



Borders on the move: Cross-strait tourists' material moments on 'the other side' in the midst of rapprochement between China and Taiwan



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 January 2013

Received in revised form 11 April 2013

Available online 16 May 2013

Keywords:

Border
Materiality
Identity
Rapprochement tourism
China
Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This paper forms part of an endeavour to elicit the cultural-geo-politics of rapprochement tourism between China and Taiwan from a grounded approach. It seeks to examine cross-strait tourists' travel experiences on 'the other side' through the lens of 'border', 'materiality' and 'identity' in an attempt to move beyond the often state-centric analyses of cross-strait ties. Discussion shows that travel documents that are close to the personal or those that are part and parcel of a touring experience are far from inert; they participate in the social and political lives of their owners, feature in bordering practices between the Chinese and the Taiwanese, and are often platforms through which identities are performed. Importantly too, as the various travel narratives reveal, the ubiquitous border certainly does not exist only in its physical form; imagined and perceived social borders are equally potent in (re)shaping cross-strait relations. A study that captures the often neglected field of comparative tourists' travel experiences is timely in the advent of a warming relationship between China and Taiwan and the unprecedented increase in tourism exchanges that ensues.

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1. Introduction: Re-visiting the 'border'

The idea of a 'borderless' world (Ohmae, 1990) gained much popularity throughout the end of the 20th Century (see Paasi (2005) and Bauder (2011) for an overview of the changing discourses on the border). Yet it has also come under heavy challenge. Mobility studies remind us that passport and visa regimes continue to be limiting and discriminate against certain groups of people, rendering them immobile in an otherwise 'interconnected' world. For example, Wang (2004) reports on the immobility of Taiwanese people across certain international borders as a result of the perceived invalidity of the Taiwan passport. He discusses the humiliation and embarrassment experienced by Taiwanese travellers whenever their visas or passports are scrutinised by immigration authorities, and the inconvenience of being mistaken as mainland Chinese. Similarly, Jansen (2009) argues that the formation of the European Union (EU) does not lead to a borderless region or seamless travel. Rather, it further excludes the 'immediate outside' as the mobility of citizens from non-member countries is heavily restricted. He describes the 'humiliating entrapment' experienced by people of Bosnia–Herzegovina and Serbia as they attempt to enter EU countries. Such constraints on one's mobility and unequal treatment to holders of different passports by the authorities have led Wang (2004) to question the post-national genre of border research, suggesting that the old 'nation-state' model of citizenship

is "being entrenched perhaps more deeply than before" (p. 371). Far from diminishing, borders seem omnipresent in a variety of forms and practices.

Whether borders are here to stay or about to wither away, what we find in the literature on borders is the predominance of a statist and static approach to this subject, meaning that it becomes difficult to capture the intricate dynamics of societal transformations (although, see Baird, 2010¹). For example, narratives of the border are plagued by a managerial/top-down approach, assumed by the privileged observer "that makes the rest of the world an object of observation" (Mignolo and Tostanova, 2006: 206). In contrast, this paper seeks to study the border by attending to happenings on the ground, to ask the ontological question of 'who does the bordering?' and to call for a study of borders from 'the bottom up', "with a focus on the individual border narratives and experiences" (Newman, 2006: 143). Indeed, the proliferation of borders does not stop at the limits of the sovereign state; it overflows and extends beyond political boundaries to affect personal experiences as well (Paasi, 2005).

Contributing to these debates, this paper concerns itself with the re-visiting of 'border' in the context of rapprochement tourism

¹ Baird (2010) examines the negotiations of the ethnic Brao people living on the borderland between Laos and Cambodia in terms of how they utilise the international border to their advantage. In a sense, such studies go beyond the statist approach to the study of border and capture the fluidity of the concept in terms of how borders are produced in the everyday. However, it is still about how people 'get around' the border rather than an exploration of how borders are performed by people.

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between China and Taiwan.² It seeks to elucidate the experiences of ordinary people at border-crossings, and the various material practices engaged by them during their tour. The concepts of materiality, identity and liminality will be utilised to explore the enactment of bordering practices at and across political boundaries in a variety of different ways. This emphasis on human experiences does not mean ignoring or sidelining the potency of the physical border, which can be dismissed by discussions that focus on the 'invisible' or 'personal' border. Far from being 'non-places' (Auge, 1995, cited in Burrell, 2008), spaces at border crossings and areas are 'furnished' with emotions, identity negotiation and performances. Burrell (2008) for example, explores how Polish migrants perform the 'experience of mobility' through the materiality of things like passports and laptops at international borders. She shows that far from empty 'in-between' spaces, "the physical practice of journeying and border crossing... is a highly materialised and emotional undertaking, and a real, tangible space in its own right" (p. 353). Perhaps, it is interesting to note here that the Chinese equivalent of 'border' (bian-jie: 边界), connotes a dual meaning of 'edge' and 'world'. The spatiality of the term and the infinite ways in which this space can be theorised call for a more critical interrogation. Indeed, as Shields (2006: 233) argues, "...borders and boundaries have complex ontologies and spatio-temporal form as interfaces. They are not just edges." It is hoped that this paper can shed some light on the world of possibilities in border and mobility studies.

