VFR Tourism and the Tourist Gaze: Overseas Migrant Perceptions of Home

Abstract

VFR travelers have personal connections with their homeland, which influence how they gaze upon its people, cultures and landscapes. This study examines the perceptions of children of immigrants towards visiting their ethnic homeland. The tourist gaze provides a theoretical framework to analyze their experiences when navigating dichotomies between home-and-away and between the self-and-others during their travels. Findings revealed that rather than gazing at the exotic "other," they are seeking out similarities which allow for a greater connectedness with family and heritage. They also explained problems and issues that they encountered, as a consequence of feeling obliged to defend their homeland.

Keywords: VFR tourism, migration, diaspora, tourist gaze

Introduction

This study applies the concept of the "tourist gaze" to investigate perceptions of China as a tourism destination amongst second-generation Chinese-American migrants, and explores the factors that influence these perceptions, both prior to and during travel to their ancestral homelands. In his concept of the "tourist gaze," Urry (1990; 1992) articulates a particular way of looking and seeing that defines touristic ways of engaging a place, grounded in the consumption of vistas and images of a place which provides a reaffirmation of how the place differs from home. This paper interrogates the concept by investigating the nature of the tourist gaze as manifest in a form of tourism where the binary distinctions that are presented through categories such as "home" and "destination," "self" and "other," are less distinct and unequivocal than tourism generally – namely, when travel is undertaken by second-generation migrants to the homeland of their parents.

Return visits by international migrants to their homeland have been labeled in different ways, with terms ranging from "ancestral tourism" (Alexander, Bryce, & Murdy, 2016; Fowler, 2003), "diaspora tourism" (Cohen, 2004; Coles & Timothy, 2004), "genealogy tourism" (Meethan, 2004; Santos & Yan, 2010), to VFR (visiting friends and relatives) tourism (Griffin, 2014; Uriely, 2010). The challenge of labelling this niche market are attributable to the diversity of travel motivations, ranging from sightseeing and visiting relatives back home to tracing one's family roots and embarking on a spiritual quest (Alexander et al., 2016). In the case of second-generation migrants whose parents were born in the home country, the migration history of their family is fairly recent. Thus, it is likely that their visits to the homeland will be more influenced by familial connections, than by

genealogy or pilgrimage. This study discusses visits by second-generation migrants to the homeland from the perspective of VFR travel. Although such travelers will not encounter relatives on every occasion, their trips are motivated by family relationships and by personal connections with the destination. For the purposes of the present research such travelers are treated as a sub-segment of VFR travel, "as a form of travel that enables its participants to feel at 'home' in a foreign place" (Uriely, 2010, p. 855).

Visiting friends and relatives is well established as a major purpose for travel (e.g., Church, 1970; Crompton, 1979; Peattie, 1968). Since the 1990s, the topic has received more attention from tourism researchers as a substantial market and unique form of travel (e.g., Backer, 2012; Backer & King, 2015; Jackson, 1990; O'Leary & Morrison, 1995). According to Lehto, Morrison, and O'Leary (2001), VFR travel research can be categorized into three themes: the magnitude of the VFR market (e.g., Chadwick, 1984; Jackson, 1990; Backer, 2012), marketing and economic contributions (e.g., Backer, 2007; Lee et al., 2005; Seaton & Palmer, 1997), and market heterogeneity (e.g., Hu & Morrison, 2002; Moscardo et al., 2000; Pennington-Gray, 2003; Seaton & Tagg, 1995). Apart from market perspectives, researchers have also explored the involvement and experiences of VFR hosts (e.g., Griffin, 2014; McKercher, 1996; Shani & Uriely, 2012; Young, Corsun, & Baloglu, 2007). Surprisingly, the experiences of VFR travelers themselves have been somewhat neglected, despite a small number of studies on the experience of hosting friends and relatives. A content analysis of the VFR literature over the period 1990 to 2015 by Yousuf and Backer (2015) concluded that most VFR travel research has focused on traveler profiles and characteristics. Only three articles were identified on the traveler experience. One of these (by Shani (2013)) investigated VFR tourist feelings about being both "home" and "away" during the course of their travel experience.

According to Uriely (2010), VFR tourism research has been dominated by marketing approaches. He expressed the urgency of conducting more analysis that adopts a sociological perspective, covering topics such as how VFR travelers experience "home" and/or "away" environments. King and Dwyer (2015) also discussed the relationship between migration and VFR travel. Whilst migration is "a precondition for VFR travel" (p. 55), VFR travel may also provide a prompt for chain migration. A broader perspective on VFR travel which considers the relationship between tourism and other forms of mobility is likely to provide more holistic insights (King & Dwyer, 2015). There is also an opportunity for research which extends consideration of VFR travelers beyond commercial activities and expenditures, and to explores experiential aspects including perceptions, feelings, motivations, and relationships (Yousuf & Backer, 2015). The present investigation contributes to this body of knowledge, by investigating a VFR travel niche that is especially intertwined with psychological issues such as personal identity and a deeper sense of connection with the place being visited than is the case in VFR travel more generally.

The focus of this study is on the perceptions of international migrants when visiting their homeland. Specifically, the researchers explore how the respondents gaze at the people and the home that they left to pursue a different life. How is the "tourist gaze" constructed in this context? And how is the gaze mediated through family related connections with the destination? The study has a specific focus on the experiences of "second generation" migrants who were born in the new country. For this group, the ancestral homeland is a new destination and is not their previous home. The researchers have adopted the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011) as a theoretical framework in order to acquire a better understanding of VFR traveler perceptions as they attempt to negotiate the dichotomies of "home and away" and of "the self and others" during their travels. The prospective insights should shed light on the difference between VFR travelers and other tourists.

Literature Review

Migration and Tourism

Migration and tourism involve human movements across geographical regions, but extending over different time periods (Williams & Hall, 2000b). During previous eras of more hazardous and time-consuming international travel, the prospect that migrants would visit their home country was commonly a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity (Kasinitz et al., 2008, p. 258). However, the improved convenience and affordability of transportation, have provided contemporary migrants with greater opportunities to travel back and forth between two countries. Their relatives from "home" also have more opportunities to visit. The ease and frequency of the various types of homecoming trip and other VFR related trips which are a downstream consequence of migration may be considered as realms of the tourism phenomenon.

