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TRANSFORMATIONS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: FUTURE  
PERFECT IN TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND EVENTS

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# TRANSFORMATIONS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: FUTURE PERFECT IN TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND EVENTS

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# Contrasting Appreciation Of The Tasmanian Wilderness: Mediating The Chinese Visitor Experience From A Cultural Complexity Approach

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## Abstract

This exploratory study focuses on the diverse appreciation of the Tasmanian wilderness in the eyes of Chinese visitors. In response against an essentialist approach to understanding Chinese visitors and in addressing the criticism that a more dynamic and fluid understanding of culture is mainly academic and not useful for the practice community, this study adopts a cultural complexity approach to understand Chinese interpretation and comprehension of wilderness. It suggests that tourism mediators can utilise the range of contrasting appreciation of a site to engage visitors and shape their experiences. By analysing posts on Cradle Mountain – a premier Tasmanian wilderness site – at a popular Chinese travel blog website, we have identified a range of ‘reference points’ that can be used in tourist experience mediation. We postulate that by invoking the range of them in the mediation process, together with local interpretation and knowledge, visitors can create more endearing and engaging experiences.

**Keywords:** wilderness, Tasmania, Chinese visitors, cultural complexity, reference point, appreciation

## [WP]

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## Introduction

Tasmanians take pride in their island’s pristine nature. The way that Tasmanians interpret and appreciate their wilderness however can be different from visitors (Ma, 2019). Instead of using the common static way of catering to Chinese visitors, this paper understands the cultural backgrounds of Chinese visitors through a cultural complexity perspective, i.e. culture is seen as a dynamic carnivalesque web of contrasting, complementing and contradictory social manifestations which is necessary for the functioning of any society. The myriad of social manifestations is a resource for members to express, interpret, control and navigate diverse situations and encounters, even when they are travelling (Ooi, 2019).

Such an approach contrasts against the essentialist and more static reading of Chinese visitors. While an essentialist approach offers clear directions on how to cater to them, it also often orientalises these visitors, and is disrespectful (Ma et al., 2018). The criticism of using a dynamic and fluid understanding of culture is that such an approach is not useful for the practice-community; we take up this challenge in this project.

This study seeks out the diverse ways that Chinese tourists describe and appreciate Tasmanian wilderness. Their diverse ways of interpreting the same site, albeit often under different conditions (e.g. weather, social company), lay out a range of ‘reference points’ for tourism mediators to invoke and communicate desired and layered interpretation, understanding and evaluation of the site while presenting to and/or interacting with them. It is not just about using one or a few of these reference points but to understand the range of them to help contextualise and shape the tourist experience with the visitors.

Reference points or touch points are cognitive and emotional resources that resonate and draw interpretative and evaluative responses from individuals (Rosch, 1975; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1992). Narrating a web of familiar reference points enables tourism mediators to weave a narrative that is more entwined in the visitor’s worldviews and fit into their cognitive maps. It will also endear their



new tourist experiences into their own perspectives and understanding (Ooi, 2011, Ong & du Cros, 2012).

#### Notes on method

Data were collected through a popular Chinese travel blog website mafengwo.com. The website offers users a platform to post reviews, and many use it to communicate with other travellers who may be at the destination at the same time. 75 posts on Cradle Mountain, Tasmania were collected (by 9<sup>th</sup> September 2020). The posts, which are all in Chinese, are dated from 2014 to 2019. Our goal is to look at the diversity and richness of the reviews, rather than to force a more generalised and simplified view of Chinese visitor experience at Cradle Mountain.

After collecting the data, it was coded within the original Chinese into categories and sub-themes were identified to depict the core elements. Eventually all data were sorted and grouped by the categories and sub-themes, enabling us to identify, compare and reveal the diversity of how Chinese visitors describe their experiences and appreciate Cradle Mountain. Whole translation and interpretation steps were conducted during the writing process, mainly by Zhang who is a native Chinese speaker, and then revised by Ma, who is also a native Chinese speaker, and Ooi, who was taught Chinese Mandarin at school in Singapore. The interpretations aim to reflect the intended meanings, and for clarity, references to classical poetry and sayings were interpreted in a contemporary manner.

#### Findings and discussion

To demonstrate the type of data collected and how we intend to use the cultural complexity approach to support tourism mediators in their work, we will use two examples: animal droppings and Dove Lake.

With regards to the first example, there are many wombats at Cradle Mountain, and their droppings (together with other animals') are littered everywhere. CM014-1 wrote:

*... I took the photo of the legendary cube-shaped poo [便便, Bian Bian] of wombats. It was very cute, hahahaha [laughing].*

This user mentioned the uniqueness of wombat droppings and being amazed by it. In this text, the user referred to the phrase *Bian Bian*, which is an endearing term for droppings. In contrast, some users were disgusted by the droppings. CM073-1 lamented:

*When I entered Cradle Mountain, it looked beautiful. However, when I looked down on the ground, there was full of animal shit (粪, Fen). Based on the size, they looked like kangaroos' [sic].*

In this text, the user used *Fen*, which has a strong negative connotation, and is often used to refer to dog shit littered in public spaces in China. The expressions demonstrate that there is no singular appreciation of the animal droppings at Cradle Mountain. And the interpretations invoke different experiences. The contrast provides the opportunity for mediators to use them together as reference points to weave a layered story to engage visitors, stir a debate and deepen understanding of Tasmanian wildlife.

The second example is on how Chinese visitors describe Dove Lake which sits at the foot of the mountain. CM043-5 described a deep experience:

*I was walking in the virgin forest, and enjoying the spiritual cleansing of enjoying Dove Lake. The lake was like a mirror because there was no wind [潭面无风镜未磨, Tan Mian Wu Feng Jing Wei Mo], and the peaceful scenery looked like a painting. I was fully immersed in nature and was oblivious to my own existence.*

The phrases used refer to a classical Chinese poem. They characterise the Chinese experience of peace and in 'harmony with nature,' and allude to a transcendental experience. Besides the use of classical literature, there are other ways of depicting the lake in the most evocative manner.

CM071-2 wrote:

*Dove Lake looked different with the angles of the sunlight, so pretty. I saw the lake in grey, blue, yellow, and colourless. I have no idea what the lake will be like when it mirrors the snowy beauty around it during winter.*

And with references to experiences that are considered rare in China, CM018-1 and CM068-2 opined:

*The water of the lake (Dove Lake) in the mountain (Cradle Mountain) is so clear that one can see the bottom [清澈见底, Qing Che Jian Di].*

*... I was too thirsty when hiking. I bottled the lake water to drink ~ It was so sweet [甘甜, Gan Tian].*

The different and contrasting interpretations of Cradle Mountain, and as described through Chinese poetry, references to daily experiences back home (such as not being able to drink the water in the wild) and through common expressions offer a range of reference points that readily invoke and shape the tourist experience of the site. We postulate that by invoking the wide range of contrasting points (not just one or a few) in the tourism mediation process – together with local interpretations – visitors are encouraged to celebrate and appreciate Tasmania wilderness at a deeper level. The co-creation of the tourist experience can be nudged in the desired direction if we see the engagement with visitors and their cultural background as constantly open, dynamic and negotiable.

### Implications

In using a cultural complexity approach, this study identifies a contrasting array of diverse interpretations and appreciation of Cradle Mountain by Chinese visitors. The goal is not to present a flattened view of the Chinese but instead to find reference points that would invoke responses and help manage the co-created tourist experience. The mediation process is dynamic, and for the case of tour guides, they are in a better position to use these reference points to dialogically help tourists construct the preferred experience.

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