



Residents, their use of a tourist facility and contribution to tourist ambience: Narratives from a film tourism site in Beijing



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The paper examines a film site of heritage value based on literary values and Chinese 'Redology'.
- Recreational use by local residents adds to the ambience for tourists and contributes to a sense of authenticity.
- Residential users create insights into site attractiveness and recommendations for tourism managers.
- Conceptually the paper addresses the role of residents' activities as a backdrop to tourist destination attractiveness.
- Tourists and residential usage of the site represent an application of yin and yang to tourism.

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ABSTRACT

Any tourist site open to local residents represents a point where residents and tourists become a backdrop for the experiences of the other. This paper examines a specific Beijing film tourism attraction, Grand View Gardens, and the manner in which the site is used by local residents, the meanings attributed to it, and residents' role in creating an ambience for tourists. Residents have a daily connection with the site, and form audiences for events held at the Gardens. They often interact with tourists, becoming a source of information for tourists. The paper examines residents' motives for using such attractions, their attitudes towards tourists and suggests they possess a role in the creation of a sense of place that is valued by tourists. The paper fills a gap in an under-researched area, where, in the Chinese context, both residents and visitors form backdrops to each other's experience of place.

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1. Introduction

Over thirty years ago Murphy (1985) and Mathieson and Wall (1982) noted that the relationship between residents and tourists depended upon many factors, including where they met, the extent to which they shared a common space, the frequency of encounters and the numbers and activities involved. One of the features of Chinese life that tourists are coming to appreciate is the way local Chinese use their parks and heritage sites as recreational resources (Fang, Bi, & Gan, 2012). Many such areas are seen as a place of relaxation and community reinforcement, and commonly words

such as 'green, natural, relaxing, comfortable, quiet, and peaceful' are used to describe them (Shi, Wang, & Li, 2006). Equally those places feature in the itineraries of tourists, and local use of those places becomes part of the tourist experience of place.

This study focuses on Grand View Gardens in Beijing, China, which is not only a city park, but was built as the film set where the popular television series, *The Dream of the Red Mansion*, was shot. The television series is based on a classical Chinese novel much loved by many Chinese (Plaks, 2015) and the site possesses profound cultural and heritage significance (Knap, 2000). The reasons for this are many and include (a) as illustrated in the following figures, it is a faithful permanent replica of a Qing Dynasty Palace carefully constructed to replicate not only one of the classics of Chinese literature but also the style of buildings and gardens of that period, and (b) it is a site where students and enthusiasts for the novel come to deepen their knowledge of the book and has become

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a shrine for 'redologists', that is those who deeply study the book and use the television series and the site as a benchmark for analysis.

In response to the comments of referees two points must be stressed. The first is that the novel on which Grand View Gardens is premised is an important treasure of Chinese literary culture and this cannot be under-estimated (Hawkes, 1973; Plaks, 2015). Second, many Chinese tourist attractions are open to local residents who have free or discounted tickets. Examples include the Summer Palace and Jingshan Park in Beijing, while equally many tourists will avail themselves of free local amenities such as, say, Green Park, Kunming – itself a site of a Chinese film of the same name. Such venues have become increasingly popular with international tourists as they become more aware of these parks and palaces as not only heritage sites but as sources of entertainment as they observe local residents dancing, playing musical instruments, practicing Tai Chi and other activities consistent with perceptions of a traditional pattern of Chinese life (Su & Wall, 2014). In studies of this phenomenon two themes in the research can be discerned (Fang et al., 2012).

First, based on sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, researchers have focused on the different use of the parks made by various groups (e.g. by socio-demographics), their leisure activities and the resultant social cultures (e.g. Zhang, Yan, & Qiu, 2010). The second theme has been based on the residents' activities and perceptions, and the research studies have also discussed concerns of park management as they respond to these activities and those of visitors (Fang et al., 2012).

