

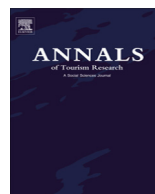


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Review Article

Tourism research in China: Insights from insiders

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an up-to-date and comprehensive survey of tourism research by Chinese scholars residing in China, through analyzing Chinese journal publications and conducting interviews with members of the academic committee of the China Tourism Academy (CTA). There has been an imbalance in the type of research on tourism in China: most research has reflected applied work whereas little priority has been given to theory development. In addition to this imbalance, tourism research in China still faces challenges such as the academic development of tourism researchers and the raising of the status of research on tourism to a level in line with research in other academic disciplines. Mastering cutting-edge research methods is also critical to helping China's tourism scholarship.

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Introduction

With the fast development of the tourism industry and tourism education after China's opening-up and economic reform in 1978, the study of tourism in China has made a big progress. On the one hand, there has been considerable growth in the number of tourism institutions and students of tourism in higher education in China (Zhang & Fan, 2005). According to the China Tourism Education Association (2012), by the end of 2011, the number of higher education institutions with tourism-related programs had reached 1,115, and the number of current higher education students in tourism-related programs was 599,800, an increase of 3,800 compared with 2010. On the other hand, there has been a rapid expansion of the tourism academic community in this country. By the end of 2011, there were

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at least 1,100 supervisors for Master degree students and about 90 supervisors for doctoral students (China Tourism Education Association, 2012). In China, generally only faculty members at the level of associate professor are eligible to supervise Master degree students; and at the level of professor for doctoral students.

However, despite the fast development of tourism education and tourism research, the communication between members of the Chinese tourism academic community and those in Western countries is still limited (Chen & Huang, 2008). Thus there is still little understanding and knowledge of tourism research in China by academics outside of China (Huang & Hsu, 2008; Tsang & Hsu, 2011). Therefore, it is time to identify “where we are now” (Sharpley, 2011, p.30) in tourism research, to rethink what kind of tourism knowledge we have created after more than 30 years’ study in the field, and to communicate the state of the art in tourism research in China to the international academic community.

It should be noted that there has been a growing body of literature reviewing English publications on China’s tourism and hospitality. Key reviews include Cai, Li, and Knutson’s (2007) and Keating and Kriz’s (2008) analysis of research on China’s emerging outbound tourism market, Gross, Gao, and Huang’s (2013) review of the literature on hotel development, and Yang and Cheung’s (2010) study of publications on ecotourism in China. In addition to these reviews of specific areas, Tsang and Hsu’s (2011) and Andreu, Claver, and Quer’s (2010) work have each provided a more synthesized review of a broad range of studies covering research on tourism and hospitality in China.

Nevertheless, international academics still have little understanding of tourism research conducted by Chinese scholars residing in China (Huang & Hsu, 2008; Tsang & Hsu, 2011), since the majority of the research findings have actually been published in the Chinese language. However, publications in the Chinese language by tourism researchers residing in China are vitally important for two reasons. First, this body of localized knowledge (Bao & Ma, 2011; Xu, Ding, & Packer, 2008) is highly comprehensive in its coverage and thus effectively reflects the status of the field of Chinese tourism research. Second, these publications present a body of knowledge that is highly influential in shaping the thought patterns of Chinese tourism scholars.

In the growing number of reviews that focus on tourism research by Chinese scholars residing in China, three basic categories are identified. The first is general reviews on tourism knowledge and methodology in China based on analyzing publications in flagship journals, which in the case of China refers mainly to *Tourism Tribune* (Huang & Hsu, 2008). The second category refers to reviews of work related to a specific knowledge area and/or methodology, not limited to publications in one single journal. For example, Xu et al. (2008) shed light on research in tourism development and tourism cultural studies. Li (2009) reviews the progress in the field of tourism demand modeling and forecasting in Greater China. More recently, Bao and Ma (2011) focus their critical review on the birth, developmental stages and future directions of tourism geography in China. The third category relates to the analysis of doctoral dissertations (e.g., Huang, 2011) and tourism-related research funds granted by the National Science Foundation of China and the National Social Science Fund of China (e.g., Liu, 2008). Such analyses provide an overall view of tourism knowledge development in China.

The review publications mentioned in the previous paragraph have provided insights into the state of China’s tourism knowledge and methodology, however, most of the work is either limited to one single journal or more or less focused on limited research areas, rather than providing an all-round picture of tourism research in China. Moreover, although some Chinese scholars residing in China have exerted efforts in analyzing tourism research development in China, this invaluable research is rarely accessible to the international academic community due to language barriers.

Building on the above discussion, this paper aims to provide the most up-to-date and comprehensive survey of tourism research by Chinese scholars residing in China. To achieve this goal, this article will adopt two analytical lenses. First, we provide a bird’s-eye view of the terrains of tourism research in China, highlighting the major developments as revealed in a large body of journal literature contributed by tourism scholars in China in the last three decades. Second, adopting the methods of grounded theory and self-autography, we interview seven members of the first session of the academic committee of the China Tourism Academy (CTA), which is a research institute fully affiliated to the National Tourism Administration of China, and aim to explore key issues and challenges as well as give an assessment of the origin and developmental stages of tourism research in China.

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