

## **The role of self-gentrification in sustainable tourism:**

### **Indigenous entrepreneurship at Honghe Hani Rice Terraces World Heritage Site, China**

#### Abstract:

This article examines three forms of tourism gentrification within the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces UNESCO World Heritage Site in Yunnan, China. The Indigenous Hani and Yi communities who populate this remote mountainous area possess distinct cultural practices that have supported the rice terrace ecosystem for centuries. This article uses interviews and non-participant observation conducted with inhabitants and newcomers to analyse the gentrification within the site. We argue that Indigenous cultural practices, and consequently rice cultivation in the area, are threatened by gentrifier-led and state-led gentrification, combined with high levels of outward migration of Indigenous persons. This poses a significant threat to the sustainability of tourism there, to the survival of the traditions and culture of the Indigenous inhabitants and could compromise the site's World Heritage Status. Some Indigenous people are, however, improving their socio-economic standing – and becoming “middle class” or “gentry” – particularly through adopting entrepreneurial strategies gleaned from their encounters with outside-gentrifiers and tourists. This article proposes the concept of “self-gentrification” as a way to describe individuals who seek to improve themselves and their own communities, while threatened by gentrification, and offers ways to promote that concept to help conserve both heritage landscapes and Indigenous ways of life.

**Keywords:** self-gentrification; Indigenous; entrepreneurship; tourism gentrification; sustainability; World Heritage Site.

## **Introduction**

On 22 June 2013 UNESCO inscribed the Honghe Hani Rice Terraces in Yunnan province in southern China (hereafter ‘Honghe WHS’) as a Cultural-landscape World Heritage Site. The designation refers to an area primarily populated by Indigenous Hani and Yi ethnic minority peoples who carved the mountain slopes into large swathes of spectacular rice terraces. The area’s remoteness means local communities still observe cultural practices which differ from the main Chinese Han ethnic group. Rice-terrace cultivation is an integral part of their cultural practices, with ‘vernacular knowledge’ ensuring the sustainability of the system, maintaining the balance between agriculture and the natural environment. This harmonious co-existence is the main reason cited for the UNESCO inscription (UNESCO, 2013). Local people therefore celebrated the global recognition of their culture that the inscription represented, and are excited about what this could hold for the future of both themselves and their rice terraces.

Prior to the inscription, Honghe WHS had gained a significant domestic and international reputation as a tourist destination, with visitor numbers steadily increasing from 32,000 in 2009 to over 140,000 in 2012 (Chan, Zhang, McDonald & Qi 2016). Inscription has created an expectation that such growth will continue exponentially. However, amidst this change, the Indigenous communities have also been experiencing severe outward migration of young people to neighbouring cities for work (Chan et al., 2016), albeit reflecting a general trend across rural China (see Cai, Park, & Zhao, 2008). This exodus raises concern over loss of local cultural knowledge and practices, especially those related to rice cultivation. The influx of tourists and tourism operators further escalates these concerns particularly in displacing Indigenous families and converting traditional dwellings for tourism purposes, both of which are typical phenomena of change and “gentrification”. This article proposes a new concept of ‘self-gentrification’ which describes how long-term residents can respond to gentrification in a proactive manner that benefits them, while also ensuring a sustainable future for the WHS.

“Gentrification” is used here to understand the process of social transformation in the WHS. This concept is especially useful for understanding situations where in-

migration puts pressure on native groups, increasing living costs and changing land use, land values and housing stock use. While the term “gentrification” was not literally used by the participants of this study, it has been widely applied to describe similar processes in China (du Cros, Bauer, Lo, & Rui, 2005; Gu & Ryan, 2012; Su, 2012; Qian, He, & Liu, 2013), and the authors believe it helpful in understanding phenomena occurring in Honghe WHS.

This article also contributes to Indigenous tourism studies by highlighting gentrification in the context of specific Indigenous minority groups and asks whether a gentrified Honghe WHS can be sustainable. It contrasts a number of different forms of gentrification occurring in the area, discussing the impact on sustainability for each. Despite many examples of successful gentrification in touristic market towns in both China (Su, 2012; Xu & Han, 2013) and elsewhere (Smith, 2002, p. 439), this article argues that tourism gentrification would not be sustainable in the Honghe WHS because of the inter-connectedness of the local population and the rice terraces. The absence of the Indigenous people caused by gentrification would likely result in degradation of the rice terraces, which are the main tourist attraction. The article also raises the wider universal issues of tourism’s tendency to introduce social and, in this case, cultural change. Some of these changes are especially pressing for Indigenous communities worldwide, many of which have until recently governed their lives and economies in a collective, traditional and ecologically friendly way, and can find the often neo-liberal pressures of tourism to be challenging (see, for example, Hillmer-Pegram, 2016).

### **Gentrification and its agents**

The term gentrification was coined by Glass (1964) to describe a process of changes in housing stock that took place in Islington, London, following demand from incoming middle class persons, resulting in a loss of housing provision for the original working class people of the area. Glass viewed the displacement of long-term residents – most of whom belonged to deprived or disadvantaged communities – as an injustice. Since then, gentrification in city neighbourhoods has been extensively studied by researchers and practitioners in many fields, while retaining its distinctly moralistic flavour.

