



A geographic analysis of hosts' irritation levels towards mainland Chinese cross-border day-trippers

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Provides a geographic analysis of hosts' irritation towards Chinese day-trippers.
- Contributes to existing debates on the utility of Doxey's Irridex.
- Advances knowledge on host-guest relations by incorporating GIS.

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ABSTRACT

There is a proliferation of research on Chinese tourists' unpleasant behaviour in host destinations, but analyses on cross-border day-trippers remain scarce. This paper offers a geographic analysis of hosts' attitude towards mainland Chinese visitors in Sheung Shui, a border town in Hong Kong. It utilises a novel adaptation of G.V. Doxey's Irridex Model together with Geographical Information System to spatially assess attitudes of over 280 shop owners. The spatial differentiation of antagonism levels, and correlations between irritation and factors like business type and distance from major transport hubs were discussed. Results revealed businesses related to 'Fashion and beauty' and 'Supermarkets and convenient stores' had greater resentment. There were also statistically significant differences between irritation levels and the shortest distances to various transport hubs ($p < 0.001$). The findings will have implications on the planning and management of the flow and circulation of mainland Chinese travelers in Hong Kong.

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1. Introduction

In today's China, modernization and the rapid development of a consumption-oriented economy has seen restrictions on travel being lifted or relaxed. Not only is China coming out of an era of isolationism but the state is also actively using 'travel' to 'imagineer' the modern Chinese subject (Nyíri, 2010). With a polity still organised by a household registration system tying people to the place of their birth, modern China is a contradictory set of fixings and movements. Despite official fixing some 200 million are internal migrants, and some 4.4 billion tourist visits were made internally in 2016, up 10% from the year before. Outbound tourism numbers stand at 122 million. Of the 42.8 million mainland Chinese

arrivals in Hong Kong, 59 percent (i.e. 25.4 million) were same-day visits. In terms of transport infrastructure and networks, the state is investing vast sums in high-speed railroads that connects Beijing to politically divergent parts of Greater China, like Lhasa (one of the highest cities in the world), Shenzhen and Hong Kong. It is evident that the modern Chinese subject is increasingly mobile within and beyond mainland China. However, Chinese people travel across borders for a variety of purposes that goes beyond the intent to engage in touristic activities. Hidden in the two categories of travel for work or pleasure are a host of other activities that bind 'Greater China' together. The most numerous internal border crossings involve the territory of Hong Kong and include: students commuting daily to schools in Hong Kong, those who travel to visit relatives, 'mainland mothers' who cross over to Hong Kong on tourist visas to deliver their babies, and parallel traders who smuggle goods like mobile phones and infant milk powder to sell in the mainland. How do we reconcile the disjuncture between these

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Chinese mobile subjects' identity as 'modern Chinese citizens' and the stark realities of how Hong Kongers perceive them?

This timely research focuses on one particular genre of cross-border activity – mainland Chinese day-tripping in a Hong Kong border town. More specifically, the paper aims to investigate and conduct a geographic analysis of hosts' attitudes towards mainland Chinese day-trippers in Sheung Shui. The town is conveniently connected to the mainland and is a shopping haven for day-trippers from the neighbouring city of Shenzhen. Attracted by the lower taxes in Hong Kong, the stronger Chinese Yuan, and concerns over product safety in China, Chinese visitors arrive in hoards on a daily basis. These visitors are part and parcel of the landscape of cross-border mobilities and importantly, their activities bring about significant socio-cultural, economic and political impacts, and the creation of unique spaces of encounters. However, they have been blamed for overcrowding, shortage of goods, and for pushing rents up in these border towns. Crucially, these day-trippers include 'parallel traders' who cross the border to bulk-purchase Hong Kong products to be sold to wholesalers in the mainland for a profit. Traded goods range from infant milk powder, diapers, to cosmetics and iPhones, but to name a few. The influx of mainland Chinese consumers has been reported to have a negative impact on the everyday lives of residents due to overcrowding and rising commodity prices (Li, Turner, & Cui, 2016). Smaller traditional shops that originally cater to locals' needs were forced to close due to increased rents. The consistently high volume of mainland Chinese visitors often proves too much for the carrying capacity of main shopping areas in the border town. Moreover, shoppers tend to open their luggages right in front of shops to re-pack their purchases, and so are accused by business owners of blocking the shop's frontage and thus affecting their businesses (personal communication). The over crowdedness and congestions have antagonized several shop owners and have already given rise to several protests that were anti-mainland Chinese in general and anti-parallel traders in particular. These protests often started peacefully, but at times escalated into clashes between the anti-mainland Chinese and pro-establishment camps. Some even intensified into abusive episodes when protesters ended up in scuffles with the police or kicked and shouted at the mainland day-trippers (*South China Morning Post*, 9 March 2015). Analysts have claimed that such clashes show 'rising cultural tensions with China' (*International Business Times*, 8 April 2015). The Chinese cross-border day-tripping issue is as much cultural as it is political, and developments of late have seen a city divided over contrasting opinions on the consequences of increased social and economic integration with the mainland. This calls for a timely intervention by tourism managers and planners.

