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Chinese Tourism Research Trends:

A Social Network Analysis of Doctoral Dissertations from 1999 to 2009

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ABSTRACT

Both the tourism industry and tourism education are growing rapidly in China. Due to language barrier, most of tourism research achievements in China remain unknown to international tourism research community. This study examines what Chinese tourism researchers have done by analyzing 200 tourism doctoral dissertations in China written between 1999 and 2010. Using the content analysis and social network analysis method, the study characterizes the current situation and trends of tourism research in China, including research topics, methods, and authors' profile. The study also identified topic evolution in tourism research.

Keywords: *Tourism research, doctoral dissertation, China, content analysis, social network analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

In China, tourism education grows in tune with the development of the tourism industry, which experienced consistent and significant growth since the implementation of the policy of “reform and opening up” in 1979. According to the WTO, in 2020, China will become the largest tourist country and the fourth largest for overseas travel. The same increasing trend is evident in tourism education in terms of the number of both students studying tourism and academic institutions providing tourism programs. The great expansion of interest in tourism studies has led to a plethora of tourism-related texts, journals, conferences and researches (Botterill, Haven, & Gale, 2002). However, due to language barriers and resource constraints, opinions and research findings of indigenous Chinese scholars have hardly been exposed to the outside world (Zhang, 2003).

With China's role in the world tourism market becoming more important, international tourism academics are in great interest to get a more comprehensive understanding of tourism

research topics and methods in China (Huang & Hsu, 2008). However, despite a few research works regarding China's tourism published in English, few have focused on picturing the state of tourism research in China (Huang & Hsu, 2008). As Hall (1991) mentioned, the academic respectability of tourism is gained by the conduct of postgraduate studies, particularly in the form of research dissertations. Therefore the goal of this study is to outline and introduce China's tourism research by an examination of past Chinese doctoral dissertation. Combining content analysis with social network analysis method, the study intends to: 1) to analyze and map the structure of tourism research in China; 2) to identify the key topics and the commonly used research methods in tourism; and 3) to examine the topic evolution of tourism knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism as the subject of doctoral dissertations

In North America, researchers have been interested in tourism doctoral dissertations study for a long time. The earliest studies were Crichton's (1978) examination of 122 dissertations related to "travel, recreation, and leisure" and Pizam and Chacko's (1982) examination of 65 dissertations with a relevance to "hospitality and tourism". The pioneering study is done by Jafari and Aaser (1988) on tourism doctoral dissertations in North America which identified the growing trends and the top academic disciplines. The following studies all duplicated Jafari and Aaser's study. For example, Hall (1991) analyzed the postgraduate tourism dissertations produced in Australian institutions. Meyer-Arendt & Justice (2002) documented numerical, temporal, disciplinary, and institutional trends in the production of tourism doctoral dissertations in North America. Most recently, Afifi (2009) reviewed doctoral dissertations on tourism in Egypt and identified the trends and gaps in Egyptian tourism research.

Tourism research trends in China

Recently, a lot of indigenous studies have been conducted to investigate the current state of China's tourism research but were published in Chinese only (Huang & Hsu, 2008). Most of these researches were conducted by reviewing and analyzing research articles of China's leading tourism journals to identify research themes, research methods, researchers' background, and differences of Chinese tourism research from international ones (Song et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2001 ; Zhang, 2002; Zhang & Lu, 2004; Aramberri & Xie, 2003; Zhu & Liu, 2004). There are also some researches on Chinese tourism doctoral dissertations which revealed the characteristics and trends of China's tourism research and compared tourism doctoral dissertations between China and North America and identified the differences and gaps (Zhang & Lu, 2003; Chen, 2004, 2006).

Huang and Hsu (2008) conducted the first published English study on an overview of China's recent tourism and hospitality research by reviewing 500 articles published in China's leading tourism research journal, *Tourism Tribune*. They found that tourism research themes in China primarily focused on tourism attraction/resources development and management, tourism planning, and tourism industry development issues and most research used a qualitative approach.

Social network analysis and tourism knowledge network

Social network analysis measures the structure of relations among entities and represents them as nodes and links (Knoke & Yang, 2008). Focusing on the relations between the actors and the pattern of interactions rather than the attributes of isolated individual actors (Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008), social network analysis is a useful approach to describe and interpret knowledge network, network clustering and research subject evolutions (Scott, 2000).

In the hospitality and tourism field, content analysis used to be popular method in the studies of tourism knowledge network which began to appear in the late 1980s (Weaver & McCleary, 1989; Dann, Nash, & Pearce, 1988). Recently, social network analysis has been introduced into this area and several studies have been conduct on the networks of collaboration among the researchers (Hu & Racherla, 2008), tourism themes and trends from co-citation aspect (Benckendorff, 2009), and also tourism dissertation subjects (Ying & Xiao, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a search of National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the biggest Chinese academic literature full-text online database which contains more than 71 million journals articles, doctoral dissertations, master's theses, reference works, conference proceedings, yearbooks, books, newspapers, patents, standards, science and technology achievement, metaknowledge, and classical literatures¹. CNKI has a collection of more than 118,000 doctoral dissertations on all academic subjects submitted from 380 higher institutions since 1999. The study makes a keyword search by Chinese word "Lvyou" (tourism) because in Chinese travel, traveler, tourist, and tourism all contain the word "Lvyou". All dissertations appeared under search are reviewed for relevancy to tourism and those with no tourism focus are eliminated. At last a listing of 200 doctoral dissertations is identified as tourism research for the 1999-2010 period.

Content analysis is employed to collect data from dissertations. For each dissertation, information collected included dissertation title, keywords, research method, year of completion, authors' name, and institutional affiliation. Research methods are coded into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Social network analysis is then used for data analysis. A keyword-by-keyword data matrix is built in the way that the value in the ij^{th} (when $i \neq j$) cell of this matrix indicates how many times the i^{th} and the j^{th} keywords co-appeared in all collected dissertations. The matrix is input into the *NetDraw* software and the associations among keywords were visualized into a knowledge network. Then four 3-year periodical data matrices are also constructed and mapped into longitudinal networks in the *NetDraw*.

The data analysis in this study has three steps. First, descriptive overviews of the overall knowledge network are given. Second, the longitudinal networks are examined and the changes over time are revealed. Third, a set of central nodes in the networks are identified as key topics and their evolution over time are explored.

EXPECTED RESULTS AND APPLICATION

¹ <http://eng.cnki.net/grid2008/index.htm>.

Because doctoral dissertations can represent the highest level of tourism research in China which leads the way of the discipline, the results of this study are able to present the body and trends of tourism research in China. As the first English paper attempting to investigate postgraduate research in China, this study could be an invaluable reference for international tourism researchers interested in China. Using a new method, social network analysis to examine tourism knowledge network, the study will provide a better understanding of the patterns and evolutions overtime in the diffusion of tourism knowledge.

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