plural)

Comment [PK12]: See above.

two festive days. Kaili has therefore attempted to promote itself, like many tourist cities, as a place 'where an unceasing flow of events constantly unfolds' (Judd and Fainstein 1999: 4), through the strategy of expanding the parameters of branding to include the festivals of a substantial rural hinterland.

By itself, the settlement of Kaili has never hosted more than a handful of festivals during the PRC era. References to 100 or more festivals rely on the aforementioned strategy of blurring space, by expanding without announcement from Kaili city to Kaili municipality. Moreover, different settlements within the wider municipality tend to hold the same festival at different times. One village will host the festival for a few days, before it moves on to the next village, and so on. The festival thus maintains its relative intensity over normal everyday life by moving from settlement to settlement. Such a festival can be counted in the plural for branding purposes. Similarly, the number of festivals is swollen by the fragmented nature of the Miao group, with sub-groups celebrating different events. For example, the main festivities around the Zhouxi town (*zhen*) administrative area took place in the first lunar month, in accordance with the Chinese New Year. In contrast, a village in the Sankeshu town administrative area primarily celebrated the so-called Miao New Year, which occurred during the tenth lunar month. Thus, the vast majority of these festivals take place at the same time, during the first month of the lunar year. This is the worst possible season from the perspective of tourism, as a time when the area is damp and cold. The effects of climate are exacerbated by the lack of central heating in south China. However, the temporal concentration of festive activity into a winter month disappears as soon as festivals are reduced into a simple per annum statistic. Just as space is homogenized with the claim of one festival every 10km², so time is homogenized with the claim that there is 'a small festival every day, and a big festival every three days' (e.g. *Qiandongnan ribao* 2006: 11; KSSX 2010: 60).

Concluding Remarks: The Small City, Centrality and the Everyday

Rather than China's era of urbanism being simply one of 'cities leading counties' in economic development (see Cartier [2005, 26–7] for a description of this policy), Kaili's branding suggests a more complicated relationship between the village, the small city and the big city. The small city of Kaili is caught between a need to satisfy the perceived demands of big city tourists for rural authenticity and a desire to urbanize its way up the domestic administrative hierarchy of cities. This paradox of urban development and rural evocation indicates a relationship between urban centre and rural periphery, which does not entirely accord with typical discourses of centre and periphery. As described by Carolyn Cartier (2013, 79-80), the periphery is typically pronounced backward by the centre, and expected to emulate the centre in order to catch up. In

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contrast, the urban centre of Kaili relies on the rural imagery of its periphery for branding. There is therefore the need for the periphery to preserve the appearance of rural minority culture rather than emulate the modernization of the centre, in order to facilitate appropriate branding.

While there is no space here for detailed ethnographic description, it should be stressed that oppositions of urban and rural, and of centre and periphery, did not blur in the everyday life of Kaili in the way that they did within the language of branding. Indeed, the strength of everyday symbolism attached to Kaili's centre undermines Lefebvre's assertion in *Right to the City* (1996, 73 [1968]) that the urban fabric and centrality are opposites, and that urban centres have gone into decline to become little more than tourist destinations for those who once lived in them. Andy Merrifield (2011, 475–8; 2012, 275–6) has critiqued Lefebvre's ideas of the city and centrality in previous issues of CITY, noting that people can create absolute new centres elsewhere when old centres have become zones of exclusion. The perspective from a small Chinese city is again somewhat different, since the absolute centre itself was a site of contested meaning, as local inhabitants created their own conceptualizations of what their city symbolized. In contrast to the image of Kaili as the homeland of 100 festivals, local acquaintances constantly stressed to me that the centre lacked cultural practices worthy of research, and that I should instead head to the rural periphery, where I could study the culturally authentic music of 'genuine peasants'. Rather than understanding the likes of the Dashizi *lusheng* statue as representative of the city's ethnic character, citizens simply used these central spectacles as points of entertainment and orientation in the navigation of urban everyday life; in an amusing example from a local newspaper, one Mr Chen mourned the destruction of the *lusheng* statue since it had served as his directional marker after heavy drinking sessions (Luo 2013, A13).

