

# THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF TOURISM — A Case Study in Dali, Yunnan Province, China<sup>①</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Ancient town Dali is located in northwest Yunnan Province. With its ancient history and natural scenery, it is preserved as one of the first 24 historical and cultural towns in China. Dali has become one of the most popular attractions for foreign tourists since it had its first foreign visitors in 1983. As a result, English came into the life of the local people. This paper presents and explains the results of questionnaires and interviews about Dali people's attitude toward learning English. Three types of questionnaires were designed to local businessmen, local residents and foreign tourists. Interviews were also given whenever possible. In this study, businessmen in Dali were divided into two distinct groups. One group had their business in "Foreigners' Street", which was in front of Hongshancha Hotel where many foreign tourists stayed. Another group had business in Fuxin Street, which was vertically across "Foreigners' Street". The 41 shops and restaurants in "Foreigners' Street" served mainly foreign visitors, and most of them had English names and advertisements. The 353 shops and restaurants in Fuxin Street mainly catered for domestic visitors but also served more and more overseas ones. Subjects from local residents were mostly young people because aging ones were apparently not much affected by English. The results of the study showed that the oral English levels became lower from "Foreigners' Street" to Fuxin Street to local residents, due to declining frequency of contact with foreign people. There were also distinct differences in general English level, the understanding of the importance of English, the purposes of communicating with foreign tourists, the willingness and purposes of going on

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learning English between businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street” and Fuxin Street: people in “Foreigners’ Street” had more positive feedback than those in Fuxin Street because their constant contact with foreigners required them to speak better English which enabled them to exchange with foreigners in many aspects, which in turn help them to know more about other cultures. On the other hand, Fuxin Street businessmen would catch up with more and more prospective contact with overseas people. Though local residents had nothing to do with foreign tourists, they met them in the street every day and might have to talk with them in unexpected ways. They lived in a place where they saw English advertisement every day. Accordingly, study results showed that they were very much motivated to learn English. They showed even stronger desire to learn more English than businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street”, though many of them were too young to tell why English was so important for them. This is an indication that English has become part of the necessary education for young people in Dali. With the development of tourism, Dali is gradually becoming a place where Chinese culture and western culture meet and coexist.

**KEY WORDS:**tourism, social impacts, ancient town, Dali

## I. INTRODUCTION

The study of tourism is the result of increasing global tourist activities associated with rapid economic growth since the mid 1960s. John Urry (1990) has observed “to be a tourist is one of the characteristics of the ‘modern’ experience”. Geographers have focused their research in this field on a number of different themes, including: the evaluation of tourist resources; tourist planning and development; the analysis of tourist flows; and studies of the impacts of tourism on natural resources and local economy<sup>[1]</sup>.

As Dogan has suggested, although the social impacts of tourism have not been studied as extensively as other impacts, the majority of the research has found the effects to be largely negative in character<sup>[2]</sup>. A review of the literature indicates that the existing studies have investigated a number of distinct themes, including: the effect of tourism on the decline of local traditions<sup>[3]</sup>; increasing materialism; elevated crime rates and other indicators of deviance and social problems<sup>[4]</sup>; crowding and environmental deterioration<sup>[5-6]</sup>; and greater dependency of developing countries on industrial countries<sup>[7-8]</sup>. The studies investigating the positive effects of tourism have predominately been concerned with the economic benefits<sup>[9-11]</sup>, but other topics have been considered, such as: the revitalization of local cultures and greater ethnic consciousness in an attempt to provide new and improved tourist attractions<sup>[12-13]</sup>; increasing modernization and integration with urban civilizations<sup>[14]</sup>; improvements in the services provided by the government to remote regions and localities; a more

