

A humanities wanderer "lost" in tourism studies: A critical reflection

一个人文旅游学者的自白

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Abstract: Auto-ethnographically, this essay attempts to tell a story of how a humanities graduate has ended up as a tourism academic, and the consequences or felt changes associated with his journey. Drawing from lived experiences along the way, the narrator offers critical reflections on 1) A farmer's son becoming an academic; 2) Positioning self against others in the community; 3) Authenticity – Being a tourist, being yourself, and being “at home”; and 4) Cultural identity – An expatriate doing China Tourism Research in Hong Kong. The narrative raises many questions as it unfolds itself along the way of his becoming an expatriate tourism academic working in Hong Kong. The writing also sets forth the disciplinary, institutional and cultural contexts within which the story is developed, its meanings interpreted, and implications, if any, inferred.

Keywords: Autoethnography, narrative, critical tourism studies, (being an) academic, China Tourism Research.

[摘要] 这篇短文，以自叙的方式，讲述了一个文科毕业生如何走入旅游研究的故事。结合切身感受与亲身体会，作者叙述了“一个农家小孩如何当上大学老师”、“在圈子里如何找位置”、“如何保持真实自我”、以及“如何面对文化身份与交流困惑”等故事情节。自我反思在旅游学的语境中展开；内容涉及学圈文化以及海外（华人）学者从事中国旅游研究等等问题。

[关键词] 自叙式民族志，故事，批评旅游学，学术生涯，中国旅游研究。

Contextualizing the narrative

This essay is a first person reflexive account about an expatriate tourism academic working in Hong Kong at the time of its writing. Hence, methodologically, it should best be seen as a treatment of “the researcher as subject”, and for that matter, a journey into one’s inner self. To break a little from tradition, I choose to write an autoethnography to explore and expose the evolving and interweaving forces affecting my personal, professional and intellectual growth as a tourism academic – those influences that have been leading to my perceptions of “whom I am, where I am, and what my education is preparing me for” in the academic community. The aspiration of doing this is that, through developing a self-narrative, the exploration and exposition of my personal experience may help deepen and enlarge the understanding of the culture – the ever-growing sub-community of expatriate (China Tourism) academics of whom I am a member – and possibly shed light on the journey of being an academic for peers like myself.

Qualitative/interpretive methodologists have variously referred to such autoethnographic narratives as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p.209), “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and others in social context” (Spry, 2001, p.710), or texts that “democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power” (Neumann, 1996, p.189, cited from Denzin, 2006, p.419). A critical and reflexive method of inquiry developed over the last two decades within the qualitative movement in social sciences, autoethnography has left behind notable traces in tourism, recreation and leisure studies (Bai, 2012; Botterill, 2003; Buckley, 2012; Dann & Dann, 2011; Havitz, 2007; Noy, 2007; and Sikes,

2006). Additionally, as Glover (2003, p.160) notes, narrative inquiry offers a great deal of promise and potential to explore the meaning of lived experiences in the lives of individuals.

To contextualize the narrative, it would be useful to note the evolution and changing features or focuses of the community in the different stages of its development. These include, among other things, the humble origins of many now well-established hospitality and tourism schools as well as the decline or termination of otherwise strong programs; the ever-clearer evolution from single disciplinary to multi-/inter-/post-disciplinary standings of its higher education with the so-called T(ourism) generation now in full play; the phenomenal growth of the community in terms of research outputs, number of journals and research associations and conferences, number of research students annually admitted and graduated, and number of worldwide degree programs; and the emergence of new programs such as convention, event, and eTourism, as well as the coupling, renaming or reorientation of the old ones. Along the way, information technology has increasingly become a facilitator of communication in the academic community, where journal submissions shifted from mail packages to email attachments in the mid/late 1990s, and onto the publisher's online submission system in the early 2000s. To enhance reader-author interaction, for example, *Annals of Tourism Research* has started, since 1996/97, to include an email address of published authors in their bios. Electronic bulletin boards such as trinet have become key platforms for releasing recruitments, scholarships and conferences as well as posting other scholarly messages. As the field evolves in increasing tension with (or against) the institutionalization of university-based research, academics and journals in many parts of the globe are subject to ranking and rating with impact factors and indices applied to tenure decisions and promotion of its faculty.

