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Regional Spotlight

One country, two strata: Implications of social and cultural conflicts of Chinese outbound tourism to Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of the Individual Visitor Scheme (IVS) in 2003 has been regarded as a pivotal milestone of tourism development in Hong Kong. Introduced with the policy aim of invigorating the ailing local economy suffering from the impacts of an epidemic, the IVS has also sparked exponential rise of Chinese outbound tourists to Hong Kong, and has been assuming growing significance in local tourism development. Notwithstanding the benefits that the tourism industry, as well as Hong Kong as a destination at large, can gain from the IVS, there have also been a number of controversies over the negative social impacts brought about by the IVS that have recently been widely exposed in the mass media, leading to calls for the reform and even the rescinding of the IVS. This spotlight examines the social and culture conflicts of the IVS through the integration of key attributes that are conceptualized and established in general tourism social impacts studies, as well as the unique economic, social and cultural contexts of the IVS.

1. Historical background of the scheme

Travel to Hong Kong and Macau by mainland Chinese visitors has been traditionally deemed as outbound travel by the Chinese central government, due to the 'one country, two systems' political arrangement that recognizes Hong Kong and Macau as special administrative regions (SARs) with substantial degrees of autonomy. The introduction of the Individual Visitor Scheme (IVS) in 2003, however, has been regarded as a pivotal milestone of tourism development in Hong Kong. The IVS is an integral component of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) signed between the Chinese central authorities and the government of the Hong Kong SAR. Introduced with the policy aim of invigorating the ailing local economy, which was suffering from the effects of an epidemic, the IVS has sparked an exponential rise in Chinese outbound tourists to Hong Kong, and this influx has assumed growing significance in the development of local tourism. In 2015, Hong Kong attracted 45.6 million visitors from mainland China, which accounted for nearly 77% of its total inbound visitations (HKT B, 2015).

2. Negative effects of the IVS

Notwithstanding the benefits that the tourism industry and the Hong Kong region has gained from the IVS, there have been numerous controversies over the scheme's negative social effects, which have been widely exposed report in the mass media recently. These issues have

led some residents to advocate for the reform and even the retraction of the IVS. Some of the issues raised are relevant to the general social capacity of Hong Kong as a tourism destination. These issues include traffic congestion, inflation of property values, reduced availability of daily necessities and the incursion of visitors into the living spaces of local residents.

For instance, IVS visitors commonly use public transportation as their mode of travel in Hong Kong, and therefore the visitors and local residents increasingly come into contact on these transportation systems, especially on the Metro Transit Railway (MTR). Consequently, local residents perceive increased crowding on the transit services, especially during rush hours and weekends. Such overcrowding affects not only the routes connecting scenic spots or the crossborder routes that are directly related to tourism, but also the daily commuter routes frequented by ordinary local residents. Given that the frequencies of service and the carrying capacities of the MTR have reached maximum levels due to limitations of the signal control system, the problem of crowded spaces is believed to be growing worse. This issue is further exacerbated by the current social controversies over the construction of new transit routes and terminals.

Another social problem arising from the IVS relates to its transformation of the retail shopping sector in many tourist areas of Hong Kong. This takes at least two forms. First, the retail shops in many areas increasingly focus on catering to the shopping needs of IVS visitors. Therefore, many shops in tourism-intensive areas give priority

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to commodities that are most favored by IVS visitors, such as cosmetics, jewelry and electronics. For instance, the number of shops selling cosmetic products increased by 1500% between 2004 and 2013 (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2014). Meanwhile, numerous shops have emerged that are exclusive for visitors from the mainland. Such a trend of homogenization in both the range of commodities and in customer segments has been observed to extend beyond shops in the tourism 'hot spots' to areas along the major MTR routes, especially the east rail line that connects the border with mainland China.

Second, the rental prices for retail shops catering to mainland visitors have undergone increases of nearly 80% between 2004 (when the IVS was initiated) and 2014. Driven by the tourist-market demand, more capital and investment has poured into the construction and leasing of such shops, and incidents involving commercial speculation schemes have occurred. This trend, combined with the homogenization of the shops, has squeezed the profitability of shops that serve the local residents. Such local service shops have been increasingly forced to relocate into more remote areas with lower rental prices. Also, many local shops are closing down. For example, the number of grocery stores declined by 30% from 2004 to 2014 (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2014). Although it has been argued that other macroeconomic factors, such as low interest rates in the USA, may also be responsible for this transformation of the local retailing situation, mainstream public opinion has pointed to the IVS as the chief contributor.

In addition, there has been much controversy and debate concerning the uncivilized behavior demonstrated by IVS visitors in Hong Kong's public places. In many cases, the behavior of these visitors sharply conflicts with local norms and values. Such behavior includes making loud noise, inattention to personal hygiene, eating and drinking in public places, or pushing and cutting into lines. Vast numbers of the local residents have experienced such behavior directly or have heard about it from other people they know. Such unpleasant encounters have led to negative impressions, and even to strong resentment by the local residents.