Tourism is a transnational activity through which overseas communities can participate in the affairs occurring in their homeland (Coles & Timothy, 2004). It allows migrants to remain connected and to enhance their attachments with ancestral origins. This entails the adoption of certain ways of encountering and "gazing" upon the homeland, which are distinct from those exhibited by other travelers. There is a two-fold relationship between tourism and migration. On one hand, tourism leads to migration, such as labor migration and retirement migration (Williams & Hall, 2000a). On the other hand, migration and diaspora generate five prospective travel modes (Coles, Duval, & Hall, 2005; Coles & Timothy, 2004). First, migrants travel back to their homeland to visit relatives and stay connected to their heritage. Second, those from "home" can come to visit the migrant relatives in their current place of residence. Third, migrants can take trips to destinations beyond the homeland to visit co-members of their extended community. Fourth, transit zones, such as Ellis Island which played a part in migration processes, also function as destinations to which immigrants return. And fifth, diasporic communities establish vacation places where they can encounter

people from similar ethnic backgrounds. The VFR travel category is usually confined to migrants who travel back to their ancestral homeland and relatives back home who visit the new country (Griffin, 2015). However, the third mode, which has been described as "intra-diasporic travel" (Coles, Duval, & Hall, 2005, p. 472) and which involves family members who migrated to various countries may also fall into the VFR travel category.

Migrants travel back to their homeland for many reasons. Apart from business travel by transnational entrepreneurs who conduct business across home and host societies (Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002), migrants visit their country of origin to retain family ties, visit friends and relatives, and reinforce their ethnic and cultural identity (Hughes & Allen, 2010; Nguyen & King, 2004; Stephenson, 2002). Those with longer migration histories may also return to the homeland following several generations in order to search for family roots and ancestry (Alexander et al., 2016; Basu, 2004; McCain & Ray, 2003; Meethan, 2004; Santos & Yan, 2010). For diasporic communities who experienced forced dispersal (i.e., victim diaspora), such as the Jewish and African diasporas, their motive for visiting the diasporic homeland is more spiritual (Cohen, 1997). They long for a "promised land" or imagined motherland, and their "home-coming" trip resembles a quest or pilgrimage, where they make peace with their ancestors' sad history, find their spiritual centre, and experience self-transformation (Cohen, 2004; Holsey, 2004; Ioannides & Ioannides, 2004; Schramm, 2004; Timothy & Teye, 2004).

The relationship between migrants and their homeland is shaped by the original contexts of their exit from home and reception in the host society, such as voluntary versus forced emigration and being welcomed versus alienated in the new country (Haller & Landolt, 2005; Stephenson, 2002). Moreover, family migration history may also influence one's perceptions of and motivations for visiting the homeland. Comparing the migration histories of diaspora tourists, Li and McKercher (2016) found that new migrants tried to retain and re-affirm connections through travel, while root-seeking was an important motivation for multi-generational migrants. Hughes and Allen (2010) studied the tourism profile of the Irish diaspora living in the UK, revealing that first-generation Irish exhibited more frequent visits and attached higher priority to visiting Ireland. For the second and third generations, homeland visits were less frequent and more likely to be regarded as a form of family obligation. Nguyen and King (2004) also examined the travel patterns of first-generation Vietnamese in Australia. They found that traveling back allows Vietnamese migrants to fulfill family obligations. Family and filial piety are important in Vietnamese culture because of the influence of Confucian principles.

Previous studies have suggested that visiting and being with family is an important motive for both recent migrants and for earlier generations. They may also be inspired to travel to the homeland out of a sense of obligation. Such homeland trips may be considered as a part of VFR travel. While there is no universal definition of VFR tourism, it is commonly

defined by either the purpose of travel or by the type of accommodation that is used (Backer, 2010). Some scholars have argued for a broader conceptualization, recognizing that visiting friends and relatives may not be the main purpose for travel, but a single activity (Moscardo et al., 2000). In the VFR-related travel activities of migrants, VFR may not be the sole reason for travel "but commonly involves a combination of motives that . . . results in participation in activities that extend beyond VFR" (King & Dwyer, 2015, p. 55). Though migrants may make multiple visits to their homeland, they may not always have face-to-face interactions with local relatives. Mason (2004) discussed how kinship can be maintained over long distances through "co-presence," which involved not only being co-present "with people," but also "in places" and "at occasions and events." Ziakas and Costa (2010) also examined the case of a celebratory event in a small rural community, which targets current residents as well as former residents as a way of fostering VFR tourism. Former residents were encouraged to attend the event. In such cases they were visiting the community, though not necessarily a specific friend. The present study adopts a broader conceptualization of VFR travel as trips that are motivated by family relationships and by other personal connections with the destination. Even where there are no direct interactions, such visits can enhance kinship and friendship ties between visitors and their friends/relatives within the community.

As a consequence of the kinship ties that connect migrants with their relatives back home, VFR travel can flow in two directions. Both sides are involved in the processes of visiting and of hosting friends and relatives (Griffin, 2015). This suggests that there are at least two modes of tourist gaze in VFR travel –descendants of immigrants visiting their ancestral homeland and travelers visiting their relatives who have emigrated abroad. The VFR tourism phenomenon has a stronger emphasis on host/guest interactions than is prevalent in other types of tourism (Yousuf & Backer, 2015). This may provide a partial explanation for why studies on host involvement and experiences have been more common in the VFR literature than studies on the visitor experience. Since VFR traveler research has tended to be more marketing oriented with a focus on visitor profiles, characteristics, and expenditures, more in-depth analyses are needed on social and experiential aspects of the phenomenon, particularly in the context of migration and transnational relationships. Specifically, this paper investigates the social and experiential aspects of VFR travel for second-generation migrants returning to their ancestral homelands –places that are both foreign and at the same time a sort of home for them. The tourist gaze concept, which rests on a distinction between images of the familiar home and the exotic destination, is an especially cogent starting point for exploring the psychology of such travel.

The Tourist Gaze

A variety of perspectives may be adopted to explore the perceptions of VFR travelers and how they experience destinations. For example, destination imagery involves beliefs and

impressions about a place, and place attachment explains the dimensions of how people form an attachment to a particular setting (Choi, Chan, & Wu, 1999; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004). However, rather than measuring the strength of VFR traveler place attachments or their evaluations of different destination attributes, this study is more concerned with *how* and *why* they look at the destination in a particular way. Urry's (1990) tourist gaze concept has been selected as a theoretical framework that can prospectively provide a reference point to understand migrant VFR traveler destination perceptions. The origins of tourism draw from the rather basic and binary distinction between leisure and work, and between the home and the destination (Urry, 1990). The latter distinction is of particular importance for the purposes of the present investigation. A central element of the travel experience is to "gaze upon or view a set of different scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 1). Researchers have argued that tourists tend to gaze upon things that are *different from what is found at home* in order to free themselves from daily life and to experience novelty.