However, the use of assessment metrics and performance thresholds may not naturally lead to quality and excellence. As noted by David Airey and colleagues (2015), while potential strengths in quality of research and teaching have become well established at some elite centers, tourism education as a whole still suffers from a long tail of relatively poor performance. Also, as time goes by, new societies such as critical tourism studies have formed with promises of paradigmatic shifts in the community's research and practice (Ateljevic, Pritchard & Morgan, 2007).

Additionally, John Tribe (2006, 2010) refers to the dynamics of the academia as knowledge force fields within which individuals perform and networks or tribes form. Notably, the disciplinary, institutional and cultural contexts of being a tourism academic are characteristic of rules and positions, as well as ideologies and ends facing (or forcing) an individual, and could also vary by countries or geopolitical jurisdictions in which s/he works. While these dynamics may be true to every field, the origin and development of tourism education and research may vary from country to country. In mainland China, for example, the practice of higher tourism education has been strongly subject to government policy or policy changes at the level of education ministry and the national tourism administration (Xiao, 2000). Viewed historically, tourism education began in the late 1970s in the domain of economics and later under business administration until it recently earned its first-tier disciplinary status in the education ministry's discipline catalogue. In a comparative lens, unlike instances in the United States or Canada, where recreation, leisure and parks were developed before tourism in the education and research arena, tourism in China has exactly experienced the opposite pattern of development, with a much later focus on domestic/outbound tourism coupled with leisure, recreation and health for the well-being and quality of life of its people. Such a pattern of growth is clearly reflected in the

history and practices of China's tourism education and research (Xiao, 2013). Consequently, tourism academics in China have been working under their own unique circumstances and policy dynamics over the years.

My journey as an academic: A self-narrative

Preoccupied with questions centering around “how I become what I am because of what I do, or by reverse, what I am determines what I do”, I have been collecting fragmented thoughts over the years, either when such reflections came to me all of a sudden, or appeared in my mind from time to time – during my sleep, or when jogging in the morning. As an acknowledgement, the following narrative has been read to an academic audience during my school's research seminar and at the third world research summit for tourism and hospitality in Orlando, Florida on 18 December 2015. Notably, while reading and writing are different forms of presenting the narrative, the flow by itself could hopefully represent a stream of consciousness, indigenous to my own thoughts of the “then and there” as I constructed the text.

A farmer's son becomes a tourism academic

I was born to a rural family in Northwest Fujian Province (China), and I spent all of my childhood and much of my adolescence in poorly furnished elementary and secondary schools during weekdays, and helping in the farm on weekends. Nationwide entrance exam was restored in the late 1970s. Thanks to parents' support and teachers' encouragements and indeed to the era when “*backdoorism*” and/or “*guanxi*” (relationship) were yet to impose any influence, I was lucky to be admitted, with only a passing grade, to an undergraduate “English Language and Literature” program in 1983 at Fujian Normal University (located in Fuzhou, the capital city of Fujian Province). Building on this strength, I continued my humanities pursuit onto the postgraduate level at Soochow University in Jiangsu

Province, and after graduation, started to embark on an academic career in the Department of Tourism at Huaqiao University, which is located in Quanzhou, Fujian Province.

Anecdotally, it was by sheer accident that I got engaged with tourism education and research. When I reported to the human resources department in a hot summer afternoon in 1989, there was another graduate (with similar background as mine) reporting to Huaqiao University for an academic position. After some tea and welcome conversations, we were asked to make a choice of our own, as one of the posts to be filled was affiliated with the Foreign Languages Department and the other was in the Tourism Department, which, by then, was a fairly new department of only five years. Being a little novelty-seeking in my mid 20s and also due to anticipations of potential differences, I chose the “Tourism Department”. It was this utterly uninformed decision that I then made (without even sufficient time for any consultation or second thought) that has brought me to the world of tourism education and research, and that has made all the difference!

