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Urban livability and tourism development in China: Analysis of sustainable development by means of spatial panel data

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is not neutral with respect to local quality of life. With the transformation of traditional city roles and the boom of urban tourism in China, the interaction between tourism and local livability is increasingly important for sustainable development plans of urban areas. Our paper aims to address the complex interdependence of the emerging tourist industry and local livability in Chinese cities. Based on a conceptual model and a subsequent empirical statistical analysis of 35 large and medium-sized Chinese cities for the years 2003–2012, our study finds that urban livability and its related factors benefit tourism development, and that, in turn, tourism has a reverse impact on livability in urban areas; their performance appears to vary in different sub-regions and for different factors of livability; the geographic interdependence between livability and tourism development is also remarkable. Potential threats from excessive tourism development on urban livability, in particular in the Chinese Eastern and Central large and medium-sized cities, can be inferred from our empirical analysis. These conclusions may lead to important lessons to policy makers, while various suggestions based on our findings are provided as well.

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1. Introduction

We are nowadays living in the ‘urban century’, a period in human history in which urbanisation has become a dominant megatrend; nowadays, more than half of the world population is living in urban areas, and this trend is rapidly increasing, including in the emerging and developing countries (see Kourtit, 2015). Along with these trends, human livability has become a more and more important parameter of sustainable urban development (Kashef, 2016). The World Health Organization (WHO) proposed the concept of ‘the living environment’ in 1961, considering that an appropriate living environment should meet at least four basic conditions: safety, health, convenience, and comfort (Higasa & Hibata, 1977). Evans (2002) emphasises in particular the importance of sustainability when considering the livable city. As a sum

total of physical, economic and social attributes (Saitluanga, 2014), livability is an assembly of environmental quality, neighbourhood amenity, and individual well-being (Lennard & Lennard, 1995); it is nowadays sometimes even used synonymously with quality of life (McCann, 2007; Schomberg, Polakit, & Prospero, 2011). This above sketched situation also holds for China. It is noteworthy that the strategic objectives of urban planning and policy in China have changed from the expansion of city functionalities to the improvement of city competitiveness and attractiveness, including sustainability of the local habitat.

Our modern economies have gone through dynamic transformation processes, in particular from a manufacturing orientation to a services orientation, in terms of both consumer and business services. Parallel to this industrial reorientation trend, we also observe an additional and mutually related trend in contemporary society, viz. a clear focus on leisure activities (see Florida, 2005; Van Geenhuizen and Nijkamp, 2012; Veblen, 2007). Most creative and innovative activities are taking place in cities or, in general, urban agglomerations. A significant part of consumers’ leisure-economic choices, including home improvements/renovations, home entertainment equipment, holiday or luxury items,

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find their origin in discretionary expenditure behaviour (Crouch et al., 2007). With the increase of disposable income in emerging economies, tourism has achieved a surprising growth, even despite the global economic crisis (Wang, 2014). It is clear that modern tourism has become one of the most pronounced manifestations of the leisure society. Modern cities offer an unprecedented portfolio of leisure-oriented goods, so that urbanisation and tourism have become closely intertwined phenomena. Consequently, urban agglomerations have become attractive areas for international mass tourism. This is also increasingly manifested in China.

In 2009, “The Advice of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Tourism” put forward the goal to improve tourism as the strategic industry, so that the average rate of increase of tourism income should be 12%, and the consumption of tourism should occupy 10% of the overall consumption of Chinese citizens by the year of 2015. Since then, tourism industry has acted as an important driving force for the economic-social development in China, while the government has spared no effort to promote tourism growth in China (see *The State Council - the People's Republic of China*, 2016). By the end of 2011, 30 out of 34 provinces in China had regarded tourism industry as the pillar industry or leading industry (*Chinese Tourism News*, 2012). The aim of an annual increase rate and of total income of the tourism industry has always been emphasized by the “Five-Year Plan” and other important national, regional or industrial plans in China (e.g. *Fujian Tourism Administration*, 2016). The economic, social and environmental benefits of tourism development have substantially promoted the development of cities. Urban tourism can be the major economic dynamic of the post-industrial city (Lever, 1997). However, there are broad negative impact of tourism development on the host communities (Sheng & Tsui, 2009; Wise, 2016). The benefit of tourism investors may dominant on the community interest, and a part of public works even concerns more on the needs of tourists than on the residents’ in some tourism destinations (Al Haija, 2011). The existence of large numbers of tourists is doing harm to the sustainable development of the fragile urban social-economic system in China. As the living space of residents is inevitably impacted by visitors, several citizens have shown a negative attitude to the development of tourism. This situation has forced authorities to think more carefully about an appropriate development model of the tourism industry, in which local quality of the human habitat is also respected. With the transformation of city functions from material production to human-oriented services supply, the explicit consideration of the interaction between city livability and tourism development is of great significance for a sustainable development of urban human settlements. Livability is chosen here as a ‘miniature’ of urban sustainable development, against the background of the comprehensive interplay of urban tourism and regional sustainability in our study. The present study based on a theoretical and empirical panel study on large and medium-sized Chinese cities provides crucial information for a balanced allocation of urban resources and for a new strategy on favorable sustainable development of urban areas.