democratic and tolerant political climate; the growth of cross-cultural understanding<sup>[15-16]</sup>; and the emancipation of women through increasing employment in the tourist industry<sup>[17]</sup>. Tourist impacts on people and places are never universal<sup>[3]</sup>, and the complex nature of tourism makes it difficult to devise a single measure of impact<sup>[8]</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that researchers have approached the issue of social impact studies in many different ways. Most of the early research on social impacts tended to be general in scale and was focused primarily on economic issues<sup>[5,9]</sup>; but there have also been some studies dealing with the general social impacts in tourist locations<sup>[3,18]</sup>, as well as those focussing on specific social issues such as “sex tourism” in Thailand and other places<sup>[19-20]</sup>, and the revival of traditional crafts<sup>[13-21]</sup>. Studies have also investigated the attitudes of local residents toward tourists<sup>[2,5,22,23]</sup>. To date, however, little work has been conducted on the influence of tourists’ language on the host populations. The present paper is a case study designed to focus on this issue in Dali, a popular tourist designation in Yunnan Province in southwestern China. The major goal of the study was to examine changes in the host population’s communicative ability in English, and the attitudes of the local people toward learning English.

## II. THE CASE STUDY

### 1. A General Introduction to the Study Area

Dali Bai Minority Autonomous Prefecture is situated in northwestern Yunnan Province. Dali City, the capital of the Prefecture is close to Mount Cangshan and Lake Erhai, two areas with most scenic spots. In addition to the such popular local attractions as Butterfly Stream and the Three Pagodas, the area features a number of Bai villages, which offer tourists a colorful and informative introduction to China’s ethnic minority culture. The Ancient City of Dali, which is situated within the capital city, was designated as one of the 24 Famous Cities of Ancient History and Culture by the Chinese government in 1984, and was subsequently opened to foreign visitors.

As Gormsen has observed, Dali already had more foreign tourists in 1988 than Huangshan, the popular mountain resort in Anhui Province<sup>[24]</sup>. By June 1993, Dali had received tourists from 62 countries and areas, and ranked second after the capital city of Kunming as a tourist attraction in Yunnan Province. According to the tourist bureau of the Autonomous Prefecture, there were 22,046 foreign tourists in 1991, and 27,095 in 1992. There was a 22% increase in the number of visitors in the first half of 1992, compared to

the same period in 1991; and a further 12% increase in the first half of 1993. The opening of Dali International Airport in 1995 will make the area much more accessible, and it is expected that tourism will continue to increase.

The center of Dali consists of two criss-crossing roads (Fig. 1): Fuxin Road, running north—south, which has 48 restaurants, 57 traditional craft shops, 45 batik tailor shops, and 203 other shops selling a variety of items for tourists. Huguo Road has 14 restaurants, 13 shops, 8 traditional craft shops and 6 delis. The two roads are frequently crowded with tourists, both domestic and foreign. On Huguo Road, opposite the Hongshancha Hotel, which is one of the two hotels receiving foreign tourists in Dali, there is a concentration of restaurants, batik tailor shops and traditional craft shops on both sides of the street. All of these businesses cater to foreign tourists, and most of them have English names and advertisements. As a result, this part of Huguo Road is often referred to by the locals and the tourist guidebooks as “Foreigners’ Street”.

Foreign visitors go to Dali in two ways: one is with tour groups, the other is independently. The tour groups usually stay for about two days for organized activities, and the tourists have few opportunities to come into contact with the local people. Individual tourists, by comparison, tend to stay at least three to five days, and some stay as long as one month, venturing into all possible places. Most of the individual tourists stay in the Hongshancha Hotel, which provides basic (budget) accommodation. Most of them share rooms with other tourists. The majority of them are young people who are not interested in the paying for luxurious hotels, preferring to explore the area by foot or on rented bicycles. In the daytime they may wander up and down “Foreigners’ Street” and other parts of the ancient city, alone or with newly-made friends; or they may use the local buses to visit the nearby attractions, such as Mount Cangshan and Lake Erhai. At the time of the survey, there were no other entertainment places in Dali apart from the natural scenery and the local shops and restaurants. Consequently, “Foreigners’ Street” became the place where most foreign tourists congregated in the evenings. After spending the day enjoying the local scenery or visiting the Bai minority villages the tourists crowd into the local eating and drinking establishments in Dali. People from all over the world meet here and become friendly with one another almost immediately. It is reasonable to expect that their presence and activities exert a strong influence on the local people and this was the assumption underlying the present research.