I have stayed in the same Department (now College) of Tourism for about 14 years. But it did not take me long to realize that “teaching hotel and tourism English” was of limited interest to me. However, by training, what else could I do if I did not teach English for hotel and tourism purposes? It was during these years in the early 1990s – during my library research of possible new subjects to teach – that I “discovered” early subscriptions to *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Tourism Management* from the university’s periodical shelf, particularly the early volumes of *Annals*. Judging from the dust on its cover and the fragrance of print from its pages, I could tell I was the first ever reader of those volumes on campus. I was immediately impressed by *Annals’* social sciences and almost humanities perspectives on tourism (particularly those special issues published in the 1980s and early 1990s), which resonated with my university training. By about 1993, after reading all of the available past volumes (no electronic copies then), I was at the point of checking and waiting for the latest issue of *Annals* to arrive and be placed on the “current-issue” shelf. As I read on, I also began to write review articles to introduce some of the intriguing perspectives I came across in *Annals* and *Tourism Management* to my Chinese colleagues. Shortly after, I began to teach “*Hospitality and Travel Marketing*” in English, by adopting Professor Alastair Morrison’s 1989 textbook of the same title.

Fortunately, over the years, my journey as a tourism academic has benefitted greatly from the guidance and inspiration of many mentors. While there are too many for individual coverage in this narrative, the mentorship and friendship of Jafar Jafari deserve a special mention. In 1997, Jafar’s efforts

towards internationalization of *Annals*' editorial board resulted in an invitation of me to serve as its resource editor. I still remembered the type-written letter arrived in *Annals*' neatly designed letterhead, signed by the editor-in-chief. While the invitation kept me happy for days and weeks, soon came with it the responsibility for coordinating and reviewing manuscripts. Thanks to his trust, I became further involved in *Annals*, by taking care of its "subject and author index" since 2002 (a feature of *Annals* passed down from cultural anthropologists Nelson Graburn, Valene Smith, and Margaret Swain), and later by looking after *Annals*' "calendar", "acknowledgement of referees", and other editorial functions. Upon Jafar's recommendation, I also did a content analysis of *Annals* as my master's thesis under the mentorship of Steve Smith and Geoff Wall at the University of Waterloo in 2004. In the subsequent years of my doctoral studies and research, I have had the pleasure of becoming an apprentice, learning from a master on copy-editing *Annals*' accepted manuscripts. After moving to Hong Kong in 2008, our collaboration extends to the current ongoing community knowledge project – the Springer *Encyclopedia of Tourism*. In every respect and indebtedness, I must say that Jafar is a great mentor and role model for a junior tourism academic like myself.

Positioning self against others in the community

An area of interest developed during my doctoral studies and research at Waterloo (under the advice of Steve Smith) and sustained over the subsequent years is knowledge development. Tourism, as a scientific community, has witnessed phenomenal growth over the last two to three decades, in various fronts of its knowledge development: First, theory development (or theoretical state-of-the-art); second, theory and practice (or the nurturing of communities of learning and practice); and third, communication of social sciences across language communities. As noted by Doug Pearce and Dick Butler (2010) in their conclusion to the 2009 International Academy for the Study of Tourism conference book (subtitled *A 20-20 Vision*), the tourism research community has been found characteristic of the following trends: Notably, that growth in volume and scope of tourism research has been accompanied by an expansion in a wide range of topics explored; that much of the growth of tourism as a field of study has been incremental; that the overall and emerging landscape of tourism knowledge is one of continuity with little evidence of any paradigm shift; that most research appears to have not been driven by the pursuit of core questions under a unifying set of theories leading consequently to a cumulative yet fragmented body of knowledge; that tourism scholarship has been "inbreeding or walling-in" of itself with increasingly fewer ingredients or nutrients from other

broader disciplines; and, that an inability or unwillingness has been apparent of the English community to look beyond their own language or cultural settings.

