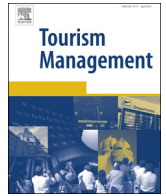




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The debate between empirical and broader phenomenological approaches to research

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines current debate in China over research approaches.
- Examines the requirement for 'scientific integrity' in Chinese tourism research.
- Distinguishes between 'pseudo-empiricism' and empiricism.

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the discourse between positivism and phenomenology has dominated the development of social science research methods. The argument is reflected in current tourism research and some scholars doubt the validity of positivism. Here opposing views as expressed in two recent Chinese publications are examined. By analyzing the two views and their methodology, the characteristics and limitations of both positivism and phenomenology can be highlighted. Both positivism and phenomenological methods have their own advantages and disadvantages, and an integration of the two types of research methods is most commonly used. In some specific research methods positivistic and phenomenological methods can be combined to attain more scientific knowledge. The paper also examines 'technical rationality', a philosophy which has been criticized by many for excessively focusing on the tool itself and so ignoring the research object and the purpose of the study. Yet although technical rationality does derive from positivism the former cannot simply be equal to the latter. It is suggested that the improvement of the scientific quality of tourism research is still the primary need for the development of the tourism discipline at present. It is not possible for tourism research to become a discipline purely through inclusion in specialized courses or existing subject content. Tourism research must become more scientific before it becomes a discipline.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, more tourism researchers are skeptical of positivism. Thus, Li Tianyuan (Babble, 2009) and Zhang Jinshan (Hui, 2010) have warned against excessive praise of positivism in tourism research. Similarly, Xie Yanjun (Husserl, 2001; Li, 2010), and Zhang bin and Zhang Pengjun (Qing, 2010) have suggested exploring the essence of tourism with phenomenology, which they regard as the primary way in which to conduct research, and they have sought to construct the own system of tourism studies from that perspective. To summarize that discussion seems to tell people: phenomenology will be the mainstream in the tourism

research. Currently, it seems in the Chinese literature that few adopt both positivism and phenomenology, and there remains a lack of theoretical analysis for the adoption of mixed methods. In this case, it is necessary to deepen discussion in tourism studies. Based on that premise, this paper will combine the two theories put forward by the Chinese scholars and try to elaborate their characteristics and limitations. Moreover, this paper will also discuss the trend in tourism research methodologies.

2. The characteristics and limitations of positivism

Using Shen Baojia's concept of tourism phenomenism as an example, in 2010, when Shen Baojia was nearly 90 years old, he published a book, entitled "*The principle of tourism - the systematic explanation of tourism research on the Law of Motion*". In this book

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Shen developed one of his basic points, namely: tourism is one of the outcomes of market economy development. He said this conclusion was the first proposition in his research life and it has subsequently directed his research (Shen, 2010, P 4).

Shen notes in his research of the basic theory of tourism that the first problem to be solved is the origin of tourism. In the tourism academy, reference is made to the view that “tourism is from ancient times” (Shen, 2010, P 40). Therefore, for Shen, his conclusion that tourism is one of results of market economy development is a view based on rigorous research with positivist methodology and derived from historical study.

Shen’s argument involved two complex concepts. The first is his definition that “tourism” is better understood as the “tourism phenomenon”. Shen then argues that the concept is basic and is a core theory in his research. This is justified by the view that tourism is a personal activity, but in its wider context a better way of describing the issues is to use the phraseology “tourism phenomenon” (Shen, 2010, P 16).

From the above summary, it can be seen that Shen never denies that “tourism” is one of personal activities, but the “tourism phenomenon” is one of the productions of market economy development” and hence the total study is premised around the “condition of tourism phenomenon production” and the “development and operational form of tourism phenomenon.” For Shen the understanding of “tourism” is primarily within the “tourism phenomenon.”

The second related perspective is that Shen’s “tourism phenomenon” is actually “tourism as a social phenomenon”. When he discussed the question ‘what is the tourism research object?, Shen quoted Durkheim’s words: “When the sociologist tries to study a kind of social reality, he must investigate it as an independent existence, instead of studying it from specific personal behavior.” in the other words, researchers should investigate those social realities as a “thing”. The “thing” does not mean social reality or social phenomenon had been materially created, but it means a law and that social reality and social phenomenon have their own law, which cannot be transformed by people’s mind alone but by a wider social structure (Shen, 2010, P 14). In conclusion, Shen pointed “when we confirmed tourism is a historical product of social development, we also confirm it is physical attribute. We confirmed it is a ‘regular’ social phenomenon and we called it a ‘tourism phenomenon.’” (Shen, 2010, P 15).

