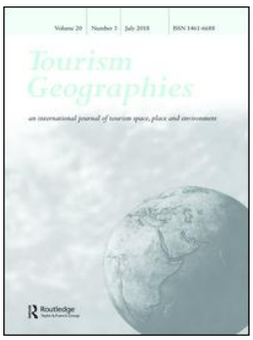

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Tourism Geographies

An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment

ISSN: 1461-6688 (Print) 1470-1340 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtxg20

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To cite this article: Jundan Jasmine Zhang & Carol Xiaoyue Zhang (2020): Ontological mingling and mapping: Chinese tourism researchers' experiences at international conferences, Tourism Geographies, DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2020.1757745

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1757745

Published online: 25 Apr 2020.

TOURISM GEOGRAPHIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1757745

Ontological mingling and mapping: Chinese tourism researchers' experiences at international conferences

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ABSTRACT

Within tourism studies, the 'critical turn' has evoked growing reflective and critical perspectives on the role of the researcher in producing knowledge. This has also led to calls for building an inclusive research community, particularly through including non-Western and non-positivist methodologies. While it is noted that non-Western scholarship has gained more visibility in the international tourism research community through publications in prestigious academic journals, few studies discuss non-Western scholars' interactions with other scholars in a qualitative and individual manner. Based on in-depth interviews with nineteen Chinese tourism scholars, we explore how their experiences at international conferences have shaped their positionality as 'Chinese researchers' in the international scientific community and thus contributed to their knowledge making. A process of mingling and mapping is shown in the narratives, where Chinese scholars attempt to find meanings of being at an academic conference and to understand the relations embedded in the conference space. Dynamics and reflexivity are seen in terms of how one goes around certain constructed binaries, such as 'Western/non-Western', 'male/female' and 'junior/senior'. Finally, such a process of mingling and mapping affects the participants' views on who will make the non-Western knowledge and how. With these voices from Chinese tourism scholars, we therefore contribute to the discourse of non-Western knowledge-making.

摘要

在旅游研究中, "批判性转向"引发了对研究者在知识生产过程中的作用的反思和批判。这也导致营建一个包容性研究社区的呼声, 特别是包容非西方和非实证主义的方法论的研究社区。虽然有人指出, 非西方学者通过在著名学术期刊上发表论文, 在国际旅游研究界获得了更大的知名度, 但很少有研究以定性和个性化的方式讨论非西方学者与其他学者的互动。通过对19位中国旅游学者的深入采访, 我们探讨了他们在国际会议上的经验如何塑造了他们作为"中国研究者"在国际科学界的立场, 从而为他们的知识创造做出了贡献。在叙事中, 中国学者试图找到学术会议的意义, 理解会议空间中蕴含的关系, 呈现出一种交融与映射的过程。动态性和

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 February 2019
Accepted 3 April 2020

KEYWORDS
Positionality; critical tourism studies; non-Western methodologies; international conferences; qualitative studies

关键词
立场性; 批判性旅游研究; 非西方方法论; 国际会议; 质性研究

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反身性显现在一个学者如何围绕诸如"西方学者/非西方学者"、"男性学者/女性学者"和"资浅/资深学者"等某些二元结构进行行动。最后，这种混合和映射的过程会影响参与者对于谁生产以及如何生产非西方知识的看法。有了这些来自中国旅游学者的声音，我们为非西方知识生产的话语做出了贡献。

Introduction

There is a clear recognition that an inclusive tourism knowledge production is increasingly important. Reflecting on the ten years since the 'critical turn' tourism studies took, Morgan et al. (2018) urge tourism scholars to march on with the spirit of 'hopeful tourism' while also confronting a number of challenges, among which they mention that 'we must dare tourism to develop conceptualizations that include multiple cultural differences and worldviews that reflect and recognize the plurality of human practices, positions, and insights' (p. 185). Indeed, the themes of inclusion and pluralism have been central in the establishment and development of 'critical tourism studies' scholarship. To some extent, these themes are instrumental in fostering a growing awareness within tourism studies to recognize the ever-persistent divisions and binaries between tourism studies/tourism management, the colonial/the colonized, qualitative/quantitative, and Western/non-Western.

At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that our inquiries into the inclusive conceptualizations in tourism studies are still at an early stage, despite increasing engagements with studies of feminism studies, Marxist, and postcolonialism. For instance, we are reminded that in several aspects, tourism knowledge is still largely shaped by Anglo-Saxon paradigms, traditions, and ideals (Morgan et al., 2018). First of all, it is argued that even within the paradigm shifts from positivism and post-positivism towards more critical and constructivist paradigms, non-Western scholars' knowledge-making is still deeply dependent on Western thoughts (Mura & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018b; Wijesinghe et al., 2019). Secondly, tourism knowledge and traditions in non-English systems are rarely presented or studied in English scholarly articles, confirming that English as the field's *lingua franca* remains a major limiting factor for academic inclusiveness (Mura et al., 2017). Finally, yet importantly, the benchmarks for measuring the progress of inclusiveness in tourism studies are unclear. How can we know if the community of tourism research has become more open-minded, inclusive, and equal over time? And on whose terms?

The above three aspects all deserve more attention in the future, if our aim for a hopeful future, academia, and society is serious. However, for this special issue of *Re-centering critical tourism studies*, it is the last point of the 'how' that we wish to explore and contribute to. As two Chinese-born female researchers who have been trained and have worked largely within Western education and academic systems, we are interested in the unclear, messy and ambiguous situations deriving from the process of judging, selecting and evaluating the very status of 'criticality' (the ability to constructively criticize the existing knowledge), as well as 'creativity' (the ability to contribute new knowledge and new ways of thinking to the existing knowledge, i.e. non-Western knowledge). We observe that, despite the previous studies reflecting on the inquiry-action nexus of non-Western knowledge (e.g. in Zhang, 2018 and Tucker &

Zhang, 2016), very little attention has been paid to the implications and dilemmas faced by scholars who live, study, and work across the Western/non-Western boundaries. We do notice that several studies attempt to visualize and measure the progress of non-Western scholarship in the international tourism research community, yet adopt an exclusively quantitative approach by describing the shifts in publication quantity results (Bao et al., 2014; Huang & Chen, 2016). While these studies are valuable, we maintain that it is also important to investigate questions concerning the process of non-Western scholars' knowledge production in a more qualitative and interpretative manner.

