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Research Article

Translating the Snow Leopard into a Fictitious Commodity

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Abstract

Snow leopard tourism has emerged as a niche in Ladakh's broader tourism sector. This paper traces the translation of snow leopards into a fictitious commodity in the context of wildlife tourism in Ladakh. Snow leopards are not a commodity in a Marxist sense because they are not a product of human labor. Instead, I draw from Karl Polyani's notion of "fictitious commodities" to conceptualize the peculiar nature of the commodified snow leopards. To trace the process of becoming a fictitious commodity, I take anthropologist Anna Tsing's concept of translation, which she uses to examine shifts in the value of matsutake mushrooms from gift to commodity and vice versa. The idea of translation helps elucidate how the snow leopard comes to be treated as a tradable entity. However, before such translation is possible, the snow leopard must be made visible as a wild animal. This article suggests that popular books, such as Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), as well as academic/conservation research and wildlife films, played a key role in rendering the snow leopard visible. Once the animal is visible, advertisements and tour packages translate the snow leopard into a fictitious commodity. However, the emergence of a commodified snow leopard raises questions about responsibility, especially when one of the major threats to the species is the changing climate, a phenomenon to which the fossil fuel-dependent tourism industry is a major contributor.

Keywords

snow leopard, fictitious commodity, Ladakh, translation, wildlife tourism

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Introduction

One of the leading wildlife tour operators in India describes the snow leopard tourism experience in Ladakh, the Indian trans-Himalayan region, as follows: "That mythical experience, which sounds like folklore, leaving you haunted by its stories is the one that will transform you. As winter sets into the Trans-Himalayan region, it's time for us to head up to Ladakh and rekindle our romance with the ghost of the Himalayas – SHAAN in Ladakhi a.k.a. The Snow Leopard [sic]" (Encounters Asia n.d.). The offering of a "mythical experience" and the possibility of "romance" with the snow leopard in the trans-Himalaya is being sold or commodified by the tourism sector. This research perspective is an attempt to trace the process of commodification of snow leopards through ecotourism.

How Does Snow Leopard Tourism Happen?

The snow leopard, also called *shan* in Ladakhi, belongs to the genus *Panthera* (commonly called "big cats"), which contains the leopard, lion, tiger, and jaguar. Snow leopards are found in twelve South and Central Asian countries (Macdonald, Loveridge, and Nowell 2010). Ladakh, located in North India, is emerging as a center of snow leopard tourism. Snow leopard tourism happens in the winter months. Rumbak, Shang, and Uley are Ladakh's famous destinations for snow leopard tourism. Different destinations have different facilities. There are luxury camps or lodges in villages like Shang and Uley. Other locations offer only homestays. I conducted fieldwork for nineteen months between 2022 and 2024 in Ladakh as part of my ongoing PhD degree in sociology/social anthropology, studying the human-snow leopard relationship. Since this article is an attempt to theoretically make sense of what kind of commodity the snow leopard is, I do not draw on ethnographic insights. However, in the conclusion, I dwell on the ethical stakes of commodifying the experience of seeing the cat.

The role of the trackers is crucial in snow leopard tourism. They scan the landscape with spotting scopes (portable telescopes) and binoculars. Trackers sometimes go to nearby valleys to track snow leopards' movement by checking their pugmarks and other marks, such as scent marks. Snow leopard tourism entails uncertainty; the elusive cat may not be sighted at all. Sometimes, visitors only get a glimpse; however, lucky ones might be able to observe snow leopards for several days if found with killed prey. When trackers discover a snow leopard, a rare occurrence, they promptly notify the tour leaders via walkie-talkie, and standby taxis transport the group to the location. Most snow leopard sightings occur at a considerable distance, requiring tourists to view the cat through spotting scopes and binoculars. Travelers pay a hefty amount for the opportunity to see the snow leopard, whether they view it or not. And Beyond, one of the leading wildlife tour operators, charged USD 7,862 per person for a 10-night tour for four guests. The ten nights include six in rural Ladakh, three in Leh, and one in Delhi (And Beyond n.d.).

