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Visiting a picture-perfect tourist site in Hunan - but there's trouble below the surface.

A thread■

Seems every couple months, Hunan's Furong Village goes viral on social media. It's been doing this for several years, on Weibo, Douyin, even Twitter sometimes.

Easy to see why: <https://t.co/EuijF0JU8M>



Furong Village ■■■■, also called Hibiscus Town, is a prime attraction in Yongshun, Xiangxi.

It's just two stops north of Jishou on the brand-new HSR (and one stop south of Zhangjiajie). It lies on the north bank of the Xishui River that divides Guzhang and Yongshun Counties. <https://t.co/yotFhVBwmK>



Furong itself looks so cool. An ancient village, built on the banks of a creek flowing down a slope into the river.

As the creek ate away at the hillside, it created several cascading waterfalls. Add colored lights & walkways...BOOM.

You've got the hottest attraction around. <https://t.co/ZZADxg6yZR>



But..behind all those glittering lights, Furong has some unfortunate dirty secrets. Before we get to that though, I have to talk about where I stayed, how I got around, and how I gathered info.

To do that, it's time to introduce the protagonist of my Furong story: Boss Xiao.

Boss Xiao is the owner of the guesthouse we stayed at while visiting Furong.

His guesthouse is not in Furong at all; it's actually on the south bank of the river, in Guzhang County.

A lot of online reviews mentioned how loud the hotels in the village are, so this seemed better. <https://t.co/QHaJHk9ZcW>



Boss Xiao is a local. He joined the PLA straight out of high school and stayed for 14 years.

The military doesn't pay great, but you can save literally every penny. After he got out in 2014, he worked for a few years, took all his money, and built this dream guesthouse in 2019. <https://t.co/RuH3cuFJPI>



This plot of land used to be his childhood home. As Furong tourism was picking up, he flattened it and spent all his savings to build what you see here.

The two units closer to the river (facing Furong) are for guests; his family lives in the third unit.

My balcony's view: <https://t.co/gTPoT5njAd>



But business is awful for Boss Xiao right now. Over 3 days in the 20-unit guesthouse, we were the ONLY guests.

"Before Covid, I got up at 5AM & was so busy that I didn't have time to eat...or pee...until 2pm."

Now he spends his days drinking tea and dreaming of other jobs.

"Actually I'm not really suited for the hospitality industry, you know? I used to have a really bad temper when I was in the army. I used to get into fights all the time. But you can't do that with guests. You have to smile, accept abuse and say "sorry....sorry...sorry".

"All my friends say my personality has changed since I opened the guesthouse.

Before, when we went out to get beers and BBQ, if some asshole bumped into me or wanted to hit me, I would fight him. But now I just smile and say sorry....sorry...sorry...It's true...it's me now"

"Really, I don't like this job. But when we opened, I was too busy to think about whether I liked it. Every day...waking up early, picking up and dropping off guests, carrying luggage. My wife stood in the kitchen all day making meals. Now I am just so bored."

Despite his dislike of the job and the industry, he's actually very good at it. The rooms are clean, comfortable, and attractive, with great views of the river.

For a small guesthouse in the Hunan countryside, a lot of thought has gone into designing these spaces.

<https://t.co/m0weCLQgdB>





And it shows in his online ratings. He's got a near-perfect 4.9/5 on Ctrip & distinctly remembers EVERY guest that ever gave him less than 5stars (I quizzed him one evening drinking tea together).

And his service is fantastic. For 3 days, he personally chauffeured us everywhere.

During normal business times, ALL the places to stay in Furong would totally sell out and the overflow demand would allow his place just across the river to book up as well.

Furong still has lots of tourists, but not quite enough for this model to work anymore.

Let's get back to Furong for a second.

Originally, this village was famous for one thing: the filming location of the 3rd-gen classic Hibiscus Town ■■■■, a 1987 Golden Rooster Best Film/Best Actress winner including a young (and almost unrecognizable with that hair) Jiang Wen.