Emerging from conversations on the authors' own experiences at international tourism conferences, this article regards international conferences as an important yet neglected social space and context for understanding how non-Western scholars experience and perceive their own interactions with others in the academic world, and how these interactions and experience have influenced their knowledge-making process. Conferences are traditionally viewed from an organizational perspective, and most previous studies tend to focus on the motivations of conference attendees and the functionalities of the conferences, such as networking, getting feedback, developing career paths, keeping up with research trends, and encountering research interests (Mair & Frew, 2016). Recently in tourism studies, some scholars situate issues relating to knowledge production, such as gender and social justice, in the context of conferences (Munar et al., 2015; Walters, 2018). To some extent, these studies bring in new perspectives that regard conferences as a social space and open up new discussions concerning inclusion and diversity in the tourism research community. Following this line of discussion, we aim to examine the relationships between the personal conference experiences of 19 Chinese tourism scholars and their own perceptions of the roles of their identities in their knowledge-making.

Theoretical background

In this section, we present theories and concept that lay the foundation for the research. It contains three subsections: knowledge production/distribution; conference as social space and positionality at international conferences

Knowledge production/distribution

Although thinkers from all cultures and civilizations have discussed ideas, wisdom and beliefs throughout history, the discussion of knowledge and epistemology in a reflective and systematic way did not start until the 20th century, largely led by philosophers and social scientists in the West. In such discussions, it is fundamental to note a division: knowledge as science and knowledge as culture (Delanty, 2001). Similarly, as Latour (1993) describes it, the knowledge of things is placed on one side, and power and human politics on the other. Moreover, Machlup's (1980) work *Knowledge: Its Creation, Distribution and Economic Significance* notes that knowledge can be viewed as a product and that there is a market and demand for certain types of knowledge rather than others. When discussing the flows of knowledge, Machlup argues that the

flows from transmitter to recipient happen through both space and time. Through materializing and rationalizing knowledge as something tangible and countable, the process of knowledge-making and distributing also becomes objective and thus manageable.

According to Foucault (1972), this rationalization is part of the archaeology of knowledge and historically plays a role in the intertwined relationships of knowledge and power. Through specifying each stage in the knowledge-production process, the flows of ideas, ideals and shared feelings are interrupted and isolated, and thus knowledge comes to be governed and controlled. Sometimes this is done by assigning different tasks to different individuals, and sometimes by constructing different tasks for the same individual but at different times. This mentality has come to be fundamental in the organization and management of time, space and agency in modern time. From this perspective, we can really start to see that the binary of the distribution and production of knowledge is institutionalized and part of the governmentality of knowledge.

This governmentality of knowledge may explain the lack of research on conference attendance's influence on academics' reflection on their knowledge production. Through the arranging and cataloging of knowledge-making into steps periodically and spatially, productivity and applicable values come to be the priority, while irrational factors such as feelings, ethics of research, and politics and power are detached from the process of knowledge-making. As a result, it is normalized that knowledge production happens at a particular place or site, such as a university, laboratory, or field site (Delanty, 2001; Latour, 1988). The conference is one of the places where scholars share and present the knowledge they have produced. Indeed, in a way, the conference itself is a by-product or invention in order to serve the rational organizations of knowledge. Therefore, studies on conference attendance have mostly taken an organizational perspective (e.g. in Rittichainuwat et al., 2001; Oppermann & Chon, 1995), missing the human attendees and the dynamics and complexities of intellectual interactions that are essential in the knowledge-making process.

Previously knowledge production and sharing have been analysed in management studies using socio-psychological frames. For instance, social exchange theory suggests that self-profit is the motivation for knowledge sharing behaviours (Liao, 2008). Yet again, in such frameworks, knowledge is viewed as a product. In this paper, we follow Foucault's (1972) view that knowledge is discursively formed through discourse. A discourse is produced through language (in the broadest sense) and is constantly reproducing itself through discursive practices. As a result, all forms of ideas are produced, circulated and disseminated through discourses. Hence, it is the competing discourses and their enactment of power that construct what we know as common knowledge and common sense. In this way, knowledge-making is not a conduct carried out in a certain period, at a certain space and by a particular individual, but rather the discursive practices and formations that interrelate subjects, place and time all at once.

Hence, many questions remained unanswered: what could be counted as non-Western knowledge? Who can be said to be the producer of non-Western knowledge and where and when does the knowledge become non-Western knowledge? And indeed, why is there even a thing called 'non-Western knowledge'? With these questions in mind we also start to see that the conference, as a space for the communication of

different discourses, is spontaneously the space of knowledge production. Looking into how the conference as a social space enables and dis-enables individuals to express and access discourses, then, is important for understanding how individuals' knowledge production can be shaped through their conference attendance.

Conference as social space

Ford and Harding (2008) use Lefebvre's (1991) theory of spaces/places, and suggest that arrival at the physical territory of a conference endows one with an 'identity' at the conference. When conference attendees identify themselves at the actual place socially and collectively, the material and discursive spaces and places of where the conference activities happen become 'the conference'. On the other hand, 'it is place that also helps bring individuals into being, for place solidified a sense of embodiment' (Ford & Harding, 2008, p. 7). Therefore, it is the dialectic relations between the conference attendees and the conference as place/space that bring each of them into being, perhaps even before the conference 'actually' happens. For in practice, an academic conference often has particular theme(s) and targets. The making of an academic conference is thus built on a set of presumptions. Here there is a paradox in relation to the inclusiveness of a particular conference. On the one hand, the functionality sides of a conference require it to reach a certain number of attendees; on the other hand, its specific themes as well as its entrance fee do create boundaries between who can be 'in' or 'out'(Lloyd, 2015; Sweeting & Holh, 2015).

