



Developing a typology of diaspora tourists: Return travel by Chinese immigrants in North America



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This research examines the impact of diasporic travel on one's place attachment and cultural identity.
- Opinions from different generations of Chinese diaspora tourists from North America are considered.
- A highly-explorative qualitative research design is adopted.
- Five discrete types of diaspora tourists and their respective characteristics are outlined.
- Consequences and outcomes of diasporic return are further discussed.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 July 2015
Received in revised form
2 April 2016
Accepted 11 April 2016

Key words:

Diasporic travel
Place attachment
Cultural identity
Migration
Chinese diaspora

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role played by tourism in affecting cultural identity and place attachment among members of the North American Chinese diaspora who travel to China. Previous literature portrays diaspora tourists as homogeneous and suggests that home return travel engenders broadly similar impacts on the individual. This study reveals diasporic communities are quite diverse and complex. Five types of diaspora tourist are identified, each having distinct travel motives, experiences, migration backgrounds, cultural identities and place attachments. The consequences of diaspora tourism particularly in terms of place attachment and cultural identity are further discussed, as home return travel induces positive, neutral and negative reactions.

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1. Introduction

Research on travel by members of diasporic communities can be found under many names including home return travel (Basu, 2007; Duval, 2004; Hughes & Allen, 2010; Kang & Page, 2000; Nguyen & King, 2004; Pearce, 2012), roots tourism (Basu, 2005; Bruner, 1996; Handley, 2006; Pinho, 2008), ethnic tourism (Butler, 2003; Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013; Kang & Page, 2000; Ostrowski, 1991;), visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism (Pearce, 2012; Uriely, 2010), genealogical tourism (Santos & Yan, 2010) and of course diaspora (diasporic) travel (Kim & Stodolska, 2013) or tourism (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Moufakkir, 2011). Importantly, with few notable exceptions (Coles & Timothy, 2004),

these types of studies tend to regard diasporic groups as being undifferentiated, and who, depending on the group in question, travel for similar reasons and achieve broadly similar outcomes associated with resolving personal identity conflicts, discovering one's roots, retaining or maintaining personal connections or engendering feelings of being at home in their "native" soil (Duval, 2004; Stephenson, 2002; Timothy, 2008; Wessendorf, 2007). With the exception of roots tourism conducted by descendants of former slaves (Handley, 2006; Pinho, 2008) and a few studies on multi-generation migrants (Coles & Timothy, 2004; Wessendorf, 2007), most of current research tends to focus on recent migrants from a single ethnic group who have moved to a single migrant destination (Hughes & Allen, 2010; Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013; Kim & Stodolska, 2013).

While this literature is informative at one level, it largely fails to appreciate that diasporic communities, like all populations, are heterogeneous. Members migrated at different times, sometimes

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many generations earlier, had different reasons to migrate and have or retain different levels of connection to both their country of origin and their current country of residence. These conditions influence place attachment and cultural identity. Some identify themselves as belonging to their migrant country, others retain a strong sense of identity with their country of origin, others feel comfortable in both worlds and others still may feel rootless (McHugh & Mings, 1996). As such, one would expect the reasons to engage in travel back to one's ancestral home vary as would their subsequent experiences. Some travel to ancestral home for deep reasons of seeking roots and feeling connected to one's ancestry (Basu, 2005), and the others return for leisure and business purposes (Reynolds, 2010).

This research examines the travel back to China by members of the North American Chinese diasporic community. Its focus is on migrants whose original roots are mainland China and not in other ethnic Chinese economies such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Macao, Taiwan, Vietnam and the like. Chinese has a long migration history and growing prevalence. Chinese traditional value appreciates home and ancestry and has driven growing number of individuals with Chinese heritage to trace their ancestry (Mei et al., 2001). The study explores how travel experience affects diaspora tourists by looking at whether return travel stretches or further embeds ties to either North America or China, reduces ties to either place, or strengthens mixed place identity. In the end, a typology of diaspora tourists is proposed.

2. Research context

The word “diaspora” has been used traditionally to describe populations “deterritorialized” and “transnational” in nature and whose economic, social and political networks cross state borders (Safra, 1991; Vertovec, 1999). Diasporic members in first-generation may maintain a stronger attachment to ancestry homeland, such that their identities are not yet completely transformed (Hay, 1998). Once generations have passed, the descendants from families with long history of migration have better assimilated to the host society and have become important actor in the construction of national narratives, regional fusion and transnational political economies (Vertovec, 1999). Significant changes occur in place attachment and identities and their ties may not be as strong as those experienced by their ancestors. This would lead to difficulties with self-identity as they question who they are and where their genuine home is.

