



Ancient poetry in contemporary Chinese tourism



Xiaojuan Yu*, Honggang Xu

Sun Yat-sen University, China

HIGHLIGHTS

- Ancient poetry continues to influence Chinese tourism in terms of what and how to gaze.
- Ancient Chinese poets and their poems create value for places as tourism attractions.
- Poems may help enhance tourists' landscape appreciation and aesthetic experience.
- Poetry may be combined with scientific knowledge to improve environmental interpretation.

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ABSTRACT

Classical poetry is an important part of Chinese culture. This study explores its roles in contemporary Chinese tourism based on participant observation of tourist destinations in the Three Gorges and surrounding area along the Yangtze River and content analysis of tourism guidebooks. Classical poetry is used to guide Chinese tourists in terms of what to gaze at and how to gaze. Specifically, first, poets and their poems create historical and cultural value for a place, which forms an essential foundation for its attractiveness as an object for Chinese tourists gaze. Second, poems may be used to enhance tourists' aesthetic appreciation of a landscape along the spatial and temporal dimensions, creating transcending poetic experiences. Such influence of classical poetry exemplifies the cultural continuity in China that should be well understood and considered in contemporary tourism. Implications in tourism development and marketing, aesthetic experience creation, environmental interpretation, and literary tourism are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Poetry was the most respected and practiced literary genre in ancient China and is an important cultural heritage to contemporary Chinese (Lin, 2009). A number of studies have sporadically recognized its influence on both the supply and demand sides of Chinese tourism (Li, 2005; Packer, Ballantyne, & Huges, 2014; Peterson, 1995; Sofield & Li, 1998, 2011; Xu, Cui, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2013; Xu, Cui, Sofield, & Li, 2014; Xu, Ding, & Packer, 2008). Most of these studies recognized that tourists tend to go to places associated with poems (Sofield & Li, 1998, 2011). Also, poems are used in tourist site interpretation because they are commonly known by Chinese tourists (Xu et al., 2013, 2014). However, few studies have really examined how poems work to

guide tourists' experiences in a more systematic way.

While we tend to learn more about this issue from research on literary tourism (e.g., Fawcett & Cormack, 2001; Herbert, 1996, 2001; Watkins & Herbert, 2003), which consists of visits to “places celebrated for literary depictions and/or connections with literary figures” (Squire, 1996, p. 119), we have not obtained many insights. First of all, most of the published literary tourism studies mainly focus on the artists, the resident houses of artists, and particularly they focus on one artist. Artists and their works are the main motivation for tourists in these studies. Yet, Chinese poems are embedded in many Chinese attractions. They often function as a moderator to enhance the tourism experience and to help tourists understand the natural or cultural resources that they are visiting. Secondly, in this growing subsection of cultural and heritage tourism, there is still such a lack of research on this phenomenon in China that Hoppen, Brown, and Fyall (2014) assumed that literary tourism “tends to be more of a European and North American

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: yuxiaojuan214@163.com (X. Yu).

phenomenon” (p. 38). A notable exception is Ryan, Zhang, Gu and Ling's (2009) research on tourism related to a classic Chinese novel and its television series. Yet the vast reservoir of poems and their continual influence on Chinese tourism has yet to be empirically studied. The information extracted from these poems can be used as material for reconstructing the past world, as is often done by literary geographers (Liu & Ma, 2012; Wang, 1990; Yan & McKercher, 2013), as well as for marketing and branding a destination and enhancing the tourist experience, as in other literary destinations (Hoppen et al., 2014).

This study aims to explore how classical Chinese poetry is and may be further used in destination marketing and tourist experience production through the study of tourism in the Three Gorges and surrounding area along the Yangtze River, which is full of poems. This paper is organized as follows. The literature review includes three relevant topics: (1) the influence of culture on tourism in China, which delineates the context in which this study is embedded; (2) classical poetry in China, which describes the status of poetry in Chinese culture; and (3) the role of poetry in tourism in China, which summarizes the insights about this specific issue that are scattered in existing tourism studies. In order to delineate the role of poetry in the current Chinese tourism field, participant observation and content analysis of tourist guidebooks are conducted with regard to the Three Gorges area; these are reported in the methods section. The findings reveal how the Chinese gaze is shaped by classical poetry. Implications of these findings are discussed in the last section with regard to destination marketing, landscape appreciation, environmental interpretation, and literary tourism.