It is thus pertinent to say that conference space is constructed socio-culturally, economically, and politically. Why do we care? Again, the dialectical relationship between the individual and the conference results in the social construction of the conference space interrelating with how we as conference attendees identify ourselves with the broader scientific community. Ford and Harding (2010) observe that:

> We arrive at a conference knowing how to occupy the subject position of conference participant, monitoring ourselves to ensure we occupy it correctly, and in doing so render ourselves somewhat passive and receptive to whatever it is that we experience. (Ford & Harding, 2010, p. 509).

And, in their recent paper, Edelheim et al. (2018) ask what conferences do to the academic attendees, reflecting:

> By attending a conference in person, attendants subject themselves to the judgement of the collective, as well as to individual judgements of others, be it based on gender, age, appearance, or metrics like number of publications in highly ranked journals (Edelheim et al., 2018, p. 98).

It is the meeting between the individual and the collective that evokes the process of evaluating, reflecting, and positioning. Walters (2018) suggests that academic conferences can be regarded as texts and represent a community, conveying a particular social order. Bell and King (2010) also suggest that conferences 'constitute a key site of academic socialization that enables norms and values to be passed on from experts to newcomers. They thus provide a material means of inscribing regimes of cultural power onto the embodied subject' (Bell & King, 2010, p. 432). Notably, the masculine atmosphere and climate have been described and analyzed in recent years. For

instance, in their report, Munar et al. (2015) note that women are subject to unequal treatment and social status at tourism conferences, especially concerning who can be the keynote speakers and hold honorary chair positions. Studies from other fields have also discussed gender inequality at academic conferences, noting that female participants are not as included or listened to compared to their male peers (King et al., 2018). The phenomena as such pose a question of what conference space can enable and dis-enable for long-term knowledge-making. Do academic conferences ignore or even reinforce the very problems they claim to criticize (Mair & Frew, 2016; Walters, 2018)? If tourism academia strives to be more open and inclusive, what kind of conference space is desirable? And who has a say in this?

King et al. (2018)believe academic conferences can potentially alleviate barriers and reproduce diversity in academic field, while Edelheim et al. (2018) also point out that a good conference containing 'thought-providing presentations' can create 'new thought paths' and therefore lead to future change within both the participants and the field (p. 101). However, as Mair (2015) observes, previous studies researching motivations for and factors influencing delegates' decision-making process are largely situated in a Western context (Mair & Thompson, 2009; Oppermann & Chon, 1995; Rittichainuwat et al., 2001). With increasing internationalization at academic conferences, attendees from other cultural backgrounds may bring new dynamics and perspectives regarding not only how conferences are organized, but also how they may function as a socio-cultural and geopolitical space for knowledge production. For example, Rowen (2019) argued there is a clear 'geopolitical effects of tourism scholarship' (p.3). Hence, interpersonal conference link to the broader knowledge production landscape and geopolitical dynamics.

Positionality at international conferences

Maher and Tetreault (1993) contend that the concept of positionality refers to 'gender, race, class, and other aspects of our identities [as] markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities' (p. 188). Positionality takes a more relational approach in examining individuals' roles in a certain social setting. It starts from and requires constant reflexivity, with researchers considering their subjectivities as negotiable in different situations in relation to others, be it the field site or other academic settings. While positionality in tourism research has received more attention in recent years, most studies have emphasized the researcher's positionality in relation to the 'researched' (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Bakas, 2017; Hall, 2010). Only a few have discussed the researcher's positionality in knowledge-making in a general sense (Khoo-Lattimore, 2018; Xiao, 2016; Zhang, 2017; Zhang, 2018). This is surprising, considering that positionality is an important concept in all three trends in the current epistemological and ontological inquires, namely the gender equality (Khoo-Lattimore, 2018), critiques on Western centrism within tourism studies from both decolonial and postcolonial perspectives (Chambers and Buzinde, 2015; Tucker & Zhang, 2016), and inter/trans/post-disciplinary debates (Hollinshead, 2010).

Drawing upon our theoretical understandings of the conference as the space manifesting the discursive practices of presumptions and interrelations within knowledge

production, we may also consider conference attendance not only as shaped by the conference space but also as a form of contributing back to the broader discourse of knowledge-making. This is done through individual attendees' active self-positioning within the conference environment. Conferences are self-evident elements of being academics, as they are linked with many essential elements within our academic careers: networking, presentations, meetings and publications. On some occasions, special issue and publication opportunities are announced as part of the conference to popularize it among academics. Conferences organized by top journals are often recognized as high quality due to their exclusivity (Bell & King, 2010). Increasingly, popular workshops like publishing in top journals are organized by conferences to set out what is recognized as acceptable knowledge and approaches. Those discursive activities and objects of conferences produce highly complex social spaces oriented to the production of knowledge and the production of successful scholars (Edelheim et al., 2018).

Despite the style and objective of different conferences, they have their own social norms. By attending a conference, attendants subject themselves to the judgement by others. Unlike writing a paper, academics' identities at conferences are easily spotted as conference attending requires face-to-face interactions. Attendees therefore look for physical clues such as name, affiliation, age, race and gender etc. to find the right people they want to be around or away from based on their different motivations (Edelheim et al., 2018; Halford & Leonard, 2006). Those embodiments become symbols, which helps people to find the right people, who might contribute to their development as academics. This is because conferences enable academics and attendees to be counted and legitimated as scholars (Henderson, 2015). The outputs of conferences are thus layered to signify one's seniority in the field from conference papers to invited keynote speeches. Recognition through a keynote speech or fellowship at an exclusive conference like the International Academy for the Study of Tourism implies the success of one's academic career. That recognition often assumes that individuals have made a significant contribution to knowledge-making.