Fictitious Commodities

The growth in wildlife tourism globally, in the context of ecotourism, is an important factor in the commodification of snow leopards. Tracing this broader history is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I specifically ask how the translation of snow leopards into a commodity happens. Before engaging with this question, let us understand what kind of commodity the snow leopard is. The snow leopard is not a commodity in the conventional Marxian sense. According to Karl Marx, a central aspect of commodities is that they are produced by human labor (Marx 1990). In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Volume I), Marx asserts that the value of a commodity, which he calls "substance of value," is not produced through use and exchange value. It comes from labor, which is quantified as socially necessary labor time (Marx 1990, 125). Marx argues, "What exclusively determines the magnitude of

the value of any article is therefore the amount of labor socially necessary, or the labor-time socially necessary for its production" (Marx 1990, 129). For Marx, it is labor that provides value to a commodity. In this sense, exchange value (the rate at which a commodity is exchanged) does not assign value to the commodity itself, as it is merely the bearer of value. In the case of snow leopards, human labor has not gone into producing them, but the big cats possess an exchange value of USD 7,862 per person. If this is the case, Karl Polyani's notion of fictitious commodities helps us understand the peculiar case of the commodified snow leopard (Polyani 2001).

Polyani distinguishes between commodities and fictitious commodities. On the one hand, he defines commodities as those services and goods purposely manufactured for sale, like machines, food, and tables. On the other hand, fictitious commodities are not originally produced for sale but are sold and bought in the market economy. Polyani (2001) presents land, labor, and money as fictitious commodities. Land "is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man" (Polyani 2001, 75). Similarly, labor, another name for human capacities, is not produced in a profit-driven production process that functions under the competitive pressures of the market. Money, according to Polyani (2001), "is merely a token of purchasing power which, as a rule, is not produced at all, but comes into being through the mechanism of banking or state finance" (Polyani 2001, 75–76). Polyani asserts, "But labor, land, and money are obviously *not* commodities; the postulate that anything that is bought and sold must have been produced for sale is emphatically untrue in regard to them" (Polyani 2001, 75, emphasis in original). To maintain the fiction that these non-commodities are produced for sale or exist for sale, Polyani asserts that they are extricated from the social relationship of which they are part and parcel. As he pointed out, "But labor and land are no other than the human beings themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists. To include them in the market mechanism means to subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market" (Polyani 2001, 75). Polyani's argument stresses that the market economy involves uprooting socially embedded relations and converting them into commodities (which are actually non-commodities).

Snow leopards are not manufactured by humans, and if we consider them as fictitious commodities, we would place them close to land, which Polyani equates with the natural environment. Similarly, Diana Stuart and Ryan Gunderson (2018) argue that animals (like cattle) in industrial agriculture could be seen as fictitious commodities and be located between labor and land depending on their function in the production process. They use conceptual frameworks in Marxist theory to highlight the negative impact on animals, the environment, and public health associated with the incomplete fictitious commodification of animals in industrial agriculture. Their larger aim is to highlight that animals are embedded in social relationships and that exploitation under capitalism extends to animals, beyond the humans. However, in the case of snow leopards as a fictitious commodity, it is difficult to see their direct exploitation in tourism. Snow leopards are almost always seen from a distance through binoculars and spotting scopes. Unlike in tiger and lion safaris, humans usually do not come near snow leopards. Given this, the snow leopard is a fictitious commodity, with no direct contact or exploitation. As indicated in the opening quote of this article, tour companies sell the possibility of sighting the big cats, presenting these sightings as a romantic and "mythical experience." Thus, the snow leopard and the landscape experience are both commodified. Put differently, what is commodified is the snow leopard-in-the-landscape.

