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Breathing New Life into Old Theories

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Introduction

Various models and theories have been applied in tourism studies, such as hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943), psychographic typology (Plog 1973), and tourism area life cycle (Butler 1980). Almost all the classic theories are derived from Western studies but their application is not only limited to that context. Asian scholars have translated the theories into their own language to disseminate knowledge or have used these theories as frameworks to conduct case studies (Yang, Ryan and Zhang 2014; Zhong, Deng and Xiang 2008). However, the models and theories are from the perspectives of Western scholars, often based on their values and interpretations, which do not necessarily reflect those of Asians. For instance, according to Plog's (2001) psychographic destination positions, China is a country positioned in the near-venturer and venturer realm while Mexico (border) is near-dependable. Since he developed his dimensions based on Americans, it can only be applied to American travelers but may not necessarily be the same for others, such as Chinese or Korean travelers. Additionally, as tourists and places are two important elements of tourism, diverse characteristics of tourists and different development stages of countries may influence the validity and applicability of theories. For example, Arlt (2006) suggested that Mainland Chinese tourists do not behave based on Western individual values like self-actualization. Asians are more collectivist and stress social values rather than individual needs (Irimiás 2013). Therefore, we could argue that the hierarchy of needs for Western tourists and Mainland Chinese may be different. To have a better understanding of Western theories applied in an Asian context, this study took Butler's tourism area life cycle (TALC) as an example and compared its research enquiry and application in Western and Asian contexts. The objectives of this study are to identify the differences of the TALC in Western and Asian, specifically Chinese, contexts, and to discuss the potential causes of these differences.

Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle

The foundation of TALC dates back to Christaller's (1963) concept that tourist areas evolve with different types of tourists (Butler 1980; Martin and Uysal 1990). Subsequent researchers analyzed the types of tourists, and the two most popular typologies are those proposed by Cohen (1972) and Plog (1973). Cohen (1972) categorizes tourists into drifters, explorers, individual mass tourists, and organized mass tourists based on their preference for either familiarity or novelty, while Plog (1973) characterizes tourists as allocentrics, mid-centrics, and psychocentrics. Plog (1973) suggests that tourist areas appeal to different categories of tourists as they are at different stages of development. A tourist area is attractive to adventuresome allocentrics at the beginning. When the tourist area is better serviced and more popular, a large number of mid-centrics are likely to visit it. As it matures, the area would become more attractive to psychocentrics. Plog (1973) summarizes that the rising and falling of a destination are caused by the changes of different types of tourists. Since mid-centrics have the largest population while allocentrics and psychocentrics have the least, so a destination would experience a rise, peak and decline.

Based on previous studies, Butler proposed the tourism area life cycle (TALC) model in 1980. It is one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks in tourism research (Zhong et al. 2008). Butler (1980) suggests that tourist areas are influenced by various factors including visitors' dynamic needs and preferences, replacement of facilities and infrastructure, and changes in the initial attractions. He uses an asymptotic S-curve to holistically and comprehensively explain the dynamic development of a tourism area. The six stages of this asymptotic S-curve are exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline or rejuvenation (Figure 1). The life cycle model predicts different development stages of a tourism area. It gives implications for how to gain competitive advantages and shows that a tourism area has limited life, so researchers and marketers need to adopt various strategies to rejuvenate or extend its life cycle.

There is no doubt that the TALC is one of the most popular models derived in the Western context and applied to the Chinese context (Zhong et al. 2008). Several classic tourism textbooks in China, such as *Tourism Planning* (Ma, 2011), *Principles of Tourism Planning* (Wu and Yu 2010) and *Regional Tourism Planning Exploitation and Management* (Zheng and Chu 2004), include and discuss Butler's TALC. Since it is in the textbooks of compulsory courses at universities, almost all students majoring in tourism management in China learn about the TALC. Additionally, some tourism planners use the TALC as a tool to analyze the development stage of a destination and to make planning suggestions, even though Butler states that "the shape of the curve must be expected to vary for different areas" (Butler 1980, p.11).