<https://t.co/iFI2clJERj>



...except back at the time of filming, it wasn't called Furong Village. It was called Wang Town ■■.

Hibiscus Town was a 1981 novel that was supposed to be set somewhere in south Hunan. The film producers chose to film this fictional site in Wang Town for the 1986 movie.

The name of Wang Town was formally changed in 2007 to match the tourist interest in the titular "Hibiscus Town" (which before that didn't actually exist anywhere in Hunan).

See the modern pic vs. a (blurry) pic from 2010 <https://t.co/imEeeksgps>



From what I can gather by looking at old travel blogs, Furong Village was a smaller regional attraction for many years.

In 2012 it earned a 4A rating. There were guesthouses, a few vendors, a few teahouses. Film buffs went to check out locations from the movie (pics 2011). <https://t.co/xqcT5gSOXv>



But all that changed when the Yongshun gov't got the idea to upgrade Furong Village to a 5A attraction.

A development company was established & the money spigot opened up. 100s of millions of RMB were spent on upgrades. Amphitheatres, a tourist center, a waterfall trail... <https://t.co/ROfnN46I4H>





湘西芙蓉镇要火！投资5亿的项目开工！

2019-01-08 21:00



1月7日上午10点，湘西旅游集散地·芙蓉镇5A级游客服务中心开工奠基仪式隆重举行。该项目对进一步打造“神秘湘西·土司王城”旅游品牌，全面推进永顺全域旅游发展具有里程碑意义，标志着芙蓉镇将引领全县旅游事业发展开启新纪元！

When Boss Xiao opened his guesthouse in 2019, Furong Village had already transformed itself into something more like a theme park with a waterfall.

Six performance shows a day. Crowds massive and growing. 200+ new buildings, doubling the town's size. <https://t.co/APxzAI3iDL>

We walked around the village on our second day. With the exception of the waterfall itself, it was everything I hate about Chinese tourist towns.

Naggy vendors. Expensive tourist traps. Roasted sausages on a stick. Vape stores. Loud dazzling performances in fake costumes.

The waterfall and scenery and the night views of the village lit up with fairy lights were still awesome, and that's what we were there for.

We tried to focus on those and not dwell on the things that cheapened the experience. <https://t.co/juTn5ViJ2a>





So it was a little disappointing, but when Boss Xiao picked us up later, it got worse.

He asked us how it was, and we answered it was OK, but too commercial. "At least it helps the economy" I said.

"Yes, Furong is rich now" he said. "We're still poor on my side of the river..."

"I feel the villagers of Furong have a lot of disruption to their lives though" I added. "They live inside a very busy tourist zone...there's no privacy and the loud bars are open quite late. How much do they get for their dividends? (■■■)"

"What dividends?" Boss Xiao asks.

I'm surprised. The villages I've been to paid a % of the tickets to the locals whose lives are on display for tourists.

"But then why would they want to develop the village like this?"

"They don't" Boss Xiao says. "Actually they have conflict with the development company"

He tells us that since last year, when the 5A rating was earned, relations have been VERY bad between the residents of Furong Village & the Furong tourist development company.

In fact, last year about 300 of the shops and vendors even called a general strike! I ask for details.

Their complaints were as follows:

1. The residents are upset that the attraction is open & selling tickets all the way until 11pm. It used to be until 8pm, after

everything closed, but the operator extended the hours to stop people from entering for free. Now they can't rest.

2. While residents ofc don't have to pay to enter their own village, there was no special allowance for family members coming to vist from nearby counties.

If they weren't a Furong resident, they had to pay. It was a discount (60 RMB vs. 108) but they felt it should be free.

3. Rumors of sleazy business practices. According to Boss Xiao, one very famous rice tofu restaurant was making 3M RMB a year & the tourism company decided they wanted a piece of it. They offered the owners a rent of 1M a year to retire and allow the company to operate the shop..

...but the owners refused, cause they were happy to work & make more money. In retaliation, the tourism company stopped bringing package tour groups to that shop & let copycat vendors with the same product to open in the same area.

