Reconceptualising host-guest relations at border towns

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Introduction

This research note offers a glimpse into the cultural-geopolitics of cross-border mobilities at a Hong Kong border town. More specifically, it focuses on residents' relationship with mainland Chinese day-trippers, which is imbued with political tensions of sovereignty, economic integration and social exclusion. The note presents findings from a perception survey and in-depth interviews using three promising conceptual themes that will potentially set the tone for a reconceptualisation of host-guest relations at border towns.

Host-guest relationship is believed to be fundamental to tourism (Smith, 1977), and understanding this relationship would imply exploring tourists' experiences on one hand and residents' perceptions towards tourism and tourists on the other (Sharpley, 2014). However, existing literature concentrates overwhelmingly on perceptions towards tourism development rather than individuals (Woosnam, 2012). Moreover, tourism perception studies have predominantly been conducted using quantitative methods (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016; Deery, Jago, & Fredline, 2012; Sharpley, 2014), and tend to describe how tourism is perceived, without explaining why (Sharpley, 2014). Also, 'few have explicitly addressed the powerful connections between tourism and geopolitics' (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016: 226). Adopting a cultural-geopolitical perspective to study the 'why' would facilitate addressing and conveying socially constructed practices, which in turn leads to a more nuanced understanding of how the world is represented (Moisio, 2015). Therefore, this study is a response to calls for: 1) 'a more multidimensional approach' to research into host-guest relations (Sharpley, 2014: 47-48); 2) considering the potential of 'contemporary cultural geography to more generally inform tourism management' (Hall & Page, 2009: 7); and 3) incorporating geopolitics as new ways to understand and theorise tourism relationship and practices (Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016).

The research site is delimited to Sheung Shui, a Hong Kong border town and shopping haven for day-trippers from neighbouring cities in mainland China. Crucially, these shoppers include 'parallel traders' who cross the border to bulk-purchase products in Hong Kong and sell them to wholesalers in the mainland for a profit. These mainlanders who arrive in hoards on a daily basis have been blamed for overcrowding, shortage of goods, and pushing rents up. Protests against Chinese in general and parallel traders in particular have been staged in the town, and some even escalated into abusive episodes when protesters ended up in scuffles with the police or kicked and shouted at Chinese shoppers. On one hand, these episodes of antagonism reveal the exceeded social carrying capacity of the town. Conversely, residents' reactions are excellent examples of embodied geopolitics in tourism encounters. However, academic attempts to address this urgent socio-cultural issue are scarce. Those who did focused on 'top-down' policing of borders using criminological perspectives (see Laidler & Lee, 2015; Wan et al., 2016); an analysis of the host-guest encounters and interactions is lacking. This timely research assesses the impacts of this particular sub-national cross-border consumption activity on the everyday lives of residents to gain a more nuanced understanding of host-guest relationship.

To garner a preliminary understanding of the perceptions towards mainland Chinese day-trippers, 44 shopkeepers in Sheung Shui were asked in a survey to describe the visitors in

three phrases. Following this were semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 Hong Kong residents who have been living and/or working in Sheung Shui. Questions focused on their encounters with and perceptions of mainland Chinese visitors. Three recurring themes were drawn from the preliminary findings (Table 1).

Table 1. Findings from perception survey and interviews

Perception survey (N = 44)		In-depth interviews (N = 10)	Themes
Behaviour/attitude	*Physical presence*	*Behaviour/attitude*	
• Impolite	• Too many	• Spitting	
• Unhygienic	• Ridiculous	• Blocking passages	
• Ill-mannered	• Annoying	*Physical presence*	
• Unaware	• Harmful	• Mandarin heard	➔ **Morality**
• Blocking-passages	• Hateful	*Change of community landscape*	
• Selfish	• Love-hate	• Business orientation	
	• Tolerate	• Social bonding	
		Shops	
		• Short life-span	
		Goods	
* No significant terms related to temporality		• Pack-and-go in original packaging	➔ **Temporality**
		• Gone in an hour	
		People	
		• Inability to control one's speed of movement	
Movement of materials		*Bodily encounters with materials*	
• Blocking-passages		• Purchase as blockage	➔ **Materiality**
		• Brushing and striding across bodies and bags	

Morality

A common theme in our interviewees' narratives is that of morality. Some opined that they did not mind parallel trading activities, but could not accept the behaviour of mainland Chinese visitors. Packing purchases and irresponsibly disposing unwanted cupboard boxes along footpaths, thus blocking the passages, and spitting in public were some of the main complaints. Also, almost all the interviewees lamented the impolite and noisy crowd and how their feet were always 'rolled over by suitcases or trolleys' – a typical travel companion of mainland Chinese day-trippers. Some others were 'annoyed' by their presence and akin

their encounters to 'seeing ghosts'. There was also a hint of moral geographies at play when respondents bemoaned that Sheung Shui was 'getting Mainlandised' as one can hear Mandarin (as opposed to Cantonese) being 'spoken everywhere' and that it is getting 'dirtier and messier'. One resident demanded, "I don't want to see the Mainlanders…just feel disgusted." Other than complaining about the visitors' presence or behaviour, the interviewees also claimed that the influx of visitors, especially parallel traders, has rendered the marketplace profit-driven, lacking the 'social bonding' and 'human warmth' one experienced in the past.

Temporality

The temporal is another recurring theme in our interviews. Some observed the short life-span of shops catering to parallel traders. "You know they won't stay for long…don't even have a name for the shop. They just need some shelves for products and a cashier counter," exclaimed one resident. "In the past, people working in traditional pharmacies would organise the goods tidily. But now the goods are packed in boxes and gone in an hour." The locals seem upset with such temporariness of goods and services, and would often reminisce about a not-so-distant past with their preferred rhythm of everyday life. Furthermore, the speed of movement is another issue. Some would complain that due to the swamp of suitcases and bodies, one simply could not walk fast enough, while others brood over the fact that they were forced to walk too quickly in fear of getting knocked down. However, the concern is less about how fast or slow they were walking than their inability to *control* the speed of movement. As much as there is a geopolitical flavour in the locals' negative perception of their mainland Chinese counterparts, host-guest relations may also be affected by perceived changes to the tempo and rhythm of everyday life.

Materiality

Things and bodies featured prominently in the recollections of hosts' encounters with the visitors. One genre focused on stagnant crowds and bags of purchases blocking passage ways. A resident shared her experience with 'bodies that won't move':

> I usually use my bag as a weapon. The mainlanders have a lot of stuff with them. They underestimate their body size; they don't realise that they are carrying bags on both shoulders plus a suitcase. When you say 'excuse me', some will move slightly if you are lucky, but others won't move at all. Since we can't communicate, I simply brush my bag against them to pass through.

Such 'bodily encounters' and the brushing of bags reflect a more antagonistic response to mainland Chinese visitors as opposed to the more passive negativities mentioned earlier. In another encounter with the materialities of mainland Chinese travel, a local commuter of the 16-seater minibus grumbled, "It was full of 24-inch or 29-inch suitcases. I could barely pass through the aisle. I had to stride across the suitcases to get a seat."

Conclusion

In adopting an explanatory qualitative approach and incorporating cultural geographical analyses, this study offers a more critical alternative to the hitherto quantification-oriented studies on host-guest relations. The themes discussed above offer a framework that can help us reconceptualise host-guest relations and better explore how the cultural-geopolitics of day-tripping and human interactions permeates the everyday, and weave into the fabric of contemporary social life at the border.

Acknowledgments

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