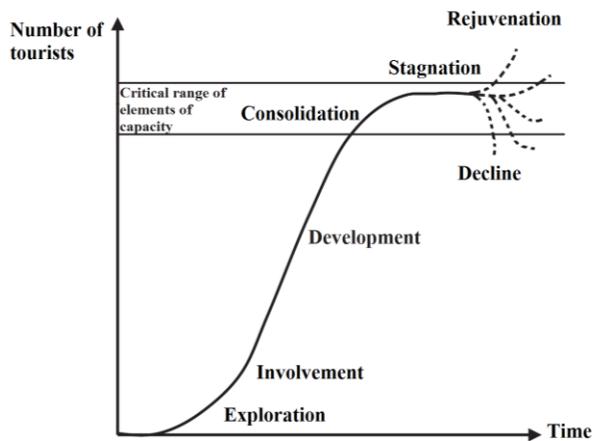


Figure 1. The tourism area life cycle (Butler 1980)

Methodology

This study conducted a two-step analysis to identify the differences of the TALC in Western and Chinese contexts. In the first step, articles that use the TALC published in English and Chinese academic journals were analyzed. Based on their comparison, differences of the TALC in Western and Chinese contexts were found. It could be argued that the TALC is inapplicable in many cases in China. To gain deeper insights into this proposition, this study provided some explanations about the inapplicability. In the second step, an expert review approach was adopted to verify these explanations. Since the expert review approach has been recognized as an efficient way to improve the validity of research (Choi and Sirakaya 2006; Delamere 1997), the conclusions of this study do not only reflect the authors' personal interpretation.

The objective of this research is to compare the differences of the TALC in two contexts, so only a limited number of experts familiar with the TALC in both Canadian and Chinese contexts can serve as verifiers. Therefore, judgment sampling was identified as the most appropriate way to recruit experts. This study recruited nine Chinese experts who have engaged in tourism research for at least eight years and who have rich experience in doing tourism planning projects in China. These experts are drawn from universities, the public sector, a non-profit government organization (NGO), and planning institutes (Table 1). The Chinese experts were asked to answer three questions: (1) Do you agree with the authors' explanations for the differences of the TALC in Western and Chinese contexts? Why? (2) With which arguments do you disagree? Why? (3) Could you please give your insights into the applicability of the TALC in China based on your knowledge and working experience?

Table 1. Affiliations of the experts

Expert number	Affiliation	Category of the affiliation
1	China Academy of Urban Planning & Design	Planning institute
2	Shanghai Urban Planning & Design Research Institute	Planning institute
3	Zhoushan Tourism Commission	Public sector
4	Xiamen Urban Planning & Design Institute	Planning institute
5	China Academy of Urban Planning & Design	Planning institute
6	Beijing Municipal Commission of Urban Planning	Public sector
7	Beijing Jiaotong University	University
8	Peking University	University
9	China Construction Industry Association	Non-profit government organization

Results

To analyze the differences of the TALC in Western and Chinese academic articles, the keywords “tourism” and “life cycle” were used to search English articles and “旅游 (tourism)” and “生命周期 (life cycle)” were used to search Chinese articles. Based on the citation frequency, this study chose the top 20 English and top 20 Chinese articles related to the TALC topic. Additionally, this study left out the English articles using Chinese destinations as a case, such as Zhong et al. (2008) and Yang et al. (2014), to avoid a mixed-up between Western and Asian thoughts. After eliminating 4 studies and keeping the other top 20 cited articles, this study conducted content analysis and found four differences in these two contexts: (1) terminology, (2) research perspectives, (3) cases chosen, and (4) selection of tourism resources.

The TALC has received considerable attention from Western scholars since 1980 (Omar, Othman and Mohamed 2014). However, it was only introduced into Chinese tourism studies at the end of the 20th century (Zhang 2013). During the 1990s, Chinese scholars focused more on its application (Bao 1995; Bao 1997; Lu 1997; Xie 1995), but began to theoretically discuss the TALC in the 21st century (Li, Ying and Zhang 2004; Ren and Li 2003; Yang and Lu 2004). In the most recent decade, there has been an extensive debate surrounding the application of the TALC (Liao 2006; Xu and Long 2005; Xu, Zheng and Bao 2005; Zhang 2013).

After comparing the top 20 English and Chinese articles (Table 2), it was found that scholars used different terminology to describe the TALC, conducted research from different perspectives, selected different scopes of cases, and investigated different tourism resources.

