Consultants as Knowledge Brokers: Issues and Implications for China Tourism Research

（咨询专家作为知识中介：中国旅游的相关问题与研究启示）

Abstract: Consultants play a unique role as knowledge brokers in a scientific community. In the accelerating demand for knowledge-based practices, consulting has not only turned into a flourishing profession, it has also served as an effective strategy for academics to demonstrate practical implications of their work through spreading innovative ideas and promoting the use of knowledge for industry, policy and development practices. As a result, consulting has become an area of research in its own right in such fields as business and management, information and technology, and health studies or healthcare. In tourism, nonetheless, research on consultancy as knowledge brokering has been particularly limited. This article presents a general review and critique on consulting as knowledge brokering, and highlights issues, perspectives and implications for future research on this subject in the potentially largest origin and destination in world tourism.
Keywords: Scientific community, knowledge development, knowledge brokering, consultancy, China tourism research

摘要： 在科学共同体中，咨询专家扮演着独特的知识中介角色。在追求知识型发展风气日益盛行的今天，咨询不仅成了一份欣欣向荣的职业，也是学界传播创新思想、展示学术实用、促进知识型（产业/政策/发展）实践的有效手段。在工商管理、信息技术、健康/康护等学科，咨询本身就是专门的研究领域。然而，在旅游研究中，针对咨询专家作为知识中介的探讨却显得极为有限。本文就该课题在其它相关领域开展的研究作了批判性综述，并在此基础上，针对中国旅游，提出研究问题、寻找理论视角、展示探索取向。
关键词： 科学共同体，知识发展，知识中介，咨询，中国旅游研究

Introduction

At the turn of the century, Druckman (2000) noted that "Social scientist as consultant is a relatively new development; there are few consultant role models, few source books on the craft of research consulting, and virtually no courses on consulting offered in academic social science departments" (p.1565). A decade later, in accordance to Feighery (2011, p.1031), the situation was not much improved, as the role of academic researchers as consultants in the development process has still remained a "much neglected" area. Although it is often perceived that consultancy can take academics away from their primary responsibilities of teaching and research, synergistic relationships or dynamics could also be fostered amongst the three as consulting experiences could ground teaching and research in real situations and events (Wall, 2016).

This review on the rising importance of knowledge brokering and its predicaments, discusses the emergence of problems and issues relating to the nexus between knowledge production and consumption, as well as the constraints and opportunities surrounding knowledge brokering professions, in particular consultancy. The review and analysis have resulted in a detailed profiling of, and critique on, consultants as knowledge brokers in various aspects of their work and professional development. While studies in business and management, information and technology, and health studies or healthcare dominate the literature, little research on consulting was found in tourism, suggestive of a future agenda on this subject both generically and in the China tourism context in particular. Given the latter being one of the fastest growing and largest origins and destinations in the world tourism arena, a trajectory of knowledge-based development is imperative to bring knowledge brokers and stakeholders into the process. In this very context, China tourism could serve as a fertile field for the versatility associated with the topic.

Worthy topics on consulting as knowledge brokering include, for example, its nature and structure, contents and constituents, processes and outcomes,professionalism, roles of consultants, as well as consultant-client relationships. Questions surrounding the ethics of consulting are also provocative (Feighery, 2011; Jacobson, Butterill, & Goering, 2005). Despite potential variations by fields and culture, generic probes as follows form a valid basis to advance the understanding of consultancy as a knowledge brokering strategy in China tourism and its research: What makes a consulting project? How is it done? Who is a consultant? Who is a client? What constitutes consultant-client relationships? How does one maintain ethical and constructive consultant-client relationships for knowledge exchange? What contribution(s) does consulting make to the promotion of knowledge-based practices?

This review draws on literature across various fields. Emerging as an important topic of academic inquiry since the 1990s (Jacobson et al., 2005), published materials focus primarily on fields such as business and management, information and technology, and health studies or healthcare. Critical content analysis and review of published research on this subject – mostly qualitative and academic - were conducted to understand the brokering role(s) of consultants in the knowledge economy, as well as the conditions and concerns associated with knowledge brokers. The discussion points to the challenges, opportunities and constraints of the knowledge economy, and in particular, addresses what consultancy may mean to China tourism research, irrespective of the business (marketing and management) or development (planning and policy) aspect of tourism consulting.

Admittedly, the expansion and growth of knowledge development research in other domains or fields have rendered it impractical (if not impossible) for this critical review to claim any comprehensive coverage of issues and perspectives on consulting as knowledge brokering, nonetheless, this conceptual paper is intended as a starting point, and represents the contextual/theoretical foray of a few related academic research grants on knowledge development in (or for) China tourism. Primary/empirical observations resulting from these undertakings are to be reported in separate documents to hopefully link the points of intersections, and perhaps to go beyond, the currently fragmented body of literature on knowledge management, knowledge transfer, and innovation in tourism (Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Xiao & Smith, 2007). Overall, this review essay aims to enhance awareness of, generate interest in, and discuss implications for viewing consultancy as knowledge brokering in China tourism research.

Knowledge Brokering

As bridges in the production-and-consumption of knowledge, brokers such as consultants play an increasingly important role in the knowledge economy. Variously referred to as a middleman, boundary spanner, intermediary and sometimes gatekeeper, the broker serves as a value-added service person (or organization) facilitating the transformation of innovation and ideas, and making information and knowledge user-friendly and accessible to the recipients (Bielaka, Campbell, Pope, Schaefer, & Shaxson, 2008; Cranefield & Yoong, 2010; Prince, 2015; Traynor, DeCorby, & Dobbins, 2014). Research suggests that the lack of defined dimensions has resulted in its roles being variously described as “advocate”, “teacher”, “fact finder”, “technician”, “adviser”, “bridge builder”, “storyteller”, “applied theoretician”, and even the “witch doctor” (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.3). By adopting a primarily advisory role, the broker has also become a champion, master, or expert with a reputation similar to that of an esteemed consultant (Boari & Riboldazz, 2014; Ha, 2014).