2.1. The Chinese diaspora

The Chinese have a long migration history to the West (Pan, 1994), with three key migration waves noted: the Gold Rush (1840–1900), Post World War II/Post China Civil War (1945–1978) and Post Open-Door Policy (1979–present) (Lewis, 2009; Wang & Lo, 2005; Tan, 2013). North America has been a key destination for migrants from Southern China since the mid-1800s (Daniels, 1990; Light, 1984), when more than 50,000 Chinese moved there during the California Gold Rush and subsequently worked on railway construction (Government of Canada, 2012). Most migrants at this time were single men, or married men who left their families behind. This wave continued until the late 1800s when the United States implemented the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, followed by similar legislation introduced in Canada some years later (Kemp & Chang, 2004) that imposed strict restrictions on Chinese migration. The result was an effective cessation of migration until well after the Second World War (Lee, 2003), leaving remnant Chinese populations in Chinatowns. Here familiar linguistic and cultural environments helped maintain their lifestyles, traditions and culture

(Pan, 1998).

A second wave occurred in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War in the early 1950s. Many migrants were both political and economic refugees who initially left China temporarily, hoping to return once the political situation stabilized (Li, 1998). Many also had multiple migration patterns, moving first to places like Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vietnam, often for many years before migrating permanently to North America when it became clear they could not return home (Chang, 2004; Con & Wickberg, 1982). Many set down some roots in intermediate countries and had children there.

The third wave began with the introduction of China's Open Door Policy announced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. This policy allowed citizens to move voluntarily to developed countries for a better life quality, employment opportunities and education. As a result, unlike in early eras, most Chinese immigrants could be classified as life-style migrants who had strong educational backgrounds (Skeldon, 1996). They also cared about the development of their motherland and strove to maintain their Chineseness after migration (Mei et al., 2001).

2.2. Place and place attachment

Place is a bounded entity with unique identity and historical continuity that involves three principal components of geographical location, material form and investment with meaning and value (Gieryn, 2000; Tuan, 1974). People-place bonding can consist of affective (emotion, feeling), cognitive (thought, knowledge, belief), and behavioral (action, behavior) dimensions (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992). More recently, Scannell and Gifford (2010) suggested place attachment could be understood from the dimensions of person, place, and process. They defined the personal dimension by individual or collective meanings, the place dimension by characteristics of attachment associated with spatial specificity, and the prominence of social and physical elements in defining the space and the process dimension by the affective, cognitive, and behavioral components of attachment. Indeed, place attachment can be experienced at both individual and group level (Low & Altman, 1992; Shamsuddin & Ujang, 2008), for group experiences and memories also play a role in determining the attachment an individual has to the place.

This issue is especially relevant for members of diasporic groups, for they often congregate (or were forced to congregate) in a relatively bounded space that ensured maintenance of common bonds of ethnicity, culture, religion, national identity and race (Cohen, 1997; Coles & Timothy, 2004; Vertovec, 2001), and in doing so, also ensured their status as outsiders in the host community. On the one hand, it served the purpose of retaining a semblance of their home culture, language, identity and rootedness through generations (Vertovec, 2001). On the other hand, it also ensured they remained culturally apart from the host society even though they were physically a part of it. It must also be appreciated that the retention of their status as ‘other’ was often enforced by the dominant host culture especially when the other was ethnically (Berry, 1997), linguistically or culturally different (Berry, 2000; Berry & Kalin, 1995; Hannerz, 1992), or if the receiving society held negative attitudes toward the diasporic members (Berry, 2000).

While common-sense understandings of place are more focused on stability and continuity than change, a number of studies has portrayed places and people-place bonding as being dynamic (Gieryn, 2000; Gustafson, 2006; Massey, 1994), meaning migrants often develop and/or retain multiple attachments to different places (Beckley, 2003; McHugh & Mings, 1996; Stedman, 2006; Williams & McIntyre, 2001; Wilson & Peters, 2005). Some of the factors influencing the likelihood of multiple place attachments

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