Table 2. The differences of the TALC in Western and Chinese contexts

	Differences	English context	Chinese context
Terminology	Tourism/tourist area life cycle	3, 6, 10, 15, 16, 17	[1], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [14]
	Resort life cycle	1, 2, 5, 8, 14, 13, 18, 19	[16], [17]
	Destination life cycle	4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 20	[10], [13], [18], [19]
	Tourism product life cycle		[2], [4], [11], [12], [15]
	Life cycle of destination image		[20]
Research perspectives	Applicability and implication	1, 4, 7, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 20	[1], [5], [7], [16], [18], [20]
	Attributes influencing the TALC (e.g. social, environmental and economic changes, and policies)	5, 6, 8, 17, 19	[9]
	Theoretical analysis	12, 14	[2], [4], [8], [10], [11], [12], [14], [13], [15], [19]
	Literature review		[6], [17]
	Strategies for development (e.g. restructuring or taking the exit route)	2, 3	
	Tourism planning	9	
	Carrying capacity		[3]
Cases chosen	Single tourist attractions	6 (Cypress Gardens), 9 (Niagara Falls, Canada),	[1] (Jianshui Swallow Cave), [4] (Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum, Yaolin, Mochou Lake Park), [5] (Mount Huangshan, Mount Jiuhuashan), [7] (theme parks), [13] (cities), [16] (Mount Putuoshan), [18] (Dujiangyan Tourist Attraction and Bifengxia Tourist Attraction), [20] (Zhongshan region)
	Combination of tourist attractions	1 (Torbay, UK), 2 (Torbay, UK), 4 (The Isle of Man), 5 (Bahamas), 7 (Melanesia), 8 (Parksville and Qualicum Beach, Canada), 11 (Lancaster County, USA), 13 (Mediterranean resorts), 16 (Tenerife, Spain), 17 (Catalan coast, Spain), 19 (Atlantic city, USA), 20 (Smoky Mountain region, USA)	
Selection of tourism resources	Island	4, 5, 7, 16	
	Coastal resort/beach	1, 2, 8, 13, 17	
	Falls	9	
	Lake		[18]
	Metropolis	11, 19	[13]
	Mountainous destination	20	[5], [16]
	Cave		[1]
	Recreation area (e.g. theme park and caravan park)	6	[4], [7], [20]

English Context	Chinese context
1. Agarwal (1997)	[1] Ding and Bao (2000)
2. Agarwal (2002)	[2] Li (1997)
3. Baum (1998)	[3] Liu and Wu (2004)
4. Cooper and Jackson (1989)	[4] Liu, Zhang, Huang and Xie (2003)
5. Debbage (1990)	[5] Lu (1997)
6. Di Benedetto and Bojanic (1993)	[6] Shao and Gao (2006)
7. Douglas (1997)	[7] Wang and Huang (2004)
8. Foster and Murphy (1991)	[8] Wu and Huang (2004)
9. Getz (1992)	[9] Xie (1995)
10. Haywood (1986)	[10] Xu, Zheng and Bao (2005)
11. Hovinen (2002)	[11] Xu (1997)
12. Johnston (2001)	[12] Xu (2001)
13. Knowles and Curtis (1999)	[13] Xu and Long (2005)
14. Lundtorp and Wanhill (2001)	[14] Yan (2001)
15. Martin and Uysal (1990)	[15] Yang (1996)
16. Oreja Rodríguez, Parra-López and Yanes-Estévez (2008)	[16] Yang, Liu, Zhang, Lu and Xuan (2004)
17. Priestley and Mundet (1998)	[17] Yang and Lu (2004)
18. Russell and Faulkner (2004)	[18] Yang (2003)
19. Stansfield (1978)	[19] Yu (1997)
20. Tooman (1997)	[20] Zhou and Sha (2001)

Note: [4] used both “tourism/tourist area life cycle” and “tourism product life cycle” terms.

Even though Western scholars also expressed the TALC in different ways, such as “resort life cycle” and “destination life cycle”, all these phrases refer to a place. Interestingly, the TALC was translated in two different ways into the Chinese context. In addition to the “life cycle of a place” (旅游地生命周期; e.g. tourism/tourist area, resort, and destination), “tourism product life cycle” (旅游产品生命周期) is also widely used (Li 1997; Xu 1997; Xu 2001; Yang 1996). There is a debate in Chinese studies as to whether “tourism area life cycle” or “tourism product life cycle” is the more appropriate term (Li 1997; Xu 1997; Yan 2001; Yang 1996; Yu 1997; Zhang 2013). Chinese researchers define tourism products as intangible services that satisfy tourists’ needs; and these services are related to six elements of a trip (i.e. dining, lodging, transportation, travel, recreation and leisure, and shopping) (Yang 1996; Tao and Lin 1994, p. 35). The destination is deemed to be a combination of various tourism products (Agarwal 2002). The relationship between a tourism area and tourism products are just like a farm and farm products, or a factory and industrial products (Xu 1997). The changes in the development of a tourism area are caused by the combination effect of tourism products (Liao 2006; Liu et al. 2003; Zhu and Zhang 1999). The tourism area-tourism product life cycle model proposed by Liu et al. (2003) indicates that the rise and fall in popularity of a tourism area is consistent with that of tourism products (Figure 2). It also shows that adding new tourism products is a strategy to maintain or raise the attractiveness of a tourism destination. For example, the Disneyland theme parks often design and open new attractions or events according to tourists’ demand and to keep the park “fresh” in the minds of repeat visitors.