Furthermore, Walsh (2002) describes the role and functioning of brokering consultants as service professionals providing an intangible experience that is not in possession by a client. Hence, brokering lies in a simultaneous production and consumption of a set of expertise through consultancy. At the same time, it is noted that consultants take on different approaches to performing their tasks; some become “partners” to solve their clients’ complex problems. However, little research shows how they actually perform their task.

Knowledge Brokers: Who They Are, What They Do

Contextually, the negligence of scientific knowledge has remained a serious issue in modern society. Taking healthcare as an example, Ward, House and Hamer (2009a, p.2) find, “doing health research is costly and time-consuming but often the results are acted upon slowly or not at all... This results in poor health outcomes, health inequities and wasted time and money”. To facilitate better uptake and knowledge utilization in society, robust channels and durable relationships between the two communities of academics and practitioners need to be created (Bielaka *et al*., 2008). To bridge the divide between the two communities, various approaches have been proposed, such as the formation of and commitment to research-practice partnerships (Ferguson, 2005), experiential learning or learning by doing (Kayes, 2002), diffusion of innovation (Senge, 1990), and the nurturing of communities of learning and practice (Wenger, 1998). One way to overcome this divide in communicating science, or other types of new knowledge for that matter, is through intervention such as knowledge brokering.

Knowledge brokering is an exchange between two individuals: One seeking information and the other providing it (Wong & McKercher, 2011). The process involves workers (or organizations) mediating or exchanging sources of knowledge (usually from research) for the benefit of all parties, particularly users (Bielaka *et al*., 2008; Meyer, 2011). To do so, brokers are expected to play a highly skilful and complex role (Cranefield & Yoong, 2010). They are skilled professionals because of their ability to understand an issue and to monitor, filter and identify new information, knowledge and solutions to it. Therefore, knowledge brokering involves skills or tasks such as information management, linkage and exchange, and capacity development (Ward, House, & Hamer, 2009b), which have been elaborated by other scholars as knowledge identification and localization, redistribution and dissemination, and rescaling and transformation (Donnelly, 2009; Cranefield & Yoong, 2010).

Moreover, knowledge brokering requires both “soft” and “hard” skills. As well as being culturally compatible and an expert in methodology or in a specialized field, brokers are considered accountable, accessible, and organized professionals (Bielaka *et al*., 2008). They are reflective, have a positive attitude, and often hold tangible attributes such as past experience. They are also described as an approachable and patient character in the gaining of trust and respect from their clients (Traynor *et al*., 2014). These skills are vital to build and maintain rapport within the various communities of practice and networks in which brokers work.

Additionally, brokers are “boundary spanners” (Cranefield & Yoong, 2010, p.77), located “in-between worlds” (Lomas, 2007, p.129). The literature identifies them as having the capacities, attributes, and positions of mentors, advocates, go-betweens, gatekeepers and cheerleaders (Traynor *et al*., 2014). Brokerages are also found in real estate or in stocks, where they sell and/or buy property or shares respectively. In the context of knowledge, however, brokers are understood as facilitators in the creation, sharing, and use of knowledge, or as intermediaries between academia and various societal or practitioner groups (Meyer, 2011). Such groups and individuals must be comfortable in initiating dialogues and operating in the worlds of producers and users of knowledge, should they wish to be trusted, valued and respected by both parties.

As Lomas (2007, p.129) noted, brokers not only transfer knowledge in one direction; they are also engaged in knowledge exchange between and/or amongst different places or locations, known as the “in-between worlds” that privilege knowledge transfer across boundaries. Through activities such as translation, adoption and conversion, knowledge brokering goes beyond mere transfer to achieve transformation (Boari & Riboldazz, 2014).

Furthermore, as outlined by Kellogg (2014, p.912), brokering involves two sets of practices: buffering and connecting. The former is indicative of brokers being effective in managing information, matching meanings, and maintaining interests, while the latter is useful for facilitating cross-group collaboration in situations where the majority of the required tasks are high status and high value; it enables the targeted groups to use their specialized expertise and display their deeply held identities.

Brokered knowledge is a value-added service that promotes a culture that values the use of evidence (Traynor *et al*., 2014, p.539). This is not only due to it being a tailor-made service; further, it makes knowledge more robust, accountable and usable, thus improving its quality and usefulness as evidence for decisionmaking (Meyer, 2011, p.123). Examples developed in work practices include repositories, specifications and standards (Kellogg, 2014). Apart from their role in recombining existing evidence to form new solutions, brokers also enhance their clients' capacity and skill for improving and acquiring knowledge as well as critically appraising it.

Knowledge brokers play an influential role. They add value to improve the operation of organizations due to their ability to liaise with and transform existing management structures. In a destination marketing and management context, Wong and McKercher (2011) explain how satisfactory encounters are most likely to occur when the knowledge seeker elucidates his or her needs clearly and when the broker provides information that satisfies those needs. On the contrary, unsatisfactory experience can occur either when the seeker does not make specific requests or when the broker provides information that is not relevant. Hence a good broker is one who exhibits patience to walk through a complicated process with his clients, and possesses clear communication skills to explain each step of the process along the way if necessary.