Understanding Shen’s point that “tourism is one of the productions of a market economy development” transfers to mean “tourism as a social phenomenon, is one of the productions of the market economy development”, makes it easier to comprehend his whole study. Only under the market economic system of mass production, does tourism become a kind of public lifestyle. Or in the other words, “tourism” becomes “tourism phenomenon”. In history, tourism was (arguably) a form of personal entertainment of travel and leisure instead of being social phenomenon. Only when mass production and self-consciousness become the supporting material and spiritual power of social development, could tourism transfer from a time it was but a small scale and self-supporting economy where tourism was a personal entertainment into a tourism phenomenon in a market economy (Shen, 2010, P 3).

Researching “tourism” as regular social phenomenon rather than personal activity is representative of the classical departure point of early positivists (such as Durkheim) among the social sciences researchers who wanted to locate social science research alongside a science of nature. The basic positivism behind the researcher’s gaze of social fact and social phenomenon as a “thing” is seeking the ‘fact’ as the basis of research. Or, all valid knowledge must be based on empirical facts and be confirmed by experience.

In this way, this experience is a perceptual experience that can be observed by the public and quantified by measurement. Only in this way can tourism research achieve scientific objective and accuracy (Tian, 2010, P 11). Some positivists even proposed strictly separating ‘fact judgments’ and ‘value judgments’ because the former is premised in a realism that can be confirmed by experience but the latter is an idealistic judgment not capable of being wholly confirmed by experience. Therefore, value judgment does not belong within the scope of scientific research (Tian, 2010, P 24).

One of the major challenges posed by early social science is the focusing of research on objective reality, particularly in regular social phenomenon, which enabled social science to get rid of ambiguous concepts or value based contradictions and thereby attain higher-consensus research achievements by using research methodologies derived from the natural sciences. However, there are methodological limitations that attract many critiques.

First, many have questioned whether there is an ‘objective reality’. It is argued that it is inevitable that social scientists bring their own consciousness into their research, and hence the ‘objective fact’ is simply their own understanding of an objective fact. The developments of phenomenology and postmodernism relate to these issues. Earl Babbie notes in his book “The Practice of Social Research” that increasing numbers of philosophers are discussing reality from a postmodern viewpoint. From this perspective “reality” comes from their consciousness. Namely, there is no external world. All is in an internal world (Tribe, 1997, P 10).

Second, people also suspected there is a regularity in social phenomenon. Positivists such as Mill believed social phenomenon also has homogeneity, but is nuanced, uncertain and hard to find. Others disagreed. They insisted that the decisive factors that influence the people’s behavior or social change are not only perplexing and constantly changing, but also hard or impossible to predict; while others have suggested that social research is not independent of the object being researched, that is to say, social science theory could affect the development of social phenomenon. It remains an open question as to whether there are regularities of social phenomenon. Yet, even they do exist, they may be difficult to discern and may be inhibited by patterns of wider changes due to complex influences and a changing. Popper, although a positivist, noted in the beginning of his book “*The Poverty of Historicism*”, that “The basic argument of this book is believing historical destiny is a kind of superstition. Human history cannot be predicted by any ways” (Tian, 2010, P 64).

Third, the outcomes of social science research are reduced for want of value. For example, Husserl pointed out in his latest book, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*, that a modern person’s whole world view is the only thing dominated by empirical science, and also is the only thing confused by the “prosperity” of science. This uniqueness means people avoid the crucial question of the true humanity, almost with indifference (Xie, 2005).

Fourth, the generalization of a technical rationality leads to social science research that escapes from social practice. The technical rationality is in itself neutral, but adverse consequences may appear from such a generalization. This paper provides a detailed analysis in the third part of this paper.

Certainly, although the above critics have a point, it does not provide sufficient reason to reject empirical research. For example, everyone observes facts with personal perspectives, but there is space to be filled. To forecast the development of society is difficult, but it cannot be denied that there are instances when the development of specific social phenomenon has been successfully forecast. Besides, positivism itself is developing. For instance, Popper proposed “critical rationalism” when he criticized logical

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