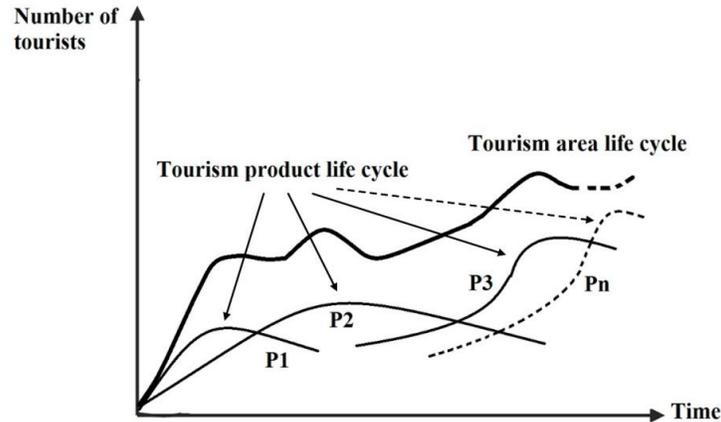
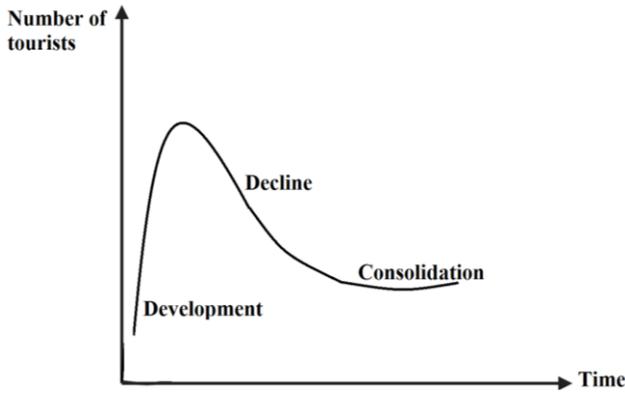


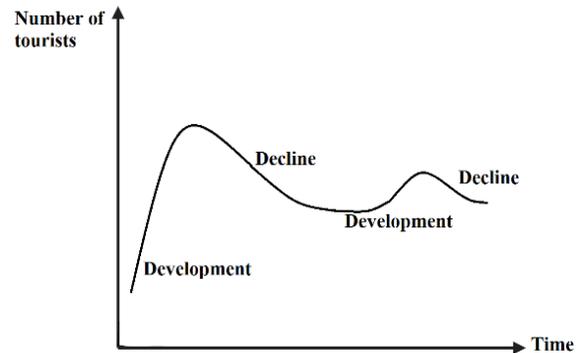
Figure 2. The tourism area-tourism product life cycle (Liu et al. 2003)

However, some Chinese researchers argue that it is difficult to predict the development of a tourism area based on tourism products because these have diverse characteristics and different development stages (Xu et al. 2005; Yang 1996). Demonstrating the development of a tourism area based on the different features of all tourism products (e.g. hotels, tourist attractions, and events) is not scientific (Xu et al. 2005). The life cycle of a tourism area is reflected by that of tourism products only if the tourism area has one dominant tourism product or the development stages of all tourism products are the same. Based on this criterion, Chinese researchers often select a single tourism attraction as a case to examine the TALC (Ding and Bao 2000; Liu et al. 2003; Lu 1997; Wang and Huang 2004).