To sustain one's ideal academic self, individuals often perform a conference identity to fit the conference style and expected behaviour (Bell & King, 2010). While mingling and interacting with other delegates who each hold their own ontologies and epistemologies, it is inevitable that one will find a place in the net of relations and opinions. Who am I, and where do my thoughts and I belong? Or simply, who should I talk to? While 'positioning' is 'the key practice grounding knowledge organized around the imagery of vision … positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices' Haraway (1991, p193), a question is worth raising: can we position ourselves? Our conference bodies perform as academics, but our values and judgments are not decided by individuals but broadly the academic field and general accepted roles. Social identities such as gender and race have stereotypes beyond academic field, which still significantly influence those from minorities groups (Edelheim et al., 2018). These questions thus are not simply related to one's self positionality as academics in a particular field, but what is to be a *recognized* academics in the field, here tourism studies. In the context of calling for more inclusive tourism studies and a re-centering of critical tourism studies towards non-Western epistemologies, we should therefore ask how non-Western scholars are positioning themselves in the intellectual community of tourism studies.

Methodologies and research design

Methodology should be more than just the procedures of selecting the most appropriate methods for collecting 'data' in the most efficient way or picking the 'camp' of which paradigm we subscribe to. It is rather about the whole process we as researchers and authors go through, reading, thinking, questioning, experimenting, challenging, interpreting, and negotiating with both internal and external factors. Hence, in this section we explain how our ontological and epistemological positions are influenced by both Western and Chinese philosophical schools.

Our ontological and epistemological positions are reliant on social constructionism theories and the 'School of Mind' in Chinese Neo-Confucian philosophy. While social constructionism shares similar views with constructivism, that reality is constructed by society and individuals, the former emphasizes the significance of social interchange between individuals in the making of reality and knowledge (Parker, 1998). Particularly, the linguistic practices (e.g. language, pictures, and other texts) embedded in our everyday discourse actively shape and constitute our realities (Parker, 1991). For instance, what we 'are' (as women, Chinese, non-Westerners, etc.) is in fact the result of how these existences are spoken of and discussed in different social contexts (Yu & Kwan, 2008). Along a similar line, the Yangming School of Mind (阳明心学) has challenged the rationalistic views of reality in the School of Principle (程朱理学), arguing that it is the mind that gives meaning to the world rather than the other way around (Chang, 1962). Furthermore, the social constructionism and the Yangming School of Mind share the view on knowledge that there is no pure knowledge 'out there' for us to simply observe and describe, but that knowledge is produced and reproduced through our actions and interactions. These thoughts also resonate with our theoretical framework, again highlighting the fact that methodological pondering occurs throughout the entire process of the design and carrying out of research.

Starting from these philosophical points, we view our examination of Chinese tourism scholars' conference experiences as exploring the fragments of reality that emerge from social interchange. Importantly, research design, methods, and analysis result from discussions and negotiation between us two authors. To some extent, our experiences of co-authorship also reflect a social constructionist approach that each of us contributes to the construction of this study, not only from our own perspectives but also through our interactions with one another. We also extend this process of co-creation of knowledge to our participants: that they as knowledge co-producers and collaborators are essential in how we think and write (Ren et al., 2017). Moreover, we adopt an interpretivist approach to read and analyze their narratives, aiming both to highlight their voices and perspectives as well as to situate them in the broader discussion of including non-Western tourism scholars in the tourism scientific community.

A qualitative approach was employed to collect materials through semi-structured interviews. Following Denzin (2001), we see interviews as 'a way of bringing the world into play' and 'a site where meaning is created and performed' (p. 25). It is the performative sensibility that enables the researchers and the participants to explore the different ways of presenting an interview text (ibid). A total of 19 participants were recruited through a combination of purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling techniques. As shown in Table 1, all participants were ethically Chinese and self-

Table 1. Profile of research participants.

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Current Location	Position	Conference experience
1	30s	Female	Sweden	Research fellow	>10
2	30s	Female	UK	Lecturer	Around 5
3	30s	Female	UK	Lecturer	Around 5
4	20s	Female	China	Lecturer	3
5	20s	Male	New Zealand	Lecturer	4
6	30s	Male	China	Assistant Professor	6-10
7	30s	Male	China	Assistant Professor	5-6
8	30s	Female	UK	Lecturer	3
9	30s	Female	China	Associate Professor	>10
10	30s	Female	China	Associate Professor	1
11	30s	Female	UK	Senior Lecturer	Around 10
12	40s	Male	Macao	Assistant Professor	>10
13	30s	Male	China	Assistant Professor	>10
14	40s	Male	China	Assistant Professor	>10
15	50s	Male	Hongkong	Assistant Professor	Many
16	30s	Female	Macao	Assistant Professor	7-10
17	40s	Female	Australia	Professor	>10
18	50s	Female	China	Professor	Many
19	50s	Female	China	Professor	Many

identified as Chinese tourism academics despite their geographical locations and affiliations. All participants had attended international conferences and their conference experiences are included in the table. It should be noted that those who had limited experience at international conferences indeed had well attended academic conferences within China. Here, international tourism conferences are discussed due to the fact that international conferences in English have been prioritized as a recognized and valuable conference. And by international conferences we mean those are outside of China with English as the official communication language. Table 1 also demonstrates our sample diversity in terms of their age, gender, geographical location, and career stage.

The interview questions consist of four parts: 1) descriptions of previous international tourism conference experiences; 2) understandings of the conference as a social space; 3) reflections on positionality at the conference; and 4) reflections on knowledge production in relation to conference attendance. We prepared the interview questions in both Mandarin and English, and then cross-checked them to ensure accuracy. One of us conducted eight interviews and the other eleven, both independently. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and the others in English. The average interview duration was 45 minutes. The interviews were either audio-recorded when the interviewee consented, or documented through extensive notes taken during the interviews and double-checked with the interviewee afterwards. The interview material was then transcribed into texts.