One way to effectively intervene is to design a method to measure and monitor hosts' attitudes. We hypothesize that antagonistic attitudes towards mainland Chinese day-trippers in Sheung Shui are not homogenous, and that factors like business type and distance from major transport hubs are related to irritation levels. In order to prove our hypotheses, a systematic assessment of antagonistic attitudes towards mainland Chinese visitors is needed. As such, we turn to a combination of what we call the Mainland Chinese Irridex (MCI – adapted from Doxey's Irridex) and Geographical Information System (GIS) to map out antagonistic attitudes of over 280 Sheung Shui shop owners. It is hoped that through GIS mapping, we can gain a better understanding of the complexities of host-guest relationships, unravel some underlying reasons behind the antagonism, and in the process develop a research methodology appropriate for studying cross-border travels and their impacts on host societies in general.

2. Theoretical background

To date, studies on mainland Chinese tourists in Hong Kong have been overwhelmingly tourist-centric. These range from visitors' motivations for visiting Hong Kong (Zhang & Lam, 1999), shopping experiences (Wong & Law, 2003), experiences of mainland Chinese medical tourists (Ye, Qiu, & Yuen, 2011), and tourists' satisfaction levels (Heung & Quf, 2000; Song, Li, Veen, & Chen, 2011), to name but a few. In contrast there is little systematic research done on the perceptions of Hong Kong locals towards the mainland Chinese visitors, although locals' resentment has increasingly become vivid on various social media. In the case of day-tripping at Hong Kong's border towns, Laidler and Lee's (2015) textual analysis of media reports looks specifically at the border trading of infant milk formula from a 'border criminology' perspective. Although Zhang and Kwong (2017) do make an attempt to reconceptualise host-guest relations at Sheung Shui via a qualitative and cultural-geopolitical approach, a systematic analysis of locals' sentiments is still lacking. This paper serves to address the lacuna by looking at the very recent outpour of antagonism towards mainland Chinese day-trippers by local business owners and residents in Sheung Shui. By adopting a GIS approach, we seek to gain a more meaningful understanding of the hosts' attitudes and emotions when encountering the mainland Chinese visitors.

We aim to fulfil both empirical and conceptual objectives. The empirical site of Chinese travel to Hong Kong is important for at least two reasons. For one, the ambiguous 'One Country, Two Systems' agreement, coupled with an unprecedented increase in cross-border mobilities (primarily via tourism exchanges) over the last five years, present a politically-charged analytical space to interrogate the strong anti-mainland Chinese sentiment that is clearly present in everyday life in Hong Kong. Secondly, such a timely research also serves as a counter to the increasing representation of China on the move in terms of 'Chinese colonialism' in Africa (see Power & Mohan, 2010 for a critique of such a representation). Furthermore, it is argued that research on mainland Chinese tourists in Hong Kong should go beyond the pillars of tourist expectations/satisfaction and issues of demand and supply. In this epoch of antagonism towards mainland Chinese shoppers and parallel traders in border towns, there is an urgent need to analyse tourism happenings 'on the ground', to elicit the nuances of host-guest encounters and interactions.

Conceptually, this project engages with debates on host-guest relations. It does so by revisiting Doxey's Irridex Model and explore how it can be adapted to analyse the socio-political situation in Sheung Shui. There has been sustained interest in residents' attitudes towards tourism impacts since the 1970s. In 1976, George Doxey introduced his 'causation theory of visitor-resident irritants' to help planners "measure and monitor 'irritations' [that] stem from the impact between residents and outsiders at any given tourist destination area" (Doxey, 1975, p. 195). Doxey suggested that residents' attitudes change from euphoria to apathy to annoyance and antagonism due to an increasing influx of tourists. The 'Irridex' (irritation index; Table 1), which Doxey coined remains one of the most popular and widely cited concepts to understand hosts' perceptions towards the guests at a tourist destination (Sharpley, 2014).

The Doxey's Irridex has been instrumental in various tourism research. For example, Ryan, Scotland, and Montgomery (1998) apply Doxey's theory to the study of residents' attitudes in the Rangitikei area of New Zealand's North Island. They conclude that the tourist destination was experiencing the stage of Euphoria as the residents highly supported tourism and were happy with the presence of tourists in the area. As is evident, Doxey's model is useful in shedding light on extrinsic dimensions of tourism

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