## 2. Survey Methods

Data for the survey, which was carried out in July of 1993, was obtained

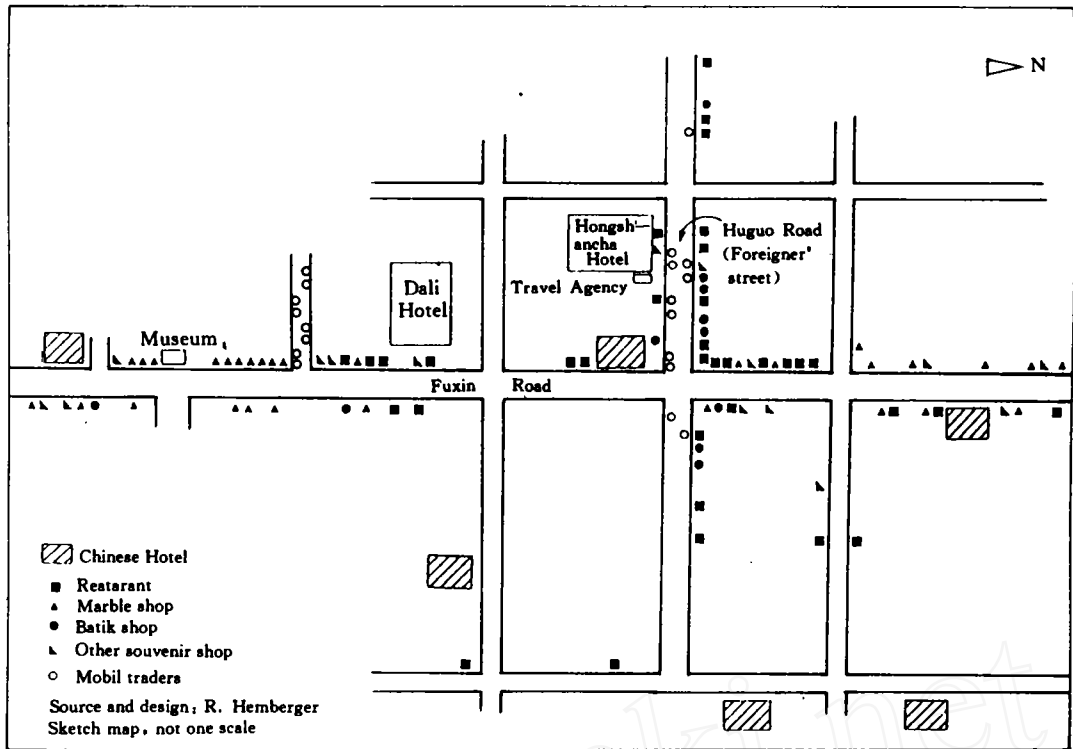


Fig. 1 Dali tourist infrastructure

through questionnaires which were coupled with in-depth interviews when necessary and convenient. It is obvious that the businesses in “Foreigners’ Street” have the most direct and frequent contacts with foreign visitors. Surveys were conducted in all the 14 restaurants, 13 batik tailor shops, and 4 craft shops there. The various businesses in Fuxin Road were mainly meant for domestic tourists but also attracted some foreigners. Of the 150 restaurants, batik tailor shops, and craft shops there, 41 were randomly selected for this study. The residents in and near the ancient city of Dali were inevitably under the influence of foreign tourists and therefore were also included in the study. Since few elderly people were motivated to learn a foreign language, the study focused on young people under the age of forty.

### 3. Questionnaire Design and Interviews

#### 3.1 Questionnaire design

People in Dali were divided into three categories: businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street”; businessmen in Fuxin Road; and residents living or

studying in Dali. The businessmen were divided into two groups because of the difference in the frequency of their contacts with foreign tourists. The overwhelming majority of the international visitors made their purchases in “Foreigners’ Street”, where advertisements were often written in English, assistants usually spoke English on a daily basis. Businessmen in Fuxin Road also had overseas visitors every day, most of whom were “window shopping”. Consequently, interaction in English was needed, but was much less frequent than that in “Foreigners’ Street”. As for the local residents, they saw foreigners every day and occasionally had unexpected exchanges with them.

