



## **A City of Brand Names: (En)Countering Narratives of Development in Qingdao, China Tourism**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how promotional tourist DVDs construct narratives of corporate space in Qingdao, China. The videos – which are marketed at heritage tourist sites as “video postcards” – are designed to produce a particular chronotope in which the industrialization of Qingdao’s hinterlands emerges inevitably from the landscapes of heritage tourist sites. These spatial narratives are directed at domestic tourists, and take advantage of distinctly Chinese traditions of image-making and tourism. By narrating the connections, for example, between Mount Lao (the birthplace of Taoism) and the Tsingtao Breweries (China’s most famous brand name), the videos and associated tours “place” the body of the tourist in past-time spaces of Chinese heritage, contemporary (imagined) landscapes of unproblematic development, and projected, “branded” landscapes of Qingdao’s (and China’s) future.

### ***Land, Development, and Protest in Contemporary China***

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005 Chinese police opened fire on a crowd of protesters in the small, seaside fishing village of Dongzhou in Guangdong Province in southern China. The protesters had gathered to contest the building of a wind power plant on what had previously been the property of

villagers. They were also angry at the proposed landfill that would accompany the wind power plant, which was being proposed as a supplement to the coal power plant that had already been constructed on village lands. According to the foreign press coverage as many as 30 villagers were killed, but the true death toll may never be known. The Chinese government mobilized to cover up the story, labeling it a "minor incident." This was not the image of development that would attract more foreign investment to China. Indeed, the state's legitimacy is under constant threat from the rising number of protests that have been emerging recently, as villagers grow increasingly angry over the confiscation of their land for urban expansion and development. Some have estimated that the number of protests in China has soared from 10,000 in 1994 to as many as 150,000 as of 2005 (Pan 1). Though smaller in scale, protests like the one in Dongzhou have been so common in recent years that they are, in fact, part of the process of China's economic reforms. Instances such as these of in-situ resistance are now part of the landscape of contemporary China. Outside of straightforward, violent repression, what other means have the Chinese state used to quell the resistance against the rapid conversion of land from private agricultural uses to global industrial ones (see Ho and Lin 82)? If Dongzhou is an example of how narratives and policies of development are countered "on the ground," then how has the state responded to these

challenges aesthetically? This paper attempts to answer these two questions, and makes suggestions for future research on tourism in China.

[2] Two years after the Dongzhou incident I took 17 students on a 2-week short-term study abroad program in which we toured Shandong Province – widely known as the cradle of Chinese civilization. Boasting the home of Confucius (Qufu), and China’s most sacred mountain (Mount Tai in Tai’An, which has been a tourist site for thousands of years), Shandong Province is also home to one of the rapidly changing coastal cities, Qingdao. As we toured Mount Lao, the birthplace of Taoism and still home to several Taoist monasteries, the world famous Tsingtao Breweries, and the former German administrative buildings, we noticed a common theme. Our tour guides, many of the souvenirs available, and (especially) Qingdao promotional DVDs were just as concerned with referencing economic development as they were with referencing the “heritage tours” that formed the bulk of our itinerary. Since Shandong Province tourism is overwhelmingly domestic (most foreigners are more interested in the Great Wall, Xi’an, and the Silk Route), it seemed to us that these “development” souvenirs were directed at Chinese tourists.

[3] Three years after Dongzhou all of China would be anxiously awaiting the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. As the country prepared for “the