The tourist gaze may also be understood as a *construction*. Since tourists anticipate what they are likely to see during the pre-trip phase, there is a sense in which places must be "chosen" so that they can be gazed upon. Tourist fantasies about a destination and their anticipations are "constructed and sustained" through a "variety of non-tourist technologies, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, CDs, DVDs and videos, constructing and reinforcing the gaze" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 4). In this sense, VFR travel can be seen as differing from tourism in general, in that the imaginaries and expectations of the VFR traveler, and their decisions to visit particular places, are largely derived from interpersonal relationships with people at the destination, more so than sights and images. In this case, the meanings and connections that a tourist associates with a destination may precede and condition the visual perception of the place, rather than the other way around. Drawing upon the distinction that was proposed by Pernecky (2012), the tourist gaze concept may be viewed as encompassing both a constructivist view (reality is constructed by each individual) (Glasersfeld, 1984) and a constructionist view (reality is constructed through social interactions) (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The two perspectives are not suggesting that objective reality does not exist, as has sometimes been claimed (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009), but rather that we understand and engage with the world though a sense of meanings and significance which cannot be reduced to objective facts and which are matters of personal and cultural perspectives and values. For the purposes of the present investigation, constructionism is of particular note because it has increased its influence within the tourism literature over the past decade (e.g., Ballantyne & Hughes, 2006; Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Dredge, 2010). Constructionist research is helpful because it acknowledges that knowledge is acquired through different "ways of knowing" (Hollinshead, 2006), rather than being value-neutral and purportedly "objective". Pritchard, Morgan & Ateljevic have called upon tourism scholars to apply such approaches in order to

challenge conventional socio-political conventions (Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011).

Urry proposed a distinction between two types of gaze: romantic and collective. The former emphasizes "solitude, privacy, and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze." By contrast the collective gaze requires "conviviality," with the presence of other people to "give atmosphere or a sense of carnival to the place" (Urry, 1992, p. 173). This distinction suggests that some sites are better appreciated in peace and solitude, while others can be enjoyed more and gazed upon in association with a throng of people. There is no single way of gazing at a particular sight/site. When confronted by a single attraction, tourists will gaze differentially on the basis of nationality, social group and/or historical period. According to Urry and Larsen (2011), there is no universal experience "that is true for all tourists at all times. There are many ways of gazing within tourism, and tourists look at 'difference' differently" (p. 3). In attempting to understand and to characterize the tourist gaze, various sociocultural factors and relationships between people and places should be considered.

Urry's tourist gaze concept has drawn from the work of Foucault. In *Madness and Civilization* (1967), Foucault characterized madness as a spectacle to be gazed upon, which resembles the way that tourists gaze at native people in a destination as if they were mad people behind bars (Urry, 1992). In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1976), Foucault discussed the dominating power of the medical gaze, epitomized by doctors' examinations of patients. Likewise, tourists may exercise judgment and a sense of superiority when gazing at locals (Urry, 1992). The tourist gaze reflects the power dynamics between tourists and hosts and the relationship between self and "other." When tourists encounter local people, the gaze "orders and regulates the relationships between the various sensuous experiences while away, identifying what is visually out-of-ordinary, what are relevant differences and what is 'other'" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 14). In anticipating differences, travelers tend to romanticize what they see and become fascinated by the exotic people, customs, and landscapes they encounter (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). The process of "other-ing" may be reflective, enabling tourists to obtain a clearer sense of "self." However, it may simply reinforce their pre-existing beliefs rather than lead to real transformation (Bruner, 1991).

Relative to those who travel for other motives, VFR travelers have more connections with the destination. Where they are more familiar with the destination, they are like to have greater interactions with their hosts. In this sense, how they gaze at the destination may differ from the practices of other tourists. Specifically, it may be asked whether migrants who are travelling back to visit their home communities, are anticipating similarity or difference? Do their transnational ties with the destination determine the nature of their tourist gaze? The researchers view the tourist gaze concept as a suitable foundation for undertaking an in-depth analysis of tourist perceptions in the VFR context. This is particularly the case because the concept focuses on tourist place relations. The interplay between the familiar and the exotic

and between home and abroad can potentially illuminate the unique relations that these tourists construct with the places that they visit.

Methods

This study examines the perceptions of second-generation Chinese migrants to the USA towards visiting their parents' country of origin (or "homeland") and explores the deeper meanings that underpin such perceptions. Following Pernecky's call to apply different "ways of looking" through a mobilization of constructionist approaches to tourism studies, the present study examines the perspectives of international migrants: what they see in China and how they make sense of their experience through their heritage and family connections. Based on the ontological view that reality has a multiplicity of manifestations, it is suggested that the way in which people gaze at China as a destination and/or homeland is experientially based, historically situated, and context specific (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is believed that migrant destination perceptions are shaped by a combination of personal and community backgrounds and identities. The research has progressed according to the epistemological perspective that knowledge, (or what is learned through research), is created. It is contended that research findings are co-created through reflexive dialogue and through interactions between researchers and interviewees, leading to an intersubjective understanding of tourist experiences (Hollinshead, 2006; Schwandt, 1994). The researchers are all first-generation migrants. The principal investigator is ethnically Chinese and has lived in the USA for more than 9 years. The co-investigators have also studied and worked abroad for more than 10 years. The researchers' personal experience as migrants and VFR travelers and their understanding of tourism and migration theories allowed them to make meaningful interpretations of the tourist gaze and of VFR experiences.

The researchers have adopted a qualitative research approach in order to acquire greater depth of meaning. A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researchers with a view to understanding how international migrants gaze upon the destination when visiting their homeland. According to Yousuf and Backer's (2015) analysis of the VFR literature, most VFR studies have deployed quantitative methods. However, there has been a move towards using more qualitative approaches over the past decade. Such approaches may provide helpful insights into the social aspects of VFR travel, such as experiences, perceptions, and relationships. The underlying meanings behind VFR travelers thoughts, feelings, and attitude cannot be understood without considering the sociocultural context and the transnational ties between migrants and the homeland. There is a VFR component to the lived experience of such migrants, even though their purpose of travel may not always be to visit specific people, but rather to visit their ancestral homeland. As suggested by Griffin (2014), this VFR conceptualization offers "a more holistic view to include any tourism-related experience that involves a prior personal relationship, whether as

motivation, accommodation, a short visit during a trip, or any combination of these" (p. 491).

Sampling and Data Collection

This study focuses on the perceptions of second-generation migrants, who were born in the new country. It does not consider first-generation migrants who migrated from their homelands to the new country. In the case of first-generation migrants, their memories and prior experiences are likely to influence their perceptions of the homeland as a destination. For this reason, they were considered to be less suitable as a target population for the current study. By contrast, the second generation (as well as third and later generations), see and experience a new destination when they visit their ancestral homeland. This suggests that undertaking an analysis of second generation perceptions would provide a better understanding of the construction of the tourist gaze in VFR tourism prior to travel and its distinction from the influences of familial and heritage ties during the course of the trip.