The questionnaires for businessmen included questions about their levels of English, how well they communicated with foreign people, their plans for learning English, whether their shops had English names and advertisements. Since the businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street” had much more direct contact with foreigners than those in Fuxin Road, the data from the questionnaires were analyzed separately.

The questionnaires for the residents were different from those administered to the businessmen. The questions explored their purposes in learning English, and whether they could understand the advertisements in English. To correspond with the survey of the local businessmen and residents, a questionnaire was designed for foreign visitors, to evaluate the English competence of Dali’s people. Questions for them included their communication with the locals, and their perceptions about the English competence among the residents.

### 3.2 Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to find out more details based on the information elicited from the questionnaires. At least half of each group of respondents were interviewed. All of the interviewees who were approached, bosses or employees, were willing to answer the questions, perhaps because of curiosity and the fact that this was the first encounter they had with being interviewed. Foreign tourists were more familiar with interviews, and the interviews with them were often extended into topics that went beyond language discussions.

## 4. Results of the Survey and Analysis

### 4.1 Subjects

The 31 subjects chosen in “Foreigners’ Street” worked in 31 shops/restaurants and the 41 in Fuxin Road belonged to 41 shops/restaurants. The numbers of local residents and foreign tourists sampled were 78 and 45 respectively. Since age is an important factor in language learning, the subjects were

divided into 4 groups, those from 10 to 14, from 15 to 39, from 40 to 59, and from 60 to 69. More than half of the subjects were between 15 and 39 years of age. This age group is physiologically and psychologically capable of changing themselves in response to changes in circumstances.

#### 4.2 *Shops with English names and advertisements*

In “Foreigners’ Street” 25 of the 31 shops had English names and advertisements; among them 13 had written the names and advertisements by their own businessmen; 12 had asked for help from local people who knew English; and 3 had changed names or version of advertisements after suggestions from foreign tourists. In Fuxin Road, 19 of the 41 shops/restaurants had English names and/or advertisements, 17 had been helped by the local people who knew English; 2 had help from friends from foreigners.

From Table 1, it is obvious that there were a lot more businesses with English names and/or advertisements in “Foreigners’ Street” than in Fuxin Road. All of the restaurants in “Foreigners’ Street” had English names and menus. The 6 batik shop owners had thought that the clothes being displayed were the best advertisements, but they gradually came to realize that they lost their advantage when their competitors had advertisements in English. They said they would think of using English advertisements in the future, and 2 of them actually renamed their shops in English during the survey.

The fact that 52% of the English names of the shops/restaurants in “Foreigners’ Street” were written by someone in the business indicates that businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street” had better English levels than their counterparts in Fuxin Road. According to the foreign respondents. The English they saw and heard in Dali was good. Interviews indicate that almost all of them based their evaluations on their experiences in “Foreigners’ Street”. However, the fact that nearly half of the shops with English names and/or advertisements in Fuxin Road means that businessmen had realized the importance of the language and considered English a key element to attract foreign customers.

**Table 1 Percentage of Stores with English Names and Advertisements**

	With English name & advertisements	Self-named	Named by local people	Renamed by tourists
Foreigners’ St.	80%	52%	48%	12%
Fuxin Rd.	46.3%	0%	89%	10.5%

#### 4.3 *Evaluation on the English-learning attitudes of the local people and their levels of English*

It was apparent that businessmen in Dali simply could not ignore English.

According to the data from the questionnaires, 80% of them in “Foreigners’ Street” thought ignorance of English would affect their business negatively, and 58.5% of them in Fuxin Road shared the same idea. Clearly, people working in “Foreigners’ Street” were more aware of the importance of English than those in Fuxin Road. One thing worth pointing out is that those who did not think English very useful in “Foreigners’ Street” worked in the batik tilor shops, where most of the businesses could be done with gestures. From the interviews, it was learned that those who did not think highly of the use of English in Fuxin Road dealt primarily with domestic customers. They admitted that they would be happy to have foreign customers, but they were too busy to learn English, and therefore chose to focus only on domestic tourists. In other words, they would learn English if they had the time, but this did not seem likely.

