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The Tourist Wall: The Case Of China Visitors In Malaysia

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Abstract

Tourist bubbles reduce tourist anxiety but they also create walls. This exploratory study looks at how Chinese visitors publicly review Malaysia on mafengwo.com and qyer.com. There is a conspicuous silence on the discriminatory policies against Chinese Malaysians in those reviews even though manifestations of that policy is omnipresent. Thus, we look at how a Chinese tourist wall is constructed, and how tourist businesses are inadvertently strengthening that wall. We are also suggesting the importance of acknowledging “silence” in our data collection and analysis. This paper aims to facilitate our further understandings in Chinese tourists and the complexity of the host-guest relations in tourism.

Keywords: tourist wall, tourist bubble, Chinese tourist, ethnic harmony, ethnic discrimination, Malaysia

[WP]

Introduction

The increasing global acceptance of Union Pay alludes to the importance of China consumers, visitors and residents around the world. In tourism, tourism promotion agencies are tapping into various Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat and mafengwo.com, to reach out to Chinese visitors (Ma, Hardy, & Ooi, 2020). While businesses are catering to and reaching out, they are also entrenching a Chinese visitor wall by perpetuating the Chinese “tourist bubble”. Chinese visitors do not need to explore other platforms to communicate, seek information and interact with the world.

The suggestion that the Chinese are “closed-minded” carries little weight when studies have shown that they are keen on wanting to engage with locals and go native (Ma, Ooi, & Hardy, 2018). Many are adventurous (Cai, 2018). But Chinese guest-host interactions remain selective. Malaysia has a formal discriminatory ethnic policy against its own Chinese citizens, and it is publicly known. Dr. Huang Huikang, the then-Chinese ambassador to Malaysia, even openly criticized the policy in Kuala Lumpur’s Chinatown back in 2015 (Reuters, 2015). Despite the growth of ethno-nationalistic sentiments in China, a huge majority of Chinese visitors are ignorant or seem to have ignored the discrimination of ethnic Chinese in their understanding and review of Malaysia. There is an apparent wall between the Chinese visitors and the host society.

So in this context, we define the tourist wall as the selectively manifested barriers and obstacles that prevent tourists from interacting and connecting with the host society. The barriers may be social, cultural and even technological, and are not necessarily insurmountable.

Tourist bubbles and Chinese tourists

A tourist bubble broadly refers to the physical and psychological spaces that tourists are protected within when they travel (Unger, Fuchs, & Uriely, 2019). These bubble-wrapped spaces alleviate tourist anxiety caused by strangeness of a destination (Ooi, 2019). They also inevitably create a wall between visitors and the host society. In our context, we refer to how Chinese visitors use China’s dominant apps and platforms when they travel, as well as, receiving information and interpretation on host societies from Chinese sources. By doing so, they avoid awkward interactions with residents while picking up local knowledge and shun potential conflicts (Ma et al., 2020). Their understanding of the host society is then likely to be skewed towards a Chinese perspective.

Malaysian context

As a popular travel destination, Malaysia received 3.11 million Chinese tourists in 2019 (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Malaysia officially presents an image of ethnic harmony, and celebrates its own Malaysian Chinese community and their heritage when targeting China's outbound tourism market. However, the "bumiputra" policy is a cornerstone of the country's social, economic and political governance strategy (Harris & Han, 2020). Under this "son of the soil" policy, the majority Malay and indigenous populations are privileged, and minority groups, such as the Malaysian Chinese and Indian, are not given equal access to education, government jobs and business support (Harris & Han, 2020). Seen as affirmative action for the economically oppressed Malay group in the past, the privileged treatment of the Malays is publicly obvious in Malaysian everyday life (NST, 2020). The discrimination of the Malaysian Chinese and Indians are just as obvious. Discussions of these formalised discrimination are common in many Malaysian Chinese language media channels, for instance.

Methodology

This paper reviews 150 travelogues posted on two major online travel communities of China (i.e. mafengwo.com and qyer.com). The two websites are dubbed as Chinese versions of *Lonely Planet* (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). An interpretive paradigm is adopted to understand the layered reality of the Chinese tourist bubble (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). By analyzing the online travelogues, we capture a range of diverse reviewers' comments, so as to create a myriad of rich and diverse understanding of how different tourist bubbles formed in the context of Chinese visitors in Malaysia.

Some findings

There is a silence on Malaysian ethnic politics in the travel reviews we saw, even though some Chinese visitors are aware of the policy after interacting with local residents. The issue of discriminating Malaysian Chinese seem irrelevant to their travel experience, and/or that they may not even be cognizant of the tacit discrimination they may have faced while in the country. The Chinese tourists seem to be walled out of Malaysian society. Based on our initial review of travelogues, media coverage and relevant literature, it is found that most Chinese tourists visiting Malaysia did not know the ethnic discrimination against minority groups, and only a few tourists noticed the situation from interactions with local residents. However, the fraught silence on discriminatory ethnic policies in Malaysia may arise from at least four interrelated reasons.

First, many of these tourists are not interested in deeper engagement with the local Malaysian host society, and find comfort and enjoyment in their protected tourist bubbles even though such experiences may be considered "shallow" (Ye, Zhang, & Yuen, 2012). Second, many tourists desire to engage more with the local community but are not able to because they are walled out and are merely using sources of information from China through their social media and news channels that do not say much about Malaysia (Lajevardi, Oskooii, Walker, & Westfall, 2020). So despite their efforts for a more "authentic" experience, their interpretation of the local host society remains superficial. Third, many visitors do not care about politics and want to enjoy Malaysia for only its tourist attractions. Fourth, many Chinese tourists may not want to engage with the issue because they consider the bumiputra policy irrelevant to their travels in Malaysia or they do not feel right to voice their outsider opinions (Fox & Holt, 2018). They have inadvertently fenced out politics from their tourist experience.

Conclusions

This study highlights "silence" in the construction of the tourist wall. What is not reviewed and spoken reveals much about the social and psychological spaces that tourists carry with them. Our discussion on the Chinese tourist bubble highlights the Chinese tourist wall. Our desire to cater to

the needs of Chinese visitors in using their social media platform, for instance, contribute to building that wall.

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