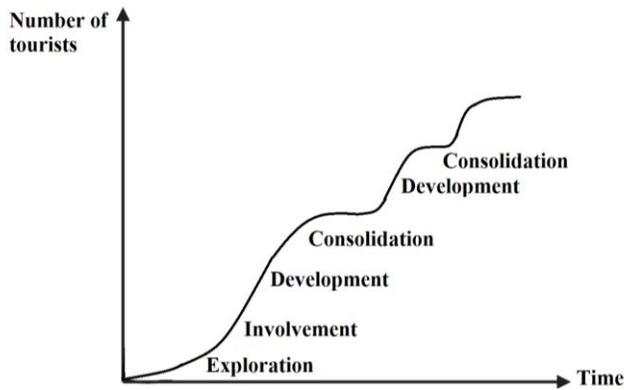
Western scholars frequently examined the applicability of the TALC and investigated its influencing factors, whereas Chinese scholars conducted more theoretical analysis of this model. In particular, they conducted literature reviews and critiqued the theoretical framework of the TALC. Li (1997) argued that tourism products have a life cycle but tourism destinations do not. A tourism product (e.g. hotel, restaurant and shopping malls) could be closed down because of significantly declining tourist arrivals, but a destination will not be shut down. Some destinations in China, such as the Forbidden City and the Great Wall will never fall into decline because of their unique and precious tourism resources (Yan 2001; Yang 1996). Additionally, Chinese researchers noted that the TALC can be seen from two perspectives: the number of tourists and the profit/income of destinations. For example, even though the number of tourist arrivals of the Yaolin tourism area declined, its profitability experienced a gradual increase as a result of introducing some expensive and interactive tourism activities (Li 1997). In addition to criticizing the TALC, some Chinese scholars proposed new curves, such as “development – decline – consolidation (成长–顿挫–成熟)”, “circulation – recirculation (循环–再循环)” and “scalped shape (扇贝形)” (Figure 3-A, B and C), based on the development of Chinese destinations (Ding and Bao 2000; Li 1997; Xu and Long 2005; Yang and Lu 2004). Bao (1998) and Zhang and Wu (1997) also discussed the life cycle of theme parks in China (Figure 3-D), which is different from Butler’s TALC.



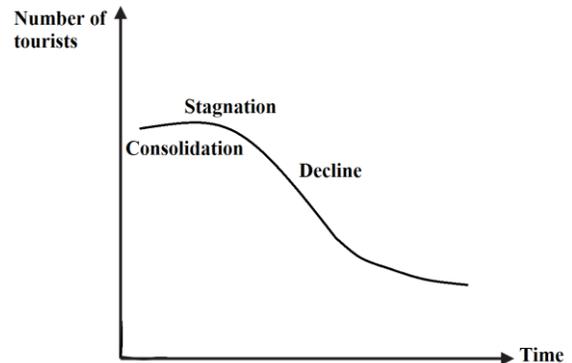
A. Development – decline – consolidation
(Li 1997; Yang and Lu 2004)



B. Circulation – recirculation
(Ding and Bao 2000; Li 1997; Yang and Lu 2004)



C. Scalloped shape
(Li 1997; Xu and Long 2005; Yang and Lu 2004)



D. Life cycle of theme parks
(Bao 1998; Zhang and Wu 1997)

Figure 3. The tourism area/product life cycle proposed in the Chinese context

In terms of the man-made tourism destinations in China, the periods of exploration and involvement are so short that the life cycle curve looks like Figure 3-A or Figure 3-D. For example, when a theme park is opened to the public, the number of tourists peaks very quickly (Wang and Huang 2004). The Splendid China Miniature Scenic Spot in Shenzhen had 3.32 million tourists in 1990 when it first opened, but the number dropped to 1.12 million in 1995 (Dong 2000). Different development modes in China and Western countries are a cause of the discrepancy of the TALC. The theme park investors in China tend to complete their construction at one time instead of building them in phases (Wang and Huang 2004). On the contrary, many theme parks in Western countries, such as Disneyworld or Universal Orlando, are built in two or more phases. Additionally, Chinese theme park investors hope to gain profits as soon as possible, and thus they put much effort into advertising and attracting tourists' attention rather than considering a sustainable development. This strategy works well at the beginning but leads to a fast decline because of insufficient funds or inappropriate operation.

Chinese researchers argue that the life cycle of some special tourism resources, such as karst caves, have their own characteristics (Ding and Bao 2000; Li et al. 2004). This kind of destination often enters the stage of development directly without experiencing exploration and involvement. Since

karst caves are relatively isolated, the periods of consolidation and stagnation are very short. After the stage of stagnation, the number of tourists at karst caves often drops very fast until it reaches a certain level and starts to increase again. The life cycle of karst caves follows the curve of “circulation - recirculation” (Figure 3-B).

