

# 9 Being outbound Chinese tourists: An identity perspective

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## The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Introduce identity theory and tourism;
- Provide an overview of research and government measures in dealing with uncivilised behaviours;
- Explore the way in which Chinese tourists reflect on the recent negative identity of the country;
- Draw out the dominant themes that underpin the reflections of Chinese tourists on the projected negative identities;
- Offer recommendations to the government and industry providers to deal with the increasing negative perception on Chinese tourists.

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## Introduction

The term 'Chinese outbound tourist' was almost non-existent until the initiation of the Open Door Policy in 1978. At present, Chinese tourists are among the fastest-growing segments of global tourism. With the increasing disposable income, the beneficial exchange rate of Chinese *yuan*, growing direct flights and ease of visa applications, the number of Mainland Chinese outbound tourists increased from 3.74 million in 1993 to 130.51 million in 2017. In addition, Chinese tourists spent 115.29 billion US dollars in 2017, which ranked Chinese tourists as the first and most profitable outbound tourists in the market (CTA & Ctrip, 2018; UNWTO, 2003). As a fast-growing market, Chinese tourists are different from other tourists due to their unique culture. Chinese tourist behaviour has become the most popular topics among all China-related tourism research (Bao et al., 2018). To understand Chinese tourist behaviour, existing studies have focused on demystifying culturally-embedded travel motivation and behaviours to examine the way in which tourism providers can understand and engage in the growing market (e.g. Hsu & Hsu, 2016; Pearce et al., 2013). With academic research primarily addressing the economic benefits of this group of tourists, the social impacts of such growth have received relatively less attention.

When searching for the words 'Chinese tourist' in the Internet, although a few articles continue to address the beneficial elements of this profitable market, the majority of news articles describe this group of tourists as 'uncivilised', 'stupid' and even 'the world's worst tourists' (e.g. Ejinsight, 2018; Pile, 2017). Such uncivilised or negative behaviours have been represented as salient characteristics to define Chinese tourists and even China as a country. Given the intensified projected identity of Chinese tourists, such a topic has received relatively less attention, especially in the English literature. Only a few studies concerning the perceptions of host countries on Chinese tourists have implicitly touched the topic (e.g. Chen et al., 2018). On the contrary, academic studies in the Chinese language have increasingly focused on improving the projected perceptions (e.g. Chen, 2016; Guo & Zhang, 2008). With the fast-growing number of Chinese tourists, understanding how individuals reflect on these imposed identities is urgent. This chapter introduces a national-based social identity to understand the reflective process. Social identity is particularly useful for understanding intergroup interaction in defining the self (Tajfel, 1982). As any form of socially constructed identity inevitable involved in the continuous interaction with 'us' and 'others' (Sarup, 1996), the interactive nature of social identity is useful to understand individuals' behaviour towards 'us' and 'others' (Tajfel,

1979). Without such an understanding, the interaction between tourists and host communities remains incomplete.

Drawing on the social identity, this chapter employs a constructivism–interpretivism research paradigm to highlight the interactive nature of identity formation (Jennings, 2005). Data used in this chapter came from multiple resources, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, administrative documents and other literature, to provide an overview about the reflections of Chinese tourists on their projected negative image. Twenty frequent Chinese outbound tourists, comprising diverse professional backgrounds, geographic locations, annual incomes, genders and ages, were interviewed. On average, the semi-structured interviews took 45 minutes. All of the informants have had at least five outbound international travel experiences.

## **Identity and tourist behaviour**

Identity concept is strongly associated with unity, which establishes the limits of a subject and allows it to be distinguished from any other; identity, by its definition, identifies who we are as a group and who I am as an individual that belongs to that group (Schlesinger, 1987). The basic idea of any form of identity is that individuals have a fundamental need to belong to different social groups. Social identity as the emotional and evaluative consequences of belonging to groups links self-concept with group normative values (Tajfel, 1982). As a specific type of social identity, national-based social identity is conceptualised as a powerful means of locating individuals in the world through a prism of collective personality and its distinctive culture (Smith, 1991). Hence, nationality is traditionally used as a key indication to understand tourist behaviours and values (e.g. Chen et al., 2018; Hsu & Huang, 2016).

An often neglected aspect of identity construction is the idea of *otherness*. Sarup (1996) stated that identity is always related to what one is not – the other. To maintain a separate identity, one has to define oneself against the other. Other scholars extended the idea of otherness and argued that perception with others, and the response associated with such perception also plays a vital role in identity construction in a global context (Alexander et al., 2005). By taking the idea of otherness into consideration, identity is not just related to self-concept but an interactive term which involves negotiations between ‘us’ and different ‘others’.

In fact, social identity theory aims to understand intergroup relation (Tajfel, 1982) and indicates that negotiations between intragroup (us) and intergroup (others) make identity unique. Brown (2000) agreed

with such conceptualisation and argued that group differentiation is the essence of social identity. It is the process of having a positive self-concept attached to group superiority over others, and explains intergroup and intragroup behaviours. To understand one's social identity, scholars have often proposed three interlinked elements: cognitive, evaluative and emotional components (Ellemers et al., 1999; Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1982). Cognitive component indicates any sense of belonging that involves the awareness of group memberships and its associated characteristics (Ellemers et al., 1999). The cognitive understanding of the group is socially constructed and negotiated between 'us' and 'others'. When the social identity is formed, boundaries between social groups are created to define members' uniqueness in relation to that of non-members. Hence, cultural values are often utilised as symbolic boundaries to categorise different groups (Anderson, 1991).

Based on the understanding of cognitive characteristics of 'us', the evaluative component further highlights essential group values to define membership (Tajfel, 1982). To maintain a positive social identity, the sense of superiority is often addressed; positive evaluations of 'us' over 'others' enhance self-esteem (Ellemers et al., 1999). The last component, namely, social identity, highlights the emotional investment of the other two processes: cognitive and evaluation (Tajfel, 1982). Although nations are imagined as community (Anderson, 1991), the emotional commitment of the social group enhances the social cohesion and motivates individuals to continuously improve the group status (Smith, 1991).

Identity and tourism are not new juxtapositions. Indeed, recent studies have considered tourism an appealing way of enforcing social cohesion (e.g. Gielling & Ong, 2016). Bossen (2000) noted that tourism reinforces national identity through the process of making homogeneity out of existing heterogeneity, which creates a sense of common descent among groups. In this sense, visiting national heritage and archaeological sites can be regarded as an emotional journey for domestic tourists to seek cultural affinity and identity with their homeland (e.g. Pretes, 2003). Through the utilisation of the national heritage attractions in demonstrating the uniqueness of a nation, the tourism industry has constructed the 'commonly seen world' (Hollinshead, 2009). Heritage-related studies primarily concern common ancestry and their relation to national identity construction.

Another group of research has addressed the usefulness of social identity in understanding collective behaviour and social differentiation. Many of these studies have focused on how belonging to a social group influences a host country's collective behaviour in welcoming tourists