The target population for this study consisted of second-generation Chinese-Americans who have experienced traveling back to China. Chinese-Americans were considered to merit selection because they were the earliest and remain the largest ethnic group within the Asian-American population (Marger, 2012). The context of substantial cultural distance and intense economic and ideological competition between China and the USA provides another substantive lens to explore trans migrant identities between the world's established and emerging superpowers. A purposive sampling approach was used in order to engage with this target population. Prospective participants were initially recruited through the medium of several Chinese-American organizations in southern California. Specifically, the officers of these associations were the first points of contact, as they were likely to be more engaged with their heritage, and might be involved in broader Chinese-American networks. Subsequent participants were contacted through the deployment of snowball sampling amongst existing participants. The latter group of respondents were not necessarily members of Chinese-American organizations. A total of 26 face-to-face interviews were conducted in English over the period June to August, 2011. The interviews ranged in duration from approximately 30 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes.

An interview guide was developed to capture the different characteristics and dimensions of the tourist gaze in the VFR travel context. These included similarities and differences, gazing and othering, pre-trip anticipation, and construction of the gaze. The main interview questions included the following:

- What did you like and dislike about your trips to China? Why?
- Was China similar or different from what you expected? In what ways?
- Which parts of the trip exceeded your expectations?
- Which parts of the trip fell short of your expectations?
- Do you still have relatives living in China?

- When you visited them, did they show you around in China?

- Did you see the house where your parents grew up?
    - Did your parents tell you stories about their past or childhood in China?
- What was the origin of your expectations or knowledge about China?
- What did you learn about China from your parents/friends/school/the media?

As well as participating in interviews, participants were also asked to complete a short, pre-interview questionnaire. This elicited demographic information and the characteristics of their trips to China, highlighting information about: their purpose of travel, number of trips, age at the time of their first visit, length of stay and size of travel group for their most recent trip, and whether they still have relatives who reside in China.

Data Analysis

Clearance was received from the University ethics committee following a review of the recruitment procedures for participants, interview protocols, and security measures to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All interviews were audio recorded and consent was sought and subsequently received from the participants. Transcripts were made of the recordings, along with interviewer notes and observations, with a view to ensuring the accuracy of the transcribed data. To ensure anonymity, participant names were not used when reporting study findings.

The transcripts were examined using a systematic classification and identification of themes and patterns in order to analyze the qualitative data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding process involved three steps, namely: descriptive coding, topic coding, and analytical coding (Richards, 2005). First, descriptive codes were generated to identify and store the information and attributes of the experiences being analyzed. Second, each meaning unit was labeled and passages were allocated under different topics, reducing extensive textual data into a range of topics. Third, analytical coding was used to group topics and concepts into various categories. Conceptual categories were integrated into themes by interpreting and establishing the relationships between core concepts. An iterative approach was adopted towards the coding process (Richards & Morse, 2007). As new coding categories emerged, the original transcripts were reexamined to allow for reflection about prospective new categories. The qualitative findings were considered in relation to relevant theories and literature in order to obtain a meaningful interpretation of the data (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Findings

The study participants consisted of US born second-generation Chinese immigrants. With one exception, all participants were residents of the state of California. One was a New York resident who was visiting California at the time of data collection. Table 1 presents the

participant demographic information and some characteristics of their experience of traveling to the homeland.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

No.	Gender	Age	Age of First Visit	Relatives in China?	Number of trips to China
1	F	20	1	Yes	4
2	F	20	15	Yes	3
3	M	21	11	No	3
4	F	22	3	Yes	7
5	F	22	20	Yes	1
6	M	21	8	Yes	10
7	F	28	1	Yes	4
8	F	20	17	No	2
9	M	21	10	Yes	5
10	M	21	14	No	2
11	F	21	8	Yes	5
12	M	19	18	Yes	1
13	F	22	20	No	1
14	M	20	1	Yes	8
15	F	19	10	Yes	7
16	F	26	1	Yes	10
17	M	20	1	Yes	3
18	M	23	12	Yes	3
19	F	20	2	Yes	2
20	M	22	10	Yes	2
21	M	23	6	Yes	2
22	F	22	19	No	2
23	F	21	1	Yes	3
24	F	25	19	Yes	1
25	M	22	5	Yes	1
26	M	26	2	Yes	4

The travel purpose of the respondents was determined through an open-ended question: “What was your main purpose for visiting China?” Some participants provided more than one answer. Out of 26 participants, 13 reported *visiting family* or *visiting relatives* as one of their main purposes, 15 wrote either *touring* or *sightseeing* as part of their travel purpose, and 9 participants included *learning Chinese* as one of their main purposes. All responses to this question could be categorized under these three types. As 21 out of 26 participants had relatives currently living in China, it was unsurprising that visiting family and relatives was a main purpose for travel. In the case of participants who had no relatives residing in China, their trips to China were relatively less frequent and their age at the time of

first visit was relatively older, when compared to those who had relatives in China at the time of data collection.

As most participants had travelled to China on several occasions, it was impractical for the interviewer to cover all of their prior trips. For this reason, some questions in the pre-interview questionnaire asked about their most recent trip, e.g., length of stay and travel group size. Using the short questionnaire as a point of reference, the interviews began by considering he respondents' most recent trip, though was not constrained to this experience. Participants were also asked to recall and share other memorable experiences. The most widely visited Chinese destinations were Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, along with the respondents' parental hometowns. In view of China's large dimensions and regional diversity, it was not surprising that the participants expressed a diversity of perceptions about different destinations. To elicit information about both the wider context and destination specific insights, the interviewer asked about overall impressions of China, including both positives and negatives. During the second stage, participants were asked to provide more detail about specific locations and experiences.

Positive and Negative Perceptions

Firstly, it was found that there was a general consensus about the destination attributes of China that were most liked and disliked by respondents. The top five (most frequently mentioned) "likes" by participants were: delicious food, cheap prices, shopping in the local markets, convenient public transportation, and natural scenery. The top five things that they did not like about China were: hot and humid weather, sanitation issues, population density, crazy driving/traffic, and people trying to trick them out of their money.

While participants generally agreed about their likes and dislikes, they expressed a variety of preferences for different places. Some participants liked Beijing with its rich history: "*It had a lot more cultural and natural scenery and attractions. Shanghai was too much of a metropolitan area. I associated a lot more with Beijing, because it was China, more cultural and traditional*" (by Participant 18), while others preferred Shanghai because of its city life and cultural diversity: "*You can see some western influence on the eastern, all mashed together. Seeing Shanghai, the sceneries, I loved seeing everything there. The people were friendly. It was like tourists, local people, everyone together. All the different people there, centered in this one city*" (by Participant 12).