Even though both China and Western countries have traditional tourism resources, like mountains, the development of these destinations is different. As indicated by Tooman (1997), Butler’s model fits well with the tourism development of the Smoky Mountain region in the USA. However, this model does not reflect the development of Mount Huangshan in China (Lu 1997). In particular, Mount Huangshan has not reached the stage of stagnation and decline of the TALC, but rather continues to maintain a developing trend. Lu (1997) mentions three main reasons leading to the different development curve: uniqueness of the attractions, potential tourists, and political environment. Firstly, Mount Huangshan, as a World Cultural and Natural Heritage site, has strong competitiveness and attracts tourists from all over the world. Additionally, this mountain is located in Anhui Province, near to Shanghai, Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province, where a large number of potential tourists live. Thirdly, the government of Anhui Province provides significant support for the development of this tourism destination. Under these three favourable conditions, the number of tourists at Mount Huangshan continues to grow. Overall, its development is consistent with the curve of the scalloped shape shown in Figure 3-C.

When applying the TALC, Western and Chinese scholars selected cases of different scopes. Most cases used in a Western context are tourism destinations consisting of various tourist attractions, such as a coastal area, a city, a county, a country, or a region. Differently, Chinese scholars often chose relatively small destinations, like a park, a mountain, or a cave. This may be caused by different accessibility of data. It is more difficult for Chinese scholars to collect data at the county or country level and official statistics can be highly questionable with frequently changing methodologies. Additionally, from the Chinese scholars’ perspectives, the life cycle of a single tourism attraction is easier to be described or predicted compared to a complex tourism destination.

Discussion

Based on the content analysis, this study found that Western and Chinese researchers have four main differences in analyzing and discussing the TALC: terminology, research perspectives, cases chosen, and selection of tourism resources. This finding was confirmed by nine Chinese experts.

Terminology

Tourism as an applied science has relatively weak theoretical bases, and the same terminology has different meanings in different contexts. For example, ‘tourism destination’ can refer to a tourism attraction, a city, or even a country. Additionally, different terms are used to describe the same concept in tourism studies, such as tourism destination life cycle and tourism area life cycle. The inadequate justification of terms also leads to different interpretations, especially when they are translated into another language. It is not surprising to see both the terms “tourism/tourist area life cycle” and “tourism product life cycle” in the Chinese context.

All nine Chinese experts admit that the different terms describing the TALC create some challenges in its understanding, especially its scope of application. Expert #4 states that most studies in the Chinese context analyze one specific tourism resource or attraction while those in

the Western context analyze the whole destination (whether county, city, region and country). This could explain the different shapes of the development curves.

“The definition or the scope of a tourist area is not justified in Butler’s TALC. Since Chinese scholars have different interpretations of a tourist area, they have analyzed the evolution of a region, an attraction, and even a restaurant. The different objectives have a great influence on the applicability of the TALC.” (Expert #6)

Research Perspectives

Western and Chinese researchers do have different research perspectives when analyzing the TALC. Since it is derived from a Western context and then applied to the Chinese context, most Chinese researchers theoretically discussed the concept of the TALC at the early stage (Table 2). In the recent decade, however, they have paid more attention to the inapplicability of the TALC in the Chinese context. The dissemination of the TALC in China follows a gradual process: knowing what it is and criticizing its applicability.

“When we first learned about the TALC in a Tourism Management course, we were only taught that a destination will follow the six stages of Butler’s TALC, and the instructor did not pay much attention to discussing the differences in both contexts. However, I found that the real development curve of a destination can significantly deviate from the TALC when I did tourism planning projects.” (Expert #1)

Additionally, Chinese researchers have seldom explored the topic of local involvement and the TALC. However, Western scholars have given some insights into the relationship between residents and tourism development over the different stages of the TALC (Johnson and Snepenger 2006; Pennington-Gray 2004). Since residents play very important roles in destination development, studies on local involvement and the TALC could be conducted in the Chinese context in the future.

“China now puts much attentions on the economic development. However, how to benefit local residents is extremely important. Especially with the development of a destination, residents may have different types of involvement.” (Expert #4)

Cases Chosen and Selection of Tourism Resources

As mentioned before, since the definition and scope of a tourist area has not been clearly justified, Chinese researchers often chose relatively small destinations because of the data issue. However, the cases chosen and selection of tourism resources have an impact on the applicability of the TALC. For example, some Chinese researchers discussed the applicability of the TALC in theme parks, which are owned by the private sector and where reliable data about tourist visits could be obtained. However, theme parks have many different characteristics compared to islands and coastal resorts analyzed in the Western contexts, and these could reduce the TALC’s applicability in the Chinese context.