Making the Snow Leopard Visible

Now, we can begin to unpack the process of converting the snow leopard-in-the-landscape into a fictitious commodity. It seems that before we can sell the "view-of-snow-leopards" to prospective tourists or turn it

into a fictitious commodity, we must bring the snow leopards and the landscape to the forefront. They must be made legible or visible in a particular way. I argue that they have become visible through popular books, documentaries, and works of conservationists, which bring forth the snow leopard and the landscape.

Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978) is a book that has played a key role in making the snow leopard visible. The book captures Matthiessen's physical and spiritual journey in the Himalayan mountains to Crystal Monastery in Dolpo, Nepal. He travelled with George Schaller, a famous biologist who was studying the bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*), a snow leopard prey species. In their journey, they did not see the cat, and Matthiessen received a spiritual lesson—let go of desire. As he relinquishes his desire, Matthiessen initiates the process of highlighting the snow leopard and its surrounding landscape. For instance, the following quote in the early part of his book sets the tone when he writes. "And where bharal were numerous, there was bound to appear that *rarest and most beautiful of the great cats*, the snow leopard. GS [George Schaller] knew of only two Westerners—he was one—who had laid eyes on the Himalayan snow leopard in the past twenty-five years; the hope of glimpsing this *near-mythic beast* in the snow mountains was reason enough for the entire journey" (Matthiessen 1978, 3, emphasis added). The book makes a particular kind of snow leopard visible. It is visible as the "rarest and most beautiful of the great cats" and a "near-mythic beast." Additionally, the book makes the landscape, which features as "snow mountains," mythical due to its hosting of the big cats. In other words, the big cat and the landscape are intertwined in a mythic enterprise. Most importantly, the book gives a spiritual spin to the journey and the desire to see the snow leopard.[1] You may recall how the advertisement on the website of the tour operator is similar to Matthiessen's portrayal of the big cat and the landscape.

Similarly, the work of biologists, wildlife scientists, and conservationists raises the profile of the snow leopard.[2] This is illustrated by the following quote from an article by conservationists: "Livestock depredation has become a significant problem across the snow leopard's range in Central Asia, being most severe in and near protected areas. Such predation, especially incidents of 'surplus killing,' in which five to 100 or more sheep and goats are lost in a single night, almost inevitably leads herders to retaliate by killing rare or endangered carnivores like snow leopard, wolf, and lynx" (Jackson and Wangchuk 2001, 138). Notice how the range has been described as "snow leopard's range" even though the same quote mentions two other carnivores. Certainly, lynxes are not as infamous as the snow leopards, but wolves would rank with snow leopards when it comes to killing domestic animals because more than 50 percent of the wolves' diet comes from domestic animals (Shrotriya et al. 2022). Snow leopards, wolves, and lynxes share the landscape. Yet, the focus is on snow leopards, which makes them more noticeable than wolves or lynxes. The focus on the snow leopard creates an image of the landscape as the "snow leopard landscape."

At the same time, documentary films have also made the snow leopards famous. One of the earliest and most popular of these is *Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard,* directed by Hugh Miles and Mitchell Kelly (2005).[3] In this case, the filmmakers succeeded in getting close-up footage of the big cats after striving for some years. "We're relieved too, for after four years, we finally have our close-up shots of a snow leopard feeding on a wild bharal kill. It is a privilege and a rare sight. In fact, it is difficult to express what a thrill it is to get probably the closest film ever taken of a wild snow leopard" (00:49:54–00:50:14). The point is that someone must spend years getting close-up shots of these big cats. This reinforces the image of the snow leopard as elusive, demanding patience and hard work to get close-up shots. When the filmmakers assert that it was tough to get those shots, they represent the elusiveness and rarity of the big cat. The filmmakers also interviewed biologist and conservationist

Rodney Jackson, one of the authors of the paper I quoted above, for his insights. In the film, Jackson explains the big cat's behavior, including hunting, courting, and mating. Thus, the knowledge produced by biologists and conservationists modulates the representation of the snow leopard in the film.