2. Setting the stage, materialising the border

The China–Taiwan conundrum remains one of the unresolved conflicts of the Cold War era. Although it can be said that both political entities are relatively at peace with each other, no peace treaty has ever been signed, and China remains ardent that it will use military action against Taiwan should the latter proclaim independence. However, the phenomenal rise of China over the last decade saw the two republics engaging each other on a totally different political game. Taiwan has increasingly come to terms that 'independence' is simply not a realistic option. Pushing for independence could only upset China and strain both cross-strait and international (US) relations.³ China, on the other hand, is beginning to abandon the futile efforts in engaging Taiwan in non-constructive verbal disputes over the latter's sovereignty, in preference of the potential economic benefits to be reaped from a Greater China sphere of co-prosperity. Such sentiments for peaceful and mutual economic development are neatly captured in existing tourism developments in and between the two republics.

4 July 2008 marks a historic moment in cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan. For the first time in almost six decades, mainland Chinese were permitted to visit Taiwan via direct charter flights and vice versa.⁴ Evidently, such a development goes in tandem with Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou's doctrine of "Economic Cooperation Before Politics". Ma, who was re-elected in January 2012 to serve his second term as President believes that "a surge in two-way trade, investment and tourism across the Taiwan Strait [has] helped Taiwan's export-dependent economy... [and] will raise Taiwan's competitiveness" (*Businessweek*, 14 January 2012). His victory has offered him a mandate to forge ahead with plans of expanding cross-strait economic exchanges. Conversely, as President Hu

Jintao subtly changed the Chinese take on the Taiwan issue from the political rhetoric of 'peaceful reunification' to an economic rationality of 'peace and development', China has begun to engage Taiwan beyond conventional political platforms. In pursuing the 'peace through tourism' agenda, Head of China's Tourism Administration, Shao Qi Wei, lauded the normalisation of travel between the two politically divided territories, hailing the launch of regular commercial flights and the beginning of mass tourism from China as akin to building "a bridge of friendship" (*Morning Star Online*, 4 July 2008).

Although the normalisation of travel between the two former enemies is a welcome development, politics can never be eradicated from seemingly banal activities, and local realities challenge the global framework of 'peace through tourism'. Rather than seeing it as 'economics before politics', cross-strait engagement has metamorphosed into something that not only concentrates on macro-political issues, but micro-political nuances as well. As such, tourism activities that infiltrate into the lives of both populations become even more important to analyse. In particular, I suggest that we can grasp a more nuanced understanding of people's negotiation with and performance of their identities by interrogating things that are part and parcel of their travel experiences. More specifically, this paper looks at travel documents like passports and entry permits, and documents that travel with cross-strait tourists such as national identity cards and tour guide licenses. More than that, 'things' here also extend to 'significant others', 'practices' and 'political causes' (Sayer, 2011). Furthermore, things matter to people, but they do not merely serve as an 'extension of self' (Belk, 1988), that is, 'what one is'; things also contribute to 'how one is' (Sayer, 2011). In other words, tourists are suspended amongst other things during their travels and these things are capable of affecting their feelings, emotions and values. As such, in response to calls for new experimentations with potentialities of materiality (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004), I hope to garner a more intimate understanding of Chinese and Taiwanese tourists' travel experiences through things that are close to the personal and the everyday. In other words, rather than seeing cross-strait exchanges as political rhetoric, I see them as being experienced by ordinary people.

I am also interested in how tourists behave during their tour, especially at border-crossings or border areas (e.g. immigration checkpoints). I suggest the concept of 'liminality', famously developed by Arnold van Gennep and later by Victor Turner (1969), could provide some clues. According to Turner (1979: 465), 'liminality' literally means 'being-on-a-threshold' – "a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending, preserving law and order, and registering structural status." These in-between places constitute a liminal space within which normativities of the tourists' everyday lives are temporarily kept in suspension, allowing them to encounter the 'Other' in a different social structure. Utilisation of 'liminality' in tourist/tourism studies is not new. A quick reference to existing literature shows the concept being applied to society's/individuals' behaviour, activities (e.g. sex tourism; pilgrimage, etc.), and specific site/place (e.g. hotel). For instance, Wagner (1977) adapts Turner's notion of 'communitas' and argues that tourists form 'spontaneous communitas' and interact with each other based on 'the spirit of the holiday' rather than 'the home life social hierarchical system'. Gottlieb (1982) on the other hand, experiments with the inversion of the everyday identities of holiday-seekers: the upper-class tourists temporarily becoming a 'pseudo-proletariat', while the middle-class ones seek an aristocratic change when on tour. Building on this genre of 'inversionary behaviour', Lett (1983) incorporates the concept of 'play' as developed by Huizinga (1950, cited in Currie, 1997) and Norbeck (1971, cited in Currie, 1997) to explicate yacht tourists' sexual behaviour. Tourism, for Lett, is a form

² In this paper, 'China' refers to the 'People's Republic of China' and 'Taiwan' refers to the 'Republic of China on Taiwan' (see also, Footnote 5).

³ The United States has been and still is such a crucial factor in China–Taiwan relations that Taiwan's international relations can be seen as almost synonymous with its US relations with regards to cross-strait issues.

⁴ Under the agreement signed by the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits based in China, and the Taiwan-based Straits Exchange Foundation, there is now no need for tourists from both sides to travel to a third country (usually Hong Kong) before landing.

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