world's" arrival, images of economic change were front and center. This was to be China's coming out party – a demonstration of how China had emerged from its turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century to become the world's newest superpower. It is in the context of these massive preparations that I look at one way in which the Chinese state attempts to create alternative narratives of an unproblematic, inevitable economic development. The promotional DVDs are marketed alongside postcards and miniatures that promote the regional, cultural, and geographical distinctiveness of Qingdao. Unlike scenic postcards, however, the promotional DVDs take traditional "heritage" sites and blend them seamlessly with the newly emerging areas of foreign investment and industrial development. I argue below that a "chronotope" – understood here as a discursively produced time/space onto which linear narratives are transposed (Bakhtin) – is produced in which Chinese landscapes are imagined as industrial "stages" for the emergence of a late modern China. The national narrative of China's economic development becomes tied to the eternal China of heritage tourism in part through these types of visual systems. The merging of heritage tourism and economic development in China is nothing new. Ethnic heritage parks, notable landscapes in miniature, and even religious holidays have been at the service of the economy all over China for the last twenty years (Anagnost; Sofield and Li). Here I concentrate on two particular Qingdao promotional

DVDs as a way of understanding how the Chinese state attempts to naturalize the changes taking place on the ground in many of China's cities.

[4] This paper is based on fieldwork activities undertaken during a short-term study abroad program in Shandong Province, China that the author conducted with students in January 2007 and January 2008. During the course of those field schools, the students and I photographed the landscape, collected souvenirs, and produced short films about our experiences as tourists. As we conducted our class-related activities, I took note of how the local guides with whom we worked were extremely concerned with the direction of change "on the ground" in their hometowns, including Qingdao. Jokes, stories, and even suggestions for things to do in our free time all centered on various interpretations of the scope and pace of recent changes on the landscape in contemporary China. As this became more apparent I also discovered a genre of promotional videos at several souvenir stands at various tourist attractions in Qingdao.

[5] My analysis follows Marcus Banks' method of visual research, as it depends on the symbolic "linkages" between images, between images and material contexts, as well as between images and the socio-cultural contexts within which they are dynamically embedded (Banks 51). The goal here is not only to establish "grounded theory," but also to examine the "materiality

of the visual,” or how each image/narrative articulates with material, physical and socio-cultural worlds (12). After purchasing the first DVD – “Flying Over Qingdao” – I started looking for others at local bookstores, souvenir kiosks, and markets. We can learn much about how the local and regional government authorities are attempting to impose meaning on the wild, unpredictable, and often unsettling changes taking place on Qingdao’s increasingly commercial landscape by situating these works in larger discourses of development. Qingdao as a “city of brand names” is an emerging official narrative of development that the state attempts to reinforce in part through promotional DVDs and postcards. Narratives of material change take on meanings through their embeddedness in discourses of development, traditional understandings of Chinese landscapes, as well as in their relatedness to other tourist souvenirs. The “naturalness” of development gets “worked out” through tourist engagements with this particular visual system.

### **The Coastal Development Strategy in Qingdao**

As most tour guides are quick to point out, Qingdao was a small fishing village less than 100 years ago. The city’s unique, cosmopolitan history – and its prime location vis-à-vis South Korea and Japan – made it a perfect location to carry out the initial experiments with capitalism in China’s eastern seaboard cities. The Qingdao Economic and Technological

Development Area (QETDA) – with preferential trade and industrial development policies – broke ground on March 28, 1985, as part of the first wave of coastal city development. As a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the QETDA became host to a range of tax and tariff policies designed to make it a more inviting space for domestic and foreign investment. Then, in 1992, the State Council approved the Qingdao Free Trade Zone within the QETDA, a move that also combined the QETDA with the Huangdao District of the city proper (*Qingdao Economic and Technical Development Area Official Website*). Combined with the Shandong Provincial Government's construction of the Xuejiadao Tourism and Vacation Zone in 2000, these policy developments trace the histories of reform era policies in China, from Deng Xiaoping's earliest reforms, through the state's increasing "openness" to transnational capital. Intended as a "laboratory" for experiments in capitalist growth, SEZs were open doors to foreign capital with more direct avenues of communication with the central government (Osborne). These privileges have led to unprecedented growth in cities such as Shenzhen and Tianjin, where joint ventures between the Chinese government and foreign corporations have built thriving metropolises virtually overnight. The Chinese government attracts foreign investment by offering up cheap, compliant labor and land that is still technically owned by the central government, and there has been much work on how factory workers are disciplined and produced as global factory workers (Rofel; Ngai). Less common are studies

related to the ways in which these processes are playing out “on the ground” beyond the borders of the SEZs. Through what means has the state attempted to “naturalize” the confiscation of farmland and fishing grounds in the name of economic development?