This article adopts a more inclusive definition of gentrification, applying the concept to study similar phenomena in non-urban settings such as rural (Phillips, 1993; Hines, 2010) and market towns (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990; Smith & DeFilippis, 1999; Su, 2012; Xu & Han, 2011). In doing so, it opens a new area of study, both in Asia and worldwide, and especially in the study of Indigenous tourism.

Hackworth (2002, p. 815) defines gentrification as “the production of space for progressively more affluent users” resulting in the gradual, indirect displacement of long-term residents. This definition is broader than the conventional meaning of “gentrification” used to describe the process of middle class colonization in disinvested urban neighbourhoods, resulting in changes in the social fabric, along with increases in properties prices, and rental and living costs (see Glass, 1964).

There are numerous overviews of gentrification research and debates in the literature (see Atkinson, 2003; Clark, 2005; Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Slater, 2006). The literature has tended to focus on the definition, causes, processes, geographical identification, causal and resultant migration, political assignation of victims and perpetrators, and policy recommendations in response to gentrification. The following subsections critically review the literature on gentrification and its implications, analysing in particular gentrifier-led and state-led gentrification. We then offer the concept of self-gentrification as a key proposal of this article. Subsequently, we provide a contextual review on the application of gentrification on tourism and Indigenous tourism, particularly in China.

### ***Gentrifier-led gentrification***

The dominant perspective on gentrification sees it as a process largely initiated and sustained by incoming populations. Neal (2010, p. 557) views gentrification as a gradual process where the gentrifiers are “pioneers who seek to tame the wilderness of rundown urban neighborhoods, and in the process potentially reap a profit from rising property values”. This group is sometimes said to be typified by their indifference to the existing population (Brown-Saracino, 2009, p. 3).

Other scholars have challenged the assumption that middle class gentrifiers are purely guided by an unwavering desire to civilise their new locality. Schlichtman & Patch (2014) identified six ‘pull factors’ that appeal to would-be gentrifiers: economic

(affordability of houses), practical (centrality and connectivity of the location), aesthetic (character houses with historical *caché*), presence of amenities (proximity of museums, parks, waterfronts), social (e.g. cultural ‘melting pots’), and symbolic (e.g. community history and authenticity). Gentrifiers, they claim, are willing to accept the inconvenience of living in a deprived area for one or many of the pull factors.

Gentrifying populations sometimes display awareness of the potential impacts of their arrival, such as the physical, political, economical, and cultural displacement of the long-term residents (Brown-Saracino 2009, p. 4). Brown-Saracino (2009) has proposed that gentrifiers could be categorized based on their attitude towards the social-cultural heritage of the community. Despite these qualms held by some gentrifiers over their own impact, studies suggest they do bring some benefits to long-term residents. For example, middle class gentrifiers tend to be more influential advocates when it comes to defending local communities, their presence improves the local economy of usually rather deprived areas, and they offer better social capital and networks that extend beyond the locality (Schoon, 2001).

This process, which is here defined as gentrifier-led gentrification is distinctive in that, by being initiated by early gentrifiers (both individual and commercial) themselves, the gentrification process often appears scattered and unorganised. Examples of this have also been observed in China by Feng & Sha (2009) and Qian et al. (2013).

### ***State-led gentrification***

Another form of gentrification frequently identified in the literature is organised, large scale gentrification occurring under the direction of government, in partnership with investors and developers. This process has been expanded, made into policy, and implemented by governments, resulting in what has been termed state-led gentrification. Government has played a leading role in the effort of re-engineering urban neighbourhoods since the late twentieth century (Smith, 2002).

This also reveals how the application of gentrification have shifted, from an almost accidental process arising out of similar, but independent choices made by typically unconnected individuals, to an orchestrated process that forms part of the bureaucratic governance system. Here, both these agencies and the incoming residents may be labelled as gentrifiers (Hackworth and Smith, 2001, p. 467).

State-led gentrification forms part of political decision process by which concepts of urban regeneration and revitalisation are employed to serve varying policy objectives such as increasing local tax revenues (Hackworth & Smith, 2001), creating neighbourhoods with more stable social orders (Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans, 2007), reducing crime, increasing social diversity, making places more ‘liveable’ (Florida, 2002) and fostering sustainable communities (Lees, 2008). In this context, gentrification has increasingly become a “global urban strategy” (Smith, 2002) of reinventing central urban cores deemed to have the potential to become places of enhanced economic and cultural production and social cohesion (Uitermark et al., 2007).

State-led gentrification projects seem to produce mixed results. While Byrnes (2003) posits benefits for existing low-income long-term residents, not all scholars agree. Clark (2005) suggests this process of state-led gentrification has its price in that the influx of middle-class residents does not necessarily increase social cohesion, but rather results in an uneasy cohabitation with the long-term residents, contrary to the policy objectives of its proponents (Rose, 2004). Numerous scholars have suggested that state policies of social mixing in gentrifying neighbourhoods have only limited success (Atkinsons & Blandy, 2006; Lees, 2008; Veldboer, Kleinhans & Duyvendak 2002).

Gentrification in cities occurs beyond Euro-American context, and now constitutes a global phenomenon (Clark, 2005). In Asia, cases of large-scale and state-led gentrification are well documented (e.g. He, 2007 and Zhao, Kou, Lu & Li, 2009 in China; and Lee and Joo, 2008 and Shin, 2009 in South Korea). Gentrification in Chinese cities is the result of urban development strategy to upgrade building stock and revitalise the economy, and occurs on a particularly intensive and large scale (He, 2010). The expulsion of original residents is also well organised and large-scale (He, 2010; Su, 2012; Zhao et al., 2009), with some relocated to particularly distant areas.