The benefits of knowledge brokering are manifold. According to Yang (2008, p.345), they include, a) minimizing potential losses of intellectual capital from employees leaving, b) improving job performance by enabling all employees to easily retrieve knowledge when required, c) increasing employee satisfaction by obtaining knowledge from others and gaining from reward systems, d) providing better products and services, and e) making better decisions. These factors effectively result in retaining and improving organizational competitiveness in a highly dynamic marketplace.

Despite the benefits of working with a knowledge broker, many obstacles also surface. As brokering often takes place in the "back stage", its transparent tasks and explicit roles are still not well understood. Further, brokers reflect on whether work would be sustainable because they are simply "parachutes", which are here one day and gone the next day (Traynor *et al*., 2014, p.538). Their ability to move from one organization to another is seen as an important means to the diffusion of knowledge.

What Is Consulting, How It Works

Consulting is a process and strategy of transferring expertise, knowledge, and/or skills from one party to another. Unlike translators or value-added service providers whose main job is limited to information exchange, consultants offer advice. They help communities or organizations to achieve their objectives by providing help or solving problems in such a way that they can continue with decreasing "outside" aid (Gable, 1996, p.1177; Jacobson *et al*., 2005, p.302; Kellogg, 2014, p.920). In this regard, their work resolves around identifying opportunities for value creation, fit-for-purpose feasibility and system studies, and the like (Prince, 2015).

Sometimes, consultants are external experts in an organization; they interact with their clients through gathering data, diagnosing the problem, providing advice, and then departing and returning again. They provide advice where internal staff are inadequately equipped or unsure of a problem and/or its solution. Occasionally a consultant could be an "extra pair of hands" that take on temporary administrative or technical tasks as need arises. Here the popular metaphor of "seagull" has been used to describe well-known international firms that fly in specialists from overseas, who briefly hover around the organization before dropping a large report and then flying off home (Traynor *et al*., 2014, p.538).

As an "outsider", consultants are not necessarily tie-up in office politics of bureaucratic and staid organizational cultures. However, critics question their ability to properly access the client's business and provide relevant and practical advice. As a critical comment, Kitay and Wright (2004) noted the standardized, impractical or sometimes even flawed advice as potential harms from having a consultant. Some even argue that consultants tend to convince clients to pay exorbitant fees for an often intangible service which they present as unique and high in added value. Therefore, the symbiotic nature of such consultant-client relationships is generated by opposing interests or tendencies.

Nonetheless consultancy work is a highly interactive type of "people work", where face-to-face contact and pleasurable interactions are important (Alvesson, 2006, p.254). Consultants build relationships based on mutual understanding, collaboration and trust with their clients. As Taminiau, Boussebaa and Berghman (2012) have noted, when the ultimate goal is a reciprocal relationship, it will ensure long-term business. Hence a shift in thinking may take place from the consultant being a powerful expert (outsider) to a more collaborative (insider) role.

In addition, the consultant is essentially a knowledge worker. As such, s/he is predominantly engaged in intellectual work. This requires high levels of tacit knowledge to generate creative, inventive and innovative solutions (Donnelly, 2009, p.330). In fact, the emergence of the consultant is emblematic of the ways expertise has been marshalled worldwide, especially in recent decades. Trends toward outsourcing and alternative organizational forms have also increased reliance on external consultants in both advisory and operational capacities. This has been the result of a combination of factors including neoliberalism, managerialism, globalization, casualization, and the growth of business schools in elite universities (Prince, 2015).

While consulting projects may vary in nature, scope, process and outcome, data collection is essential. Without new data, a consultant cannot be actively involved in the problem-solving process (Nikolova, Reihlen, & Schlapfner, 2009, p.292). But before any data is collected, a pressing need should be identified. When clients identify their needs, they are more likely and willing to pay consultants to help and, as a result, are motivated to use the knowledge generated after the consulting project. As Bielaka and colleagues (2008, p.220) have noted in a policy research context, the most important aspect of consulting is to get the research question right. Hence, the role of the consultants is to develop a "correct" problem structure and to generate an appropriate solution on the basis of their expertise, and the client is reduced to the role of an information supplier and implementer of the solution (Nikolova *et al*., 2009, p.296). This means investing in specific measures in close consultation with end users to elicit and articulate knowledge needs is an important part of consultancy. Sometimes, as the consulting team better understands the issues at stake, the lead consultant increasingly sees the main task of the project as being conflict resolution. However, when the need is perceived to be less urgent or when the problem is not recognized by the clients themselves, the chances of the knowledge being used are substantially reduced (Jacobson *et al*., 2005, pp.310-314).

Various reasons for hiring consultants (both professional and academic ones) have been articulated in the research literature. One is to gather evidence that will support the clients' own arguments. Another reason managers employ consultants is simply to legitimize a decision that has already been made, or as Kitay and Wright (2004, p.3) put it, a "scapegoat" for an unpopular course of action. Thirdly, in many of the political contexts in which decisionmakers operate, developing a link to the prestige of academia through a university-based consulting team can prove advantageous (Donnelly, 2009, pp.325-326). From an academic consultant's standpoint, consulting can give him/her an opportunity to better understand the contexts in which policy and practice decisions are made and implemented. Such knowledge may then enrich the conceptualization of research questions and in some cases the knowledge produced is of general rather than purely scholarly interest. Additionally, hiring academics as consultants is a popular choice, since it allows the client to access both applied research skills and the expertise and knowledge (Jacobson *et al*., 2005, pp.316-317). In essence, data collection through academic consultants has the effect of creating and improving local capacities for interpreting, synthesizing and applying research. Hence the chance of knowledge being used through consultancy is promoted by the specific nature and circumstances of the clients.