[7] Qingdao has been no exception to the course and pace of change, and it has become a preferred destination of many Fortune 500 corporations in the electronics (GE, Dell, Intel, IBM), communications (Motorola), chemical (DuPont), and automotive industries (Toyota, Volkswagen). Alongside the engineering, finance, and service industries, foreign investment in the QETDA had reached 25 billion Yuan (\$3.13 billion U.S.) by 2006 (*Qingdao Economic and Technical Development Area Official Website*). Both DVDs discussed below consciously attempt to “brand” the landscape – meaning that they narrate the arrival of various corporations as inevitable extensions of Shandong Province’s privileged position as the cradle of Chinese civilization.

***Flying Over Qingdao (Fei Yue Qingdao) (2002, Yan Tao, Director)***

I purchased the promotional DVD *Flying Over Qingdao (Fei Yue Qingdao)* at a souvenir kiosk housed by a converted hilltop pagoda overlooking the city. The top floor – where the main attraction was actually the view of the “European” part of the city – housed a sizable collection of



postcards and disposable cameras for those who wanted to capture their own panoramic souvenirs. The postcards featured the most commonly featured aspects of the city – the distinctive European architecture, panoramic views of Mount Lao, the famous Qingdao Pier, and the spiraling orange flame that predominates at the May 4<sup>th</sup> Square at Fu Xian Bay. *Flying Over Qingdao* was displayed alongside these postcards, and its packaging featured many of the same sites. I bought it with the assumption that it would be a flyover of the city, with an introduction to the historical sites featured in postcards. Offering English, Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin versions, the menu was the first clue that this was no mere animated postcard. American, Korean, and Japanese investors have been at the center of the central government’s plans to develop the coastal cities through direct foreign investment, especially in Qingdao (which is closest to Korea of all of the coastal experiments in capitalism).

[9] Roughly the first 4 minutes of the 17-plus minute video are dedicated to the city’s natural attractions and scenic spots – the green trees, blue skies, and azure sea are featured prominently, and the various small mountains within the city boundaries are listed as evidence of the city’s ancient heritage. After describing the city as one where “East meets West” in a way that tends to attract Chinese celebrities, the “newness” of the city takes center stage, when it is noted that “Ten years ago it was a suburb

filled with the sound of fishing boats and the bells of temples. Today a modern new city has emerged" (00:05:40). This is the transition point, and it is when the focus of the video changes from Qingdao's natural offerings to its future as a center of technological development. It touches on the newly constructed municipal complex, and highlights the Chinese Academy of Sciences and of Engineering (00:07:03). As the title suggests, all of these attractions are literally flown over, using a camera angle that can either reduce the significance of the person or landscape on screen or suggest a "complete whole." Here, Qingdao the city is presented as one continuous landscape in which "the mountains connect [with] the city and the city connects [with] the sea" (00:00:29).

[10] From there the main focus becomes specific, recent development projects, particularly the Qingdao Economic and Technological Development Area:



**Clip 1: Qingdao Economic and Technological Development Area**

See the full clip here:

<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/scottwilson.php#clip1>

[11] The emergence of the QETDA gives way to a return to the whole, as the last section of the video returns to the natural landscape, while linking it to heritage sites via a quick glimpse (but no mention) of Mount Lao. Declaring Qingdao a “city of brand names,” the video ends with “we are proud” of the changes taking place in the city, where “the glory of the past, the hopes of the future fly together with this rapidly developing city” (00:16:37).