### ***The Conceptualisation of Self-gentrification***

In summary, gentrification has traditionally been conceptualized and understood in a number of different ways. In its most essential form, gentrification has stood out as an unusual reversing of upwardly-mobile physical and social migratory trends, with

those of high social and economic capital intentionally inhabiting environments that were generally considered not becoming of them, and in so doing gradually transforming the status of those locales (often to the exclusion of the original inhabitants). The majority of gentrification research foregrounds the detrimental effects of gentrification (Atkinson, 2002, p. 20).

Moving forward from existing discussions, this article addresses an under-explored area in the literature – how long-term residents (including both indigenous people, and incomers who have lived for a long time in the area, and sometimes adopted local cultural practices) might and could appropriate the process of gentrification for their own ends. There is only limited literature discussing these responses - for example, long-term (early) gentrifiers using nostalgic narrative to counter further gentrification in Lower East Side, New York (Ocejo, 2011). However, the above case illustrates defensive strategies by the long-term residents to counter the advance of gentrification, rather than any proactive approach to improve their own socio-economic standing.

We propose the concept of self-gentrification as:

*Under the threat of other forms of gentrification, the long-term residents adopt a proactive approach to become the ‘gentry’ themselves. As such they are able to benefit from the positive aspects of gentrification whilst avoiding many of the negative effects, particularly displacement.*

The notion of self-gentrification adds a further dimension to the concept, allowing for the gentrifier to be a native of the community undergoing transformation. It possesses both individualistic features (i.e. a desire to improve one’s lot), but also concern for a wider community to whom one belongs. As such, this version of gentrification is perhaps acutely prone to ambivalence, and contradictory feelings, especially in Asian contexts where values of extended family, community and place of origin are so strongly emphasized. **Table 1** summarises the features of these three types of gentrification.

[Insert Table 1 here]

## **Gentrification in tourism settings**

Increasingly, research in gentrification has been applied to describe similar processes under different contexts and locales (Phillips, 2014). Gentrification has also been applied in suburbs and market towns (Smith, 2002, p. 439; Smith & DeFilippis, 1999), rural areas (Phillips, 1993; Phillips & Smith, 2001; Hines, 2010; Stockdale, 2010), and sites of tourism (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990; Gotham, 2005).

In tourism studies, the concept of gentrification became popular between the mid-1990s and early 2000s (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990, p. 95). The majority of studies took place in the context of historical urban areas or small towns (see Judd, 2003; Page & Hall, 2003). An important study for rural areas was provided by Ateljevic and Doorne (2000) who introduced the concept of life style entrepreneurship by incomers into rural areas seeking rural life styles. In China, large-scale tourism gentrification, which happened in cities or market towns, was mostly led by government and big corporations and resulted in the extensive relocation of long-term residents away from the main tourism site to the peripheries (e.g. Su, 2012; Zhao et al., 2009).

In the process of tourism gentrification, space is transformed into affluent enclaves to accommodate better-off tourists. Extreme cases of tourism gentrification have been described as cases of “fantasy city” (Hannigan, 1995), “museification” and “mummification” (Bouché, 1998), where gentrifying projects turn urban space into “tourist bubbles”.

The gentrifiers are both outside owners and employees of establishments catering to tourists, as well as the tourists themselves. Clark (2005) notes that although individual tourists may be transient, the continuous stream of tourists may lead locals to view them as ever-present outsiders. Similarly, the original inhabitants may leave the area because of the overwhelming presence and sometimes unfamiliar social behaviour of the tourists. Local people may also respond to increasing property prices and living costs in touristic areas, and relocate to less expensive and calmer zones.

The process of tourism gentrification in suburbs or urban peripheries has also generated positive outcomes. Tourism gentrification can contribute to protection and revitalisation of the built cultural heritage and urban landscape. The regeneration of Wendeka in Quebec City sponsored by the Canadian government in partnership with



local Indigenous authorities helped to revitalise the Indigenous Huran culture and language (Iankova, 2008).

Beyond touristic cities and towns, tourism gentrification in remote rural tourism areas remains relatively unexplored, with very few exceptions (e.g. Hines, 2010; Stockdale, 2010). Koutsouris (2009) provides a review of the power and cultural conflicts involved by incoming life style entrepreneurs in rural Greece. Power and cultural imbalances can also be linked to conflicts emerging as a result of gentrification leading to competition for land for development. While land is can be more plentiful in rural settings, the unusual topography of Honghe WHS restricts available land and provides a special context for a study of tourism gentrification in a rural setting.

### ***Indigenous entrepreneurship and rural tourism development in China***

Rural tourism is often typified as being “built upon the rural world’s special features of small-scale enterprise, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, 'traditional' societies and 'traditional' practices” (Lane, 1994, p. 14). Its development is often contingent on the conservation of nature and cultural heritage (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Particularly in China, the government often attempts to guide rural tourism development as a means of rural socio-economic regeneration (Su, 2011).

