



Current state of tourism research in China



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ABSTRACT

This study presents the current state of tourism research in China by reviewing the information in 129 articles published in 2015 in *Tourism Tribune* as China's most representative tourism research publication outlet. *Tourist behavior, destination image, tourism economic issues, and tourism marketing* were found to be the frequently studied research themes, demonstrating a transition of research foci from industry supply to market demand issues. Nearly 60% of the articles applied quantitative research methods, indicating a shift toward positivism and post-positivism. A gender balance was found among the authors in the journal, largely due to a generational shift of the researchers witnessing more female authors in young age-groups. The findings depict a snapshot of tourism research in China and provide a shortcut for the international tourism academia to access tourism scholarship in China.

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1. Introduction

Tourism research internationally in its institutionalized form is believed to have undergone over 40 years (Airey, 2015). In China, although some researchers may attribute the birth of tourism research to the epoch-marking year of 1978 when China started its reform and opening-up (Bao & Ma, 2010), the real sense development of tourism research may only be more formally acknowledged as having a history of 30 or so years by 2015 (Cao & Hu, 2008; Wu, Song, & Deng, 2001). The year of 1986 when China's first tourism research journal, *Tourism Tribune*, was established, is commonly referred to by different review studies in the Chinese literature (e.g., Cao & Hu, 2008; Wu et al., 2001) as the start of the more institutionalized tourism research in China. However, tourism geographers may see the start of the pioneering tourism research taken by geographers a bit earlier (e.g., Bao & Ma, 2010; Wang, Lu, & Liu, 2003).

Retrospective reviews and reflections on the development of a research field have been conducted by numerous researchers. In the international tourism academia, Sheldon's (1991) work led many review studies of such (e.g., Jogaratnam, Chon, McCleary, Mena, & Yoo, 2005; McKercher, Law, & Lam, 2006; Ryan, 2005). In China, tourism researchers also tend to review tourism research trends in international English journals as well as in Chinese language tourism journals published in China (Wu & Xing, 2005; Zeng, 2010; Zhu & Liu, 2004). Despite

different scope, contexts, and perspectives, these studies mostly intended to understand tourism research in various aspects, including research themes and topics examined, authorship, individual and institutional contributions, and historical development trends and transitions in the field.

In the recent decade, tourism development in China has attracted a significant amount of research attention internationally. Shen et al. (2014) conducted an extensive survey on the publications in major international tourism, hospitality, and leisure journals from 2002 to 2011 and found that China has been predominately featured among the research focus countries in these publications. This finding indicates the preponderance of China tourism as a topic area in the international tourism research community, which can be corroborated by many other review studies (e.g., Leung, Li, Fong, Law, & Lo, 2014; Tsang & Hsu, 2011; Zhong, Wu, & Morrison, 2015). Although research on China tourism published in international journals has been extensively reviewed by both researchers in China and those outside China, in either English (Tsang & Hsu, 2011; Zhong et al., 2015) or Chinese language (e.g., Sun, Wei, & Zhang, 2013) publications, there appears to be a negligence of significant reviews of Chinese indigenous scholars' works that are published in Chinese language only and thus remain unknown to their international counterparts (Ryan et al., 2016). A few researchers including the Editor of *Tourism Management* Chris Ryan have referred to this gap of knowledge and called for more research works making tourism research in China more visible to the international tourism academia (Huang & Chen, 2016; Ryan & Huang, 2013; Ryan et al., 2016). As a matter of fact, this need may have led to the agreement between *Tourism Management* and *Tourism Tribune*, a leading, and unarguably

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the most representative, tourism journal in China, to publish 10 selected “best” articles (after translated into English) from *Tourism Tribune* for a special internet volume of *Tourism Management* (Ryan et al., 2016).

In line with the effort made by the agreement between *Tourism Management* and *Tourism Tribune*, a small number of English articles, together with several books (e.g., Huang & Chen, 2016; Ryan & Gu, 2009; Ryan & Huang, 2013), have attempted to bridge this knowledge gap by introducing tourism research in China as embodied in the Chinese language literature to the international tourism academe. In 2002, Bao (2002) published a review article in *Tourism Geographies* examining tourism geography as the subject of doctoral studies in China; this was followed by another study by Bao and Ma (2010) reviewing tourism geography studies in China from 1978 to 2008. Huang and Hsu (2008) examined 500 articles published from 2000 to 2005 in *Tourism Tribune* in terms of research themes, methods, authorship, and institutional contributions. Utilizing a similar analytical framework, Hsu, Huang, and Huang (2010) surveyed a total of 1511 articles published in two Chinese tourism journals, *Tourism Tribune* and *Tourism Science* from 2000 to 2008. More recently, Bao, Chen, and Ma (2014) combined both content analysis of published articles and interviews with key informants and provided a comprehensive overview of the terrains of tourism research in China. These studies are all published in English journals, thus enabling researchers outside China to have a good understanding of the state of tourism research in China. It should be acknowledged that a great number of studies reviewing tourism research in China have been published in Chinese language journals by Chinese researchers in China (e.g., Cao & Hu, 2008; Wang et al., 2003; Wu & Xing, 2005; Wu et al., 2001; Zeng, 2010; Zhu & Liu, 2004); however, due to language barrier, these studies cannot be accessed by the majority of tourism researchers outside China who cannot read Chinese.

