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Framing China as a Tourism Destination: A Study on Media Discourse

Introduction

Humans rarely have an unmediated contact with reality, and what they know is socially constructed or mediated (Beeton, Bowen and Santos, 2005:28). “Any message which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame...gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the message included in the frame” (Bateson, 1972:188). However, people do not usually reflect on or question these frames because most of them are acquired through the process of socialization (Goffman, 1974). It is precisely because of this that mass media has the power to portray reality.

The same is true in the context of tourism. Tourist experience is typically a mediated experience. “When individuals’ understanding of a destination and culture is limited, the media’s framing can become the main reference” (Santos, 2005). Contemporary mass media plays an important role in the communicative staging of destination. During the pre-trip phase, many tourists’ decision of where to go and what to see are affected by travel writers’ or professionals’ opinions (Williams and Shaw, 1995); when they arrive in a destination, there is a dominant frame for them to rely on (Santos, 2005). Social constructionism maintains that reality is socially generated and maintained by language (Kuhn, 1962), and it is a construction in people’s minds (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The reality mass media has constructed about a destination is just a representation of the destination, not necessarily the accurate and complete reality. Thus, it is crucial to examine and understand the destination reality disseminated by the mass media.

Through analyzing the content of the *New York Times* travel sections’ coverage of China as a destination, this paper aims to look at how China is constructed through media discourse and narratives. Specifically, this paper has three objectives. (1) To identify the various and recurring coverage frames offered to the readers of the *New York Times*; (2) To identify general narrative characteristics of these travel articles on China; and (3) To explore the representation of China and Chinese people in western media discourse.

This research is theoretically grounded on the notion of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1971 [1966]). However, Berger and Luckmann did not suggest specific methods for empirical research. In analyzing these newspaper articles, we will attempt to utilize the framing analysis of texts (Santos, 2005).

The Concept of Frame and Framing Analysis

The concept of frame in existing literature is usually addressed through sociological and psychological approaches (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). The former focuses on the interpretative and rhetorical processes of media discourse, as well as the processes of news production and dissemination (Gitlin, 1980; Snow and Bendford, 1988, 1992; Gamson, 1992), whereas the latter focuses on the organizing structure of thought and the process by which audience interpret information (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984;

Iyengar, 1991; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). This study choose to use the sociological concept of frame to analyze the underlying frame on China as a destination.

The notion of frame, as a subject for academic analysis, was first proposed by Goffman in his seminal work *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974). In his view, individuals develop their thoughts and experiences under a series of frames based on the individual's prior experiences and knowledge (Goffman, 1974). To Gitlin (1980:7), framing was "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse." Gamson developed the concept further. He maintained that a frame is a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to events related to an issue" (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987: 143). According to Gamson and colleagues, there are some symbolic devices that signify the uses of frames, including metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images (Gamson and lasch, 1983; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Entman holds that to frame "is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1993:52). In contrast, the conceptualization of framing in psychology emphasizes that individuals' cognition is affected by the allocation of information. Therefore, the process of framing in psychology is to place information in a special context so that individuals give selective attention to some elements over others (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984).

By identifying the use of terminology, general narrative characteristics and themes in media discourse, researchers are able to understand the deeper meaning of the entire communication (Santos, 2005). Initially, framing analysis was used in political communication; after that, it was identified as a useful tool in negotiation research (Fischer and Ury, 1981; Neale and Bazerman, 1985) and mass media research (Gamson, 1992; Entman, 1993; Berger, 1997). Many scholars have used this approach in different areas of tourism research (Balme, 1998; Buzinde, Santos and Smith, 2006; Noy, 2008; Pearce, 2009; Santos, 2004; Wu and Xue et al., 2012). Their works involve the introduction of the framing analysis approach and how framing theory can assist tourism research (Santos, 2005), empirical research using framing analysis which include analysis of travel writing and narratives to identify the representational dynamics (Santos, 2004), analysis of online news stories to study tourism policy-making (Wu and Xue et al., 2012), tourism marketing study (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998) and tourists' activities study (Jaworski and Pritchard, 2005).

Different from quantitative content analysis (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994) which uses standardized measurements to code, characterize and compare "manifest texts" (Choi et al., 2007; Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Horng and Tsai, 2010; Hudson and Miller, 2005; Kemp and Dwyer, 2003; Kim and Stepchenkova, 2015; Lin and Mao, 2015; Stepchenkova and Zhan, 2013), framing analysis focuses on examining and identifying underlying frames from the media narratives. This method allows researchers to progress from studying tangible narratives to developing a conceptual interpretation that helps to further understand those media realities (Santos, 2005).

Therefore, we believe it appropriate to use framing analysis to identify the hidden frames of media coverage on China as a tourism destination.

Study Method

In order to identify the various and recurring coverage frames about China and the representation of China and Chinese people in western media discourse, we will conduct a framing analysis of the *New York Times* travel sections' coverage of China. A total of 94 articles on China published in the travel section of the *New York Times* website between 2005 and 2015 have been collected. To explore the underlying narrative frames, articles involving Chinese outbound tourism, travel trends, industry report, introducing China together with other destinations such as Japan and Korea, columns that have no detailed introduction about China such as "Letters to the editor", "Comings and goings" , "In transit" and "Q&A" were excluded. At last, 47 feature articles about tourism in China will be analyzed in three stages by two separate coders. First, we will look at the totality use of terminology and collect terminology by reading all of the 47 articles word by word. Then, we will focus on the terminology identified in the first stage, combined with the context to answer what occurs, when, how, and where. Last, general narrative characteristics and the theme used will be identified, similar themes will be combined.

The coverage of China as a tourism destination in the *New York Times* is chosen as analysis unit for the following considerations. First, according to Wikipedia, the *New York Times* has the largest circulation among the metropolitan newspapers in the United States. As a national newspaper, it is acknowledged as a powerful source of information setting the national and international news agenda (Santos, 2002). Second, the *New York Times* is recognized as a respected newspaper with higher interest in international issues and events (Santos, 2002). Last but not the least, the *New York Times* has the travel sections' coverage on domestic and foreign travel and tourism every weekend. There are many columns introducing tourism destinations and trips for their readers.

Expected Outcomes

First, this study will identify some underlying frames of China as a destination created by the *New York Times*. Second, how these frames define the situations and the people in China will be explored. Last, this study will discuss the ideologies transmitted by these articles about China as a destination.

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