**Clip 2: "The glory of the past, the hopes of the future ..."**

See the full clip here:

<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/scottwilson.php#clip2>

[12] Particularly interesting is how at one point the video reinterprets an old parable about "The Silent Old Man of Stone," a famous outcropping of rock along the coastline near Mount Lao (00:09:36). According to local custom, the rock represents an old man waiting patiently for the return of his traveling daughter. He waited so long that he eventually turned to stone and can be seen in the same spot today. Amid another flyover of the QETDA two minutes later the narrator states that:

The Old Man of Stone has bid farewell to his loneliness. Opposite Qingdao is Xie Ja island, commonly known as Phoenix Island.

With the construction of the Qingdao Economic and

Technological Development Zone, the pretty Phoenix doesn't feel lonely anymore. Here you have the beauty of the nature, the beach along the coast, the islands on the sea. (Flying Over Qingdao, 00:11:12)

Here, space, history and contemporary industrial development come together through voiceover and rapid montage editing to produce a seemingly coherent landscape in which old and new bleed into each other unproblematically, without the socio-cultural ruptures that persist in less "settled" areas like Dongzhou.

### ***Qingdao, China (Zhongguo Qingdao)***

At yet another gift shop in the receiving lobby of Tsingtao Brewery #2 – amid slightly more expensive Chinese language histories and vintage postcard collections – I purchased the second DVD examined here. Whereas *Flying Over Qingdao* focuses primarily on economic development, infrastructure, and the global branding of the city's landscape, *Qingdao, China (Zhongguo Qingdao)* concentrates on the "human factors" of development in the city. Drawing on the literary tradition in which humans are understood as part of the natural landscape (discussed in a later section), the video develops the overall theme of social, environmental, and economic harmony, stating within the first two minutes that "Qingdao is a

place where the mountains and the sea, the vegetation and the people exist in perfect harmony with one another" (00:01:57).

[14] Another key difference from *Flying Over Qingdao* is the way in which the narrative is developed. *Qingdao, China* separates its "chapters" by cutting to a nuclear family (mother, father, 3-4 year-old daughter) taking in the sites, enjoying the arts, shopping, and sailing. Each of these has a musical interlude in which the little girl sings the traditional song, *Da Hai A Guxiang* ("The Sea is My Home"). The song celebrates the small-scale maritime village that Qingdao was once known as not long ago, a theme which echoes throughout this 13-minute presentation. Again, old and new uses of land, sea, and resources coexist unproblematically in the imagined Qingdao of these promotional videos, as evidenced by how the child sings this song as she and her parents enjoy the trappings afforded by Qingdao's more cosmopolitan middle-class. In addition to a strong middle-class, the video also boasts of a strong potential workforce, though this term is never used explicitly:

Qingdao is a young city populated in the main by immigrants.

With their varied cultural backgrounds and beliefs, these adopted

locals all contribute to Qingdao's reputation for openness and

diversity. Credibility, harmony, grandeur, and excellence, all of

which form the city spirit of Qingdao, have made it one of China's elite cities. (00:05:19)

This theme of Qingdao's skilled and tolerant workforce is picked up again later in the video, when the "innovative qualities" of the workforce becomes one of the longer, more developed "chapters."



**Clip 3: Innovation in Qingdao**

See the full clip here:

<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/scottwilson.php#clip3>

[15] *Qingdao, China* ends in the same place that *Flying Over Qingdao* ends: with a celebration of the brand names that now call Qingdao home. Though they take differing paths, both videos nonetheless construct the same basic narrative: traditional landscape (past) yields to a harmonious planned