According to Wolcott (1994), there are several different ways to transform data and thus different 'levels of data analysis', including description, analysis, and interpretation. We also agree with Riessman (2012) that participants' interview performances are sometimes done in a way that they hinder researchers' efforts to fragment the material into codable categories. We thus take narrative analysis to mean a set of methods and a combination of descripting, analyzing, and interpreting the narratives (in both oral and graphic forms) we collected from participants. Mura and Sharif (2017) identify different types of narrative analysis in the social sciences, and

categorize them under structural and post-structural analysis approaches. While trying to navigate the stories and representations, we based the analysis on various strategies from both structural and post-structural analysis. Hence, the following steps are taken:

a. Examining the 'story' in the narration; the flows and plots
b. Evaluating the parts of the story that reveal the narrator's attitude towards research questions and 'emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units as compared to others' (Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 37)
c. Attending to disruptions and contradictions; places where a text fails to make sense or does not continue (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 92)
d. Identifying a dichotomy in the narratives and exposing it as false distinction (e.g. local/global, Chinese/Western, insider/outsider, etc.) (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 92)
e. Making interpretations and resolutions for the results of Step b, while emphasizing the relevance of the results of Step d
f. Reflecting on and examining the narrator's interaction with the interviewer, and the role of the interviewer, while re-examining the analysis a second time (Polkinghorne, 1995)

Taking these steps, the narratives are shattered, scrambled, and then re-organized and re-constructed, as a process of creating montage and collage. As Denzin (2001) describes: ' … narrative collage allows the writer, interviewer and performer to create a special world, a world made meaningful through the methods of collage and montage' (p. 30). Furthermore, it should be noted that we also interviewed each other and include our own narratives on our experiences of international conferences in the material. Finally, the role of reflexivity is central in the whole process of interviewing, transcribing and analyzing, enabling us to be aware of our own participation in social dynamics and, in general, a worldmaking process (Tucker, 2009; J. Zhang, 2017).

Findings and discussion

Below are the four areas where the narratives cluster after the process of breaking down and reforming the interview materials. Here, it is extremely important to bring the interesting discussions that emerged from the narratives into the context of non-Western knowledge production in tourism studies, rather than simply describing and pinning down 'what has been said'. Through situating the discussions in a broader context and consequently starting a conversation with the existing discussion, we create a channel for the voices of Chinese tourism scholars and their knowledge.

What's the meaning of going to an international conference?

When talking about the meanings of conferences, what first comes to mind is often the purposes, reasons and motivations of attending them. While our participants' reasons for attending international conferences are very similar to what is written in the literature – namely networking, getting feedback, developing career paths, keeping up

with research trends, and encountering research interests – there are also many valuable narratives that reflect issues under the surface of 'functionalities of conferences'. The 'meaning of going to an international conference' therefore becomes much more contextualized in the ethics of academic life, often tightly related to how knowledge is produced. For instance, one participant says:

> *Intellectual inputs at the conferences are really important… A lot of times our conferences don't necessarily provide those experiences… But collectively we damage the conferences; we try to support only the people we know and we all only go to the sessions we think are relevant. It's like some papers are highly cited, while others are not. (Participant 17)*

Though has not been able to experience intellectual stimulation or satisfaction at most of the conferences, this participant does not simply complain about their organization. Instead, she turns inward and points out that the lack of intellectual exchange is a result of less engaged attendees. By comparing how people attend conference presentations to how people cite articles, this participant highlights the pragmatic climate that still dominate not only tourism studies but the academic world in general; that producing knowledge has little to do with intellectual exchanges or contributions, but is rather driven by a rationalization and normalization of knowledge as a product. And we '*collectively… damage the conferences*' because we submit to the normalization of the knowledge-making system. However, another participant raises a different point regarding knowledge as product and the conference as a platform:

> *I think knowledge is like a product, and people's goal is to explain or present their value through this product. For a long time we've thought everything from the West is good, so everyone uses Western theories. Now we put more emphasis on personal ontology. So, I can find my own theories and ways of producing knowledge. The conference then becomes a place where I can present myself also broaden my views. (Participant 2)*

Different from Participant 17, this participant finds possibilities enabled by the conference space in a new era in which knowledge-making is increasingly personalized and individualized. Knowledge production in a neoliberal era may overly emphasize short-term values (e.g. rebound effects), but it also provides more equal and democratic ground for different ideas, and benefits individuals who are willing to learn. But intellectual exchange is not a matter of one-way learning or presenting; rather, it requires dialogue and communication. To have these, you have to be relevant, as stated by another participant:

> *I believe any presentation should be relevant to other people, if you want to have a dialogue. We all need to contribute to form an academic community. So, what we say should try to generate relations to others as much as possible… If you only talk about China, people will feel irrelevant. But if you link the Chinese issues with others' issues, then you will attract the audience (Participant 18)*

For Participant 18, it is everyone's responsibility to make their own knowledge relevant to the other scholars, the academic community, and perhaps society. Although one can argue that this emphasis on relevance again reflects the rationalization of knowledge (more valuable when more applicable), these narratives are insightful in that they connect a number of relations together: those between presenter and audience, individual academics and academic community, and China and the rest of the world. The overlapping and intertwining connections between these relations are

critical in transferring knowledge from one scale to another both within and beyond the conference space, and as Participant 18 indicates, can be either made or unmade depending on how much one wants to have a dialogue, or how much one doesn't want to be alone and isolated. Indeed, for one participant, 'generating relations' is a necessary step before attending an academic conference:

> *I always want to gather as much information as possible on as many people as I can before I go to a conference, so that I will have more to discuss with them. It's a way for me to make the most out of a conference. If I'm unprepared, and the chance comes and I miss it … I'll feel really embarrassed and unsettled. (Participant 16)*

Still, a question extending from Participant 18's narrative is: Knowledge relevant to whom? Isn't this always a relative and subjective question? One participant makes yet another point about academic conferences, that nothing is relevant enough:

> *I think, in comparison to the Internet, academic conferences offer little space for real exchange. I'm more industry-focused so I pay more attention to industrial news and have many exchanges with netizens on relevant forums. Some of them have become good friends and collaborators. I think that's the real value. (Participant 13)*

A constant criticism regarding academic conferences is that they are almost always limited within their own bubble, without much contact with or relevance to the 'real world'. Participant 13 unfolds another layer of 'relevance' that perhaps adds to the discussion of what counts as knowledge, and what researchers' roles in our society are.

