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HUMAN MOBILITY, MIGRATION & TOURISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE
Gian Luigi Corinto, Glen Farrugia (Eds.)

Yangtze River Cruise: A journey through the promotion of fluid developing places and controversial models of sustainability

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Abstract

In the upper middle course of the Yangtze River, there is a long history of difficult navigation, especially in the section of the river that crosses the Sichuan Basin towards the Three Gorges Reservoir. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Western steamboats began sailing to Chongqing, a prefecture seat that later became the provisional capital of China during World War II. The material and ideological presence of imperialist traces caused the political decline of the city during the Maoist period and the first phase of economic reforms in the 1980s. Thanks to the institutional change in 1997, when Chongqing gained independence from Sichuan Province and became a Municipality, the city has been rediscovered due to rapid urbanization, attractive policies to direct foreign funds, and eccentric leadership. In this context, which has also been described in terms of the “Chongqing renaissance,” local tourism activities struggled to position themselves as a valuable economic sector and followed the pre-reform red tourist visit fashion. This paper investigates Yangtze River cruise tourism within the Chongqing-Three Gorges section as an emerging niche category characterized by domestic tourism to the river’s growing visibility and opening up to more globalized forms of elite cruising over the past decade. Building on the assumption that the river cruise tourism sector, particularly in China’s peripheries, is an under-investigated field of research, this study questions the global elite cruise tour models versus local ones in pre-pandemic Chongqing by looking at the local development of the ecological zone. The analysis is based on statistics and discourse analysis of the place’s online promotion through the literally and metaphorically fluid space that characterizes the area. The integration of excerpts from a personal travel journal written during a cruise on a lower-middle-class service boat aims to dive deeper into the emotional atmosphere of the Yangtze River cruise in the historical conjuncture of institutional neoliberal transition. In doing so, the paper highlights the controversial socio-economic and ecological dynamics of interaction that emerge at the local level concerning tourism activities. It also reflects on how the concepts of sustainability and ecological civilization are politicized and flow into the local understanding of the place, facilitating the formation of new power networks and territorialization tactics.

Keywords: cruise tourism, Chongqing, Yangtze River, inland port town, ecological civilization

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