2. Literature review

2.1. The influence of culture on tourism in China

Tourists leave their ordinary life and environment with an expectation of obtaining a pleasant experience, partly by gazing upon extraordinary landscapes or townscapes (Urry & Larsen, 2011). A tourist's gaze is not a matter of individual psychology, but “is conditioned by personal experiences and memories and framed by rules and styles, as well as circulating images and texts of this and other places”, which lead to the culturally constructed nature of the gazed world (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p.2). As the Chinese tourist market has surged both domestically and internationally in recent years, studies on Chinese tourists' gazes have also grown. The cultural distinctiveness of the Chinese gaze has been revealed in several micro-level behavioral studies, including preferences for and perceptions of built and natural attractions and on-site interpretations (Ballantyne, Hughes, Ding, & Liu, 2014; Ong & du Cros, 2012; Xu et al., 2013), preference for tourist destination landscapes (Sun, Zhang, & Ryan, 2015; Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2013), and attitudes toward nature, animals, and environmental issues (Packer et al., 2014).

Besides the micro-level studies above, the role of traditional culture in tourism in China has also been discussed at a macro-level (Pearce, Wu, & Osmond, 2013; Sofield & Li, 1998, 2011; Xu et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2014). These studies pointed out some of the overarching influences of traditional culture in tourism in China. Chinese poetry may be seen as embedded in a network of elements that comprise Chinese culture as a whole. It provides a unique window to the understanding of this culture through its distinctive characteristics and its connections with other elements. More specifically, poetry has been pointed out as an important part of, and a common vehicle for, Chinese common knowledge, which continues to influence tourism in China today in various ways. However, no detailed studies have been carried out on such

influences.

2.2. Classical poetry in China

China has a very long tradition of poetry that is deeply ingrained in society. Its first anthology of poetry, *The Book of Poetry*, was compiled by Confucius, followed by a variety of poetic forms developed in different periods in history (Liu, 1962). Chinese poems are generally very short and easy to recite, which facilitates their dissemination. The composition of poems, inheriting Confucius' intentions for the anthology, can be a kind of moral instruction and social comment, an expression of personal emotions, poets' contemplation of the world and their own mind, and a literary exercise and cultivation of eloquence (Liu, 1962). In the scholarly and political system in imperial China, poetry was regarded as the highest accomplishment of the literary art, an essential part of the educational system, the most solid and easiest way of testing a man's literary ability, and was an essential part of the Chinese imperial examinations for selecting government officials for more than 1200 years starting from the Tang dynasty (618–907) (Lin, 2009; Martin, 1901, 1948). All Chinese literati were poets, or pretended to be, and poetry usually took up half of the contents of a scholar's collected works. These scholar-poet-officials are exactly the kind of people that have continued to be remembered and revered by later generations. Further, poetry holds a high position in the spiritual field of Chinese life, as Lin Yutang commented: “poetry has taken over the function of religion in China, in so far as religion is taken to mean a cleansing of man's soul, a feeling for the mystery and beauty of the universe, and a feeling of tenderness and compassion for one's fellowmen and the humble creatures of life” (Lin, 2009, p.247).

In contemporary Chinese education, poetry still serves simultaneously as a means for learning the Chinese language and as a foundation of Chinese common knowledge and “Chinese-ness” (Li, 2005). A special kind of poetry toward landscapes, the Chinese *shanshui* (literally, mountain and water) poems, developed since the Weijin Dynasty (256–420 AD) (Yan & McKercher, 2013), is still perhaps the most admired type of poetry today (Sofield & Li, 2011). As part of the *shanshui* movement, it captures the unity between human and nature (Sofield & Li, 2011). Ancient scholar-poet-officials, encouraged by the Confucian ethic “to seek ultimate truth from the landscape” (Peterson, 1995), traveled extensively around China and have left countless poems that have immortalized many sites around China and made them household names for Chinese people (Packer et al., 2014; Sofield & Li, 1998; Xu et al., 2013, 2014). This cultural heritage has been inseparably embedded in the natural heritage, which is recognized by the national ranking of tourism resources and also internationally by UNESCO in the listing of four mountains as mixed cultural and natural heritage sites.

2.3. The role of classical poetry in tourism in China

Our synthesis of existing studies shows that classical poetry, as a part of Chinese cultural heritage, continues to influence tourism development and site design on the supply side and tourist destination choice, expectation, on-site behavior, and experience on the demand side.

On the supply side, classical poetry has been recognized as an important part of cultural heritage that is embedded in natural sites, as discussed above. Inscriptions of poems are a common decoration for tourist sites, which imbues them with profundity and caters to a preference for a traditional cultural flavor (Xu et al., 2014). While in Western eyes this might be regarded as a form of graffiti and hence the antithesis of environmental values (Sofield &

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