Yet, one can also wonder when negative emotions do arise, such as feelings of being left out and neglected, is it enough to say that an irrelevance of one's research or a lack of preparation is the reason? Pondering over whether she has established good contact with Western tourism scholars at international conferences, one participant recalls:

> *Even when someone is interested in communicating, it's not really like the interaction they would have with one of their own (Western). There might also be some other purposes behind, that they may actually want to have contact with the Western senior researcher who supervises me, but not me. Also, I feel like most of the Western scholars don't really know about China. They tend to make connections between your topic and other political issues. So, the questions you get aren't really based on what you present but are people's own presumptions. (Participant 11)*

Here Participant 11 experiences prejudice, ignorance, and perhaps even discrimination from other Western scholars, while she is obviously willing to have some real communication at the conference. What can be sensed here is her disrupted and contradictory feelings of wanting to be understood and seen but not believing it can/will happen, largely because of the imagined/invisible line between 'Chinese' and 'Western'.

How to cross 'the line'?

When attempting to position oneself in a conference's social space, a few participants brought up the issue of the existing division between Chinese and Western scholars, especially those with an Anglo-Saxon background. However, the dichotomy of 'Chinese' and 'Western' is also challenged and disrupted by other participants'

narratives on other 'lines' such as hierarchical and gender divisions. While these binary positions are certainly interrelated, we suggest that it is the continuous discussion on 'how to cross the line' that makes the tensions between each of the binary positions more meaningful than the oppositions themselves.

First let us stay with Participant 11 and listen to her story about the line between 'we' and 'they':

> *There is this phenomenon at conferences that is somewhat similar to zhadui (sticking together), that Chinese and non-Chinese people are in their own groups. I'm curious to see 'the other side' so I do want to cross the line. But it's quite difficult … Sometimes I feel I have come to their side, but for them I'm still on my side … Meanwhile, if I get too close to the line, I become distant from my own group and they think I've become too Western. (Participant 11)*

> *Zhadui (扎堆), literally meaning 'sticking into one pile', is a Chinese expression describing the phenomenon of many people forming a crowd not really for any particular meaning or purpose, but just for the feeling of security or a lively, bustling sense (renao, 热闹). Several other participants make the same observation and commented that "You will see Italians stayed all together as well, it is not a Chinese thing." (Participant 12)*

Although it is clarified that sticking together in a group does not make one more 'Chinese' or 'Western', what Participant 11 describes as an invisible line is perceived to be one of the effects of the grouping phenomenon. Moreover, she portrays a rather graphic dynamic between her curiosity and attempts to 'cross the line' on the one hand and the internal press and potential risk of alienating herself from her 'own group' on the other. This dynamic directly affects how one socializes and establishes contacts with scholars 'on the other side'. However, some participants believe this is due to a lack of confidence:

> *I think … whether one feels uncomfortable doesn't really have much to do with being Chinese, but is more likely due to whether you're familiar with the people and knowledge in your field. The most important thing is about sharing the same language (epistemologically rather than linguistically). (Participant 18)*

Other researchers think the 'line' is in fact set by oneself:

> *If we believe we're the same as the other scholars then we don't need to feel troubled. I'm not really concerned about my Chinese identity … I use Chinese concepts in my research not because of my Chinese identity but because of my ontology. (Participant 2)*

The above narratives on the 'line' or 'boundaries' between groups together demonstrate the complexity and diversity in how different individuals' perceptions of their own positions within a social setting can be shaped by their different self-positioning strategies, namely identities, subjectivities, and ontologies. While the identity perspective states a fixed position characterized by 'nationalities' or 'ethnicities', a perspective on subjectivity reflects more our abilities to form our own 'being' as well as the constraints that prevent us from 'becoming' (knowledge expertise, social skills, and open-mindedness), and the ontological approach to understanding our 'self and being' may create either a protection from or a pathway to the 'other'. While the intrinsic links between these perspectives are not to be ignored, differences are illustrated through the narratives: how each perspective deals with conference space is different, and may lead individuals to different situations. An example is shown below:

> *I do tend to stick with Chinese people at international conferences … a big reason is that the possibility to collaborate with them is much higher. You gain more from that. I'm very pragmatic. I have limited time, so I'm not there just to socialize with random people … Also, I think it's not really fair if it's only me adjusting myself to others, approaching them, and 'becoming' like them. It's not necessary. (Participant 14)*

Interestingly, while Participants 14's 'pragmatic attitude' suggests a rather logical and natural result of 'staying on this side of the line', the last sentence also shows his active and conscious decision to not cross the line, because 'it's not really fair' that effort is made from only one side. Another participant digs a bit deeper into the lack of effort from 'the other side', describing:

> *I feel it's easier to talk to non-English-speaking people at international conferences … because we make an effort to make ourselves understood. With people whose mother tongue is English, sometimes I might not understand them perfectly, such as the slang and references they use. But the thing is … they just assume that you get all the jokes and cultural references. I don't think I'm that Western yet. (Participant 16)*