development (present), from which a completely branded landscape will eventually emerge (future). *Flying Over Qingdao* highlights the infrastructure, while *Qingdao, China* highlights the workforce. Both aim to narrate wild, unwieldy socio-economic shifts as inevitable, “harmonious,” and just. The model for this – seen in both the videos and our tours of the city – is Tsingtao Beer.<sup>i</sup> Tsingtao Beer – purported to be the most famous international brand to ever emerge from China – draws on spring water from Mount Lao, the peak on the outskirts of Qingdao now known as the birthplace of Taoism. In two tours of the city, with two different tour guides – once in January 2007 and again in January 2008 – our structured days proceeded from ancient Taiqing Temple on Mount Lao, to a trip to “Dragon Pool Falls” and the surrounding springs in the heart of Mount Lao, to our final destination, the Tsingtao Brewery. The tourist traces the path of the chronotope mapped out in the videos – past (Taiqing Temple on Mount Lao), present (Dragon Pool Falls, a recently engineered spring water reservoir), and future (Tsingtao Brewery, home of industrialized ancient spring water, and springboard to a branded, distinctively Chinese project of globalization). The tour exists in the video, albeit in miniature form.





#### **Clip 4: Tsingtao Beer and other brand names**

See the full clip here:

<http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue2/articles/scottwilson.php#clip4>

#### **Pilgrimage to the Future**

I argue that chronotopes of Chinese development are partially produced through the visual systems of Qingdao tourism – those postcards, DVDs, and tourist vistas that decorate the (often very linear) pathways of tourism through the city. As alluded to earlier, the Mount Lao to Dragon Pool Falls to Tsingtao Beer sequence occurs in both formal tours, as well as in narratives of Qingdao history presented in the promotional DVDs. In order to understand this visual system even more, however, a discussion of the relationship between tourists, landscapes, and history is in order. The

cultural context of tourism experiences is crucial to understanding how these chronotopes are produced in this particular Chinese setting. In this instance, the production of corporate space constitutes for the tourist a “return” to an imagined geography of Chinese modernity – one that emerges seamlessly from ancient slopes of Mount Lao. In structured tours of Qingdao the body of the tourist merges with spatial narratives that extend back to antiquity (Mount Lao), and forward to the globalized corporate space of Tsingtao Brewery. Table 1 maps out the chronotope I attempt to describe here:

SCALE	THEME	TOUR	TIME
Local	Timeless / Heritage	Mount Lao, Taiqing Temple	(Traditional) Past
National	Unproblematic Development	Tsingtao Brewery, Factory in the Qingdao Econ. and Tech. Dev. Zone	(Imaginary) Present
Global	Globalizing Brands	Tsingtao Brewery, Museum and Factory Floor	(Inevitable) Future

**Table 1: Chart of Qingdao Development Chronotope**

The Tsingtao Brewery – one of China’s most recognized international brands – also stands in metonymically for the multitude of other brand names that are prominently featured in the videos. The mountain-water-beer trope recurs in the imagery of the souvenir promotional videos, the sequence of

tourist locations, and the statements of the tour guides. Its effectiveness is grounded in a distinctively Chinese tradition of image-making.

[17] In traditional Chinese art great pains are taken to locate the body – or humanity – as a part of the natural world. As much a part of the painted landscape as the waterfalls, mountains, and stones they often accompany, the human form is presented as part of what most Westerners would perceive as the “background.” Here, body, time, and space merge to form a simultaneously natural and historical landscape (Fairbank and Goldman 17). This aesthetic extends, I would argue, from the realm of art and into the experience of tourism. This inseparability of body, time, and space manifests itself in a visceral encounter with tourist landscapes in which the body becomes “placed” in history. As Sofied and Li point out, spatial understandings of historical processes are an integral part of being Chinese, and this is reinforced through education at all levels (Sofield and Li 367). Tourism here becomes less a “new” experience than a “return” to the historical staging ground of the imagined community. Understood as pilgrimage, domestic Chinese tourism aims to confirm the visitor’s pre-existing “poetic knowledge” of key landscapes. Thus, the common expression “*budao changcheng fei hao han*” (“If you’ve never been to the Great Wall, then you’re not really a fully developed person”) reveals the link between landscape, history, and personal development. Landscapes of

heritage tourism in China, then, are always already textual – and thus, are primed for the generation of narratives before the tourist arrives.

