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Wa Grotesque: Headhunting Theme Parks and the Chinese Nostalgia for Primitive Contemporaries

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Pages 497-523 | Published online: 20 Aug 2014

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.939100 Check for updates

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ABSTRACT

The Wa people have long occupied a special place in the state-directed political spectacle of minority nationalities, in both China and Burma. This fascination builds on older views of the Wa as dangerous barbarians, and closely evokes other primitivisms from around the world. In China and in neighbouring countries, state policy has recently combined with commercial entrepreneurism to cultivate a new, selective nostalgia for 'primitive-exotic' peoples like the Wa. In this paper, I discuss mainly China, and how the 'wild' Wa headhunting paraphernalia prohibited by the Chinese in the 1950s now reappear as kitsch. Some Wa of older generations see such revivals as dangerous, but younger people may embrace the revival. I discuss the new Chinese repackaging of primitive violence and the different Wa understandings of these staged exoticizations of

their culture, including ways the staged representations are taken up in Wa attempts to revive aspects of their cultural past.

KEYWORDS:

Primitivism | grotesque | kitsch | cultural theme parks | Wa | China | Asia

Acknowledgements

Most of all, I thank my Wa interlocutors for their generosity. I wish to thank Rupert Stasch and all those who contributed to the panel where this issue originated, as well as the participants in the ‘Imaginaries and constructions of Southwest China’ seminar at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, in July 2009, where I presented some of these materials. For their support, I also thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the China Times Cultural Foundation, Pacific Cultural Foundation, Woodrow Wilson Foundation, Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program, and Anthropology Department.

Notes

1. This is my term. The word grotesque (from Renaissance Italian grotteschi and Latin grotto) originally referred to the profane art rich in foliage re-discovered on the walls of a long-buried palace in Rome (Dacos 1969; Summers 2003). Since then, grotesque has come to mean outlandish or transgressive (Connelly 2003; Diederich 2008); here it evokes the view of something wild and exotic as transgressive, as in the original ‘grotesque’ art.

2. Nij Tontisirin, Cornell University, helped me with this figure. The map shows the Chinese ambition, later abandoned, to annex the entire Wa country; it also shows how early Chinese efforts relied on Shan intermediaries, whose derogatory Ka- prefix for non-Buddhist mountain people still precedes the Wa ethnonym here (cf. Fiskesjö 2006; 2013).

3. I myself passed by these avenues many times without seeing them.

4. The photo of defence works is again from the 1930s, borrowed from the IHP ethnographic photography database at the Academia Sinica in Taipei, organized on the internet by Wang Ming-ke and his colleagues from the undeveloped films left from the 1930s! There are at least 538 Wa-related photos in the Institute for History and Philology web-based database (中國西南少數民族聯合資料庫), http://140.109.18.243/race_public/index.htm (see under 'Photos of Ethnographic Expeditions' 田野照片). On these photos, see Fiskesjö (2000) and Wang Ming-ke (2008).

5. Friedman (1979), in his System, Structure and Contradiction (one of the most spectacularly unread classics of anthropology, Southeast Asian, and Chinese studies) attempted to show how these circumstances are both generated and produced in a transformative dialectic (of agricultural production and tribute-making, in opium trade and war, etc.), something which Edmund Leach and others (Leach 1954; 1960; Lévi-Strauss 1969) had failed to achieve (Fiskesjö 2010b). It is worthwhile to re-engage with this work, including the 1998 edition where the author confesses to the total absence in his own Marxist 'modelling' of the historical agency of the people involved, of people as agents of their own history. The extreme example in the original 1979 work is the aetiology of Wa headhunting 'explained' as a population-depressing measure, in the externally produced circumstances of hopeless circumscription and pressure on the increasingly densely populated Wa lands. This picture of the Wa as laboratory rats in a cage that has become too small is inadequate (Fiskesjö 2010a).

6. For example, see the official Brief History of the Wa People (Wazu jianshi 1986).

7. This disjuncture and the resultant role-play is still in evidence today in various Wa jokes about how the Chinese mistake everyday betel spittings for head-cutting bloodletting on the road, and in sayings such as 'food of the tiger, food of the Wa' (prex a vi, som a vex), which affirms that the Wa are wild people of the forest who like the tiger do not know to use chopsticks or other utensils but grab their food by their hands (or paws).

8. Compare Mueggler (2002; also Notar 2007; Nyiri 2006). There is a large literature on the 'erotic' aspects of minority tourist spectacles in China targeting Chinese men (e.g. Cable 2011). See too Meiu (2014) (on the reverse gender situation).

9. This abandonment remain, of course, half-hearted and incomplete on the official level: socialism remains the official state ideology, only partially and semi-officially

replaced by an embrace of ‘traditional’ Chinese civilizing theory and imperial chauvinism. All this is also taking place within the larger context of globalization. There is even still a minority within the Chinese power elites insisting on the continuing importance of state-held key assets and a commitment to socialism, and at most would concede that China is only ‘hiding its ideology while building strength’, as one popular slogan goes (see Nonini 2008).

10. See below, and see Stasch (2014) and Merlan (2014) for extended discussions of how this ambivalence reflects the complex ‘intersystem’ character of primitivist tourism wherein those involved are potentially able to adopt and identify with others' perspective on themselves but at the same time also to manipulate these perspectives, as well as their difference from dominant others, belying any simplistic assumptions of ‘absolute, extreme or ontologically based difference between parties in encounter’ (Merlan 2014).

11. This newly created festival, in which participants and tourist guests smear themselves with mud, implicitly yet unmistakably plays on the notion that the Wa are dirty; it contrasts uncomfortably with the widespread Tai (Dai) water-splashing festival, also massively exploited for tourist-entrepreneurial purposes today.

12. It is being prevented from switching from the traditional wood-and-bamboo construction with houses on stilts, to the brick or concrete structures that the Chinese government is aggressively promoting everywhere else (despite the earthquake dangers).

13. The Cambodian Cultural Village in Siem Reap, Cambodia (which I visited in 2012 and 2014); like many such international ventures involves Chinese investors, and the same conceptual package for choreographing the ethnic primitives – often for Chinese tourists. In Siem Reap, this involves several ethno-cultural cousins of the Wa; though for the lack of native manpower, these Cambodian minorities are impersonated by Khmer dancers. The large literature on theme parks globally is omitted here, but on Indonesia see Bruner (2005, esp. 211–30, ‘Taman Mini: Self-constructions in an ethnic theme park in Indonesia’).

14. Most performers come from my former fieldwork areas in the China–Burma border region. (One man recognized me from an encounter long ago, in 1996, back in his mountain village, when he was still a 10-year-old kid.)

15. For further discussions of this mega-park (apart from Tapp, mostly on the ‘Splendid China’ portion of the park), see Tapp (1993), Campanella (1995), Anagnost (1997, Ch. 7), Pun (2003), Ren (2005; 2007), Stanley et al. (1995), also Yang (2011) on migrant worker's perspectives; and Gordon's (2005) film Global Villages: The Globalization of Ethnic Display.

16. See Note 10, and compare Hammons (2014). Curiously, the ‘Rousseauan’ propensity of Westerners to find something among the primitives that is ‘lost’ among themselves has long been absent in Chinese ‘civilization’ (Fiskesjö 1999) – but may be emerging now as China merges with the Global North (Fiskesjö 2011b).

17. Fiskesjö and Hsing (2011). Incidentally recent genetics research affirms, to a certain extent, the Wa view of themselves as an ancient people.

18. So that the tension between Chinese settlers and aboriginal peoples on the former imperial peripheries can be suppressed (see Sturgeon 2007).

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