Again, how attendees 'end up' in a particular group is dependent not only on their own willingness and attitudes, but also on those of their counterparts. Besides the repeatedly mentioned 'line' between the Chinese and Western scholars, another line between 'small potatoes' (early-career and young scholars) and 'big names' (daniu, 大牛, senior and established scholars) is also mentioned as a barrier by several early-career scholars. For instance, one participant proposes that '*most of the negative feelings we get at international conferences are because we're small potatoes, not because we're Chinese*' (Participant 2), while another also talks about being '*transparent*' to others because he is just a '*small potato*' (Participant 6). That early-career scholars often face difficulties in gaining access to the 'academic tribes' or in simply being seen has been well discussed in the literature within critical tourism studies (Ateljevic et al., 2005; Khoo-Lattimore, 2018; Tribe, 2010; Winter, 2009). And, indeed, according to Participant 2 above this is universal. However, as several participants mention, if you are at an early career stage and are from a non-Western country, you are often confronted with the dilemma that, if you are working with Western scholars you will be in their shadow, and if you are not working with them you will be seen as not measuring up to the international standard and people will not remember you. Participant 15 summarizes his observations of the dynamic between non-Western and Western scholars at international conference over the years, suggesting that there has been a change: in the early years, non-Western and Chinese tourism scholars had low self-confidence due to language issues and the dominant Western paradigm, and this could be observed in the common scene of Chinese and young scholars circling around Western and successful scholars. However, it is a different situation today:

> *Today, many English speakers are more willing to listen to non-English speakers' presentations, which was rare back in the 1990s. They didn't bother to listen to us then. It's not great now, but much better. Interestingly, nowadays it's often the non-English-speaking scholars who don't want to listen to our own people (ziji ren 自己人). (Participant 15)*

Another participant describes being mistaken for a student by other Western attendees only because she took a photograph with a famous tourism scholar, though she has worked in the field for some time. She reflects on this, saying:

> *It feels like many people cannot accept that Chinese scholars are getting better. Especially when you're a woman … Chinese scholars going out into the world is still a process. (Participant 9)*

These narratives on the hierarchic line, and even the gender line, certainly reflect a process of mapping and positioning one's place at a conference, or even a process of positioning China in the world. They also take us back to the discussions of including non-Western knowledge in tourism studies, and evoke many questions: What does it mean to 'include'? Who is including whom? Further, how can we judge these Chinese scholars who do not listen to 'their own people'? Perhaps they are trying to become more 'relevant' and thus 'included'? Moreover, an underlying question lurking beneath these narratives is: Who is going to make non-Western knowledge, and how?

Who makes non-western knowledge, and how?

Scholars advocating for a 'decolonization of methodologies and knowledge' encourage non-Western scholars to relearn the 'mandates of knowing' (Hollinshead & Suleman, 2018) and to provide alternative discourses for the social sciences (Alatas, 2006). As a number of participants reflect on, it is more complicated than simply moving from a to b:

> *The question of changing the ideology of knowledge-making is not only one way, but two ways. On the one hand we're quite loud in Asian society that we need our own characteristics and localizing knowledge-making system, while on the other we still rely on university ranking, journal ranking, etc., trying to join the internationalization. I'm not saying that the international and the local cannot coexist; it's just complicated to balance and negotiate. For instance, studying the same question but with culturally characterized methodology is important but difficult. (Participant 15)*

Another participant also mentioned the paradox between local and global systems, expressing that although he believes publishing in Chinese journals will ensure more knowledge transfer and have more impact, the university promotion system only recognizes English publications (Participant 14). He also emphasizes the 'two-way knowledge exchange', saying:

> *It's not only about us joining them … joining or integrating is just a means, not the goal. If the goal is to have people understand us, then I don't really need to ingratiate myself with them. It's not about whether I like it or not; it's about self-confidence. (Participant 14)*

Such voices indeed challenge us to think if the 'knowledge' in general discussion is referred to 'Western knowledge' by default. The pressure of publishing in English journals is also tied to global universities' ranking, for which only internationally recognized journal papers count. Hence knowledge exchange has become limited and what happens at the micro-level is only a small reflection of the global trend of pursuing English journals. SSCI, for example, is ranked based purely on impact factor rather than any significant social impact. Conferences are therefore positioned here as a means of demonstrating one's identity as a scholar in a certain area that is defined by h index and journal impact scores.

Such pressure affects how academics develop scholarly collaboration. When asked whether conferences provide space for their future career development, several

participants start evaluating the pros and cons of finding collaboration with either Chinese or Western scholars at conferences. One participant describes his dilemma:

> *It's easier to form collaborations with Chinese scholars nowadays. But the problem is also this: that if you only worked with other Chinese scholars you'd only have one perspective, so your paper would be easily rejected or be subject to major revisions. Because they (reviewers) don't understand our perspectives. I need to work with more Western scholars. But it's hard to collaborate with them. (Participant 8)*

Another participant also expresses the frustration of working with Western scholars: '*We have very different perceptions of the world and society*' (Participant 3). It seems that, for these participants, 'the integration process' becomes a goal and is equal to 'collaborating with Western scholars', while another participant points out that '*Younger scholars feel they're just coming to learn, but not in a more advanced position*' (Participant 9). Again, as presented earlier, Participant 14's argument that the integration of knowledge systems is not the final goal brings us back to the current debate within tourism studies on alternative epistemologies and non-Western knowledge. What is the whole point of talking about Western/non-Western knowledge? Is it simply about increasing the co-authorship between Western and non-Western scholars? Or is it about the subordinates rejecting and resisting the masters? As one participant reflects:

> *Of course, we shouldn't produce knowledge that reinforces the norms, but I don't think we should be extreme either. For example, saying that the Western paradigm doesn't work in Chinese contexts is wrong; it does work in some cases, really well. What we should focus on is getting our message across in everyday conversations with our Western colleagues. It's hard for people to accept challenges, not only Westerners but Chinese as well. Even the constructive criticisms are difficult to take. I think we should be moderate in doing this. (Participant 17)*

