Why immigrants travel to their home places: Social capital and acculturation perspective

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HIGHLIGHTS

► This study explores the meaning and dynamics of immigrants' travel to their home place of origins.
► The topic was investigated from a social capital and acculturation perspective.
► Interviews with twenty immigrants were conducted.
► The influencing factors of immigrants' travel decisions were identified.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an inductive analysis of the meanings and dynamics of immigrants' travel to their places of origin from the perspective of social capital and acculturation. The narratives from in-depth interviews with 20 informants with different backgrounds vividly portray the dynamic and subjective life experience of the Mainland Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong. The results thematically (re)presents their experience in terms of the "*horizontal and vertical changes in social capital and its effects on travel decisions and acculturation, its influence on travel decisions, the effects of social capital on acculturation, and the influence of constraints on immigrants' travel.*" Quintessentially, the inductive analysis sheds light on the meanings and dynamics of the immigrants' travel to their home places. For future studies, observations from this interpretive approach could be augmented by empirical testing and measurement of the interrelationships among social capital, acculturation, constraints, and travel decisions pertinent to Mainland Chinese immigrants traveling from Hong Kong to their places of origins.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is a society composed of immigrants. In terms of origin, approximately 33.5% of Hong Kong population are genea-logically connected with Mainland China (Census and Statistics Department, 2007). Mainland China (hereafter referred to as the mainland) has been the major source of immigrants to Hong Kong since the 1940s. Historically, majority of the immigrants came from its neighboring Guangdong Province, which resulted in Cantonese being the primary dialect spoken among the residents in Hong Kong. Nowadays, the backgrounds of the immigrants in Hong Kong are diverse with people coming from different regions in the mainland. Record has shown that 43,400 Mainland Chinese immigrated to Hong Kong in 2011 alone (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). The number will continue to grow, with an average of 150 Mainland Chinese approved on a daily basis to immigrate to Hong Kong by the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government (Chief Executive Candidates Forum, 2012). The large number of immigrants resulted in the corresponding increase in travel activities between Hong Kong and the mainland. The daily average number of travelers at the Lo Wu Immigration Control is 250,000, rendering this control point the most popular border crossing station to and from the mainland (Baidu, 2012). However, this figure can reach 394,000 travelers on holidays, including day trippers and daily work migrants (Baidu, 2012).

Adapting to a new place can be a stressful experience due to a variety of factors. Understanding the life experience of immigrants in the new environment, their connections to their home places via travel, and the influencing factors on their travel behavior and decision making could help policy makers formulate relevant strategies to facilitate their adaptation. Notably, majority of the previous studies on immigration focused on international movement from one country to another rather than the intranational immigration to another region within the same country. The Hong Kong SAR is distinct from other cities in China due to its

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independent constitution and political system. Because of these differences, relocation from the mainland to Hong Kong is commonly (and legally) regarded as immigration by the public. Thus, Hong Kong provides an interesting context for understanding the immigrants' experience in connection with their travel to their place of origins. The large number of Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong has stimulated research interest in immigration in this SAR. A wide range of topics have been explored, including the immigrants' social welfare and housing (Au, 1998; Lee, 2000), identity negotiation (Ho, 2006; Newendorp, 2010), coping and adaptation (Fung, 2005; Li, 1989; Man, 2001), and community integration (Hsueh, 1998; Sinn & Wong, 2005). However, little scholarly attention has been dedicated toward understanding the immigrants' trips to their places of origin and the influencing factors in their travel decision making. Such an understanding will definitely shed light on the immigrants' life experience in the SAR, which is essential in formulating the corresponding strategies to help them adapt to the new society. Thus, the present study examines the Mainland Chinese immigrants' life experience in Hong Kong and identifies the factors that affect their travel decisions to their place of origins.

2. Literature review

Theoretically sensitized to the sociologists' conceptions of migration, community and socio−cultural change, notions such as social capital and acculturation serve as sensitizing concepts (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in the discussion of the meanings and dynamics associated with the (im)migrants' travel to their places of origin investigated in this inquiry.

Often seen as individual or collective assets accumulated over time via social interactions, social capital has attracted multidisciplinary research. Among these are the research on its structural and cognitive dimensions. (Poortinga, 2006, p.256, e.g., "the extent and intensity of association links or activities, as well as members' perceptions of support, reciprocity, sharing and trust in a community"). In addition, research has also been done on the strength of the ties and the nature of social networks in terms of bonding, bridging, and linking individuals in a community (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1993) and the benefits of social capital in achieving personal or collective goals (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998).

Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) considered acculturation as consisting of "phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (p.149). In acculturation studies, the social−cultural changes and alteration of values inevitably occurred as a consequence of the relocation of the individuals to a new residence (Berry & Kim, 1988; Sam & Berry, 2006). These authors also noted an interchangeable use of the term with assimilation in their discussions on integration, segregation, and marginalization (Berry & Kim, 1988; Sam & Berry, 2006). Contextually, regardless of the forms or the role typologies (e.g., visiting friends and relatives (VFRs), cultural brokers or ambassadors, and trade intermediaries), the immigrants' travel and/or the constraints of such travels back to their places of origin are manifestations of the interplay of social capital and acculturation.

2.1. VFRs

VFR travel is closely associated with migration. Despite its long history and tradition, systematic research on VFR did not appear until 1995 when the *Journal of Tourism Studies* published a special issue on this topic. Research on VFR was few in the earlier years because of the meager availability of relevant data and its undermined value by marketers and planners (Asiedu, 2008; Backer,

2007, 2008; Jackson, 1990; Morrison & O'Leary, 1995; Seaton & Palmer, 1997). However, according to statistics, VFR actually accounts for one-fifth of the total tourist arrivals in some countries, especially in longstanding immigration countries such as Australia and America (Jackson, 1990; Morrison & O'Leary, 1995; Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Although some scholars (Backer, 2007, 2008; Jackson, 1990; Seaton & Palmer, 1997) argued that VFR generates minimal economic effects on the destinations, others provided evidence that suggested that the expenditures of VFRs are much more significant than those of the other segments, particularly in terms of travel and food expenses (Backer, 2007, 2008; Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Some researchers even claimed that VFR is a lucrative market (Lee, Morrison, Lheto, Webb, & Reid, 2005).

Despite these initiatives, past studies on VFR have been predominantly driven by a marketing approach that emphasized on the economic value of the segment (Duval, 2003; Uriely, 2010). Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen (2007) pointed out that studying VFR from the cultural and social perspectives might be meaningful and beneficial because of its unique nature. However, only a few studies have examined the social and cultural aspects. For instance, Meis, Joyal, and Trites (1995) explored the significant lifetime value of individual VFRs. Duval (2003) explored the cultural influence and meaning associated with diaspora of immigrants in Canada. In short, research on VFR tourism suffers from shortage from the social and cultural perspectives, particularly in eastern cultural backgrounds such as China. In addition, as the research progresses, more in-depth inquiries are needed to investigate the specific VFR segments instead of treating VFR travelers in its entirety (Morrison & O'Leary, 1995). Such approach would help in better understanding the context-specific VFR segment.

2.2. Migration and travel

Migration, as a social phenomenon, is referred to as "a relatively permanent movement of persons over a significant distance, and a change of residence or normal habitation for a substantial period of time, involving the crossing of a political boundary" (Larkin & Peters, 1983, p.157). As a field of study, migration was first considered by human geographers as well as sociologists. Although the conceptual generalizations have been slow, significant attempts in theorizing migration have been done. In his pioneering and seminal work entitled *Laws of Migration,* Ravenstein (1889) related migration to the population size, density, and distance. By the end of the 19th century, Weber (1899) extended Ravenstein's work to include the demand for labor as an additional and independent variable of migration. He argued that "the organization of industry has steadily demanded an increase in the number of city dwellers, and the bulk of migration is a migration by stages having for its object the satisfaction of the demand for more labor in the cities" (p.233). The analysis of the migration variables was further substantiated by two important studies in the 1940s. Zipf's (1940) gravity model stated that the number of migrants between any two communities is proportionate to the product of the populations divided by the shortest transportation distance. On the other hand, Stouffer (1940) developed the intervening-opportunity hypotheses, which proposed that "the number of migrants going a given distance is directly proportional to the number of opportunities at that distance and inversely proportional to the number of intervening opportunities" (p.561).

However, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s when the theoretical frameworks and research generalizations began to be developed. The different forms were recognized by Peterson (1958) in his analysis of the typology of migration in which he specified five groups: (1) primitive, (2) group or mass, (3) free-individual, (4) restricted, and (5) impelled or forced migrations. Lee's (1966) attempt to develop a general theoretical framework for the