Becoming a backpacker in China: A grounded theory approach to identity construction of backpackers

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ABSTRACT

Backpacking tourism has gained in popularity among Chinese young people since the 1990s. While learning from their western counterparts, Chinese backpackers have also developed their own unique group identification strategies. By focusing on how backpacker identity is socially constructed in the Chinese context, this research explores the meaning and process of becoming a backpacker in China. Grounded theory was adopted, and the structure "image-identity-strategy" emerged to organise the process of becoming a backpacker into three phases. The findings show that Chinese backpackers employ various strategies to continuously negotiate and reconstruct their backpacker identity. It is thereby shown how the process itself of becoming a backpacker is always ongoing.

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Introduction

The development of backpacking tourism has been accompanied by a proliferation of research in this field. Backpackers are generally considered by scholars to be a socially constructed community (Adkins & Grant, 2007; Welk, 2004), in that they form a unique group style and share similar values and behaviours. For most of them backpacking is not only a travel form, but also an expression of identity. The "backpacker" label embodies ideals of independence, freedom, adventure, self-transformation and personal development (Elsrud, 2001; Noy, 2004; O'Reilly, 2005). Therefore, the identity construction of backpackers has been considered an important topic in backpacker studies (Cohen, 2010; Currie, Campbell-Trant, & Seaton, 2011; O'Reilly, 2005). However, research on backpacking has generally been Western-oriented, with researchers predominantly focusing on "Western" backpackers (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Teo & Leong, 2006). As Cohen and Cohen (2015) put it, although sharing some similarities from an etic perspective, the emic interpretation of tourism in emerging regions, like Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, is quite different from the West. Therefore, more emic research from these emerging regions is called for to overcome the Eurocentric bias in tourism studies.

Benefiting from reforms and the "opening-up" policy in China that has occurred since the late 1970s, Chinese people have had much more opportunity to travel than ever before. In the 1990s, backpacking tourism, perceived as an "exotic" style of travel, became popular among Chinese youths (Zhu, 2009). With the economic boom particularly in the last decade, the number of Chinese backpackers, travelling both domestically within China and internationally, has significantly increased.

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Consequently, backpacking has become an important subculture of contemporary Chinese youths. While imitating Western backpackers to some extent, Chinese backpackers have indeed formed their own culture and unique understanding of "backpacking". To date, however, the cultural meanings of this particular group remain under-researched. Therefore, in order to understand this unique culture of backpacking further, this paper aims to extend our understanding of how Chinese backpackers socially and contextually construct their identities as "backpackers". The study set out to explore: What does it mean in China to be(come) a backpacker? Moreover, by regarding "backpacker" as a social construct and emphasising the processes of meaning-production in backpacker-related social behaviour, the study not only highlights the ongoing re-creation processes of "backpacker" as an identity construct, but also how becoming a backpacker is itself always in process.

The "Backpacker literature

"Backpacking" as a form of tourism

Modern backpackers, who were initially called "drifters" by Erik Cohen (1972, 1973), can be traced back to the period following the Second World War in Western Europe. Cohen considered them to be the most individualistic and least institutionalised type of tourists due to their being relatively detached from the tourism establishment. However, although backpacking initially had a strong connection with the notion of "counterculture", especially drug-culture (E. Cohen, 1973), this countercultural image was replaced as the social-political context changed. For instance, the educational function of backpacking was emphasised when Vogt (1976) used "wanderers" to identify this group. Thus, they became endowed with a more positive image compared with "drifters". The following decades saw this group's continuing evolution, with these travellers no longer being considered the hedonists or anarchists that Cohen had earlier referred to (Riley, 1988). Their image had become more neutral, neither "heroes" nor "deviants", but rather simply "long-term budget travellers" (Riley, 1988), which indicates perhaps the most important institutional orders of this group.

From the 1990s onwards, the term "backpacker" has become the commonly accepted term with which to identify this group (G. Chen & Huang, 2017; O'Regan, 2016; Pearce, 1990). This semantic variation also implies the shift of this group from a de-marketing subculture to a marketing segment (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004). With the institutionalisation of backpacking, there also emerges more variants of backpackers, such as "short-term backpackers" (Sørensen, 2003) and "flashpackers" (Hannam & Diekmann, 2010; Paris, 2012). Both of these two sub-groups travel "backpacker-like", while the differences between them and what could be considered "traditional" backpackers are that the former are limited by travel time, and also the latter carry expensive technology and show greater purchasing power during their trips. Thus, Riley's (1988) definition, "long-term budget travellers", can no longer be seen to accurately represent contemporary backpackers. Moreover, it has been argued that the differentiation of backpackers from mainstream tourism has lessened (Larsen, Øgaard, & Brun, 2011). For example, Spreitzhofer (1998, p. 982) considers backpackers to be "a variant of mass tourism on a low budget level". However, no matter how ambiguous the boundaries between backpackers and mainstream tourists become, the term "backpacker" is still used as an expression of identity (S. A. Cohen, 2010; O'Reilly, 2005).

Construction of identity

Identity, which is a core concept in social sciences, is essentially about the question of "who am I"? However, the understanding of ourselves unavoidably relies on the identification with others. Nowadays, there are two main theoretical streams addressing the social nature of identity (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Zhou, 2008): one is derived from symbolic interactionism from a sociological perspective, and the other is social identity theory formulated by European social psychologists.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the self is a product of social interaction and is reflectively constructed by "taking the role of the other" (Mead, 1934). As individuals usually occupy different roles in society, they may have various role identities which are activated in different situations (Stryker, 1980). Through interactions with others, individuals learn to behave corresponding with the roles they are playing. In this way, the meanings of identities are constructed and acquired.

Social identity theory is developed principally by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975). It considers society as comprising social categories (e.g., nationality, gender, and occupation). Individuals can locate themselves in society through the process of self-categorisation, and then derive their identities from social categories they belong to, because the defining characteristics of these categories can be constructed as a component of their self-concepts. Social identity, therefore, is not merely knowledge of belonging to a social category, it is also attached to value and emotion.

Although they come from different perspectives, the discussions of both two theoretical streams are premised on constructionism, and assume that identities are neither natural nor static, but rather are dynamic and contextualised. Identities are constructed by different practices in different social contexts. Therefore, to have a better understanding of identity construction of backpackers, the following section will discuss "backpacker" as identity from the individual perspective.

"Backpacker" as identity

It has been argued that backpackers are keen to differentiate themselves from "tourists" and to label themselves "backpackers" (O'Reilly, 2005), indicating that this travelling identity is an important source of "meaning-making" for these indi-