As shown in Table 2, in “Foreigners’ Street” at the time of the survey, 21 people could hold conversations in English; 9 could use English for business purposes; only 1 did not know any English. In Fuxin Road, 13 could hold every-day conversations, 5 could use business English; 2 could do simple greetings, but 21 did not know any English at all. The businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street” spoke English that suited their purposes. The only one who knew no English at all was a 64-year-old batik could understand. It was also significant that 43.9% of the businessmen in Fuxin Road could conduct their business in English, which is evidence of the fact that the constant presence of foreigners had made them expand their business targets to include tourists from foreign countries.

In a multiple choice question, foreign subjects evaluated the English competence of Dali’s businessmen. They agreed that a few people, especially those in restaurants, spoke excellent English; they observed that some could make themselves understood, some could speak very basic English, and a few were able to communicate better with gestures. Most of them based their observations on the English competence of the businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street”. From the interviews conducted with those working in restaurants in “Foreigners’ Street”, it was found that there was usually at least one employee with very good spoken English in every restaurant. They usually had either a junior or senior high school level of education. They became relatively very good speakers of English after working in restaurants for a few years. It is important to note that none of the restaurant owners had ever been abroad, but they arranged their tables and provided menus that were clearly western in style. They admitted that their knowledge of western culture was obtained through every-day interactions with their foreign customers. Table 3 reveals



the businessmen's purposes in communicating with foreign customers. About a quarter of the people in "Foreigners' Street" talked with foreigners only for business interest, while the rest wanted to know more about other cultures or to improve their English apart from their business calculation. In contrast, about half of the businessmen in Fuxin Road interacted with foreigners only for profit, and considerably fewer of them than their counterparts in "Foreigners' Street" wanted to know more about foreign cultures. This provides additional evidence that businessmen working in "Foreigners' Street" went a step further in general than those in Fuxin Road.

Table 4 illustrates the means of communication between the local people and foreign tourists. The 6 people who able to carry on a conversation entirely in English were mostly employees in restaurants (and one owner of a craft shop who had been to France). Interviews with them showed that they all learned English in high school and slowly became relatively fluent speakers of English. They could talk with foreign tourists with no difficulty, and therefore had learned a lot about western society. Some of them reported that they had a number of foreigners as friends. The data in Table 4 also provides evidence of the distinct difference in English levels between businessmen in the two business areas. As for residents, 76.9% of them were able to use English to various extents. This is an indication that knowledge of English had become part of the education desirable for the young people in Dali. When asked if they would like to go on learning English, 28 in "Foreigners' Street", 27 in Fuxin Road, and 71 of the residents said they wanted to learn more English. (See Table 5)

**Table 2 Businessmen's self-evaluation of their English**

	Everyday conversations	Business English	Greetings only	Don't know English
Foreigners' St.	67.8%	29%	0%	3.2%
Fuxin Rd.	31.7%	12.2%	4.9%	51.2%

**Table 3 Businessmen's purposes in communicating with their foreign customers**

	For profit	To learn English	To know other cultures	To propagate	Only for profit
Foreigners' St.	74.2%	51.6%	45.2%	3.2%	29%
Fuxin Rd.	80.5%	32%	29.3%	4.9%	48.8%

Apparently, most of the three groups of people, especially those working in "Foreigners' Street" and the residents, wanted to learn more English. In-

interviews reveal that many of those who did not plan to go on learning had reached a certain level of English competence, while others either considered themselves too old or were short-term migrants who would soon go home to places where English would not be important. It is worth noting that most of the residents, especially high school students, believed English would be useful for their future, though they could not specify the exact reasons for it. However, many businessmen and residents who had jobs admitted that they were too busy to learn, therefore it was likely that those who were college and high school students would be most motivated to learn for better job opportunities.

In inquiring about the purposes of learning English, five options were given in the questionnaires: 1) to find better jobs; 2) to win respect; 3) to go abroad; 4) to improve the overall education of oneself; 5) other reasons. (See Table 6 ). It is obvious that “overall education improvement” is the major reason for learning English, which is apparently the result of the increasing influx of foreign tourists. Some businessmen, (one third of those in Fuxin Road) added “to do better business” as an additional response to the question, without being prompted. This again demonstrates that economic gains provided the motivation for learning English. Those in Fuxin Road felt this more strongly than those in “Foreigners’ Street”, because the key for them to open the market to foreign tourists was the ability to communicate in English.