Chinese Indigenous tourism is distinctive in occurring under an authoritarian state that practises market-socialist economic governance. Despite considerable reform from the 1980s onwards, the state still regulates many forms of economic activity and land use, for instance, using the *hukou* system of residency registration to distribute resources and indirectly manage internal migration (Chan, 2010). The establishment of numerous autonomous ethnic regions and districts in areas throughout China has, however, not necessarily resulted in minority groups taking more control over their own resources and destinies (Swain, 1989; Xie, 2001). In this regard, Harvey (2005) describes Chinese economic reality as an increasing incorporation of neo-liberal elements integrated with authoritarian centralised control, in contrast to cases in most developed countries where the Indigenous communities may enjoy greater control of their economic activities including tourism (Hinch & Butler, 1996).

Despite booming Indigenous tourism in China (Oakes, 1998; Walsh & Swain, 2004), the majority of entrepreneurs in the Indigenous tourism sector tend to be Han Chinese migrating from other parts of the country, which increase the economic leakages out of the Indigenous region and leads to unsustainable situations. For example, a study by Yang & Wall (2008) in another Indigenous tourism destination in the Yunnan province suggests that Han entrepreneurs dominate tourism business whereas local Indigenous people have limited involvement. The participation of the Indigenous people at managerial level is frequently non-existent or marginal.

The lack of rural tourism enterprises may be because when they do exist, such enterprises are typically fragmented and poorly organised (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). Equally, Indigenous tourism enterprises in many parts of the world are mostly micro-businesses and have their viability threatened (Fuller, Buultjens, & Cummings, 2005) by problems such as land tenure issues, low literacy, lack of access to capital, weak social capital, insufficient business skills, no training opportunity, and no knowledge of market trends (Cachon, 2000; Jeremy et al, 2010; Weir, 2007). Other obstacles identified are favouritism and clientelism faced by entrepreneurs in local communities, lack of perseverance when problems first occur, and not knowing how to seek good support (Iankova, 2016).

To ensure the sustainability of rural tourism, Bramwell (1994) proposed that attention should be “given to the role of local communities and local businesses...” instead of excessive external intervention. Cornell (2006), in analysing Indigenous business in the USA, suggests that success may depend on adequate start-up funds, smart management, adequate infrastructure, and a strong business network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners. Fuller et al. (2005) have also noted the advantages of partnership with larger corporations in the survival of Australian Indigenous enterprises.

### ***Issues of cultural change***

Literature on Indigenous tourism in China presents tensions between cultural exoticism (tourists’ desire for “authenticity” by “freezing” the culture in past representations), cultural commodification (selective modification of culture in accordance with tourists’ taste), and cultural preservation versus modernity (Indigenous people’s desire to achieve modernity) (Swain, 1989; Xie, 2001; Yang &

Wall, 2008). Non-Indigenous tourism operators often (with varying degrees of intent) misrepresent Indigenous persons. For example, Yang & Wall (2008) argue “authentic” representations of ethnic people are often being interpreted and controlled by these *Han* tourism entrepreneurs, for instance, through the construction of “alien” architectural forms, which may even be subsequently adopted by local people themselves.

In China, local theories of cultural change have taken their own specific flavour, at times drawing on the wider global debates on cultural change (Baos, 1911; Steward, 1955). It should be noted that evolutionary perspectives – that viewed non-Western cultures as essentially static (Tylor, 1881; Morgan, 1877) – still hold important sway, in part because of the influence of the Marx-Engels unilineal schema of the evolution of society, which was appropriated by the Communist party and applied to existing Chinese understanding about race (Dikötter, 1992). The ideology advanced through these accounts is that societies go through various stages of cultural evolution, from primitive, to petty capitalist, then capitalist, before emerging into socialism and eventually finishing in communism.

The work of Gillette (2000) is particularly relevant given the ethnic minority focus of this article. Gillette, studying the material lives of Hui Muslim minority populations in northwest China, noted how Hui and Han both appropriate these evolutionary ideals to different ends. The Han often stigmatise Hui populations as being ‘backwards’. In response, the Hui increase their own consumption of modern consumer goods in order to assert themselves as being more advanced than Han populations. Although Hani and Yi minorities differ in important ways from the Hui in Gillette’s example, it remains a possibility that Indigenous populations may appropriate gentrification in a similar way.

### ***Honghe WHS context***

The Honghe WHS is defined by a complex co-existence of multiple ethnic minority villages with different religions, socio-cultural systems and languages, in addition to other incoming populations. The main ethnic group, the Hani, build their villages and terraces at the highest altitude, from 1,400m. to 1,800m. above mean sea level, while the Yi ethnic group occupies middle altitude mountains, mostly below 1,600m. (see Chan et al., 2016). In total, there are 82 villages with a total population of around

50,000 in 166 square kilometres of core area and 295 square kilometres of buffer zone in the Yuanyang county, Honghe prefecture (UNESCO, 2013).

The rice-terrace ecosystem has existed for circa 1,300<sup>1</sup> years, and has become reflected in, and sustained in local cultural concepts. In the core area of the Honghe WHS, the upper slopes of the mountain, over 1,800m., are forested while the terraced rice fields are distributed in the valley down to 700m. above sea level with, at times, gradients of 15 to 20 degrees. The Hani build their villages between their sacred mountaintop forests and the earthy rice terraces further down the slopes. The villages have traditional Hani mushroom like dwellings – commonly two-and-a-half storeys with a thatched roof.