A key role of consultants therefore is not only a problem solver involved in problem identification and diagnosis, generating and evaluating alternatives, and implementation, but also a facilitator in shaping clients' interpretations of a consulting project's results (Nikolova *et al*., 2009, p.292). The less experienced a client is in working with consultants, the more important it becomes for the consultants to work on shaping clients' perceptions. As such, consultants' skills in presentation and content delivery are of importance to a project's success. It could hence be reiterated that consultants often act behind-the-scenes, realizing that their role is to make their clients look good in front of their management.

As a saying goes, "He who owns the words, rules and controls the minds of people". Likewise, communication is essential to consultancy engagements; and consultants' appearance, rhetorical skills, and argumentative brilliance are of particular importance to project success. Sequentially, the presentation of results is the last stage in a consulting project, which is often considered the most crucial part; after all, it is delivering the advisory product. As highlighted in the brokering literature, the consultant does not just hand in the documentation to the person who has hired him/her, but also offers that person help through his presentations – an approach to getting to know (be known by) the upper management.

In terms of negotiations, Nikolova and colleagues (2009, p.294) shared a case, in which a consultant advises the client to interrupt the project shortly after his team has begun because he believes that the situation is not compatible with the initial project aim. By making this suggestion, the consultant is risking a large percentage of the negotiated fee. However, this move is perceived by the client as a highly professional behavior and it creates an atmosphere in which the client sees the consultants as trustworthy experts. Similarly, Jacobson and colleagues (2005, p.309) report an instance of consultant-client interactions where the former uses a presentation style that mixes compliments with constructive suggestions about how a problem might be remedied – in a "good news/bad news" format – to build rapport and move the project forward.

As noted, a consulting project often covers a series of stages. During the diagnosis stage, consultants, assisted by their clients, gather and analyze data relevant to the issue at hand. In this period, the team and the steering committee work together to determine the terms of reference – scope and focus – of a project and to develop a research plan. Subsequently, additional members may be recruited to improve stakeholders' representation and expertise. In the intervention stage, consultants and clients collaborate to interpret the results of their analyses, to link them to a broader evidence base, and to use these results to develop recommendations. At the exit stage, consultants write and present their clients with a final report, a product and signal that the project has been concluded. Although every consulting project goes through these four stages or phases, there are often no clear lines between them. Then, in the post-exit stage, after the consultant's contract has been fulfilled, the clients have the task of implementing the recommendations. The consultant's report becomes a source of authority – "hold[ing] people's feet to the fire" in order to get things done (Jacobson *et al*., 2005, p.309). The post-engagement review is, from the consultant's point of view, an important mechanism for increasing the quality of the consulting service. Gable (1996, p.1194) mentions two main objectives of this final-final stage: To assess project success for the client, and to assess project success for the consultant.

Consultant-client Relationships

What is meant by a client? Typically depicted as targets rather than beneficiaries, their positions are diverse and wide-ranging. Rather than being a single figure, in large bureaucracies where there are diverging interests and mind-sets, many client-positions could be identified. Sometimes, the fragmentation is so strong that nobody can speak as "the client"; indeed the word "client" rarely only designates a single unique person; instead it is often associated with a "client system" in a large organization or organizational groups. In reality, the client can also adopt multiple positions and move between a shared interest and overlapping identification with a consultancy group to a more exploitative and instrumental relationship, thus showing the malleability of individuals to move between roles (Prince, 2015, p.586). As Alvesson and colleagues (2009, p.256) advice, one needs to unpack and detect the possible pluralities of roles and consider a) the division of labor within client work and associated positions, b) the relations within the client system, and c) the differentiated logics of perceiving, valuing and reasoning within groups of clients.

What then does it take to be a consultant? Consultants see themselves as imparting knowledge to solve their clients' problems and self-define their roles as the "helper", "friend", or "ally"; in other words, they are a "service-orientated partner" (Walsh, 2002, p.42). According to Alvesson (2006, p.220), the importance of establishing oneself as a sophisticated "expert" or being a distinctive character or identity in relation to other professionals will facilitate impression management and the development of social relations.

Consultants translate their clients' desires or explain to them what is possible in their situation. As Walsh (2002, p.45) quoted in a hospitality and tourism context, "…What I think I learn most from my clients is how often, at a senior level, they know extremely little or nothing at all about the industry". As service professionals, they are primarily responsible for maintaining client-consultant relationships, and are committed to responding to their clients' questions and concerns regardless of how time-consuming it may be. Very often, consultants quickly learn about central issues, demonstrate that they understand the importance of these issues to their clients, and empower their clients to more fully control the conversation (Kitay & Wright, 2004). Due to such motives, consultants spend a major part of their time engaging in learning and generating knowledge for the diagnosis and solution of client problems.

Consultant–client relationships are highly diverse, sometimes varied and contradictory; they do not fit neatly into prevailing stereotypes. Alvesson (2006, p.221) depicts a cliché image of a passive or powerless client being dominated by an aggressive consultant in a professional-layman interaction. The actual approaches have been described as falling along a continuum of directiveness ranging from advisory to prescriptive (Jacobson *et al.*, 2005, p.303). Along these lines, various consultant-client models have been proposed, including 1) the "expert model", associated with the assumption that professional action consists of solving concrete client problems with the help of scientific theories and techniques; 2) the "critical model", where consulting companies are regarded as "systems of persuasion" (Alvesson, 1993, p.1011) that communicate (using rhetoric, images, metaphors, and humor) with clients via a series of success narratives that act as substitutes for the company's ambiguous and vague knowledge base; and 3) the "social learning model", where clients share the stage with their consultants, actively diagnosing and solving the problem together (Nikolova *et al*., 2009, p.290).