(Boss Xiao was really pissed about this one).

Because the locals aren't working for the tourism company, they couldn't actually go on strike and stop the operations of the tourist zone.

But they could ensure that they are no shops, restaurants, or guesthouses for tourists to use within it. So that's what they tried to do.

According to Boss Xiao, the strike was partially successful. They got the opening hours shortened to 10pm and lowered the entry fee for one neighboring county to 30RMB instead of 60RMB.

They agreed to re-open after, and it's seemingly been a cautious peace since them. Victory(?)

Dunno what's up with the famous rice tofu shop.

But it was in the 1986 movie & has photos of their famous diners (stars & politicians) on the walls.

Including, in 1997, the Deputy Party Secretary of Fujian Province, some guy named Xi Jinping.

Their business is probably fine. <https://t.co/9iDtGZ3AzJ>



After hearing all that, I had some pretty mixed, and mostly negative feelings about Furong Village.

While it's clear the locals are finding ways to economically benefit from their town's fame, it mostly feels like they are helpless/involuntary passengers in this scenario.

However I think I do get why they aren't getting dividends like the other villages I saw.

Unlike Dehang/Longji, their lifestyle/culture is not the tourist consumption draw here. They ARE ethnic minorities (Tujia) but this isn't ethnic tourism. Furong is famous for other things.

BTW I checked the Furong tourism company ownership shares.

I found it's 30% owned by local gov't and 70% owned by a big SOLE PROPRIETORSHIP investment company in Changsha involved with a half-dozen Hunan tourism projects with local gov't as the minority partners. Interesting...
<https://t.co/xnwwlsWmb6>

序号	股东名称	持股比例	认缴出资额	认缴出资日期
1	 湖南华夏投资集团有限公司 曾用名: 大股东	70% 持股详情>	21,000万(元)	2020-06-30
2	 永顺土司文化旅游发展集团有限公司	30% 持股详情>	9,000万(元)	2020-06-30

At the end of the day, is it a disaster? Nah. The locals are still living well. Remember, Boss Xiao is jealous of them!

But the sleaziness of the development company made this feel this arrangement is lacking in equity for the locals, who even felt it was necessary to strike!

It was my first time to see this development model in Chn, with the local gov't a minority partner to a deep-pocketed private sector investor (who maybe calls the shots too?).

I'm sure it's elsewhere, but so far I've only seen local gov't-run efforts. And so far I prefer them.

Thanks for reading! This is 1/2 posts about Furong. Stick around for the 2nd, when I'll share harrowing details of literally the most dangerous tourist attraction I've ever visited in China.

And if you like this content, check out some of my other China threads.

Part 2 of Furong:

<https://twitter.com/pretentiouswhat/status/1548629733713547264?t=WCn-DmHZwTzsusWwSbGeWw&s=19>

Addendum:

Quite a few people have been asking in the replies whether I would still recommend going to Furong. Here are my thoughts on that:

1. If you would be turned off by the heavy commercialization, the ? for YOU is whether the scenery is good enough to balance it out.

Lots of places in China have this problem of over-commercialization, maybe ruining what are otherwise wonderful sites. It's similar here.

The scenery wasn't ruined for me and I still found a way to enjoy it. For others, it would be too much.

(Don't go during golden week tho)

2. On the other hand, if your concern is MORAL equity, and you want to boycott the attraction on those grounds, I'd invite you to rethink.

The loss of your individual tourist revenue means almost nothing to the investment company, but means everything to locals like Boss Xiao.

Of course it totally sucks that a rich investment firm put you in that position; you can't spend money inside & support the village economy and unless you pay a greedy company their pound of flesh at the door.■

But your "moral boycott" only makes it even tougher on the locals.

So if your main concern was the morality issue, I say go, pay the stinkin' company their stinkin' ticket price, and then spend 5x as much on drinking and dining and souvenirs inside, to the direct benefit of the villagers whose livelihoods now depend on it.