The Hani religious practice of forest worship encourages forest conservation, which helps to deliver sustainable water supply for the villages and rice terraces (Lu, 2011:121; Mao 1991; Wang, 1999). During the formation of a new Hani settlement, villagers establish a forested sanctuary to house the spirits with whom they have entered into a kind of contractual relationship (Bouchery, 1996). The forest plays an important role in the local water cycle by acting as a natural moisture trap and water reservoir, supplying ever-running streams via a complex web of natural and man-made drainage channels and sluice gates distributing water throughout the terraces via a democratic social system with an elected irrigation headman (*yiroharapo*) to manage and apportion water resources (Shimpei, 2007).

The local people maintain the terraces themselves in the course of rice cultivation. This is primarily subsistence farming, and families supplement this with raising livestock and fishing in the terraces. However, communities are losing young people who move to urban areas for jobs and education, a trend familiar in almost all rural China (Chan et al., 2016).

The Indigenous communities and rice terraces thus face a unique set of challenges that place them in an especially precarious position as tourism and gentrification bite in. These challenges differ substantially from most other heritage sites such as ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Manshu, Tang Dynasty (618-970AD), documented minority ethnic groups practising an ingenious form of mountain farming in southern Yunnan, but without further details. The more reliable records describing rice terraces and irrigation channels appeared in Ming dynasty (1368-1644AD) (Shimpei, 2007).

cities and places of architectural interest - with the notable exception of the Philippines Cordilleras rice terraces (Villalon, 2012), where the key elements of the UNESCO inscription are endangered by gentrification.

## **Methods**

This study focused its fieldwork solely on the Honghe WHS, to provide a fuller account of gentrification there in the context of growing tourism. We paid particular attention to the dynamics of gentrification agents - the gentrifiers, and the Indigenous people.

This article draws on primary and secondary evidence collected from a larger research project relating to innovation and tourism at Honghe WHS. Primary data came from 25 semi-structured interviews, 40 unstructured in-depth interviews and observation. Secondary data mainly came from statistics collected by the government and companies (including the state-owned tourism company that assumes the main responsibility for managing and developing tourism in the WHS), in addition to policy documents and narrative accounts.

Combining these different sources allowed researchers to examine competing (and sometimes contradictory) forms of evidence, which allowed for more convincing findings (Yin 2009). Data was triangulated, particularly useful in the case of sensitive evidence, to obtain more reliable conclusions (Yin, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The main fieldwork was conducted between June and July 2013. Close contact with key informants in the WHS was subsequently maintained through social media, where we obtained updates and followed key events. A 10-day revisit in May 2015 collected further data. In August 2015, another research team of seven members conducted a further two-week revisit, to verify and update some data.

The team met with owners and employees of tourism related businesses in the scenic area, ranging from small guesthouses to the large state-owned corporation and its subsidiaries. The targeted guesthouses were mostly located in the most visited villages, which are susceptible to a greater degree of gentrification. We interviewed local residents and community leaders from different villages, and also government

officials at village, town and county level, who have a portfolio related to tourism, environment and development at the WHS site. Details of key respondents and interview topics can be found in the supplementary data sections available on the online. We obtained approximately 200 hours of interview audio recordings. The interviews were mostly conducted in Mandarin Chinese (putonghua), but on some occasions our local guide helped as an interpreter (to and from Hani and Yi languages to Mandarin), particularly amongst older villagers who often had difficulty in speaking Mandarin.

Interview recordings were transcribed and stored in qualitative data analysis software Nvivo, along with photos, videos and observations notes. This was examined thematically according to the theoretical framework regarding the processes of gentrification (gentrifier-led and state-led) as depicted in the literature review, as well as the emerging category of self-gentrification. We searched for evidence of these processes, forces, and implications for the Indigenous people and their responses to such changes.

The results of this research will have practical significance for sustainable development in the WHS. It could be a *key case* (Thomas, 2011, p. 514) to exemplify the analytical objects of the inquiry i.e. the phenomena of gentrification of rural/Indigenous tourism sites, and more significantly its location in a World Heritage Site. Nonetheless, as a single case research, caution should be applied in claiming any representativeness for other cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009).

## **Findings**

### ***Unsustainable gentrifier-led gentrification***

A low degree of gentrification in the villages of Honghe Hani rice terraces had already occurred prior to its inscription as a WHS. Since 2004 a number of non-local entrepreneurs (both Han and other minorities) from other parts of China had rented Indigenous dwellings and converted them into guesthouses or restaurants. By 2013, the records of the Rice Terraces Management Bureau indicated such persons were still few in number. In-depth interviews with four such owners revealed that the

beauty of the rice terraces was the key reason for their in-migration. This group highlighted concerns regarding integration with Indigenous people.

Early gentrifiers can be distinguished by their place of origin: either big cities or neighbouring towns. Those from neighbouring towns are typically entrepreneurs belonging to other minority groups, who are keen to make the most of increasing visitor numbers. Their familiarity with the local socio-economic system, culture and languages, means they generally fare better than others from further afield. Building on these advantages, one of the owners declared that they run a few guesthouses in various tourist attractions in the surrounding regions.