Besides Beijing and Shanghai, some participants enjoyed going back to their family's hometown. Participant 1 explained why she liked Shanghai more than Beijing, but then added: "*What I really enjoyed was probably going back to Guangzhou, because that's where my family's from, and getting to see relatives, shopping, and being able to speak the language, I think that really helps*." Participant 17 enjoyed visiting the local area where his family originated and surprising everyone with his good command of Chinese: "*They can tell*

that you're American, but once you start speaking to them in Chinese, good Chinese, they would be like: wait, what? Especially when I go back to the local area where my parents and grandparents lived, and you speak their dialect, they are happy. That's what I liked the most."

Participant preferences for historic districts, metropolitan areas, or their parental hometowns may relate to their attitudes about China's development, as well as to their habitual living environment and family and educational upbringing. On one hand, they were proud of China's progress as the second largest global power. According to Participant 21: "*I feel like they want to prove to the world that they are a superpower. They are already the second largest economy in the world, so I think a lot of countries are really looking to China as the future*." Being Chinese-Americans, the participants had some knowledge of Chinese history, which allowed them to appreciate the country's modernization. As Participant 2 described:

> *I get to see how much China has changed over the years, and the strides that it has taken since being overrun by the Japanese, to Mao's period, to Deng's period, to now. They go through such drastic changes in like a decade. I feel like this really shows the endurance and strength of the Chinese people*.

On the other hand, perhaps because of the same understanding of Chinese history, participants criticized the lack of preservation measures. Participant 23 was upset to see villages being destroyed to make room for Olympics facilities, and argued that "*even though they are modernizing as a global economic power, I feel like they shouldn't just leave behind the traditions and cultures*." Another shocking example was the Houhai district in Beijing, where historic homes were turned into a bar street: "*Every single home, they turned it into a place where you can smoke bongs. A smoking place, I was really surprised to see that. I didn't expect to see that in those traditional homes, but they transformed it. They just keep the outside and redo the inside, so it's like a bar place*" (by Participant 1). Participants expressed ambivalent feelings towards China's modernization process. While most applauded China's rapid development, they also expressed concern about the loss of traditions and heritage.

In addition to China's overall history and development as a nation, participants' Chinese ancestry inspired them to learn more about their family's past in China. Hence, some participants preferred to visit their parental hometown, even in cases where this was a small local village. According to Participant 19:

> *I feel like not a lot of people would say this, but I really enjoy going back to the village, like my mom's village or my grandpa's village, and really understanding how, or what it took for them to survive, the way they lived when they were a child. Her immediate family already moved here, but my great-grandmother still lives there, in the village, so it was nice to visit.*

Compared to other tourists, participants have shown greater interest in visiting local rural areas, in addition to touring famous destinations such as Beijing and Shanghai.

VFR Interactions

Besides their overall impressions of China, participants engaged in some positive and negative interactions with their host friends and family. First, local friends and relatives sometimes took them around and introduced them to unique activities that might be unavailable to other tourists. Participant 21 compared his experiences with group tours versus visiting friends and relatives:

> *In 2004 I went with a tour group, and in 2000 I was with relatives. They would take me to local restaurants and local attractions. So I like being with local people. As a tourist, I want to do what the locals do. Other people may not like that, but I do. We went to different places. I just like to go and talk to the people myself.*

Other participants also shared some of their unique experiences with local relatives, such as fishing: "*When we went with my uncle, he would take me fishing, or we would go sightseeing in the countryside, or we went to a couple theme parks one time. I was a little kid when we went*" (Participant 21), riding motorcycles: "*It would be just visiting family. I really like their motorcycles. People would take me on it, and I always find it very fun. Last time I went, my dad let me drive it, and I went around to see their temples, and local life, it was really very interesting*" (Participant 4), and tea house music performances: "*One time I was with my friend. She took me to a tea house, where they just played a Chinese instrument. And she said that they meet there like every Wednesday, and it's free, and you just go there and get tea. So that was really cool*" (Participant 8).

In addition to unique activities, participants had more time to get to know their relatives and participate in family traditions. Participant 4 went to local markets with her grandmother, and "*My grandma would go and get her daily groceries in the morning. I would go with her there to get that, and then I would watch her cook. I always really like to watch her cook food, 'cuz she was really good at that*." Participant 10 enjoyed eating the noodles his mom ate before: "*I always tell my mom to take me to eat the food that she ate as a kid. But when she was a kid, they ate real simple stuff, like her mom owned a noodle shop, so they would just eat the noodles from the shop*." Moreover, paying respect to one's ancestors is very important in Chinese culture. As second-generation Chinese, participants' visits to their parental hometown allowed them to take part in this important family tradition. Participant 11 described the different practices in her family:

> *For the grandma on my dad's side, she has shrines in her home, so whenever we go visit, we do that at her home. She would make all this food, and we would prepare everything, set everything out at home. With my other grandma we would go to the local temple to do that, but less often. Usually my grandparents like to do it when we are at home, because the whole family is together, so they feel like it's better to do it.*

These family traditions formed an important part of participant cultural experiences in China.

In most cases, participants enjoyed spending time with local relatives, which gave them access to unique activities and experience family traditions. However, at times their interactions with local relatives could also be awkward or disappointing. Participant 2 visited the house of a distant relative, but felt more like outsiders rather than family:

> *In Hong Kong, my mom's cousin was showing us around, and took us to her home, and it was just really awkward. I don't think there's any relative connection there. I didn't even know my mom had a cousin. For my mom, I feel like it's because they haven't talked to each other for so long, there's this barrier between them. And also the place, it's like we're foreigners and they live there. We stayed with them just a few days, and then we went off on our own*.

Moreover, the many dialects in China sometimes made it difficult for participants to communicate with local relatives. Participant 21 felt bad when his relatives spoke in local dialects: "*With my uncle's wife's family, they only speak Hokkien, and they would like make jokes about us, 'cuz they know we didn't understand, then I would feel kind of alienated. They sort of set that up*." If it were with other local residents, participants might have expected to encounter some language barriers. However, with family, it felt more personal and deliberate: "*with the people I knew, and they specifically speak in a language that I don't understand, because they don't want me to hear about it*" (Participant 21). Family events such as weddings and funerals are important occasions for immigrants to return to their homeland. The use of local dialects could arise from members of the parents' generation discussing family issues which were not intended for the ears of children. However, there was a feeling of exclusion on the part of the second generation. As one of the main purposes of VFR travel is to see and be with family, being unable to communicate reduced the quality of their experience. As Participant 24 described:

> *Up until recently, mostly my mom did all the talking, 'cuz I couldn't really understand anything. So I would sort of sit at the table with the family, and be quiet, didn't really say anything. They used to speak Mandarin to each other, so I couldn't even talk to them if I really wanted to. Until, like I said, recently*.

Participant 24 emphasized "recently," because after her Mandarin improved, she was able to communicate better with her relatives. It is possible that family interactions, combined with the language diversity in China, created some negative impressions for second-generation VFR travelers. However, underneath such unpleasant interactions is the deeper desire to connect with their family.