Figure 5: Everyday customs in Kaili city: a singing busker performs beneath the Dashizi statue. Photograph: Paul Kendall

Finally, there was also a partial reconfiguration of the hierarchical relationship between small city and big city within the realm of everyday life in Kaili. Local acquaintances were quick to recommend rural cultural practices to visitors from the big cities, without themselves being enthusiastic consumers. To an extent, they were humouring visitors such as myself, whether from London or Beijing, when they waxed lyrical about minority customs, as something which might impress inexperienced outsiders, but in which they had no personal interest. If big city visitors were the consumers of rural minority practices, those who lived in Kaili were close enough to

know the product, but not so close that they themselves would generally engage in such rural practices, given their urban status.

Such are the contradictions of this small city, as it defines itself against the village while utilizing rural imagery for branding purposes, and as it defines itself against the big city while attempting to climb China's urban hierarchy. Such contradictions of self-definition emerge in part because small cities are caught between two dominant images of China, as a nation of either timeless villages or either futuristic metropolis. It is helped that further study of small cities can complicate this rural-urban binary and introduce a third perspective on China, from where it is possible to reconsider urban processes which are universally present but which do not necessarily yield universal forms or experiences of the urban fabric.

Paul Kendall is a lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Westminster. His research interests include social space, music and sound, small cities, ethnicity, tourism, and authenticity. Email: p.kendall1@westminster.ac.uk

[i] My notions of representational power and self-identification are somewhat comparable with Bell and Jayne's consideration of what constitutes a small city. Rather than representational power, Jayne and Bell point to the importance of a city's reach and influence (Bell and Jayne 2006, 4-5). In regard to self-identification, smallness appears to be regarded as an entirely negative trait by Bell and Jayne, who state that 'small meant small-minded more than small-sized' in cities such as Stoke-on-Trent, and 'You are only as small as you think you are - or as other cities make you feel' (2006, 3, 5). Conversely, the view from Kaili suggests that smallness can be regarded by residents as a positive trait in a city.

[ii] While F. Wu et al. (2007, 124-5) describe this five-tier hierarchy, it is also common to omit the sub-prefectural- and sub-provincial levels, leaving a basic three-tier system of provincial-, prefectural- and county-level cities.

[iii] See Kendall 2014 for a description of early fieldwork and the emergence of other fieldwork themes.

[iv] The rural-urban divide is a thoroughly entrenched geographical imagining of China, having been administratively solidified by the household registration system in 1958, which divided the population into two categories: agricultural and non-agricultural. However, a second aspect of the household registration was a more specific designation of location (e.g. Beijing, Tianjin, Kaili). There has therefore always been a more sophisticated spatial hierarchy co-existing alongside the basic rural-urban divide, with big city registration more prestigious than small city registration. See Fan (2007, chap. 3) for details on the household registration system).

[v] See Harrell (1995) for a description of the Confucian civilizing efforts aimed at minorities before the establishment of the PRC, and how the CCP inherited Confucian assumptions about primitive minorities.

[vi] The link between minority heritage and national identity is also quite different to the feelings of nationalism stoked by historical sites such as Yuanmingyuan (see Broudehoux 2004, chapter 3). As described by Schein (1997), minorities are simultaneously represented as an important element within the (multicultural) Chinese nation *and* as a exotic, almost foreign counterpoint to the Han nation.

[vii] The combination of landmark buildings and mega-events has already been noted by Briavel Holcomb (1999, 58), the difference being that Kaili has elected to create its own 'international' events, given the impossibility of a small Chinese city successfully competing for the Summer Olympics or World Expo.

[viii] 'Outstanding tourist city' is an official title which was awarded to Kaili by the National Tourism Administration of the PRC in 2004 (Li, Xu, and Wang 2008).

[ix] As well as arguing that festivals could not be considered separate from everyday life, Lefebvre asserted the wild frenzy of the peasant festival was the antithesis of the modern everyday, and could be harnessed to achieve 'a transfiguration of everyday life' (1971, 38 [1968]). The first argument, about the inseparability of festivals from everyday life, is more relevant to Kaili, whose festivals did not seem during my fieldwork to be likely catalysts for radical social change.

[x] Whether tourists from the big cities are actually in search of the authentic is ~~certainly~~ debatable (see Oakes 2005, 183-4), but there is certainly a belief in Kaili that cosmopolitan types are authenticity-seekers.

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NB official Chinese-English translations in round brackets, own translations in square brackets where official translations are not available.

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