These sentiments are further complicated when the local employees and staff who serve IVS visitors are taken into account. These employees, for the sake of their businesses, tend to offer preferential treatment for the visitors, and to tolerate their uncivilized forms of behavior. Such preferential treatment and acceptance for rude behavior tends to amplify the social schism within the local communities with regard to perceptions and attitudes toward IVS visitors. In this sense, it has been posited that the issues surrounding the IVS have gone beyond the realm of tourism, and have become a pertinent reflection of the broader problems arising from the increasing economic, social and cultural contacts between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland (Siu, Lee, & Leung, 2013).

3. Accounting for IVS through Social Representation Theory

Although friction and conflict between hosts and visitors has been fairly common in various scenarios around the world, the case of Chinese outbound tourism to Hong Kong assumes significance not only in terms of the sheer economic volume of business concerned, but also in terms of the broader social and cultural contexts that underlie the conflicts observed. The situation in Hong Kong has upended the established paradigms concerning resident-tourist interrelationships that can usually be explained by imbalances in social power.

At first glance, the controversies over the IVS can be readily understood in terms of classical elaborations of the social carrying capacities of communities engaged in tourism (Nowacki, 2008; Teye, Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Yoon, Gursoy, & Chen, 2001). According to such elaborations, the development of the tourism industry should be kept within certain limits, in case it should arouse ill feelings of the local residents, challenge the community's social identity, or interfere with the local people's access to public facilities and services. However, the debates surrounding the IVS are much more complicated, given

that the peculiar social and cultural fabrics of Hong Kong and of mainland China must be taken into account in explaining and evaluating the social effects of the IVS (Zhang, Heung, Vincent & Yan, 2009). Although the sovereignty over Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, there still exist vast disparities between Hong Kong and mainland China in terms of political, economic, social and cultural standards. As a pertinent reflection of mainland China's growing economic strength and the rising market demand of mainland tourists, the IVS has inflicted social and cultural shocks to the local communities of Hong Kong, and has done so at a magnitude that extends far beyond the tourism industry.

These shocks have challenged the conventional self-identities and value systems of Hong Kong's residents, and this sense of a culture clash accounts for much of the misunderstanding and disillusionment over the IVS that has grown firmly established among local residents. For instance, it has been largely forgotten in the current debate that the IVS program was initiated in 2003 as a timely policy response from the Chinese central government to help Hong Kong recover from the effects of the SARS epidemic, which had caused a sharp decline in the local economy. Instead, many Hong Kong residents have the misunderstanding that the IVS was introduced by the central government to take advantage of Hong Kong's economy. Although the IVS program has been maintained at its current level of 49 qualified mainland cities since November 2007, with no further expansion, it is still widely believed by the Hong Kong public that out-of-control expansion of the IVS program is to blame for the social problems affecting their region.

4. Implications for research on the IVS with consideration for the social representation paradigm

In taking cognizance of the social and cultural peculiarities of IVS, it becomes clear that the social and cultural mechanisms underlying the local residents' perceptions warrant a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis. Traditional theoretical articulations on the social effects of tourism, such as destination lifecycles, acculturation and social exchange, have usually attributed the local residents' evaluations of tourism to their direct, explicit demands for maximizing their benefits and minimizing the costs of their businesses. (Pearce & Moscardo, 1999; Ying, 2004). Although such economic rationality plays a part in the expectations of Hong Kong residents, their other social and cultural concerns must also be addressed. To meet this need, one tenable platform that can be readily applied is social representations theory. Social representations theory offers the benefit of integrating social contexts with the epistemological views of individuals. This theory recognizes the significance of social contexts as dominant and even overwhelming factors in regulating the value systems of individuals and communities (Ying, 2004). Hence, social representations theory offers a potential path for enabling people to evaluate and respond to social phenomena, especially phenomena that are new, unfamiliar, complicated or abstract.

In the case of investigating the influence of social interaction between IVS visitors and local people, the applicability of social representations theory as an underlying analytical framework can be established. For one thing, by taking account of the existence and the effects of the relevant social and anthropological contexts that are typically involved in relations between Hong Kong residents and IVS visitors, research that is focused on social representations offers a tenable, consistent theoretical framework for examining the perceptions, attitudes and behavioral intentions concerned. Specifically, social representations may aptly explain why some local residents in Hong Kong still hold entrenched negative opinions on tourism, even if they have benefited materially from tourism-related development (even though this conflict between attitudes and interests contradicts traditional explanations for these issues). In addition, research into social representations can help in devising better approaches to building up community support for tourism development and enhancing commu-

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