Nonetheless, it is important that consultants are responsive to their clients' wishes, tastes, and expectations in such a way that they have to "mirror" their clients. This is what Taminiau and colleagues (2012, p.1710) describe as being "pliable" or flexible, "it is important to really listen to your client and act absolutely in their own interests". At the same time, however, the consultant has to reconcile between two different demands. On the one hand, he needs to create a personal relationship in order to do the work well and safe-guard future projects. On other hand, he needs to make sure that the relationship should not become too personal, as it would impede on the consultant's professionalism.

To ensure professionalism, both consultants and clients recommend that their relationships should not develop into friendship, or that informal business relationships be not equated with friendship. In line with this preference, most consultants prefer to meet their clients during working hours. To facilitate an environment of exchange, the most popular informal setting or location outside the office is the restaurant or cafeteria, where the most popular meal is a business lunch (Taminiau *et al*., 2012). A dinner mostly takes place once a good consultant-client relationship has already been established; the more personal the relationship becomes, the more often appointments are made outside working hours. As Taminiau and colleagues (2012, p.1711) note, the difference is: “When I go to dinner I give up my personal time, but lunch is considered work time”. While there are no general principles governing work/private life, the boundaries are less clear as informal contacts can be seen as fluid. The more savvy client managers are wary of developing close, long-term relations with consultants for precisely these reasons; they are more comfortable maintaining a distant relationship and encouraging competitive bidding market-based relations (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.14).

Notably, since there are no professional certifications or accreditations, the high institutional uncertainty of the consulting market increases clients’ uncertainty and vulnerability when choosing consultants (Nikolova, Möllering, & Reihlen, 2015, p.232). Understanding how trust develops in consultant-client relationships can therefore provide important insights toward trust granting in complex and ambiguous business-to-business relationships. Thus, it is not surprising that consultants speak with pride of the enduring relationships that they have developed with clients, metaphorically characterizing them as “marriages” in which secrets are shared and trust built (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.12).

Clients often seek referrals from colleagues and friends when identifying consultants. In fact, many consultants confirm, the majority of their work comes through network relations and repeat business. Credibility and a positive track record are hence based on referrals, references, reputation, past experience, and the possession of specialized expertise, which are considered critical by both clients and consultants for the granting of trust. Creating an image of being easy to deal with, aligning with clients’ working style as well as adjusting to role expectations are perceived to be important factors in developing consultant-client relationships (Nikolova *et al*., 2015). Furthermore, Ulvila (2000), in his study on building relationships between consultants and clients, advises on how firm size (large or small) and what they sell (hard or soft) could affect the relationship. Notably, the larger the firm (or, the less technical the specific consulting service), the less the influence a consultant will have on the relationship with clients.

In addition to building relationships and clarifying process expectations, clients stress the importance of developing a sense of care for their needs from their consultants, and a sense of mutual understanding of the clients' outcome and expectations. After all, clients also choose to work with consultants whom they find likeable. Actually chemistry does matter. If one comes across a person who is very, very knowledgeable but the two do not seem to get along, that will influence the relationship. As one consultant notes, "I think that there are some clients or potential clients that I meet where there's just an instant connection and… you feel really comfortable, chatting away about things… it just speeds up that process" (Nikolova *et al*., 2015, p.240). The role of expectations in the trust granting process is distinctive by process-oriented versus outcome-oriented expectations; consultants need to be flexible and responsive to clients' expectations.

Given the importance of identifying the right consultants, some clients use cues to assess whether a prospective consultant is deemed suitable. Such cues include, and are not limited to, whether consultants are willing to spend additional time on familiarizing themselves with the views and interests of different stakeholders, to clarify how these might influence the project, and to demonstrate their ability to navigate differences and achieve a compromise (Nikolova *et al*., 2015). Research suggests that it is important that consultants understand how an organization works, what their clients do, and the types of issues that are important to them, so as to build up relationships within the organization, not only with an individual or specific client, but with others in the organization that they have to work with. Consequently, themes such as knowledge-sharing, client-orientation, and a focus on commercially useful work are highly contingent upon how consultants define themselves in a particular context. Such a dialectical process has been described by Alvesson (2006, p.205) as a "joint production of knowledge and identity", where consultants define themselves through the knowledge they create.

However, in some instances, consultants have to invest in additional activities, such as intensive conversations, explanations, and intensive client involvement, in order to familiarize the client with the problem and the data as well as with the tasks required for its solution. For example, Nikolova and colleagues (2009, p.293) realize, "I had to ask questions rather than give answers because clients provide most of the answers. You only need to help them to generate those answers. And only if the client arrives at the solution himself is he convinced by it". This raises an intriguing query of the consultant's position as someone who may know more about the client than the client actually does of himself (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.12). In a way, this speaks of the situation of regional tourism planning in China where local government clients are not necessarily more aware of the problems or options they may have than the consultant planners.

Consulting Success or Failure

What is meant by success or failure of a consultancy project? Failure may arise because consultants believe their tasks require an intimate knowledge of the clients and their needs, but the clients may either be unaware or unwilling to provide such access. Alternatively, it may result from the consultants having developed the status of an "insider" to the extent that they can no longer act or provide external objectivity. Or, the clients become overly dependent upon a single source of consulting advice (Kitay & Wright, 2004). More fundamentally, failure could be due to clients and consultants having different expectations or understandings of what is required for a particular task. This happens when the consultants and clients fail to demonstrate a shared vision or understanding. As one consultant recalls, "the minute you go outside the boundaries [the client has set for the project] you lose trust" (Nikolova *et al*., 2015, p.238). The lack of trust diminishes the clients' feeling of security.