Justifying Negative Experiences

As the above examples have illustrated, participant perceptions about China were not uniformly positive. Some perceptions, such as crowding and sanitation, might be more based on personal travel experiences, while others might be more influenced by western discourse

on China, such as communism and human rights issues. However, because of their familial connections with China, there was a sense of obligation amongst the respondents to like China. They found different ways of explaining and justifying what they witnessed. For example, after describing many negative aspects of China, such as the government, communism, pollution, and human rights issues, Participant 20 concluded: "*But at the same time they have positive things, like they work hard. I mean, I've been there, my parents are from there. My roots are from there. I can't say I don't like it*."

Among the top things that participants disliked about China (i.e., weather, sanitation, population, traffic, and people trying to trick their money), they found different justifications or alternative perspectives. For example, Participant 11 was told by her mother that the streets and the restaurants in China were dirty. However, her own perspective was that: "*I still think it's kind of dirty. But I also have to think from the point of view that they are changing really fast. For the dirty, there're so many people, so it's kind of hard to keep everything clean*." Participant 13 was also warned by her friends that "*Beijing is dirty*," but her explanation is that "*mostly they were negative about Beijing, because they're comparing it to other cities they saw in China."*

Population density was another irritant for participants, with expressions of shock about seeing so many people everywhere. As was suggested by Participant 20, however, there was a silver lining as follows:

> *It felt really safe there, because there're a lot of people there to watch you, like the people on the streets. In America, walking alone at night can be dangerous, like someone may rob you. But in China, because you're surrounded by people, so you are always being watched. People watching other people, so that was nice.*

Participant 18 also described a scenario when he boarded a crowded bus, with many people pushing and squeezing. However, he tried to be more understanding and expressed the following: "*If you can understand where they are coming from, there're a lot of people! Then you're willing to look past your own entitlement to space. It's a spatial issue*."

As for traffic, several participants noticed the "crazy driving" in China, especially when taking taxis. Participant 5 provided an interesting comparison between the drivers in China and America: "*Here in LA, people are still aggressive, but I feel like people verbalize it a lot more. They give people the middle finger, they curse them. But in China, it's like it's expected for people to be aggressive, so I didn't hear as often, like the driver cursing another driver*." She observed that taxi drivers in China are more aggressive, but that there was less swearing when people drive. A final and frequently mentioned complaint was that the local vendors set higher prices for foreign tourists. Some participants observed that this was a western stigma about China, and argued that: "*they weren't always trying to get money*" or "*not everyone is out to get your money*." Participant 10 even said he was aware of the bargaining practices beforehand, and: "*I just felt people were a lot more direct in what they*

wanted from me at least."

Participants found different ways to re-interpret the problems that they encountered. Though not based on their personal experience, a few participants also discussed some of the social issues in China. According to Participant 18: "*I feel like the country is overlooking a lot of very important issues along the way, like human rights, the environment, and health care*." However, he still felt optimistic about the future of China, because: "*The good thing is that because they are a one party state, if they want to change something, they could change it very quickly. Whereas in America, so many rules and laws and steps. It takes forever to change anything*." As Communist states are often criticized for the lack of democracy, it is interesting that participants were able to provide an alternative perspective. They often reminded themselves about not seeing things from an American perspective, and about the merit of gazing upon China more positively. These findings could also have wider relevance for other dispersed diasporic populations around the world.

Construction of the Tourist Gaze

Having gathered an understanding of participant perceptions about China, it was necessary to identify the source of their knowledge, especially in the case of what they knew *prior to* visiting. According to Urry's tourist gaze notion, any pre-trip anticipation by the tourists guides their choice of gaze during the trip. Such anticipations are "constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 4). They are important because they affect the way that travelers will perceive a place, establishing expectations that will either be met, exceeded or contradicted by the experience of the actual visit. Understanding these anticipations can also help in determining what aspects of traveler impressions about a place were already in place prior to travelling, which were acquired during the visit, and which have changed as a result of their visit.

For many tourists, the mass media may provide the major source from which they construct their "gaze." Migrants also watch or listen to ethnic media as a means of staying connected with their homeland (Kasinitz et al., 2002). However, the particular case of second-generation overseas Chinese who are travelling for VFR purposes, as examined in this study, has shown the particularly influential role of family and friends in shaping the gaze. When asked to identify their knowledge source about China, it was surprising that only one participant referred to the media: "*For the whole last year, I really kept up with the news, and it's always China this, China that, exchange rate, blah blah blah. I mean, I read it from the news, but I want to see from my own point of view, to see if what everyone says is right*" (by Participant 11). Only a single pop culture reference arose among the descriptions that respondents provided about their travel experiences. Participant 4 said she went to the Bird, Flower, and Bee market in Beijing, where she saw people selling "*lucky crickets*," like the

one from the movie "Mulan." The minimal influence of media in shaping perceptions about China was striking. One possible reason is that while some participants reported using ethnic entertainment and news media, their association with ethnic media was "Asian," in context rather than China specific. When asked about ethnic media, participants provided examples from Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, rather than China. The emerging popularity of various Asian pop cultures may provide one explanation for why second-generation Chinese are not very familiar with and influenced by Chinese media in their pre-trip anticipations about China.

On the other hand, participants' perceptions were overwhelmingly influenced by parents, education, and peers in school. Participant 9 described his experience of visiting Tiananmen Square and seeing the picture of Mao: "*That's something that you would see a lot in textbooks. But going there in person, and seeing that, 'wow! the picture of Mao is still there,' it's a good experience*." Many participants talked about how they learned about China from classes in history, sociology, and Chinese language: "*I had some impressions from the stories I've been told, or the history I learned in my history classes about China*" (by Participant 12). Participant 9 also said he learned about China "*Definitely from my peers. I spend a lot more time with them. Being involved in ACA [Association of Chinese Americans], I've learned almost everything I know about China. I also took a Chinese class, Chinese language class. I learned a lot of culture from that class too*." Moreover, what participants learned about China from school was mostly positive, which increased their feeling of attachment to China. According to Participant 2, "*I took a sociology class on China, and from what we talked about in class, I learned to appreciate Chinese culture even more. I feel connected*."