The second group often come from distant big cities. These lifestyle entrepreneurs desert city lives to become guesthouse operators in the WHS. This ‘amenity-seeking’ entrepreneurship is also observed in other parts of the world (Snepenger, Johnson, & Rasker, 1995; Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000). The three owners interviewed all presented similar reasons for relocating: affinity to the terrace landscape, a spirit of conservation and desire to help local communities. One of the earliest guesthouse owners, who has operated the guesthouse for seven years, said:

“Our journey began when my child came here and brought back many astonishing photos ... beautiful area ... air is fresh.”<sup>2</sup>

This group of lifestyle-seeking gentrifiers is not primarily profit orientated but could also play an important role in the neighbourhood (Schoon, 2001). Madden (1999) observes that the British and Irish-owned businesses in the Costa del Sol were motivated by lifestyle or social reasons rather than profit. Other studies have pointed out that conserving local culture can be a key motivation for Indigenous and other newcomers (Chang, Tsai, & Chen, 2010). For example, one lifestyle entrepreneur in the WHS commented:

“... we know that they don’t have enough teachers. We hope we can help them. A lot of children stop going to school after fifth grade. I hope to change the locals’ view on education and hope that the children [here] can attend higher education. We will encourage our guests to become voluntary teachers and will

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations are translated from Chinese unless specified.

provide them food and accommodation. We hope to be a bridge to help them. My wife has taught at the school for two years. These are the purposes of us being here.”

These two groups of newcomers also brought new (and often transferable) resources, ideas and investment to the community. We noticed some local entrepreneurs seizing opportunities, imitating business models and ideas, and learning to start their own business and run hospitality establishments. One lifestyle entrepreneur explained that he does not see such local competition as a problem, and is happy to share his knowledge with locals to help them succeed in the tourism industry.

Despite these positive contributions, the arrival of individual gentrifiers nonetheless increases the pressure on the property market. A government ban on new construction in the WHS for conservation purposes has caused high rental demand for existing Hani dwellings. The same regulation also strictly controls modification to existing buildings in order to protect the architectural authenticity of Hani dwellings. Nonetheless, it does not attempt to regulate the rental market on the traditional Hani dwellings.

The conversion of dwellings will lead to the displacement of existing occupants. Some villagers rent out their dwellings under 10-20 year long-term contracts to gentrifying-entrepreneurs. While conducting research within the WHS, only a few days after the UNESCO inscription, interviewees informed us of an increasing number of enquiries for renting Indigenous dwellings. After two years, such renting arrangements have become increasingly widespread. For example, by early 2015 Pugaolao village had 32 guesthouses/restaurants, constituting more than 20% of the total 147 households<sup>3</sup> in the village. Eighteen of these are operated by non-local gentrifiers who signed long-term rental agreements with Indigenous Hani landlords. During our 2015 revisit, a gentrifier declared the annual rental he paid to be about US\$10,000 – a very high figure in comparison to the village’s average annual income of less than US\$500 per capita<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Data for the number of households is provided by local government.

<sup>4</sup> Income figures were collected by local government prior to the application of World Heritage listing in 2012.



The guaranteed stable income from renting one's home proves extremely attractive for many local families. However, although rental incomes act as a source of income, rental agreements run the risk of displacing villagers from their own villages who must find new accommodation, often in neighbouring towns away from the rice terraces. A few tightly locked guesthouses were observed during fieldwork visits, presumably only open for business during peak tourist season.

Gentrifier-driven gentrification almost always occurs free of central planning oversight, and efforts to track it are currently minimal, making it difficult to mitigate any of its negative consequences. For instance, Su (2012), who studied the nearby gentrified market town of Lijiang, commented that it is often unclear where the long-term residents have moved to. If such renting practices became ubiquitous, villages might become 'ghost villages', seasonally populated by tourism operators and tourists, a phenomenon common in many destinations around the world.

The sustainability of the rice terraces would also be in question. The rice terraces require constant maintenance, and few beyond the Indigenous population possess the skills and knowledge to maintain it. Their absence increases the likelihood of this landscape falling into disrepair. This possibility also raises the question of whether Hani culture could survive in its current form without the rice terraces. Conversely would the rice terraces – and the magnificent landscapes and tourism industry built on it – survive without the Indigenous people?

### ***Roles of the state and corporations in gentrification***

This study did not observe any systematic state-organised gentrification in the villages within the WHS, or policies to that effect. Nonetheless, there was some discussion around transforming some villages in the Honghe WHS. One well-connected participant explained:

“There are powerful people planning to relocate one of the Hani villages. They were talking about moving the villagers to an area higher up the hill. Luckily they haven't found a suitable site; otherwise they would have implemented it.”

Suspensions of large-scale state-led gentrification are not without ground, especially given preceding examples of gentrification led by government and big corporations in

other cities or market towns in China (Su, 2012; Zhao et al., 2009). Moreover, the main drivers of the intention to gentrify the entire village are expressed in terms of providing a good environment and a suitable standard of accommodation for tourists. Challenges in promoting tourism in the villages include acute shortage of facilities, humans and livestock living at close-quarters, and poor sanitation and waste water management, all of which the government believe are barriers to tourism growth.

The tension between cultural exoticism and modernity is clearly depicted by the most senior manager in the state-owned tourist development corporation Shibo-Yuanyang Co. Ltd.<sup>5</sup> in improving the general living conditions of the villages:

“Some experts proposed that the more authentic [the culture is] the better; the more ancient the better... you demand [Indigenous people] to be poor, backward, and remain primitive, but you want to stay in a luxurious hotel room!... Our company position is... we are investing in this place, first and foremost, for conservation. But if it is merely conservation, and no reasonable development, the people cannot get rich. If local people are not rich, they will destroy [the rice terraces].”