Nonetheless, to what extent are these true to the tourism academia? Are there any signs of transformations or new developments? From some of the conferences I have attended and some of the people I have remained in contact, my answer seems to be in the affirmative. Overall, the critical and humanistic turns in tourism studies have been most notable, so has been the “Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI)” a forward-looking society in education. A few recent epistemological “turns” in tourism studies have enriched and expanded the landscapes of its knowledge development. Advocates for critical tourism studies, such as Annette Pritchard, Nigel Morgan, and Irena Ateljevic (2011), have devised a new concept known as “hopeful tourism”, defined as “a values-led humanist approach based on partnership, reciprocity, and ethics, which aims for co-created learning and which recognizes the power of sacred and indigenous knowledge and passionate scholarship” (p.949). As a recently emerged community of constructivist/interpretive researchers, critical tourism studies combine co-transformative learning and action through engaged scholarship (as advocated by Ana Maria Munar and others), equity and gender-balanced scholarship (as advocated by Dianne Dredge and others), postcolonialism and decolonial thinking and methodology (as advocated by Christine Buzinde, Donna Chambers, Hazel Tucker, and others), moralities and mobilities (as advocated by Kevin Hannam, Kellee Caton and others), as well as transformational leadership through activism and empowerment (as proposed by TEFI).

Arguably, a paradigm shift towards co-created or constructivist knowledge development in tourism studies, and towards co-transformative learning and action through engaged scholarship is at the dawn. In light of the ontology, epistemology and methodology of each and every competing paradigmatic stand, diversities of perspectives and multiplicities of realities are likely to grow in the academy of hope in the neo-liberal society.

Following the same line of thoughts – that the epistemology of tourism has been changing from positivist/post-positivist knowledge production to the constructivist/interpretive stance of knowledge development, and that measurement is giving way to (or at least embracing) engagement – community perceptions of the impacts of tourism research, either individually or collectively, are likely to be changing as well. As an academic, we are all familiar with the ranking of journals, institutions, and the publishing faculty. Neither do we find it strange that people google their own names to check online visibility, that we follow our peers in the ResearchGate, or that we set up “academic.edu” account to proactively enhance citation or potential use of our published research.

Nonetheless, despite all these, the old questions seem to have remained: What is to be left behind after living an academic life? What are the invisible or “online un-trackable” quality of a scholar that our students would love to pick up after graduation or during alumni meeting conversations? Is there an invisible tree historically mapping the intellectual connections between ourselves and our mentors, and between our current and future PhD students?

Additionally, speaking of “names and fames while positioning oneself against others in the scientific community”, cross-cultural questions could be asked: “Is a top tourism professor in “Country A” comparable to an equally top tourism professor in “Country B?”. Or, in terms of research and practice, “Is a top hotel management professor more valuable than a general manger of a top brand hotel?” (or are they simply apples and pears!)

Authenticity: Being a tourist, being yourself, and being “at home”

Tourism academics, particularly those having an interest in sociological and anthropological studies, are often asked questions about authenticity. I was once stumbling on such a query in an undergraduate class on what I meant by “existential authenticity”. Searching in vain for easy-to-understand words, I began to explain with something like, “If you are feeling completely yourself during your trip or when participating in activities at a destination, you are reaching a liminal state of being and hence are experiencing existential authenticity”. I could clearly tell from her eyes that the student was puzzled even further, and I went on with my usual critique on “modernity being artificial”, and that social norms (when observed to the extreme) can do little but make people pretending in our community or society, that is, the many circumstances in our life in which modern individuals have to pretend and cannot be ourselves.

Fortunately, there are not as many such "difficult questions to take" in the undergraduate as in the postgraduate class, nor as many in business-oriented schools as in social science programs. Perhaps it is my good intent to explain, or my poor communication skills, or my limited commonalities with students in vocabularies, that has earned me a rather “ambiguous name” from student feedbacks: "When Dr Xiao speaks, nobody understands". Or, to use an analogy, while we are going around the same sun, it appears we are on different planets.

As a critical (and at times existentialist) tourism researcher, I am often troubled (or inspired) by these three notions: “Being a tourist”; “Being yourself”; and “Being at home”. Are these knowable terms in the first place? Or are they simply contradictory terms, polarized and dualistic, like “host and guest”? Is

“home”, the usual place of residence, in any way identical to the “unusual communita” called destinations? Further, when travel is eternal, where is the place a traveler can claim “home” or “destination”?

Philosophically (and taking a mobilities’ turn), we are all tourists engaged in a multi-destination journey from one temporary home (or destination) to the next, and eventually to our permanent home (or destination). In simple words, home is a place where we could feel most comfortable, or where we could be completely ourselves. Or, by stretches of time, home is a place or space of continuity from the past to the present and onto the future.