On the other hand, the messages about China received by respondents from their parents were predominantly negative. For instance, participant 13's parents described China as dangerous and warned her prior to her trip that she should "*make sure you have all your belongings*" while traveling there. In general, first-generation migrant parents are their children's primary source of knowledge about the homeland and may shape emergent "organic images" of the destination (Gunn, 1989). However, the parents' feelings depend on the context of their original departure. In some cases, the parents' unpleasant memories or explanations of why they left China provided the children with a negative image of China prior to travel. Participant 11's parents were originally from Hong Kong. She visited Hong Kong a few times and also went to Beijing on a travel study trip. Her impression of China, specifically Mainland China, was influenced by her Hong Kong-based parents: "*Before I studied abroad, my conceptions of China are just what my parents gave me. And my mom always told me that it's a bad place to grow up in, so that's what I thought, like a lot of crimes, and kind of dirty, really dirty*." Participant 8 heard similar things from her parents: "*Before, my parents were saying that China is still being developed, that kind of thing. I heard a lot of things about China, like reasons why my parents' family left, so I already had*

this stigma." Due to these negative expectations instilled before their trip, during their travel in China most participants perceived the country as better than they had been led to expect. According to Participant 5, "*I never knew China was so beautiful! Because I was told that all parts of China are polluted, and that I won't enjoy it*."

The Self and the Other in the Tourist Gaze

When traveling, tourists seek out the extraordinary as well as gazing at the anticipated. According to Urry and Larsen (2011), potential objects of the tourist gaze "must be different in some way or other. They must be out of the ordinary" (p. 15). As tourism originates from the dichotomy between home and away, tourists tend to gaze at things that differ from their home environment. Being born and raised in America, participants gaze at the extraordinary and take particular note of cultural differences between China and the USA. For example, Participant 9 was surprised at the number of people riding bikes in China: "*when I got there, I didn't expect, there are a lot of people riding bikes. I didn't expect that, because growing up here, everyone is driving, and there's not a lot of people riding bikes*." Participant 20 traveled with his parents, who would: "*always point out the different things, like a haircut is a lot cheaper there too, and the food. They would just kind of point out the things that are different there than here*." In extreme cases, cultural differences may even be perceived as "madness." Building upon Foucault's (1967) notion of madness as a spectacle, Urry (1992) argued that the native people are often gazed upon like mad people behind bars, which is not unlike Participant 5's perception of the "crazy driving" in China: "*I noticed like how they drive in China is also very different. They are crazy, man. In China, they are crazy. It's different. Like in America, the people who drive in LA is also crazy, but it's different*."

As is the case with other tourists, VFR travelers gaze upon the cultural differences between home and the destination. However, their personal ties with the destination also prompt them to seek *similarities* when visiting their homeland. Participant 21 was warned about the exotic food in China, but he found it to be quite normal and comfortable:

> *When we went to China, everyone was like: 'oh you're gonna get sick, you're not gonna like the food,' that kind of stuff. But I was like: 'this is what I grow up eating.' So I felt more normal there. In Beijing, I felt really comfortable, 'cuz like all the buns, dumplings, that kind of stuff, I eat all the time*.

Participant 8 also described how her mother became "*all excited about her childhood*" when they traveled together in China. When they saw a river, her mom said: *"oh yeah, we used to fish in the river*." When they saw people riding bikes, her mom said: *"oh my uncle used to ride one of those, those moto, and I sat on the back*." When they saw a guy selling snacks, she said: "*yeah there was a snack man on our street, and they give us money and we go buy things*." In another instance: "*Even there was one stop when we went to someone's house, that was really different, 'cuz I know that, my mom would say that it was kind of like their*

house, so there was kind of a connection, but I also know that it's different." Participant 8 was aware that the house they visited was different from her mom's old house. But for her mother, it seemed like no matter where they went, her mother was able to compare what they saw and her own memory. This throws an interesting light on the notion of the tourist gaze seeking out the strange and the exotic – the distinctions between the home and the destination. The mother in this example serves as an interpreter or mediator between the young traveler and the place. The mother was looking for similarities; the child was aware of the differences, yet her mother's words also made her feel more connected to the places they visited.

Traveling is sometimes perceived as a path to self-discovery (Bruner, 1991). Through encountering and gazing at the exotic "other," tourists reflect upon themselves and on their identities (Galani-Moutafi, 2000). However, when VFR travelers visit their homeland, they do not perceive the local people to be exotic "others," but rather as their family, or even as their "self." When participants witnessed the difficult or stressful life of the local Chinese, not only could they relate, but they became aware that this could have been their life. After talking to his cousins in China, Participant 20 realized that: "*I could easily have been born there. . . my life could have been totally different*." After seeing some local elementary school kids, Participant 18 felt that he was "*very lucky*," because: "*if I were to grow up in that, I probably wouldn't have as many opportunities as I do here in America*." Participant 12 said his parents would "*talk about like how we have family there, like how in America you should be grateful for what you have, 'cuz back there it's not as great, how our lifestyle here it's more of a privilege, versus a right*." Participant 23 also said that her mother: "*always considered how it would be different if she stayed there instead of coming to America*." Compared to other tourists, VFR travelers can relate to the locals, rather than distancing and "othering" them. However, "othering" is not completely eliminated, but perhaps becomes more nuanced, as the traveler learns of internal distinctions, social strata and groups within the local society of the destination and may come to identify with one sub-group through association with the relatives or acquaintances who they are visiting, thus "othering" different social groups in that society.

Discussion

This study has examined the perceptions of second-generation migrant VFR travelers when visiting their country of origin. In terms of positive and negative perceptions, basic participant impressions of China were similar to those of other international tourists, giving evidence for some degree of coherence in terms of the broad characteristics of pre-trip images of China, regardless of whether or not travelers have family connections with that country. Gibson, Qi, and Zhang's (2008) study of American college students identified a combination of positive and negative images of China. Positive aspects included: scenery, attractions, exotic food, and friendly people, and negative aspects include: crowded, not very clean, and

communication issues. Shani et al. (2010) also examined the image of China as perceived by international employees in the USA. They identified positive attributes, such as exotic atmosphere, cultural and natural attractions, and shopping, as well as negative attributes, such as big and heavily populated, unclean environment, unpleasant weather, and unsafe. Another study by Xiao and Mair (2006) analyzed the image of China portrayed by travel articles in major English newspaper. A paradox of positive and negative dimensions was found, with positive categories such as culture & history, food & lifestyle, attractions & tourist cities, and rural-urban contrast, and negative categories such as politics, international relations, safety, environment & health, transportation, and economy/business. These positive and negative impressions illustrate both the preferences of international visitors and China's strengths and weaknesses as a destination.

Compared with previous studies, second-generation migrant VFR travelers resembled other tourists in terms of what they liked and disliked about China. In practice their personal ties to the destination may have made them feel a sense of obligation to visit China, to see relatives and attend family events. This is consistent with Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen's (2007) argument that tourism should not be viewed as a break from daily life. Rather, people travel to fulfill their social obligations, with VFR tourism as a notable example. As Larsen et al. (2007) noted, people need "proximity to significant others" and travel to be physically co-present with important people in their lives (p. 246). For VFR travelers, friends and relatives are the primary draw. They may not find it necessary to visit flagship attractions. Instead, the small village, the noodle shop around the corner, and watching their grandmother cook could be the main "attraction." VFR travel demonstrates how tourism intersects with everyday life, and how everyday spaces could become sites of tourist consumption (Larsen, 2008).