Nonetheless, the necessity of preserving local culture in order to conserve the rice terrace ecosystem is widely acknowledged by many stakeholders including government officers, tourism development corporations and local residents. We did not learn about any intended large-scale gentrification plan by Shibo-Yuanyang. The manager explained that:

“As for the Indigenous [people], if something were to go wrong with them, there wouldn't be anyone cultivating the rice terraces, and it would therefore be deserted. The scenery would no longer be there. The value of the rice terraces would diminish, so too would the continuation of their culture.”

While appreciating the vibrancy of tourism in nearby Lijiang, tourism executives and villagers also expressed concerns about the displacement of Indigenous communities that had occurred under state-led gentrification:

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<sup>5</sup> See Chan et al. (2016) for information on the roles and corporate structure of the company.

“We do not wish the Hani Rice Terrace to developed like Lijiang. They lost the uniqueness of the Indigenous community. It is too commercialised.”

“We do not know the future of Hani Rice Terraces, but we do not wish it to be as Lijiang. There are not many Indigenous people living in the old town.”

The company also sees the importance of providing employment and training to the local communities. They noted a few cases of local people gaining more experience and increasing responsibility. For instance, two of the newly promoted local executives were sent to the provincial capital to market the destinations. When asked about local recruitment, a manager said that:

“...Other than a few of us (senior managers) who come from the provincial capital, about 95% of middle managers are locals. We also continuously provide training to the locals, take them to other tourist destinations to observe and learn, as well as share our experience with them...”

It seems that, though the state and state-owned enterprises have taken an interest in gentrifying parts of the WHS, this has rarely been enacted in any systematic, overall way. It is unsustainable to enforce any large-scale gentrification by relocating villagers away from their traditional villages adjacent to the rice terraces, to a newly built village or town.

### ***Self-gentrification of Indigenous people***

Newcomers, the state and enterprise may seek to drive the gentrification process in certain ways, begging the question of what Indigenous people actually want themselves. Our research seemed to point to two general types of Indigenous persons – returning migrants and local entrepreneurs – who made particular efforts to improve their socio-economic status in the face of the expanding tourism gentrification in the WHS. In this section, we present the evidence for arguing that such groups may be regarded as self-gentrifiers. Importantly, our notion of self-gentrification does not necessarily entail complete desertion of one’s own culture and farming traditions. Despite transformations of Indigenous culture, even young people continue to identify

with rice cultivation as an integral part of their culture. A young Hani person commented:

“...although many young people are going away to work in the city, we will still return to farm the rice terraces when our fathers are too old to work. The rice terraces cannot be deserted, they are the bedrock of our society, inherited from our ancestors.”

### *Returning Indigenous migrants as self-gentrifiers*

In China, rural-to-urban migration is often actually circular migration, with migrants eventually returning to their place of origin (Connelly, Roberts, & Zheng, 2010, p. 4; Zhang, 1999). Studies in China and worldwide show diverse economic and social reasons (Piotrowski & Tong, 2010) for migrants returning home, including retirement, success or failure in their venture away from home (Cerase, 1974), and family concerns (Wang & Fan, 2006; Dustman, 2003). Migrants often return equipped with awareness of urban approaches to business and investment, additional language skills, and financial and social capital. Such returnees generally prefer employment in the service sector and starting small-scale businesses (Ahlburg & Brown, 1998; Williams & Hall, 2010). In the Honghe rice terraces, for instance, returning migrants played an important role in the diffusion of solar hot water systems and motorbikes in the villages. They returned with a stronger financial capacity, and improved Mandarin Chinese skills, valuable when dealing with domestic visitors.

Despite extended absence, these migrants tend to maintain a very strong feeling of connection for the rice terraces. They often already have experience of, and inclination to maintain, terrace-farming practices. Local villagers in the WHS explained that young people often return to help their families with agricultural labour during busy periods, which often coincided with major cultural-religious festivals, further enabling the transmission of cultural knowledge and continuation of practices. As one villager commented:

“Now you hardly see any young people in the village...although they are going to work in the city, they will be back, during the year, to do farm work. During

planting and harvesting seasons for instance, they will be back. Then, they go to the city again.”

Other studies have also pointed out that many return migrants establish or become involved in tourism enterprises due to the low entry barrier to this sector (Mendoza, 1982; Kenna, 1993; Thomas-Hope, 1999). A government officer informed that,

“They are learning about the inscription ... Young people are returning [after working away]. There is more passion in starting one’s own businesses, such as selling local products, ethnic clothing and souvenirs, and [running] guesthouses and restaurants. Many people are coming to ask about how to start a guesthouse and restaurant.”

### *Self-gentrification of non-migrating Indigenous people*

In addition to Indigenous returnees, we also give an example of a local young Hani male who has never left the WHS for an extended period of time but has instead transformed himself in order to take advantage of tourism development. In a decade he has moved from being a teenager in a struggling subsistence-farming family to identify himself as a successful “middle class” entrepreneur, now operating two guesthouses and a tourist transport service.

This individual explained how his journey to tourism entrepreneurship occurred through many years of ongoing interaction with tourists, through whom he learnt how to do business. He recalled how during his childhood he would chase tourists begging for money. Some tourists encouraged him to instead sell boiled eggs and rice in exchange. He later began to provide travel and photographic touring services and learned about photography himself, before ultimately investing in guesthouse operation and transport services. He reiterated this transformation:

“At the time I started to guide tourists, the tourists would say ... ‘How about we have lunch at your house?’ I would be very happy... after eating they would ... stay for the night at the house, the business slowly started in this way”

In this example a key diffusing agent of touristic knowledge are the tourists themselves, who bring their own ideas and expectations into the WHS. Often local

people develop innovative approaches to tourism services in the WHS as a result of these interactions with tourists, including once starting a cultural-performance training centre. Through ongoing interactions with tourists this individual gradually came to understand what would most interest them - for example, particular types of scenery and photogenic locations. Over the course of time, this helped him gain knowledge of photography. He soon became one of the most popular tourist guides within the WHS, with many returning customers and friends.