Epistemologically, research review studies can generate good understanding of the territories (themes), tribes (researchers and research institutions), and evolution of these in the tourism academy (Tribe, 2010). While the above-mentioned key studies (Bao, 2002; Bao & Ma, 2010; Bao et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2010; Huang & Hsu, 2008) have nevertheless depicted tourism research in China adequately, most of them covered research outputs and activities before 2010. In a very dynamic and fast changing industry environment, the landscape of tourism research in China is also believed to be fast changing (Bao et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2010; Huang & Hsu, 2008). Therefore, regular scanning of the tourism research landscape in China to identify the current state and recent transitions is always needed in this line of inquiry. Building upon these previous studies, the current study aims to survey the current state of tourism research in China. *Tourism Tribune*, as a leading tourism research journal in China, has been regarded by researchers both in and outside China as a representative publication outlet to run such reviews (Cao & Hu, 2008; Hsu et al., 2010; Huang & Hsu, 2008; Wu et al., 2001; Zeng, 2010). Accordingly, the current study chose *Tourism Tribune* as the source journal of analysis. It is not unusual to see single representative journal be selected for reviewing research development in a field (see Xiao & Smith, 2006). The year 2015 marks the thirtieth year of *Tourism Tribune* publications and can also be symbolically regarded as the epitome year for China's over thirty-year tourism research development. As the current study is intended to depict the current state of tourism research in China, we chose all full research articles published in 2015 as the scope of our analysis. In addition, we closely referred to relevant previous studies (e.g., Bao et al., 2014; Huang & Hsu, 2008; Zhang, Lan, Qi, & Wu, 2013) in both English and Chinese literatures as benchmarks to identify transitions in Chinese tourism research. Specifically, this study has the following four objectives:

1. to map the themes of current tourism research in China;
2. to identify the current state of tourism research methodology and methods in China;
3. to profile the characteristics of tourism researchers and the research community in China; and,

4. in comparison with relevant previous studies, to identify salient transitions and changes of tourism research in China with regards to research themes, methods, and the research community.

2. Literature review

2.1. Review studies on China tourism

There are numerous research review studies in the field of tourism. The foci of these studies range from academic contributions by individual researchers and institutions (e.g., Jogaratnam et al., 2005), ranking and rating academics and journals (McKercher et al., 2006; Ryan, 2005), research reflected on doctoral dissertations in different countries (e.g., Bao, 2002; Botterill, Haven, & Gale, 2002; Huang, 2011; Jafari & Aaser, 1988), to research development in a specific sub-field or topic area like international tourism demand and forecasting (Crouch, 1995; Song & Li, 2008). Pertaining to China-related tourism research, a good number of review studies have been done in the English academic literature. Andreu, Claver, and Quer (2010) analyzed 95 academic papers pertaining to China tourism published in *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Travel Research*, and *Tourism Management* from 1997 to 2008. The results show that tourism marketing and promotion was the most studied topical area, followed by tourism policy and planning, sustainable management of tourism resources, tourism business management, and tourism education policies and training. Zhong et al. (2015) reviewed 333 articles on China tourism from 97 English academic journals from 1978 and 2012. The results show that tourism policy and impacts, and tourism industry development and promotion were the two main themes in these studies. And most authors were based in mainland China, the USA, and Hong Kong. Tsang and Hsu (2011) analyzed 119 articles selected from six leading English academic tourism and hospitality journals and identified consumer behavior as the most popular research topic. The study also evidenced trends toward multiple-authorship and more sophisticated methods and methodological applications. Many studies identified increasing numbers of journal publications on China tourism in the recent decade (Gross, Gao, & Huang, 2013; Tsang & Hsu, 2011; Zhong et al., 2015). Leung et al. (2014) identified that 147 research articles published in tourism journals in a short period 2010–2012 were related to China tourism. Tourist behavior and experience was the most popular research theme in these studies, followed by culture and heritage studies. The study also identified a trend of increasing international collaboration in the articles analyzed.

Review studies in relation to China tourism also went into different sub-fields, topical or disciplinary areas of research, such as Chinese outbound tourism (e.g., Jin & Wang, 2016), China hotel studies (e.g., Gross et al., 2013), analyzing Chinese doctoral research in tourism (e.g., Bao, 2002; Huang, 2011), and tourism geography studies in China (Bao & Ma, 2010). Undoubtedly, China-related tourism and hospitality issues have become the dominant choice of research in the international tourism research community (Shen et al., 2014).

Inside China, many research review studies have been conducted by Chinese authors and published in Chinese language journals. General tourism research review studies can be classified into three categories: (1) those solely on tourism research development in China (e.g., Cao & Hu, 2008; Wang et al., 2003; Wu et al., 2001; Zeng, 2010); (2) those reviewing research development outside China in some leading international tourism journals (e.g., Wu & Xing, 2005; Zhang, 2004); and (3) those comparing tourism research developments within and outside China (e.g., Wang, Chen, Wang, & Liu, 2011; Zhu & Liu, 2004). In the third category, Zhu and Liu (2004) compared articles published in *Tourism Tribune* and articles in *Annals of Tourism Research* after 2000 and identified prominent differences: while *Annals* articles focused more on tourism impact, tourism anthropology, tourism sociology, and ecotourism, *Tourism Tribune* articles covered a wider range of interests and preferred applied research areas of tourism economics and

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