2. Theoretical framework

As the main motivation of tourists is changing from sightseeing activities to leisure-oriented activities, and the leisure experience is becoming typical of mass tourism (Cohen, 2004). The satisfaction derived from the tourism experience is affected by both the subjective feelings and the enjoyment of different landscapes (Pan & Ding, 2007). Besides ecological and historical attractions, artificially created products, such as theme parks, theatres, museums

and events, can also drive tourists to travel to a city. The vitality and sustainability of a destination region has become one of the key competitive factors in tourism development (Li, Zeng, & Cheng, 2014). The transformation from manufacturing orientation to a services orientation is turning cities sometimes come into ‘festival’ cities, which attracts the tourists and comes along with the boom of urban tourism (Wise, 2016). A comfortable living environment can offer tourists favorable surroundings for relaxation, thus making livability a foundation and an attraction for urban tourism. Achieving livability ensures the improvement of the built environment, safety, public participation, cultural identity, and tourist satisfaction, and simultaneously, it encourages local residents to contribute to developing the city as a better visitors’ destination (Tilaki, Abdullah, Bahauddin, & Marzbali, 2014).

Although livability has rarely been considered as an independent variable in the field of tourism development research, the evolution and diversification of tourism demand are shaping a regional sustainable development capability that is acting as an emerging driving force of urban tourism development. On the other hand, studies on tourism impact, residents’ attitudes towards tourism, host-guest relations, the tourism area life cycle, and sustainable community tourism, have all highlighted the positive and negative influence of tourism on the living environment of the destination place (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, & Vogt, 2005; Brunt & Courtney, 1999), which illustrates the reverse impact on urban livability and overall sustainable development.

Tourism development generates a flow of people, information and funds into the city. As a result, the city’s role as a shopping, recreation and cultural centre will be enhanced (Lu & Ge, 2006). The motivation for improving the city attractiveness encourages the city itself to optimise its tourism product and city image continually. Consequently, it will be keen to undertake the restoration of cultural relics, the promotion of a city image, and environmental monitoring. Meanwhile, the dependence of tourism development on public products generates a positive force which pushes the government to improve community services (Andereck et al., 2005; Fredline, 2002; Huh & Vogt, 2008). Research studies show that tourism: creates more employment opportunities (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Haley, Snaith, & Miller, 2005; Williams & Lawson, 2001); encourages more recreation opportunities (Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002; Haley et al., 2005), cultural activities (Brunt & Courtney, 1999), and the development of natural parks (McCool & Martin, 1994); and helps to improve the living conditions and quality of life of the residents in the destination (Marks, 1996; McCool & Martin, 1994). What is more, tourism development can make the local people become more environmentally aware (Andereck et al., 2005; Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Gursoy et al., 2002; Huh & Vogt, 2008). In general, in the course of tourism development there are internal and external driving forces which enhance the livability of urban places.

Cities can be regarded to as small tourism economies with limited space, resources and carrying capacity. Once a certain threshold is reached, a destination will be decrease in attractiveness (Martin & Uysal, 1990). Excessive tourism exploitation causes inefficiency in urban planning, thus leading to disordered land use, unreasonable layout, and uncontrolled investment (Gu & Wall, 2007; Qian, Feng, & Zhu, 2012). Rapid tourism development brings noise annoyance, garbage pollution, crowding of public facilities, overuse of natural resources, pressure on health and security, and even natural-environmental degradation (Allen, Lu, & Potts, 1999; Balaban, 2012; Sheng & Tsui, 2009) to the city. Many studies also claim that tourism development can cause societal

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