Expert #1 feels that some theme parks and recreational destinations in China are more likely to skip the exploration and involvement stages because of the enormous demand but this may not be necessarily applicable for national parks. Destinations based on natural resources may follow the

steps of exploration, involvement, development and consolidation since these destinations are not enclosed parks and need the participation of local communities.

However, Expert #2 argues the exploration and involvement stages do exist for theme parks (e.g. Disneyland and Happy Valley). These two stages are only condensed dramatically because of the intervention of investors, destination planners and managers. The life cycle without the exploration and involvement stages is what the tourism investors expect to see. Therefore, planners and managers analyze the demand of the target markets and conduct massive marketing campaigns before opening for operation. Investors do not need to wait for the number of tourists to increase gradually, and thus quickly profit from their investment.

Additionally, the availability of reliable data is a factor constraining Chinese researchers from analyzing a whole destination, such as a county, city or region. As indicated by Expert #6, analyzing the evolution of these geographic areas needs long-term data collection. Since China has a long history, many tourist destinations have been opened to tourists for even hundreds of years. Since continuous and reliable data are unavailable, some stages of development may be hard to identify in China. This is especially the case when conducting studies on destinations or attractions in the early stages of the model. Several experts (Experts #2, #5, #6, and #9) also argue that the poor quality of tourism statistics in China may lead to some deviation of the model.

“The tourism statistics in China are tricky, since the statistical approach is not scientific. So it is very important to get the right data to study whether a tourist attraction fits the TALC.”
(Expert #5)

Other Factors Influencing the Applicability of the TALC

In addition to the four differences of the TALC between the Western and Chinese contexts identified from the content analysis, this study also found that the inapplicability of the TALC in the Chinese context is due to China being in the developing stage and its bureaucracy having greater power.

Stage of development

The TALC actually reflects the relationship between supply and demand. The enormous demand of Chinese tourists and adequate investment make the TALC in China often skip the exploration and involvement stages. After the Chinese economic reform, Chinese life quality improved significantly, and Chinese people have considerable pent-up demand for travel. With a population of around 1.37 billion, China has a huge number of potential tourists. Additionally, its annual real GDP witnessed a 10% year-over-year growth from 1979 to 2014 (CRS Report 2015). It recently became the second largest economy and is progressively playing a more important role in the world (World Bank 2015). The tourism industry in China has been attracting investment from both domestic and international investors. This lays a good foundation for the development of destinations. Before tourist attractions are opened to the public, tourism investors often spend considerable sums on marketing. The numerous advertisements and big events generate much attention, and therefore, as soon as an attraction is opened, a very large number of people visit immediately, essentially skipping the first two stages and moving directly into advanced development. For example, when the Shanghai Disney Resort pre-sold tickets on March 28, 2016, all the tickets for the June 16 opening date were sold out within a couple of hours, and the booking

website crashed because of 5 million clicks (Hernandez 2016). This huge demand by Chinese tourists makes the development curve different from that of the TALC.

Chinese experts reviewing this article agreed with this assessment. Expert #3 states that China has had a prosperous tourism industry in the latest three decades, which is in line with the rapid economic development of this country. The increasing disposable income stimulates Chinese people's impetus for traveling (Expert #4), even though Chinese tourists do not understand their inner demand for traveling, they just enjoy the feeling of being at a different destination. Chinese tourists even accept to visit some destinations that are too crowded since they think crowded destinations are common phenomena in China. This kind of irrational tourism decision-making signifies an immature tourism market where the TALC may not be applicable.

Bureaucratic power

The Chinese government has more bureaucratic power in formulating and implementing regulations or policies than is typical in Western countries, even when compared to a highly centralized country like France that also implements five-year plans. In China, all levels of government and even some tourist attraction operators are required to elaborate a strategic plan to guide the development of the tourism industry every five years. With a planned economy, tourism destinations in China could develop in a more sustainable way and avoid an eventual decline to some extent. Additionally, the government can quickly respond to any negative factors influencing tourism destinations.

All the Chinese experts agree that governments play an active role in developing and managing destinations. Expert #3 comments that "The authors refer to the 5-year general planning. This is really an important factor underpinning tourism development for almost every destination in China." Expert #4 further clarifies that most destinations and attractions in China are owned by the local governments. The ownership enables governments to have more bureaucratic power in planning and managing the destinations. Expert #4 also mentions that China National Tourism Administration published *Tourism Law* in 2013, which further regulates and facilitates the development of the tourism industry. The active role of Chinese governments influences the development of destinations, and thus has impact on the shape of development curve.