Grand View Gardens is also a film tourist site that, when it opened, attracted over 4 million tourists a year. In 2014 it still continues to function as an important tourist attraction, and was visited by 1.4 million people. Ryan, Zhang, Gu., and Ling (2009) also discovered that the role of the Gardens in literature and film was a strong motivating force for tourists selecting to come to the site – and hence it is substantiated as being a film and heritage tourism site. The Gardens therefore represent a site where both tourists and residents intermingle, with the former being a transient population and the latter a more permanent group of users – and equally both gaze at each other with interest. Indeed, it is suggested that for tourists, especially international tourists, the very activities of the residents add to a sense of the 'authentic' as they witness a commonplace of Chinese urban life – but one often different to the places from which they come.

The purpose of the study was to examine residents' perceptions of the Gardens, the ways in which they used it and their role in generating senses of place for tourists. The contribution the paper seeks to make to the literature is in the understanding it generates of how residents view their role in being at a tourist site – and it is suggested that the importance of the findings are that they illustrate the how local social life continues at a film and heritage tourism site and the way in which residents have importance even if they may not always interact with visitors.

2. Literature review

Very little exists in the English language literature about the use of Chinese tourist attractions as recreational resources despite it being a common feature of Chinese life. A search on Google Scholar indicated but a handful of studies existing when using the keywords 'China', 'Residents', 'Local use of Tourist Attractions' and alternative research terms such as replacing the word 'attractions' with 'facilities'. For their part Su and Wall (2014) also found that very few studies focused on local residents' use of Chinese heritage sites, especially the better known tourist sites such as The Summer Palace, and the way in which local people interact with tourists at

such places. Local residents use these sites as parks and recreational assets, and become significant stakeholders in the generation of tourist experience at such sites for at least four reasons. First they represent potentially important sources of revenue for venue management. Second, their activities are of interest to both domestic and international visitors as adding to the ambience of such venues, and third they may well form a core audience for theatrical and other presentations that such venues offer to enhance the recreational and tourism product on offer. Finally they become part of the gazed upon context as tourists visit the Park and contribute to the tourist experience of place. As many residents play musical instruments in the pavilions of the Gardens they may reinforce in the tourists' minds a continuity with past cultures. Local residents use the Gardens for weddings, their children swim in the pools – indeed their very presence adds vitality to the Gardens and form links to past and contemporary Chinese life styles. These features of Chinese life impinge on the tourist experiences of, in this case, Beijing, but, as just noted, are for the most part unremarked upon in the academic literature.

For their part Hong, Zhao, Lv, and Zhang (2008) also comment that the presence of elderly people is common in Chinese city parks. They offered four major reasons for this, namely:

1. Dependence:

Elderly people want more attention and care from families, and need their families' respect and understanding. In a China of one child families the traditional support systems are weaker than in the past, and in the parks the older citizens are finding an extended social structure of people of like life experiences who can offer each other support.

2. Life goals are changed:

Retirement brings about a significant change in life as time spent working is reduced and leisure time increases. They pay more attention to developing new interests, including cultural or recreational activities, and most express a willingness to do voluntary work in order to enrich their lives and themselves. It should be noted that China offers little in the way of transitional arrangements akin to those emerging in western societies, and indeed many elderly still lack pensions.

3. Sustaining communication with others:

For many retired people the social activities in which they participated in the past cease over time, and a potential danger is that they become increasingly divorced from mainstream society. Due to the sharp contrast of life before and after retirement, and the change in both social roles and interpersonal relationships, some come to feel lost and alone. Thus, they need to contact and communicate with friends and family, as well as paying more attention to their grandchildren. This study also found examples where many residents are also happy to act as informal guides and enjoy talking to tourists, thereby feeling they still have a role to play in their respective communities.

4. Information demand:

Some older people have a desire to gain new information about society, changing surroundings, and news. They become observers even if many are no longer as active a participant in society as they once were. Attendance at such a site as Grand View Garden provides opportunities for an exchange of information, and at the least, observation of contemporary tourism.

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