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**Home Away from Home:
Diaspora Tourism and Transnational Attachment of Second-Generation Chinese-Americans**

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has allowed contemporary immigrants to live in two worlds and maintain virtual and physical contact with their homeland through leisure and diaspora tourism. This study examined the lived experience of second-generation Chinese-Americans as they traveled to their parents' country of origin and explored the relationship between their transnational homeland attachment and diaspora tourism experience. Using a phenomenological approach, twenty-six second-generation Chinese-Americans who had the experience of traveling in China were interviewed. Four themes were identified from their travel experience: destination image, authenticity, family history, and homeland attachment. Findings revealed how being a second-generation immigrant influenced the way they saw and experienced China as both destination and homeland.

Keywords: *diaspora tourism, heritage tourism, homeland*

INTRODUCTION

The desire to travel is innate in human nature, and the history of migration is as old as the history of man (Massey et al., 1998). As different forms of technology and transportation developed throughout human history, travel and migration was made faster and easier. And as international migration increases, the temporary travel of immigrants back to their homeland, whether it's for business or pleasure purposes, has also become a global phenomenon. However,

as the very definition of travel and tourism is based upon people being away from their usual environment or immediate home community (e.g., Chadwick, 1994; Smith, 1988; WTO, 1991), it is natural for the tourism industry to distinguish between *locals* and *foreigners* while neglecting a group of tourists who are in-between—immigrants who are visiting their country of origin. This type of “homecoming” tourists is half-local in the sense that they have some knowledge of and familiarity with the area, and yet also half-foreign because the destination is no longer their home. Therefore, the travel experience of this in-between group is unique in its mixture of novelty and familiarity, and different from that of domestic and international tourists.

Immigrants to a new country often find the need to travel to their ancestral homeland to search for information on their family history or to feel connected to their roots and culture (McCain & Ray, 2003). This phenomenon is known as “diaspora tourism” and is a niche market and a sub-segment of heritage tourism. Moreover, while most tourists become attached to a destination after repeat visitation, second-generation immigrants (who were born in the current host country) are connected to a “homeland” that they may have never visited before. This study aims to understand the “lived experience” of second-generation immigrants in terms of their homecoming travel as well as explore the relationship between second-generation immigrants’ transnational attachment and diaspora tourism experience. Study objectives are:

- 1) To describe the experience of second-generation Chinese-Americans when they visit their parents’ country of origin and the different characteristics of their homecoming trips, such as length, frequency, purpose of the trip, travel group size, travel style, and travel companions.
- 2) To investigate how the transnational attachment of second-generation Chinese-Americans may influence their travel experience in China.
- 3) To examine how the homeland travel experience of second-generation Chinese-Americans may also change their behavior, attitude, and attachment towards their homeland after the trip.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of “diaspora” is useful in understanding the connections between immigrants and their country of origin. “Diaspora” refers to ethnic groups of migrant origins who reside in the host country but maintain a strong sentimental and material connection to their country of origin—their homeland (Sheffer, 1986). Although diaspora originally refers to the Jewish population who were exiled from Israel and forced to settle outside of their traditional homeland, contemporary use of the term has grown to include many population movements, such as immigrants, political refugees, foreign workers, overseas communities, and ethnic and racial minorities (Shuval, 2000). “Diaspora tourism” is when these immigrants travel to their ancestral homeland in search of information on their family history or to feel connected to their roots and personal heritage (Timothy & Teye, 2004).

Within tourism literature, studies on travel motivation and heritage tourism exemplify some characteristics of diasporic, homeland travel. Crompton (1979) identified nine motives for pleasure vacations. Amongst the socio-psychological motives, “exploration and evaluation of

self” and “enhancement of kinship relationships” are similar to the homecoming journey of immigrants. Poria, Reichel, and Biran (2006) also categorized five main motives for visiting heritage sites, including “connecting with my heritage.” Moreover, research has shown that heritage tourism contributes to the construction and maintenance of tourists’ sense of national identity (Palmer, 1999). Similarly, for immigrants, a trip to their ancestral homeland may help them negotiate between cultural assimilation and maintaining their traditional identity.

In the U.S., people of European origins try to relate to their European heritage and identify themselves as being Irish, Scottish, Italian, Greek, and so on. Therefore, many European countries are popular for roots and genealogy tourism, including Ireland (Johnson, 1999), Scotland (Basu, 2004), England (Fowler, 2003), and Greece (Thanopoulos & Walle, 1988). Since diaspora tourism experiences are so diverse, current studies on immigrants and heritage travel need to extend to different ethnic groups. Moreover, as the research on diaspora and tourism progresses, it is no longer sufficient to study pan-ethnic labels as such generalization fails to take into account the cultural, religious, and generational differences within the same pan-ethnic group. There is a need to embrace different perspectives and focus on the homeland travel of specific countries and regions (Timothy & Coles, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This study explores the diaspora tourism experience of second-generation Chinese-Americans by adopting a phenomenological approach. Rather than focusing on a particular site, it examines a complex phenomenon of immigrants experiencing the land of their ancestry. The place in question is not a specific destination, but the notions of “home” and “homeland” as they relate to one’s family, roots, and heritage. A phenomenological inquiry makes it possible to not only describe what these tourists saw and felt, but also to analyze the underlying meanings of their experience, and provide a synthesized description as well as an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of second-generation Chinese-Americans.

