Cultural connectedness and visitor segmentation in diaspora Chinese tourism

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Qualitative inquiry into overseas Chinese package tourist experience in China.
- Four segments identified demonstrating degrees of cultural connectedness.
- Importance of catalytic moments in tourist performances revealed.
- Connectedness mediates tourist experience and interaction with local culture.
- Adding backstage flavor to frontstage cultural moments improves tourism performance.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study extends previous research on the motivations and expenditures of overseas Chinese tourists in mainland China by segmenting these visitors on the basis of their connectedness and experience with Chinese culture. Using empirical materials collected during diaspora-specialized tours, we identified Shallow, Extrinsic, Hybrid and Intrinsic segments which vary by their demographics, degree of cultural connectedness, experience with and knowledge of China, and willingness to engage with Chinese culture. Connectedness mediated their experience and interaction with Chinese culture, resulting in distinctive cognitive, affective, conative and prescriptive responses in various frontstage and backstage tourism moments. Overseas Chinese tourists in China are thereby revealed as a culturally and experientially complex cohort meriting distinctive product development and marketing strategies. Recommendations emerging from this research for effective engagement with diaspora tourists include the mobilization of all destination actors to add backstage flavor to frontstage cultural moments.

1. Introduction

Culture is an integral and pervasive component of tourism, but is often depicted in the tourism literature as generic, stable, and homogeneous within an ethnic group (Kwek & Lee, 2008). Terms such as "culture", "country", "nation", and "society", used interchangeably, therefore fail to capture the richness of the cultural concept and ignore deeply rooted intra-cultural variations that significantly affect tourism phenomena (Kwek & Lee, 2010; Weaver et al., 2015). Of growing interest in an era of increased human mobility is

tourism's utility as a vehicle for experiencing and reconnecting with ancestral culture, a phenomenon captured in such terms as roots tourism (Basu, 2004), genealogical tourism (Meethan, 2004), legacy tourism (McCain & Ray, 2003) and personal heritage tourism (Timothy, 1997). Our study, focusing on the Chinese diaspora, uses qualitative methods to clarify the theoretical and managerial parameters of this phenomenon by (a) identifying the intra-cultural variability of such tourists and segmenting tourists on this basis, and (b) analyzing the different experiences they subsequently have when encountering and negotiating manifestations of ancestral culture in China. Our experiential context is diaspora-specialized package tours, which reveal different types of host-guest interaction in a range of catalytic cultural moments. Theoretically, findings highlight the need to transcend macro views of cultural tourists and better recognize intra-cultural variance. Practically, the study considers several intervening and facilitating factors for destination

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management to consider in enhancing tourist experiences.

2. Theoretical background

Cultural tourism is "the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experience to satisfy their cultural needs" (Tourism Trends for Europe, 2006, p. 5, cited in Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). It is also defined as "tourism constructed, proffered and consumed explicitly or implicitly as cultural appreciation, either as experiences or schematic knowledge gaining" (Prentice, 2001, p. 8). These experiences and interpretations include specifics of local culture, such as food, custom, history or product, that can evoke emotional reactions either positive or negative, temporary or enduring; they also often combine to form a narrative that provides an authentic "spontaneous instance of self-discovery and belonging" (Cary, 2004, p. 61). When researching cultural tourism, geographical context is important as it determines the nature of the destinations being examined, and the cultural frameworks that dominate those locations. Accordingly, tourism research has highlighted the role of culture, its language and interpretation in relation to why tourists travel, and how they view the world (Ryan, 2010).

Diaspora tourism is a form of cultural tourism which transcends geography and presents a distinctive platform for understanding cultural tourist experiences and moments of guest-host interaction. The tourist moment, as conceived by Cary (2004, p.61), "simultaneously produces and erases the tourist-as-subject, as at the very instant of awareness and self-representation as a tourist, one goes beyond "being a tourist"". In this instance, the tourist perceives herself to have gone beyond both touristic representation and subjectivity (Cary, 2004). The tourism moment is both cathartic and catalytic for the participant, who is instantly changed by this authentic experience. Early research in this area focused on the premise that tourism experiences are individualistic and a ritual or pilgrimage representing a heightened sense of time (Graburn, 1989, pp. 19—36). Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987, p.314) found that the tourist experience, an "immediate conscious experience", is instantaneously personal, while Wang (1999) states that "tourists are preoccupied with an existential state of being activated by certain tourist activities" (p. 359). It is in this liminal moment that the tourist ceases to be a tourist (Ryan, 1991) but becomes entirely subsumed by the experience. Being both serendipitous and epiphanic, the tourist moment opens a path to self-discovery and communal belonging (Cary, 2004).