From the perspective of the client, a failure results from being unable to clearly define a project brief or communicate the type of relationships required, which often forms a basis for a consulting "horror-story" (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.16). A contributing factor of many "apparently" failed consultancies is a poor appreciation by both the client and the consultant of the true goals for the project and how to act progress (Gable, 1996, p.1175). Such errors occur when the broker offers advice based on the perception of what s/he feels the client may want, because "they are that kind of people" without really considering the information actually requested (Wong & McKercher, 2011, p.487). The ultimate sign of failure is seen when consulting reports gather dust on the shelves, without having any impact or use-value (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.9), which interestingly reflects what Lai, Li and Feng (2006) have observed about regional tourism planning documents in China after passing their panels of reviews.

What then is successful consultancy? Successful consulting projects are characteristic of consultants being able to complete projects that meet their designed objectives, and completion of projects being on time and within budget, amongst others (Gable, 1996). Providing the data to move people forward, or what clients claim to be "enlightenments" are other signs of success (Jacobson *et al*., 2005, p.314). As Nikolova and colleagues (2009) report, practices crucial to successful interaction include impressing, problem-solving, and negotiating expectations. Likewise, consultants' recommendations, clients' learning, and consultants' performance are often regarded as three main areas of assessment of a consulting project (Gable, 1996). These criteria are mutually dependent on profitability and performance, application to major problems, actual use, and user satisfaction.

Regardless of time and cost, a client may be satisfied or dissatisfied with a consultant. From a client's perspective, dissatisfaction may result because he feels that the consultant does not give value for money, nor demonstrates necessary expertise or experience, nor keeps him adequately informed. Yet it is worth remembering, as Gable (1996, p.1176) reminds, that clients do not evaluate quality solely on the outcome of a service; they also consider the process of service delivery. It is the human element that determines the quality of the exchange rather than the product or result itself (Wong & McKercher 2011).

A successful consultant-client interaction can be considered an engagement success (Gable, 1996). This depends largely on the human quality of trust. "No leap of faith is possible without a degree of emotional connection between the trustor and the trustee" (Nikolova *et al*., 2015, p.237). Trust is an emotional accomplishment necessary to drive engagement. It is not surprising then, when clients' expectations are discussed and negotiated early on, a sense of shared expectations results in comfort and security. Furthermore, research on newly formed teams has shown that members' expectations of each other are a reflection of their previous interactions and experience (Nikolova *et al*., 2015).

On a practical level, a useful product can only be the result of a process that is deliberate, respectful, grounded in the users' context and the researchers' expertise, and open to constant renegotiation (Jacobson *et al*., 2005, p.317). Yet, it must be noted, a distinction between the process and results, or between development and use should be made in terms of success (Gable, 1996). The former is related to the working style and role of a consultant; the latter refers to the value and outcomes of the project itself (Nikolova *et al*., 2015).

According to Walsh (2002), three types of consultant-client relationship strategies exist. These can be placed along an outcome-process continuum. The focus of the expert-based strategy is on the outcome, such as the results offered to clients. On the other hand, the service-oriented-partner strategy focuses on the process. Somewhere in between, the empowering-expert strategy aims at achieving the best outcome. It combines process with outcome in such a way that the consultants provide their clients with a highly customized service, specifically suited to the clients' needs.

From a consultant's perspective, dimensions of success may include potential for follow-on work, percentage of billings received, costs incurred, potential as a reference site, impacts on government relations, and training value of the project (Gable, 1996, p.1192). Hence consulting work could be seen as an investment, one that projects a capacity for long-term employment. By extension, project success and good word-of-mouth help build up identity and brand of the consulting company or of the broker. As noted above, identity and brand play a significant mediator role in consultancy, signifying centrality and apex of an organization, professionalism, as well as a perception of being amongst the best (Alvesson, 2006, p.216), and consequently, "members are expected to invest heavily not only their time and effort, but also their thoughts, feelings, and conceptions of themselves". The result is a feeling of exclusiveness and superiority, and such a feeling of social belongingness is often associated with a high degree of attachment, where people feel special rather than superior, working in a highly progressive firm creating superior results.

The idea of belonging to the elite and thus behaving and performing accordingly seems to increase the willingness to work hard and perform well. In the consulting literature, success is often alluded to as the apex of a hierarchical structure, where those at the top acquire their positions through having worked long hours, and the junior consultants tend to "mimic" the behavior of their mentors, so as to live up to the standards set by their superiors (Donnelly, 2009, p.337). Moreover, as knowledge can enhance the reputation of the organization and develop client trust in the firm's brand, staff loyalty is further promoted through specific work orientation, and/or flexible hours. Nonetheless, a characteristic of consultancy firms is then its culture of working long hours, where indeed the majority of the brokers tend to work very hard most of the time (Alvesson, 2006). After all, consultants undertake activities requiring a great deal of time, commitment and extensive interaction (Kitay & Wright, 2004, p.13). In reality, the work time is non-regulated, and frequently exceeds 50 – 60 hours per week, with most working 20 hours more than their prescribed, contracted time (Alvesson, 2006, p.221). Hence it is well noted that to stay ahead of the game, consultants must keep on learning so as to keep their organization marketable (Donnelly, 2009).

Last but not least, Walsh (2002, pp.40-41) reports on consultants being hired because of their "experience" and "reputation" and consequently the associated or perceived value brought to the company. In the United Kingdom, for example, it was reported that the country employs over 10,000 consultants, and the majority of them are degree-educated. More than that, senior members are entitled greater employment privileges as they are deemed to provide the intellectual capital to offer adequate client services (Donnelly, 2009). So the decision to hire is based on the reputation of the consultant's previous affiliation and experience (Jacobson *et al*., 2005, p.307). Rather than wishing to recruit fresh blood, it is more important for established companies to retain the very brightest people; after all, consultancy is a highly people dependent business (Alvesson, 2006).