To achieve the research objectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted. An interview guide was developed based on relevant literature and designed to capture the travel experience of research participants as well as their feelings and attitudes towards their country of origin and immigrant identity. Each interview took approximately fifty minutes to complete. To complement the interview data, a short questionnaire was also given to the participants prior to the interviews. The questionnaire was designed to gather basic demographic and tripographic information of their diaspora tourism trips, such as duration, frequency, purpose, and group size.

The target population for this study was second-generation Chinese-Americans between the ages of 18 to 30 who had the experience of traveling in China. Since this study focused on a specific population of interest, the participants were recruited through purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The first few participants were contacted through a student organization for Chinese-Americans at a university in California, where there is a large Chinese-American

population. Afterwards, new participants were recruited through snowball sampling of existing participants. A total of 26 interviews were conducted, and all interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewees. To process the data, all research notes and transcripts were analyzed through systematic classification and identification of themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The data was coded manually through a basic word processing program. The coding process consisted of three major stages: descriptive coding, topic coding, and analytical coding (Richards, 2005). Overarching themes and underlying patterns within the data were identified by analyzing and interpreting the relationships between core concepts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the short questionnaire provided the basic demographics of research participants as well as the descriptive information of their homeland trips. Study participants were all second-generation Chinese-Americans, who were born in the U.S. with at least one parent from China. The 26 participants consisted of 12 males and 14 females, with an average age of 21.8 years old. In terms of their education level, 22 were undergraduate students and 4 were graduate students. As for their language competence, 73.1% of the participants (n=19) indicated that they could speak and understand Chinese “well” or “very well,” but only 23.1% of the participants (n=6) could read and write Chinese “well” or “very well.”

Questionnaire data also revealed that participants took an average of 5.3 trips to China in their whole life (before the age of 30), and an average of 1.7 trips to China in the last 5 years. 18 participants (69.2%) had the experience of going on group tours or bus tours in China. Moreover, 21 participants (80.8%) have relatives still living in China, but only 14 of them (53.8%) had local relatives who accompanied them while they were traveling in China. In terms of length of stay, 9 participants who went on “travel study” trips spent an average of 84.8 days in China, while the 17 participants who went on tours or to visit relatives were only there for an average of 21.2 days.

Regarding the diaspora tourism experience of second-generation Chinese-Americans, four themes emerged from the qualitative data: destination image, authenticity, family history, and homeland attachment. The theme of “destination image” revealed their contradictory views towards the modernization and traditional aspects of China, as well as how they learned to negotiate the negative perceptions held by “Americans” and found ways to justify the issues they witnessed in China. The theme of “authenticity” discussed their desire to not only break free from the “tourist bubble” but also a “family bubble” that prevented them from getting the backstage experience, and that being bi-cultural, they didn’t go to China to search for a missing spiritual center but to *keep* the Chinese-ness that they have within. The theme of “family history” described how traveling to China not only gave them a better understanding of what their parents went through but also made them appreciate their current life after getting a glimpse of the alternate universe of “what could have been.” Finally, the theme of “homeland attachment” identified the elements that made them feel “at home” in China and demonstrated that “home” is not necessarily the village or region their family was from but a different geographical entity.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature on diaspora and heritage tourism. First, diaspora tourism for first generation immigrants involves the concepts of “return” and “homecoming” (Oxfeld & Long, 2004; Stefansson, 2004). They are returning to a previous home and re-connecting with their past. But for the second generation, regardless of whether they consider their parents’ country as “homeland” or not, they are *going* to a new destination, not *coming* home. In the case of second generation Chinese-Americans, most participants did not have the chance to visit the actual hometown of their parents. Nevertheless, they feel a personal connection to the places they visited in China from the stories told by their parents, when they eat Chinese food, when they hear a familiar dialect, and when they see things (in China) that remind them of their “home in the U.S.” When they think about their “home” in the U.S., participants can identify a specific hometown where they were born and raised. But when the second generation thinks about China as their “homeland,” “homeland” becomes an abstract concept that includes the country of China in its entirety, as opposed to a specific location on a smaller geographical scale.

Moreover, since the second generation’s attachment to China is not limited to a specific site or their original family home, they are almost creating this imaginary homeland attachment regardless of the locations they visited, which is a unique characteristic of diaspora tourism for second generation immigrants. Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) argued that the core of heritage tourism is not the physical attributes of the site, but the visitors’ perception of the site as a part of their personal heritage. Likewise, the diaspora tourism experience of the second generation is not about returning to the actual birthplace of their parents, but being able to establish a personal connection to the different places they visited. Like most tourists, second generation Chinese-Americans have their own preferences, likes, and dislikes when they travel in China. Most participants indicate that they had a positive experience in China, and would visit again. What makes diaspora tourists different from other tourists is that they feel an obligation to view the destination—their homeland—in a positive manner, so they try to find different ways to justify their negative experiences, which demonstrates their transnational attachment to their homeland.

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