Books and films have made the snow leopard visible in a particular way. The leopards were represented as wild, distancing them from humans and their attributes, like villages, and domesticated animals such as goats and sheep. Polyani (2001) argues that a thing becomes a fictitious commodity when it is disembedded from social relationships and becomes a commodity such as land. The dominant representation of snow leopards conceals their dependence on agropastoralists for food. For survival, leopards eat domestic animals. In neighboring Baltistan, research shows that as much as 70 percent of the snow leopard's diet comes from domestic livestock (Anwar et al. 2011, Hussain 2019). Similarly, close to 30 percent of the snow leopard's diet in Ladakh came from domestic animals (Shrotriya et al. 2022). In other words, snow leopards, as anthropologist Shafqat Hussain (2019) shows, were living off the local farmers' labor. There were occasional retaliatory killings of snow leopards when they were trapped. The point here is that the people who share the landscape with the cats were less interested in encountering them or getting close-up shots than the tourists.[4]

In books, films, and conservation literature, snow leopards are portrayed as wild animals that live far from humans. The killing of a domestic animal is described as an anomaly. This phenomenon can be viewed as a disease that requires conservation intervention, such as creating alternative livelihoods or constructing predator-proof corrals. Again, I am not saying that conversation programs are unimportant. In fact, they are needed because snow leopards can kill 100 or more domestic goats and sheep in one night if they enter livestock corrals. Such incidents can create a huge loss for agropastoralists whose only source of income is farming and livestock rearing. The point being made is that the snow leopard is primarily represented as a wild animal with no dependence on humans for survival, and this could be considered an erroneous portrayal of the relationship between snow leopards and Ladakhi farmers.

Translation

Once the snow leopard is visible, it can be translated into a fictitious commodity through the efforts of companies that offer snow leopard tours. I use anthropologist Anna Tsing's (2013, 2015) idea of translation to understand the translation of snow leopards into a fictitious commodity. Tsing uses translation to understand how matsutake mushrooms transform from gift to commodity and back by tracing the mushrooms' journey from the source in Oregon (the USA) to Japan, where the mushroom is considered a delicacy. Matsutake mushrooms grow symbiotically with pine trees in specific forest microhabitats. They cannot be cultivated but only foraged. People who forage for this mushroom in Oregon are mostly violence survivors from East Asian countries. The value of mushrooms lies in the freedom they seek. It is a gift of freedom, not a commodity. In the journey from Oregon to Tokyo, the mushroom begins as a gift and becomes a commodity before it is flown to Japan. In the commodity supply chain, the mushrooms move from a non-capitalist value system to a capitalist value system (commodity). The translation from gift to commodity happens in the warehouses where the mushrooms are sorted by hired alienated labor. Their work is to sort mushrooms by size and maturity, which translates them into an inventory or a commodity. Similarly, when the mushroom, as a commodity, reaches Japan, it transforms into a gift through translation by wholesalers, grocers, and consumers who exchange it through personal connections.

Anna Tsing asserts that the capitalist supply chain operates as a translating machine across different value systems, which turn different living beings (in her case, matsutake mushrooms) into commodities.

In the case of snow leopards, I argue that the global supply chain is not involved and the snow leopard is translated into a fictitious commodity through the marketing practices on the websites and social media platforms of the tour companies that offer snow leopard tours. However, we can assert that before translation, making the snow leopard visible is an important step in the translation process. Translation would not have happened without the background works of books, films, and articles that represented a particular image of the snow leopard-in-the-landscape.

To observe translation through marketing processes, the following quote from a tour company website is illuminating.[5] "The Trans-Himalaya region of Ladakh, known as 'Little Tibet,' has been hailed as one of the last frontiers for wildlife tourism. This incredible 11-day winter expedition meets the elements head-on in an awe-inspiring landscape in the Himalayan region of Ladakh in search of the elusive snow leopard and other incredible Himalaya wildlife." (And Beyond n.d.). Meeting "the elements head-on" in an eleven-day expedition shows how the sighting of the snow leopard is translated as a fictitious commodity. The quote indicates that the snow leopard becomes a fictitious commodity by the process of reducing the experience to an eleven-day specialized trip, which must be paid for. As was pointed out earlier, it is not only snow leopards but also the "awe-inspiring landscape," "Little Tibet," and "last frontier" that become part of the inventory.