A typical rural Hakka community, my home place is located in the northwest of Fujian (close to two UNESCO World Heritage Sites – the Wuyi Mountain, and the Fujian Hakka Yong-ding Tulou). Half-hidden amongst the hills, my home village is characteristic of small farmlands, with rice, fruits, vegetables, and more recently, tobacco being its seasonal and regular crops. However, like most rural villages in China, the farmland has not been successful in keeping behind its people. Perceived money-making opportunities have attracted the young and largely unskilled villagers to towns and cities. In the meantime, kinships and clanships, and traditions and customs such as festivity, reciprocity, family rituals, and worships, regularly bring them back home. As a tourism researcher, I just could not help comparing such mobilities with seasonal migrations in other parts of the world, and begin to question the extent to which global concepts or theories such as gravity model, or distance decay could ever explain such travel patterns or migration behavior (the Chinese New Year being a prime example).

Although I am not amongst these crowds of travelers, my rather irregular home visit gives me a very special feeling every time – a unique sense of attachment to this (now distant) place called home. In addition, my feeling of "being at home" has been continually reinforced by my feeling of “being a tourist” in my usual places of residence.

Looking back, in the many places where I have lived, or studied, or worked for more than one year, my feeling of “being a stranger” seems to have come from two sources: One, a perceived need for keeping moving, and two, my incompetence or inability to speak local dialects or languages. This also explains why I seize every opportunity to learn to speak Cantonese, ever since I moved to Hong Kong in 2008.

Sentimentally, a touristic dialogue resounds between a host and a guest:

The host: *“How did you get here?”*

The guest: *“I don't know. It's bitter to recollect. I remember we arrived with a group of four, only a short while ago. But now, according to the itinerary, I will be traveling on my own, while others have moved on to a place called Mississauga”.*

Nonetheless, inter-personal authenticity, through meeting strangers on the way, is the funniest part of any tourism, as was beautifully and almost existentially eulogized by Tang Dynasty poet, 白居易, about 1,200 years ago. It reads (in Chinese) “同是天涯沦落人、相逢何必曾相识” (literally translated: *You and I are strangers, both in misfortunate, and both drifting from shore to shore. With this encounter, do we ever need to care whether we have known each other before?*)

“Who am I?” – An “expatriate” doing China Tourism Research in Hong Kong!

I have to admit I was often troubled by identity crises. Emigration in 2002 has led to my loss of Chinese *hukou* but the gain of Canadian citizenship. Having worked in Hong Kong for seven years, I was granted permanent residency of this special administrative region in 2015. By this March, I will have been in Hong Kong for a good eight years. But, what have I been doing here? A Canadian with cultural affinity more to the Chinese, I should have found myself a good fit with this “Asia’s World City”. But outside my campus, some people are protesting against incoming Chinese tourists.

“Who am I?” I have to ask myself from time to time.

“An expatriate doing China Tourism Research in Hong Kong”, is the definite answer.

I could have a lot more to say about my little role as a China Tourism academic in Hong Kong. But I would rather refrain from making further comments, other than to note and respectfully acknowledge the fragmentation of the China Tourism Research Community(ties), in terms of “how we see them”, or “how they see us”.

“They are not methodologically as well prepared as we for rigorous research”, China Tourism Researchers in Hong Kong would love to say.

The mainland Chinese academics would take pride in responding, *“We are the insiders of China Tourism, and hence have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon than the outsiders in Hong Kong or elsewhere”.*

“That’s exactly why you cannot see the whole picture because you are watching from within”, researchers in Hong Kong would continue.

Metaphysically, the truth and beauty of “China watching” (Xiao & Li, 2012), or understanding China Tourism, are very well captured by a Chinese poem: “不识庐山真面目，只缘身在此山中” (literally, “*I cannot tell the true shape of Lu-shan mountain, because I AM in it*”).

Contextually, in an academic community as fragmented as China Tourism, it will be intriguing to probe: Whether China Tourism academics in Hong Kong could ever perform the role of a “bridge”? Could we instead be the “third eye”? Or, could tourism research communication across the two languages be one of “a mutual gaze”?

