Tourists' consumption and perceptions of red heritage

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Although tourism suppliers project the positive changes visits wrought upon tourists, the latter do not mindlessly consume the information they receive. A research gap exists in understanding how tourists consume political heritage and read the embedded nationalistic discourses from an emic perspective. This paper adopts the framework of social situation analysis to explore how tourists consume and perceive Chinese communist heritage and how those visits can impact their attitudes towards and support for the CCP. The results suggest that tourists were driven by a variety of motives, participated in various activities, and had split opinions about the effectiveness of "red tourism" in enhancing their nationalism. Comparisons of people's motivations and perceptions between activity-based clusters were conducted. Managerial implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Researchers have long been interested in tourists' experiences and perceptions. By definition, experience refers to the "total outcome to the customer from the combination of environment, goods, and services purchased" (Lewis & Chambers, 2000, p. 47), indicating the self in its being, change, and growth (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014). In practice, tourism suppliers nearly always project how tourists may be transformed from being "bored, alienated, frustrated or stagnant" to "re-energized, more tolerant, and spiritually uplifted" (Frost, 2010, p.723). Suppliers are meaning makers and story tellers, providing provocative backgrounds by presenting compelling stories, situations, and characters (Frost, 2010), yet not all tourists mindlessly consume the information they receive. For example, although tourism is assumed to promote cross-cultural understanding, increase acceptance of new practices and values, and thus has potential to reduce conflict (Ap & Var, 1990), empirical studies suggest that most tourists do not necessarily experience such radical cognitive changes (Anastasopoulos, 1992; Nyaupane, Teye, & Paris, 2008; Pizam, Jafari, & Milman, 1991). Direct encounters between hosts and guests who maintain traditional hostilities may not necessarily reduce their negative attitudes. On the contrary, it can reinforce ethnic stereotypes in certain contexts, as Pizam et al.'s (1991) research about American students visiting the USSR, and Anastasopoulos' (1992) study of Greek tourists to Turkey revealed. Therefore, tourism alone does not guarantee attitudinal change. In fact, preconceptions are not simply discarded or strengthened, and cognitive effect is not just a choice between positive or negative. Instead, the process of cognitive (re)construction in tourism is riddled with contradictions, equal status, personal preferences, values, lengths of stay, intimacy of encounter, and many other factors (Beeftink, 2004). In addition, even if travel does lead to assumed changes, it is not necessarily profound, long-term, or applicable to everyone

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(Brown, 2009). In actuality, some tourists may be less likely to mobilize narratives of self-transformation on the road, if they have any, after returning home.

Previous research on tourists' transformation has been conducted with the populations of study-abroad students (Anastasopoulos, 1992; Brown, 2009; Desforges, 2000; Nyaupane et al., 2008), volunteer tourists (Sin, 2009; Zahra & McIntosh, 2007), backpackers (Cohen, 2003, 2011; Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004), ecotourists (Orams, 1997; Poudel, Nyaupane, & Timothy, 2013), and wellness and spiritual tourists (Voigt, Brown, & Howat, 2011). While the scholarly work listed above focuses mostly on longer stays, much research also has examined the impacts of shorter visits on tourists. For instance, Orams (1997) and Lee and Moscardo (2005) explored how the ecotourism resort experiences and/or environmental education programs at resorts can convert tourists into "greenies". McLean (1998), Pretes (2003) and Timothy (1997) discuss how trips to memorials, museums, and other nationalistic historic sites can help visitors learn a foundational history and reinforce their national identity. Yet with tours that are themed around nationalistic education, most research, including McLean (1998) and Pretes' (2003) work, concentrates on the written texts of tourism from the perspective of suppliers; thus, there is a lack of empirical engagement directly with tourists to understand their perceptions at the individual level.

Using Chinese "red tourism" as an example, this paper adopts a social situation analysis (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981) to explore tourists' experiences with, and perceptions of red heritage. In particular, attention is given to how red tours can affect visitors' attitudes towards and support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the government, and the state. This is one of the primary goals the Chinese government desires to achieve through (re)developing and selling the country's communist heritage (Li, Hu, & Zhang, 2010; Rioux, 2008; Zou, 2014). This paper contends, however, that audiences do not passively absorb the top-down hegemonic discourses presented at such locales, and thus an empirical emic study of tourists' experiences and perceptions, which can provide insight into the effectiveness of political education via tourism, is timely and valuable.

Literature review

Red tourism in China

Red tourism is based on revolutionary narratives of memorials and places associated with the birth of the CCP, the anti-Japanese war, the Chinese civil war, and the founding of the New China (Gu, Ryan, & Zhang, 2007). It aims to help resist foreign hostile forces, reinforce the legitimate leadership of the CCP, strengthen national identity, cope with current moral decline in China, and reduce regional development gaps, as most former revolutionary bases are located in marginal and less-developed areas (Caraba, 2011).

Red tourism was introduced in China in 2004, when the first National Red Tourism Development Plan was initiated (Rioux, 2008). Since then there has been a tremendous increase in participation and tourism receipts. In 2008, the number of "red tourists" reached 272 million, a 18% increase over 2007 (National Tourism Administration, 2009). Red tourism in 2015 set a new record of 1 billion domestic participants and US$48 billion in revenue (Xinhua News, 2016). The economic achievement of red tourism can be easily measured, but it is harder to evaluate political and social outcomes. To assess whether or not the intangible goals established by the authorities can be achieved, there is a need to understand the dynamics of tourists' experiences at red destinations, particularly their pre-visit motivations, onsite activities, and post-visit perceptions, which will be examined later in this paper.

Tourism's impacts on tourists

Tourism provides an environment that blends sensory images with known and unknown objects. Thus, it can provide opportunities for people to remove themselves from familiar surroundings and discover a state of "otherness" (Hottola, 2004). Previous studies have discussed various changes among tourists in different contexts, which can be roughly classified into two categories: being and becoming. These two types of changes are not mutually exclusive or dichotomous. They are closely related in the sense that being is not static and finite. Rather, it is permeable and evolutionary (Deleuze, 1968). From this perspective, tourism experiences are a continual process that has potential long-term impacts on travelers (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007).

"Being" refers to the formation of the self. By reifying the intangible past with concrete heritage sites and museums, tourists can gain a novel or reflective view of their own society, consolidate their socially-conceived being, and experience an existentially authentic perception of self (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014). Heritage sites, therefore, not only provide simple leisure or aesthetic experiences, but also are a sign system that permeates the very essence of selfhood (Goulding & Domic, 2009). "Becoming" alludes to a journey that is a turning point in one's life, leading to a disruption or deflection in personal trajectory. A few studies have described such pivotal moments in which tourists' life stories change (Hottola, 2004; Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004). For instance, backpacking provides young Israeli tourists an opportunity to exit normal life and enter an unfamiliar situation abroad after their compulsory military service, and is thus considered a rite-of-passage and a critical transition to the rest of their lives (Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004). Not all tourists, however, are mindful enough to focus on self-reflection and thereby experience personal transformations. Many are inclined to regard their trip as a break or time