[18] That the promotional DVDs are made available as souvenirs – in all of the typical places that souvenirs are sold – is important as well. In an increasingly mediated world, authentic experiences of contact and presence are rare, and thus become the object of a particularly late-modern type of nostalgia (Stewart 133). Tourism as an industry markets to the desire for authentic experience, whether that experience relates to the environment, tradition, or a specific type of adventure. And it is through the souvenir – miniatures, postcards, photographs, and videos – that experiences are transformed into narrative fragments, in which the locus of authenticity becomes the souvenir itself rather than its material referent (Stewart 137). For the returned tourist, the places visited exist in the stories told, with souvenirs serving as narrative prompts that stand in for the original. As Stewart continues, “[t]he souvenir displaces the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative” (137). This is crucial to understanding the production of the chronotope, as this shift in the locus of authenticity facilitates another even more important transformation. Through the generation of narratives – producing the very authenticity of the experience itself – souvenirs function to transform the “external” into the “internal” (147). The material world of historical achievement, contemporary

flux, and future development are transformed through narrative into personal stories of fulfillment (the “fully formed person” as the saying recounted above goes). The traditional Chinese aesthetic of the person-in-nature returns full circle, as the miniaturized Qingdao becomes part of the souvenir collection. This has been the case elsewhere in China: Ann Anagnost found that the city of Shenzhen’s miniaturized “Splendid China” affirms the nation as an eternal unity that is bereft of the socio-economic upheavals that characterize late modern China. Splendid China, then, produces a desire in the tourist for something that does not exist in reality (Anagnost 165). Although it is impossible to miniaturize something that does not exist, it is nonetheless possible to “... align the fantastic to the real and thereby miniaturize it by displacement” (Stewart 60).

[19] Chronotopes of unproblematic development in China are produced through the miniaturization of a rapidly changing landscape (as well as through the structured tour) but they come to life in the tourist collection of souvenirs – miniatures, T-shirts, postcards, replicas, and photographs – that are used to recount the tourist’s pilgrimage for years to come. The “tourist” is not a stable persona; tourists are all potential factory workers, investors, or consumers, and the DVDs examined here allude to the multifaceted processes through which they can become each one of these. If, as I am posing here, the common Chinese understanding of how the body fits in the

fantastic landscapes of history can be displaced onto the imagined future landscape of a fully developed China, then the subjects needed to drive those changes will not protest as much as they are now. As more new landscapes of production, consumption, and distribution continue to emerge in Chinese cities, the relationship between space and subject-making will become even more important. Participant observation among Chinese tourists (as potential workers) and foreign tourists (as potential investors) in these same sites would add a much needed layer of analysis in relation to these processes. How does each group negotiate the structured tours through this manufactured chronotope?

[20] I have tried to demonstrate how the Chinese state employs powerful visual systems in its attempt to naturalize its recent development policies on the urban landscape. As these policies are countered everyday through the protests of farmers and fishermen, it is crucial to understand the aesthetic dimensions of development here. It remains to be seen how “investment friendly” the landscape of Qingdao will remain – there have been no protests reported recently. But the local police are preparing nonetheless; officials from Qingdao went to Beijing to undergo riot control training in February 2009. The purpose of this training, according to Huangdao District (Qingdao) Director Zhao Zhongguo, is to “meet the pressing demand of keeping social stability this year,” as it is likely that in the current environment “the crime

rate and social unrest ... [will] increase" ("Lower Level Police Get Added Training"). It appears that in situ resistance – with its often violent protests – will continue to be the primary means by which narratives and policies of development are resisted in contemporary China. If the aesthetic methods analyzed here do not work, then the state seems prepared to change tactics in Qingdao. Communities, lives, and the future of China's place in the global economy are all at stake in each instance of narrative production and local resistance.

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<sup>i</sup> The "Ts" and "t" in Tsingtao is an earlier Romanization of Qingdao.