Many local Indigenous people view involvement in tourism as having potential to improve their livelihood and reap the benefits of tourism development. There are other cases of Indigenous entrepreneurs who run restaurants, guesthouses, and provide transport services, or act as tour guides showing tourists around the WHS. These act as important ways of allowing native people to remain in the WHS. The above individual sees his future in the rice terraces:

“In reality there is no need to leave here, I want to remain in this beautiful place. It doesn’t matter if I earn a lot of money or not; if I were to leave, I would miss home so much. My ideal is to ride on the development of tourism here.”

Nonetheless, the phenomenon of self-gentrification does have some negative effects. Similar to any outsider-gentrifier, the Indigenous gentrifier could lead to displacement of other Indigenous households. For example, in 2012, this entrepreneur signed a 15-year lease on another property in the village to use as a guesthouse, enticing another Indigenous family to move out of their own dwelling, further contributing to the pressure on Indigenous dwellings.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Despite achieving economic transformation and tourism development objectives in many cities and market towns in China, the intertwining connections between the Indigenous communities and the main tourist attraction of the rice terraces makes state-led gentrification unsustainable in Honghe WHS. This article provided strong evidence that many stakeholders are aware of the importance of these connections for the purposes of sustainability.

While there is no imminent threat of large-scale and state-led gentrification, outside-gentrifier-led gentrification has been continuing in an unmitigated manner. The pressure is mounting to convert traditional dwellings for tourist use, and the lure of high yield renting potential increasingly leads to Indigenous people becoming landlords and moving out of their own dwellings. Coupled with the intensity of out-migration of working adults, the WHS and its communities are heading towards a precarious future where sustainability could be compromised.

This study of tourism gentrification in an Indigenous community setting has demonstrated that when long-term residents are proactive and feel empowered to appropriate tourism development, this can also contribute to social equity, sustainability of the community and its natural and rice-terrace ecosystem. Some long-term Indigenous residents have responded to forms and possibilities of outsider- and state-led large-scale gentrification by discerning for themselves ways to improve their own socio-economic standings in accordance with their own aspirations. Often these desires also included wishes to ensure the continuation of one's own culture and the sustainability of the rice terraces.

Retaining Indigenous persons in the WHS could be helped through increased support for individuals to innovate and practise entrepreneurship in the community through the process of self-gentrification. As Cheshire (2009) suggests, efforts to improve social equity would be more effective if directed towards long-term residents themselves, rather than displacing them and moving around neighbourhoods. This predominantly collective and community-centred approach to economic development would encourage economic self-sufficiency, control of activities on traditional lands, improvement of socio-economic circumstances, and strengthening of traditional culture, values and languages (Anderson, 1999; Peredo & McLean, 2010).

Nonetheless, increasing numbers of tourists and outside-gentrifiers will likely create more future learning opportunities for Indigenous entrepreneurs similar to those presented in this article. We also notice that Shibo-Yuanyang promotes ideas and understanding of tourism within the Indigenous community. However, active transfer of knowledge and entrepreneurial skills are still lacking. This article recommends that the government and big corporations should proactively facilitate this process of

learning with more concerted efforts. Such assertions are well recognised in the literature (e.g. Jeremy et al, 2005).

In summary, this article has demonstrated the novel approach of applying the concept of gentrification to analyse the sustainability of Indigenous tourism development in a WHS setting. Taking a gentrification perspective, sustainability of an Indigenous tourism area has been viewed in connection with migration, its drivers and impacts. Large-scale state-led and unorganised outside-gentrifier-led gentrifications are deemed to be unsustainable for the development and tourism at this WHS site.

Instead, the term of “self-gentrification” has been proposed to encapsulate the proactive responses of long-term residents to improve their socio-economic standing in a gentrifying neighbourhood through participation in the tourism sector, which would enhance sustainability. Provision for learning is a key success factor of self-gentrification, where knowledge is to be exchanged between Indigenous and outside agents such as corporations, entrepreneurs, governments, and tourists themselves, and needs to be promoted proactively.

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**Table 1: Gentrification types and characteristics**

Type of gentrification	Gentrifiers	Nature	Impacts
Gentrifier-led gentrification	Incoming middleclass gentries	Spontaneous and unorganised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Rising living costs, rental and property prices.</li><li>- Results in slower displacement of long-term residents.</li><li>- Newcomers might positively contribute to community and organise resistance to further gentrification.</li></ul>
State-led gentrification	Government / commercial organisations	Large scale, very organised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Rising living costs, rental and property prices.</li><li>- Intentional social engineering of a locality.</li><li>- Results in large-scale displacement of long-term residents.</li></ul>
Self-gentrification	Long-term residents themselves	Slow, requires external support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Improved socio-economic status of local population.</li><li>- Reduced out-migration compared to other types of gentrification, thereby keeping community intact and retaining local unique culture.</li><li>- Enhanced collaboration between locals and newcomers.</li></ul>