Another example comes from the Instagram handle of a newly established Ladakh-based small tour company. They posted a short video with music on the handle. Initially, the music is slow and high-pitched, as a man scans the surroundings with binoculars. A snow-covered landscape forms the background and the foreground for a few seconds, and when the beat drops, close-up images of snow leopards are shown. The caption reads, "Snow Leopard Expedition 2023! Book your slot now before it's too late!" (Snow Leopard Expedition [pseudonym] 2022). The evocative video with the feature of the snow-covered landscape and the images of snow leopards when the beat drops translate the snow leopard and the landscape into a slot or a package to be bought by tourists.

Conclusion

The primary point I want to bring home is that the snow leopard became noticeable in a particular way through the work of conservationists, naturalists, and documentary filmmakers. The snow leopard tour companies translate the now-visible snow leopard into a fictitious commodity through marketing. The translation entails maintaining evocative websites and Instagram handles. It entails offering a seat to enjoy the thrill "before it's too late!" It also involves representing the snow leopard and landscape together, the template for which was set by the most popular book on this big cat—*The Snow Leopard*. It involves translating the snow leopard and landscape into an eleven-day itinerary experience or a tour package.

Consequently, the snow leopard as a fictitious commodity is a product of the twin processes of representation and translation. This argument aims to clarify the process involved in creating the fictitious commodity. Karl Polyani argues that the development of a factory system with complex plants and machinery led to the extension of market mechanisms to the three fictitious commodities (land, labor, and money). In other words, extending the market logic to land, labor, and money secured their position as fictitious commodities. Taking inspiration from Polyani, I have shown that beyond the factory system, representation and translation are vital in the process of commodifying animals in tourism.

Hence, snow leopards are repackaged into an experience that is disconnected, fictitious, and commodified. In this process, what is being ignored is that tourism, which is based on fossil-fuel travel and the consumption of imported food while on tour, is one of the major causes of the changing climate, with pronounced impacts in the Himalayan region, including Ladakh (Hock et al. 2019). The snow leopard package is aimed at inviting increasing

numbers of tourists to the snow leopard rangeland. Local people depend on snow leopard tourism for livelihood, and some have become relatively wealthy. The point is that, given climate change, there should be some reflection on the implications of promoting snow leopard tourism for the biodiversity of Ladakh and the planet. Without this reflection, making the snow leopard a fictitious commodity seems to absolve humans (locals, tourists, and tour operators) of their responsibility and response-ability (Haraway 2016) in a changing climate. This is the ethical stake of translating the cat into a fictitious commodity and a central aspect of living in a changing climate in a precarious region.

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Endnotes

1. It is to be noted that Peter Matthiessen was certainly not the first person to foreground the elusive nature of the snow leopard. Even the British colonial hunters in the 19th and 20th centuries describe the snow leopard as elusive (Hussain 2010). However, Matthiessen's work merits special attention because it made the idea of mythical snow leopards famous. Secondly, many of my research interlocutors had read this book and knew about snow leopards through this book.

2. Anwar et al. (2011); Hanson, Schutgens, and Baral (2019); Li et al. (2022); Lyngdoh et al. (2014); and Nyhus, McCarthy, and Mallon (2016) are some of the other works on snow leopards from a conservation point of view. There is relatively less work on urial, argali, and other prey animals of the snow leopard.

3. Other popular films on snow leopards are, among others, *Born in China* (Lu 2016) and *The Velvet Queen* (Munier and Amiguet 2021).

4. However, many Ladakhi wildlife enthusiasts certainly want to encounter snow leopards. Padma Rigzin (2023) shows how the big cats are becoming a means for "natives" educated outside of Ladakh to reconnect with the landscape.

5. I do not mean to argue that the translation is only happening through marketing on the Internet.

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