Authenticating the text

As a postscript, this critical reflection through a performative self-narrative makes only one singular text, whereas the interpretations of the criticality and meanings of the text are necessarily of many, resulting – both as a strength and as a limitation – from the (inter-) subjectivity, voices, and perspectives characteristic of doing and writing an autoethnography. Instead of giving voice to others in developing the narrative, the story is told primarily by, and of, the author. Although the cultural identity part of the account takes a seemingly dialogic form, this should also be seen as *my* interpretations of others’ perceptions, positions, or perspectives. However, this critical reflection is intended as a genuine attempt of the narrator to make visible or audible a group of expatriate China Tourism academics whose experiences have come from two or more language worlds, and whose careers have already unfolded (albeit each in his/her own way with unique stories). Underneath the text, the constructions of self, other, and cultural identity, though appeared fragmented or somewhat unconnected, are undoubtedly inextricably linked in the story line. Indeed, in an explication of representing such inextricabilities in narrative development, Glover (2003) acknowledges,

In representing themselves in their stories, research participants cannot help but reveal something about an “other” with whom they distinguish themselves (e.g., *I am different from them*) and the communities to which they belong (e.g., *I am like them*); in representing an “other”, research participants cannot help but reveal something about themselves (e.g., *they are different from me*) and the communities to which they belong (e.g., *they are different from us*); and in co-constructing the communities to which they belong, research participants cannot help but reveal something about themselves (e.g., *they are like me*) and the “other” with whom they distinguish themselves (e.g., *we are different from them*). Narrative puts these constructions and their relationships into focus (p.154, italics in original).

Narrative inquirers hence also need to address issues in pertinence to “how open a text is to other readings” as well as “how the researcher is situated in the personal narratives he or she collects and analyzes” (Glover, 2003, p.159). Hopefully, this self-narrative could appeal to my intended group.

In view of representation, one paradox for this “expatriate” group has to do with languages, which, to this narrator, is not only an integral part in the sense-making of their research, but also serves as a channel or access to their specific cultural communities or academic circles within which their identities are established or acknowledged. My affiliation in Hong Kong is an English-speaking institution; hence, very often, when mainland Chinese doctoral students come to my office, I have to caution that they should not even think about the idea of using *putonghua* to talk about their research in front of another visually Chinese face. Nonetheless, as a qualitative inquirer having a background in linguistics and, worse still, one who aims to publish primarily in a language other than his mother tongue, the intricate relationships between sound and sense (or between form and meaning) have never been less perplexing in constructing or deconstructing research texts. Even for this very piece, as it is

intended for an English journal, only some of my Chinese colleagues could have access to, and even fewer can truly read into it.

Ideologically, much in analogy to the call of Donna Chambers and Christine Buzinde (2015) for a decolonization agenda and methodology, the need for a rethinking of western conceptions of the orient (c.p., Said, 1978) through cross-cultural and comparative perspectives on “China watching” in tourism contexts could be reiterated (Xiao & Li, 2012). It is also worth mentioning of the recent efforts to bring together expatriate or overseas perspectives (Huang & Chen, 2015; Ryan & Huang, 2013), which in many ways attest to the call for critical and humanistic perspectives on China Tourism.

To authenticate the text, this story was “narrated” to academic conference audience on two slightly different occasions over the past years of its development. Acknowledgeably, the narrative has also been filtered through critiques and commentaries from a few “expatriate” (China) tourism academics and readers concerned, as well as through conversations with interested colleagues who have been exposed to its performative reading.

In paradigmatic terms, however, what can be interpreted or inferred from the story? While this query should ultimately be left to its future readers, the potential merits of taking critical and humanism/humanistic turns in China Tourism Studies are noteworthy (Caton, 2014a,b). Despite its prominence in the European community(ies), epistemic and methodological orientations such as critical tourism studies, narrative inquiry, and (auto)ethnography are yet to be more fully embraced by China tourism researchers and their periodicals. By exploring and exposing personal experiences of expatriate researchers who have to confront both worlds, this critical reflection could hopefully open dialogues and trigger discussions on emerging lines of inquiries leading to critical China Tourism Studies. ▲ ▲ ▲

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