This study focuses on such catalytic moments in the context of cultural experience. We define catalytic cultural moments as a form of tourism moment in which interactions with specifics of local culture evoke emotional reactions either positive (e.g. pleasure, nostalgia, belonging) or negative (e.g. bewilderment, confusion, anger, frustration) and temporary or enduring. These emotional responses may be anticipated or not, and result in personal changes that are often evaluated retrospectively.

2.1. Diasporic tourism

"Diaspora" historically connotes forced homeland removal/displacement, but is the preferred term of destination marketing organizations to describe immigrants and their descendants (Huang, Haller, & Ramshaw, 2013). Tourism studies conventionally distinguish between domestic and international tourists. However, diasporas additionally travel between "host" and "home" countries. Such "in between tourists" are often neglected in tourism studies despite their uniqueness and significance. While diaspora tourism shares important characteristics with roots, genealogical, legacy

and personal heritage tourism, differentiation lies in the strength of ancestral heritage as motivation. Only some diasporic tourists return to their ancestral home to actively search for cultural roots, but there is general interest in visiting and experiencing relevant historical and cultural sites. These experiences can create and reinforce connectedness to personal heritage, but sometimes yield negative emotions that foster disillusionment and alienation. For destinations, it is critical to identify aspects of the diasporic tourism experience that increase attachment to place and encourage revisitation (Huang et al., 2013).

We focus on overseas Chinese tourists visiting China, a sizable and lucrative market segment drawn from the 50 million-strong Chinese diaspora (Huang, 2012). Many Chinese diasporas have retained their cultural heritage, practicing Chinese customs and rituals outside China. Literature has differentiated Chinese diasporas based on their geographic locations (Asia vs. Western countries) and different educational systems and religions (e.g., Chinese-educated vs. English-educated) (Tie, Holden, & Park, 2015), reflecting this group's diversity. Existing literature, however, mostly positions China as a tourist-*generating* country rather than a diaspora destination. Studies differentiate ethnic Chinese tourists by motivation (Kau & Lim, 2005), expenditure (Mok & Iverson, 2000; Wang & Davidson, 2010a), destination familiarity (Chen & Lin, 2012) and travel purpose (Kwek & Lee, 2010, 2013), reflecting broader patterns of market segmentation based on consumption patterns, travel experiences, and socio-economic background (Richards & van der Ark, 2013). There is however further need to recognize intra-cultural variances among overseas Chinese tourists and resultant differences in interaction with China. Indicatively, Kwek and Lee (2008) noted similarities and differences between Mainland Chinese and Singaporean Chinese when evaluating marketing images of Queensland, while Kwek, Wang, and Weaver (2014) identified diverse participant approaches for responding to the hard sell tactics of zero-commission tour intermediaries in the Chinese diasporic market.

A relevant study by McKercher (2002) identified five segments of cultural tourists to Hong Kong based on importance of destination culture as a motivation and depth of cultural experiences attained. Among non-Chinese tourist markets, the greater the cultural and geographical distance between market and destination, the more important culture becomes as a motivation to visit Hong Kong, and the greater the participation in cultural experiences. Diasporic Chinese are likely to display similar variation in cultural distance. Most market segmentations of cultural tourists, however, fail to describe tourist diversity, account for the interactions between tourists and destinations they visit (Hannam & Knox, 2010), or explain subsequent behavior.

2.2. Tourist/destination interactions and emotions

Diasporic tourists' differential reaction to "homeland" culture and history can be framed as a type of "performance" (MacCannell, 1976) within the destination *sellscape* — the multifaceted settings within which tourism products are developed, accessed, promoted and exchanged (Kwek et al., 2014) — distinctive "frontstage" and "backstage" spaces and times are demarcated (Boorstin, 1961). Using Goffman's structural division of social establishments, the frontstage is where hosts meet guests, and performance is conducted. The backstage, often perceived as "authentic", is where performances are prepared and hosts unwind. Crucial roles on these stages are played by those who perform, those performed to, and "background" outsiders who neither perform nor observe. MacCannell (1973, 1976) elaborates by identifying six types of stage along a contrived/uncontrived continuum with intermediate options such as frontstages decorated to resemble backstages, and