Issues and Implications for China Tourism Research

In summary, the above review deals with an important and significant topic that has received little attention – knowledge brokering through consultancy – which could hopefully build links between/amongst the nodes of knowledge management, knowledge transfer, and innovation (Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Xiao & Smith, 2007), and potentially result in a more coherent body of literature on evidence-based practice in China tourism. The area of consulting is an important one in business activities, planning and development, and policymaking in (or for) China tourism, and deserves empirical treatments in future research with primary data from the field. While this review could not claim comprehensiveness in the coverage of issues to be encountered, the discussion nonetheless could serve as a starting point, and indeed it represents a contextual/theoretical foray of a series of research grants on knowledge development in tourism.

China tourism is characteristic of both government-led and market-driven industries, and has experienced enormous growth at the nexus of central planning and market demands since the turn of the century (Xiao, 2013, p.1). In such a dynamic context, China tourism has been developed hand-in-hand with cultural and heritage industries, health promotion and wellness industries, hospitality, sports, and recreation and leisure industries. In her study on cultural heritage tourism in China, Dredge (2004) observed a global-local dialectic within which economic, political and social-cultural frameworks are filtered in diverse and complex ways to empower different interests, values and ideologies in the process of tourism planning, destination development, and policy-making. In the hospitality industry, the increasingly competitive market in China has resulted in the struggle of domestic hotels for competitive advantage, and of the international ones for the localization of management expertise or talents (Chan, Ye & Xu, 2016; Wassler, Wang & Hung, 2015). Overall, the changing scenarios of China tourism have posed challenges for its planners and developers, marketers and managers, policy- and decision-makers, as well as its educators, researchers and knowledge brokers to stay innovative and knowledge-based in its research and practices (Xiao, 2013, p.1).

Over the decades, the prominence of tourism as a field of research and practice in China has resulted in a proliferation of its planning, development and marketing consultancies. Nonetheless, research into such knowledge brokering practices and professions has been limited in China tourism and indeed in tourism studies in general. Additionally, in response to the increasingly louder call for community service, universities have either encouraged faculty members, or made it part of the mandate through job descriptions for academics to commit to consultancies or “outside activities”. In the meantime, circumstances such as the pressure of securing grants, the downsizing of public research fund, as well as the expansion of tourism programs at the doctoral level in Chinese research institutions have prompted university-based academics to embrace consultancies as an additional source of funding or income, both for themselves and for their graduate student helpers. Pragmatically, academic consulting in such circumstances can be seen as creating a “benign circle” when Master’s and PhD students can get involved, get paid, and complete their degree theses; likewise consultant reports can be theoretically enhanced for publications as books or monographs; and in some instances or institutions, successful or award-winning consultancy experiences can pave the way towards winning top competitive research grants from National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) or National Social Science Foundation of China (NSSFC).

Presumably, along the continuum of academic vs. professional consultants in China, a sliding of positions or change of roles may occur when a tourism professor spends more and more time in consulting and tends to be more of a broker with a consulting company and less of a university academic. By the same token, a crossover of roles also occurs in this bridge of academic tourism researchers and professional industry consultants through a two-way knowledge traffic. As Feighery (2011, p.1033) observed, while “many former consultants move into the academy, many of those now established disciplinary scholars move into the ‘operational world’ to sell their expertise in the consulting market. Thus, knowledge production emanating from the field of tourism studies, and from the practice of tourism consultancy, often share a common arena as tourism scholars in the academy undertake consultancy projects and experienced consultants are drawn into the academy to impart their ‘industry experience’”.

Nonetheless, to what extent does such a crossover of roles hold true in China tourism research and practice? More needs to be found to shed light on the motivation, career paths and professionalism behind the sliding or crossover of roles along the inquiries of why China tourism academics consult. From the standpoint of promoting knowledge-based practices, and demonstrating the usefulness and testing the actual use of knowledge, the brokerage role(s) of academic and professional consultants in achieving an enhanced state of praxis could be better understood in China tourism policy, planning and development, and industry management practices.

In light of the foregoing review and critique, can academic and professional consultants be typologized in terms of their focus, commitments and career path in China tourism research and practice? Presumably, consultants in China tourism can be further understood by their level of affinity with (or closeness to) the academy, governments, or the industry, which, depending on the origin and position of their clients, could have a bearing on the level of difficulty in bidding and winning a consulting project. In reality, consultants affiliated with a government tourism office through for example an extension unit (or as a think tank) appear to be more competitive or privileged in the client market than those brokers who have no such affiliations. A probe into this scenario could help explain why some government-affiliated tourism consulting firms have never ever experienced difficulties in obtaining major consulting projects. Nonetheless, academic consultants tend to be better received or respected by their clients than pure professional consultants, particularly those maintaining weak associations with governments. Presumably, the latter group faces greater challenges in winning consulting projects, is often perceived as lower in credibility, and is more likely to be even humiliated by their clients.

Similarly, can clients be seen in the same light of typologies in the brokerage scenarios in China tourism policy, planning and development consultancies? Depending on the purpose of a project, power relations, and consultant-client interactions during the process, clients (particularly government departments that commission a consulting project or outsource a counseling service) can appear arrogant or opinionated, with some more dominant or authoritarian than others in terms of imposing ideas or telling a consultant what to do, as in the instance of regional tourism planning as a government performance (Lai *et al*., 2006; Outlook Weekly, 2015). In a sustainable development context, some government clients may not necessarily have a long-term vision and could appear "exploitative" in the planning and use of cultural and natural resources for tourism (Zhang, Xiao, Gursoy & Rao, 2015). What they may be more interested in could be an "immediate effect" after a planning exercise.