However, whether Chinese governments can play an enduring and effective role is questioned by Experts #2, #5 and #9.

"The bureaucratic power could have great influence on the development of certain tourism areas, ensuring their sustainability and avoiding direct declines in many cases. However, it remains to be verified whether the planned economy system is a stimulating factor under all circumstances." (Expert #2)

"Although a tourism strategic plan could be a good guide for destinations, there are still chances that these destinations go through a bottleneck period due to inappropriate planning, unfriendly tourism environment, or the same old tourist attractions. It is the same with World Heritage Sites, regardless of their attraction to people inside and outside the country, they can lose tourists if they do nothing about the changing needs of tourists." (Expert #5)

“Even though the Chinese government has more bureaucratic power than its Western counterparts, it does not mean that the Chinese government is able to control everything. If a destination provides poor facilities and services, a declining trend is its destiny.” (Expert #9)

Conclusion

It should be noted that the same theory or model could be interpreted or applied differently in different cultural contexts. Taking the TALC as an example, Western and Chinese researchers use different terms, adopt different research perspectives, choose different scopes for cases, and select different types of tourism resources. Furthermore, some Chinese scholars question the applicability of the TALC (Li 1997; Yang 1996) and propose different shapes of the curve (Li 1997). The three typical life cycles in the Chinese context are “development – decline – consolidation”, “circulation – recirculation,” and “scalped shape.” These researchers argue that the tourism destinations in China often skip the exploration and involvement stages and are less likely to face an eventual decline. This study put forward four potential causes for the differences between Western and Chinese contexts: terminology, research perspectives, cases chosen, and selection of tourism resources. Additionally, the inapplicability of the TALC in the Chinese context may also be due to the difference in stages of development between China and Western countries and in bureaucratic power.

This study makes important theoretical contributions in terms of the generalization of classic theories or models. It points out a critical issue that a theory that can be applied very well in a Western context may not necessarily be a good fit in an Asian context. The life cycles of the tourism destinations in China are more likely to be different from the six stages of TALC. The different development curves show that different countries have their own characteristics, which may influence the validity or applicability of theories or models. However, previous studies often use theories neglecting the original context. There is a need to reappraise the generalization of classic theories or models when translating them into a different context. In particular, special attention needs to be paid to the transition between the Western and Asian contexts because they have significantly different cultural backgrounds, development stages, bureaucratic powers, economic systems, and tourism resources.

Limitations and Future Research

This research discussed the TALC in the Western and Chinese contexts based on content analysis and expert reviews. The sample size of this study is not large, which may lead to some potential biases. However, the approach of a two-step analysis can increase the validity of the conclusion.

Overall, destination development is always a popular topic, and several aspects of the TALC could be explored in future research. First, as discussed in this paper, the TALC is not applicable in many cases in China. Future studies could analyze the development curve of destinations in China since China is still in an economic transformation period and the governments are gradually delegating their ownership of tourism attractions to the private sector (Expert #8). The change in ownership may also influence the development of a destination. Analyzing the number of tourists before and after the ownership change could shed further light on the TALC.

Second, future studies could analyze whether the development curve of a destination in this era still follows the six stages of the TALC. Expert #1 believes that the application of the internet could influence the applicability of the TALC not only in the Chinese context but also in the Western one. Butler proposed the TALC in 1980 when the internet just started making its appearances. Today the internet has become part of our daily lives and changed all aspects of communication dramatically. Destination managers often post photos of scenery and update interesting events online to attract tourists. By browsing the websites, tourists can familiarize themselves with the destination even before they visit. The internet shortens the exploration and involvement stages of a destination and can even help it skip these two stages, no matter in the Western or the Chinese context (Experts #1 and #7).

Third, since the number of tourists may not be a good indicator of the evolution of a tourist area, other measurements could be explored. Butler (1980) used the relationship between the number of tourists and time to indicate the evolution of a tourism area, but it may be inappropriate in many cases since this number is very vulnerable to major events (Expert #6). The number of tourists could increase dramatically because of an excellent marketing initiative. For example, some popular entertainment programs in China, such as “Where are we going, Dad?” and “Running Man,” have created a huge number of tourist visits for the program recording destinations. However, the large number of tourists does not mean the destinations become mature since the facilities of those villages cannot be updated immediately (Experts #4 and #6). Therefore, there is a need to find a better indicator of the development of a tourist area.

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