This sense of obligation may extend beyond visiting and being with family. Participants also felt obligated to defend China and see beyond western stigmas about China. Xiao and Mair (2006) found that some western travel writers' negative portrayals of China were derived from a binary perception between "democracy/human rights versus communism/dictatorship," "the modern versus the ancient," and "safety/stability versus threat/instability" (p. 11). As second-generation Chinese-Americans, participants recognized Chinese culture formed part of their heritage. Their bi-cultural identity allowed them to see beyond binary opposites in their perception of China. They felt proud of China's development, yet concerned about a loss of traditions. Although they were critical of China's problems, they tried reminding themselves to avoid judging from the "American" perspective and be more understanding of the social conditions prevalent in China. Moreover, even with their personal negative experiences, they were able to explain the reasons and re-interpret the circumstances. Tourist experience and satisfaction are important because they influence tourists' behavioral intentions (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2010; Hui, Wan, & Ho, 2007; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006). The ways that migrant VFR travelers use to justify their negative experiences

supports Pearce's (2012) argument that repeat travel can be "more about travellers' personal history with places . . . rather than immediate satisfaction experiences," especially in the context of visiting home and familiar places (p. 1028).

Another reason why participants may have avoided being critical of the destination is because of their preconceptions prior to travel. First-generation migrant parents are their children's primary source of information about the homeland. International migrants' feelings towards their country of origin may vary, depending on the original context of their exit (e.g., voluntary/involuntary, legal/illegal, economic/political) (Messina & Lahav, 2006). Parental stories about home and explanations about why they left would in turn influence their children's perception of the homeland. Similar to Norton's (1996) circuit of culture model in tourism communications, migrant parents and school education shaped the anticipations of the second generation to China. Through traveling, the second-generation could authenticate and validate the tales of their parents, as well as the western discourse of China they learned from school, and develop their own experience-based interpretations of China. The circuit of culture for migrant VFR travelers also differ from Norton's (1996) model, in that their anticipations are less dependent on tour operators and tourism marketing and more from family and VFR connections. While most tourism promotional materials tend to celebrate the destination, the image of China portrayed by migrant parents was somewhat negative. Perhaps due to hearing such negative descriptions, participants went to China with lower expectations but found that the actuality was better than anticipated. It will be interesting to see how their reflection of the trip and re-interpretation of China may be progressively transferred to their children—third-generation overseas Chinese.

International tourists generally expect to experience differences when they travel. They choose to gaze at things that differ from their home environment. Previous studies have identified "exotic food" and "exotic atmosphere" as important destination attributes of China from the perspective of international tourists (Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008; Shani et al., 2010). Xiao and Mair (2006) also found that in western travel writing, relics, ruins and heritage sites in China were the primary focus of the tourist gaze, and associated with terms such as "the mysterious" and "the exotic." For migrant VFR travelers, however, visiting their homeland is in a sense a trip that occurs between two "homes" (Uriely, 2010), even if it is not a place where they have ever lived themselves. Thus, the particular group of travelers investigated in this study tended to view China with a hybrid perspective, seeking and finding both the exotic and the familiar.

Comparing first and second generation VFR travelers, first-generation parents were more nostalgic, looking for similarities and things to remind them of their childhood. The second generation, however, exemplified some evidence of the traditional tourist gaze. While they did not necessarily view China as "exotic," they noticed some of the cultural differences between China and America, and even the occasional "madness" in the behavior of the local

Chinese (Urry, 1992). On the other hand, the second generation was also capable of seeing similarities in China, through the food, stories from their parents, and spending time with their relatives. Shani (2013) argued that VFR travel brings a sense of "everydayness" to the tourism experience, as VFR travelers feel a sense of familiarity when staying with relatives. However, in some cases where participants were unable to visit their hometown or stay with their relatives, they still managed to establish a sense of the familiar, as they expected to experience and to observe similarities. Rather than gazing at local Chinese people as the exotic "other," participants were imagining what it would be like to be born and raised in China. As they realized they were but one decision away from being Chinese, they were able to relate themselves to the locals, and perceive the local way of life as "the road not taken."

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

VFR travel is arguably the world's largest tourism segment (Backer & Morrison, 2015). Besides its market potential and economic contribution to destinations, VFR tourism involves unique guest-host interactions and a special relationship between tourists and destinations. This study has contributed to the VFR tourism literature in three ways. First, it has focused on the experiential dimension of VFR travel, and has provided an in-depth analysis of the perceptions of VFR travelers and how their gaze is shaped by personal ties connecting them with the destination. Second, the tourist gaze has provided a theoretical framework to examine visitor perceptions, thereby providing a better understanding of the dynamics between people and place and highlighting the differences between VFR and other forms of tourism. Third, VFR tourism is considered in the context of migration and global networks, which challenges the dichotomy between home and away, self and other, and tourism and everyday life. In this context the study has contributed to discussions about how the tourism concept has been transformed and should be "de-exoticized" (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007).

This study has examined the perceptions of second-generation Chinese-Americans when they visit their ancestral homeland. Its focus on a specific population means that the findings cannot be generalized to other migrant nationalities, generations, and homeland destinations. First-generation migrant perceptions of their homeland can be expected to differ from those of their children, being perhaps more nostalgic and also potentially more critical, depending on the circumstances of their emigration. These insights into the particularities of the descendants of Chinese emigrants living abroad, and their perceptions of China as a prospective travel destination, have implications for tourism practitioners seeking to target this large group of potential tourists. Images relying on nostalgia may appeal to the first-generation migrants (who are the primary source of information and impressions of China for their second-generation offspring). Second-generation travelers may be more likely to be enticed by both the modern and traditional aspects of China, as well as by family traditions

and histories that can inspire feelings of proximity with their extended family.

It has been shown that the geographic and cultural distance between the respective home and host societies influences migrant VFR traveler perceptions of the destination. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the VFR phenomenon in other migration contexts. The original intent of this study was to target second-generation migrants who were born and raised in the new country. It was anticipated that their perceptions would not be influenced by previous experiences at the destination as a resident. However, it was found that the first-generation parents of these people play a crucial role in shaping the pre-trip anticipations of their children. On the basis of this finding, it is suggested that future studies should explore family VFR trips from the perspectives of different generations with a view to acquiring a better understanding of inter- generational transnational relationships. Finally, it is noted that the gaze may be understood to be mutual in tourism encounters (Maoz, 2006). Further insights into VFR guest-host interactions might be acquired by using theories of the gaze to investigate "the host gaze" in the context of VFR travel.

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