Furthermore, what is characteristic of the consultant-client relationships in a China tourism planning and development context? As noted above, issues such as negotiations between clients and consultants with respect to goal fulfillment of a project, what principle(s) to follow (authority vs theory, knowledge and/or ethics), and who (should) persuade whom, amongst others, could be intriguing avenues for future research. By ethics and social/professional responsibilities, as noted by Feighery (2011, p.1032), tourism consultants are often drawn into "a force-field of relations of institutional interests, public policy priorities, investment imperatives, cultural values, and professional standards within which they must negotiate a range of moral implications", which is associated with their practice in terms of sustainability, participatory planning, and/or community involvement.

What other constraints do consultants have when brokering or promoting better practices in China tourism? At an organizational level, consultants are often brought in to diagnose on planning and development, marketing and management, or operational problems in pertinence to service failure (or recovery), new product development, and positioning or branding of a place or destination in tourism. In addition, they are often found traveling to their consulting sites or destinations to engage in regional tourism planning, attraction design, and destination marketing and promotion. Paradoxically, however, due to the nature of their work, these external consultants or contracted "experts" can hardly spend sufficient time in one location or destination in order to gain a truly in-depth understanding of the local environment and the social-cultural implications of tourism and its development (Lai *et al*., 2006).

Another issue often identified in China tourism consultancies is the gap between regional tourism planning and implementation. After many site visits, feasibility studies and market research, a regional tourism development consultancy often results in the formulation of a master plan. In many instances, however, the plan is only as good as a project document. Drawing on case studies in China, Lai and his colleagues (2006) report, implementation gaps often result from flaws of a master plan, inadequate background survey and analysis, inaccurate anticipation, and a lack of practical experience on the part of the planner or consultant. On the other hand, clients' misunderstanding or impractical expectations of the planning exercise, diverging or contrasting views between clients and consultants, pitfalls associated with private investment, as well as imbalances in regional tourism development in China could also contribute to such implementation gaps.

Last but not least, professional development of consultants themselves through experiential learning at the interface of global-local knowledge merits more research (Salazar, 2005; Watson, 1997). Many of the brokering exercises in China tourism planning and development are characteristic of work-place learning or learning by doing, whereas inadequate research has investigated the learning pathways (Ha, 2014). In line with the above, a few queries could be further raised: What have tourism consultants gone through to acquire their expertise in the first place, and then become experts and professionals and enjoyed the reputation or respect as “key members” in their profession (Pinchain, 2015)? Further, as Taminiau and colleagues (2012) have provocatively articulated, are tourism consultancies different by culture? In what ways, and on what dimensions? Cross-cultural research should look into such differences and promote better understanding of the consulting culture(s) so as to avoid misconceptions and tensions. In this respect, it would be indeed insightful to investigate the broad differences – ideological and/or technical – between the East and the West in viewing and doing consultancies in tourism planning and development, the dynamics of assembling international consulting groups to work in less developed countries or regions, and by extension, the value systems, implications and consequences of “developed world experts” doing tourism consulting in “Other” world regions (Wu & Zhang, 2003).

In addition to the foregoing issues and perspectives, a number of challenges – both practical and theoretical – could be identified for future empirical undertakings into this subject area. First, what is the business and political culture within which the consultant and the client are embedded? Arguably, this could influence the array or scope of consultant activities, and, in cross-disciplinary terms, the foray into this realm could be well carried over into the political lobbying literature, as the inquirer at this point is likely to reach the blurring zone of decisions about where knowledge activities and associated costs are located within a (the) tourism organization. Another potential carry-over from such investigations (as noted above) is to the growing body of literature on innovation and knowledge management or transfer in tourism (Cooper, 2006; Hall & Williams, 2008; Thomas, 2012; Xiao & Smith, 2007).

Second, while it would be theoretically useful or informative to explicitly develop a typology of consultants in China tourism, there are substantial variations in size, focus and scale of such operations (e.g., regional tourism planning vs destination marketing and management consultants). Of potential challenge to this line of inquiry is where tourism academics take on the role of consultants in bidding/tendering for research projects. This is of significance for the public/private boundaries of information flows, and of implications for how, why and by whom consultants are used in tourism organizations.

Third, adding to the complications or implications in this agenda are the changing/changed role of universities and their ceaseless calls for "community service", which could be seen as a function of academic entrepreneurialism and capitalism. Under the notion of public interest groups, while many institutions still have strong interest in public research, financial and political pressures may well render much of the career/service requirement of academics into monetary return for their institutions, which in a way is attestable from the establishment of “applied research institutes or development research institutes” (应用研究院/发展研究院) in many top-tier research-intensive universities in China. Additionally, while masters or PhD projects can be undertaken as part of a consultancy, there are then substantial issues such as intellectual property, public access versus confidentiality of consultant reports, capacity to remain critical in the thesis text, as well as the concern of PhDs being an independent piece of research (or not).

Fourth, there are also pitfalls or risks in instances such as destination marketing and place reimaging as well as destination or resort developments, in which China tourism consultants or their firms have often been criticized for providing a one-size-fits-all design, or for planning solutions resulting in what is commonly referred to as the serial monotony of places or the “placelessness” of destinations. Issues as such pose challenges to the potential centralization of knowledge in a small number of “key” consulting firms.

In closing, this essay does not intend to report empirical evidence; instead it attempts to uncover research on consultancy practices by providing insights into the nature of knowledge brokering. Drawing on literature from business and management, information and technology, and health studies or healthcare, the discussion offers a critical perspective on consultancy as knowledge brokering to stimulate future research on this subject in China tourism. While much of the discussions or cited examples are of regional specificities, the phenomenon itself is of a general, global nature, with both premises and promises for future tourism studies in China as well as in other language communities.■■■

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