From the data of Table 5 and Table 6, it is important to note that more residents than businessmen in both “Foreigners’ Street” and Fuxin Road wanted to learn more English, even though they did not have direct contact with international tourists. This means that English have a pervasive influence on the life of Dali’s people. It is no longer something beneficial only to a small group of business people, but to the local people in general.

**Table 4 Means of communication between the local people and foreign tourists**

	Exchange with foreigners	English	English+Chinese +gesture	Chinese +gesture	No exchange with foreigners
Foreigners’ St.	100%	19.4%	77.4%	3.2%	0%
Fuxin Rd.	100%	0%	51.2%	48.8%	0%
Residents	96.1%	0%	76.9%	19.2%	3.9%

The impact of the influx of overseas tourists is reinforced by the observation that all businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street” hoped their children would learn English; and 92% of those in Fuxin Road shared the same hope. This suggests that if the businessmen realized the importance of English but had found no time to learn it themselves, they were keen for their children to

learn.

**Table 5 Local people's attitudes about learning more English**

	Go on learning	Stop learning
Foreigners' St.	90.3%	9.7%
Fuxin Rd.	65.9%	34.1%
Residents	91%	9%

**Table 6 Dali people's purposes for learning more English**

	Better jobs	Win respect	Go abroad	Overall education improvement	Better business	Other reasons
Foreigners' St.	29%	12.9%	9.7%	64.5%	19.4%	0%
Fuxin Rd.	19.5%	4.9%	4.9%	56.1%	34.1%	0%
Residents	17.9%	6.4%	5.1%	76.9%	0%	3.8%

### III. CONCLUSIONS

It is evident that different kinds of people have been impacted by the opening of Dali to foreign tourists. This study focused on the impacts of tourism on the local people's attitudes toward learning English. The local people were categorized into three groups: those working in "Foreigners' Street"; those working in nearby Fuxin Road; and residents of the city of Dali. The results of the study showed that the impact of tourism on the English competence of the local people was dependent on their location within the city. Businessmen in "Foreigners' Street", who had direct and frequent contacts with foreigners, were more heavily affected than those in Fuxin Road, who had less frequent (but increasing) contact with overseas customers. Although the residents had little direct contact with foreigners, they saw them frequently, and for the most part were acutely aware of their presence. The shops with English names and/or advertisements, especially those in "Foreigners' Street", reminded them all the time of the fact that English had entered their lives, and reinforced the language's importance. Among the 78 residents included in the study, 54 said that the presence of English speaking people in the streets, and the proliferation of English in signs and advertisements, made them eager to learn some English. They were likely to be asked for directions by visitors and had to confront foreign tourists on a regular basis. As a result, many of the local young people recognized that English should become part of their education. On the whole, the influx of foreign tourists has transformed Dali from a remote locality into a place where Chinese and foreign cultures meet on a regular basis. According to the survey, the need to learn English in Dali began

with the businessmen in “Foreigners’ Street”, and diffused outwards to those in Fuxin Road. It has subsequently spread even further, to the overwhelming majority of the young people in Dali. The need for speaking English originally arose from the desire of local business people to make a profit, but it was subsequently perceived as a way of improving one’s overall education. More importantly, it appears that the desire to learn English spread from the business community to the residents of the city; and instead of weakening, the strength of this effect increased with “distance” away from the business core. It appears that English has penetrated into the lives of Dali’s people, and the constant influx of foreign tourists has widened their horizons. The locals have learned not only to profit from tourism, but also to position themselves more favorably for the future by learning English.

It is predictable that with the opening of the Dali International Airport and further tourist promotion, more and more tourists will want to visit Dali, and there will be more contact between them and the local people. The present study has found that there was a strong motivation among the local people to learn more English, and English has become a very important component of Dali people’s education. Whether this will continue to be the case for Dalik, and whether these findings can be generalized to other tourist sites in China, will be the subject of future studies to be conducted by the present researcher and by others working with in the field of tourist geography.

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