An important point in Participant 17's comment is the everyday discourse of 'how to get our message across' is also part of the knowledge-making process. Rather than the radical attitude expressed in anti-colonial and decolonizing literature, again a pragmatic, rational and analytical attitude is seen here. As another scholar reasons:

> *There are indeed power relations affecting the phenomenon that some knowledge systems are not acknowledged. But many existing knowledge systems have been formed over long periods of time; it's not possible that they would collapse at once. The core is about communicating with the same language, and then seeing the difference, back and forth, to view your own research subjectively and objectively. (Participant 18)*

One can make the point, from the decolonization literature, that 'using the same language' is the exact danger of submitting to the other's mindset and ways of knowing (Çakmak & Isaac, 2017). However, as Diversi and Moreira (2009) state in their work, a 'betweenness' in knowledge production is inevitable when one spontaneously exists in multiple spaces and crosses borders of different territories. And it is challenging – though possible – to work 'between and among different spaces, and to '[unify] differences (bodies) to make a more inclusionary movement' (p. 174). However, according to one participant, the reason some Chinese scholars (especially young ones) are asked why they do not use Chinese perspectives in their research is that '*they hold an assumption that we know every Chinese classic, and this is totally because of the binary of Western/non-Western they have in their mind*' (Participant 16).

Go (2016), in his search for a solution for going beyond Eurocentric influence in the social sciences, argues that it is the 'law of division' and consequently 'analytic bifurcation' that perpetuates the persistent Orientalism of social theory. From a postcolonial perspective, what to do is ridiculously simple in a way: "if the imperial episteme's law of division cuts the world up into separate entities, a postcolonial approach would start by reconnecting the separated parts" (Go, 2016, p.111). As one participant finds connection with her non-Western colleagues, she suggests that we stop framing knowledge-making as an *'Asian/Western issue'* and instead see it as *'balancing these different experiences and having a consciousness towards people who are different*' (Participant 17).

The never-ending dynamics between the 'self' and the 'Other' entail, as Said (1993) has pointed out, how cultural identities are formed through contrapuntal ensembles; that 'no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions' (p.52). The reflections and discussions that emerge from the narratives indeed demonstrate that international conferences are a space where 'putatively separate and opposed cultures or identities are actually contaminated by each other' (Go, 2016, p.113), regardless of whether one finds it easy or hard to work with others from different backgrounds. The discussion on 'who will make non-Western knowledge and how' indicates that it is the 'connections' and equal 'dialogues' we need in order to bring newer perspectives into the existing knowledge systems. What we need to further ask is perhaps what counts as 'connection' and how to determine this. As Go (2016) recognizes, we cannot avoid such questions by simply claiming that everything is connected. We leave this inquiry for future studies.

Conclusion

Within tourism studies, the 'critical turn' has evoked growing reflective and critical perspectives on the role of the researcher in conducting research and producing knowledge (Hollinshead et al., 2009). This has also led to calls for building an inclusive research community, particularly through including non-Western and non-positivist methodologies (Hollinshead & Ivanova, 2013; Mura & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018a; Pritchard & Morgan, 2007; Winter, 2009). While it is noted that non-Western scholarship has gained more visibility in the international tourism research community through publications in prestigious academic journals and attendance at international conferences, few studies discuss non-Western scholars' responses to the calls for non-Western knowledge. In this paper, we have attempted to contribute to this discussion in the context of international conferences and investigated how Chinese tourism researchers' conference experiences shape their positionality in knowledge-making process.

As Zhang (2018) points out, Chinese tourism scholars' positioning shows that Chinese tourism scholarship is 'something in between' the global and the local, while binary positions (such as local/global, China/West) are still dominant in tourism studies and limit our understandings of our own identities and subjectivities. To this point, Tucker and Zhang (2016) contend that knowledge-making is always a process of interreacting; we are therefore always simultaneously distributing and receiving knowledge. Thus, the process of positioning is not simply to find a 'spot' for oneself, but to

reconnect the ties one was previously unaware of or had lost. In a way, to position oneself in the conference space is to find one's way through the 'overlapped territories' and 'intertwined histories' (Said, 1993), and to play an active role in the complex interchange of representations and meanings. In a similar vein, the narratives collected from semi-structured interviews in this study show a process of mingling and mapping, where conference attendees attempt to find meanings of being at an academic conference and to understand the relations embedded in the conference space. In this process of mingling and mapping, reflexivity on conference dynamics is seen in terms of how one goes around certain constructed groups, be it the group of 'Western scholars' or 'male and senior scholars'. And clearly such a process of mingling and mapping affects the participants views on who and how will make the non-Western knowledge. While the qualitative nature of this study means that the narratives collected do not present the whole group of 'Chinese tourism scholars', they do shed light on voices that go beyond the normal rationale of motivations for attending, addressing the significance of positionality for knowledge production in all academic settings. For instance, uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence are common in the narratives, redirecting the focus from the end results of knowledge production (network, publication and university ranking) to the making process, where emotional and ethical encounters are often neglected but are essential in influencing attendees' decision-making. The narratives may seem descriptive at times, due to this point and more questions are raised than answered or concluded.

Several points emerge from the materials that deserve future investigation. Firstly, the concept of the 'relevance of knowledge' should be explored more in broader contexts. We believe that it is important to invite further discussion on how to make knowledge relate to not only different groups of scholars, but also the wider society, building communicative bridges. We also suggest that future studies should continue the line of this inquiry to dig deeply into the complex mechanism through which conference experiences impact on knowledge-making, and the often taken-for-granted but vague conceptions of 'connections' and 'relations' between different individuals, groups and ideas. A recent study on slow conferencing through camping together is one example of exploring unusual forms (silence and fiction) of communication in moments of meeting (Veijola et al., 2019). Furthermore, with increasing awareness and efforts coming from the 'non-Western' scholars' side to understand the dynamics of knowledge production in today's scientific community, there is little study done on a more general population. This makes us wonder whether the 'line' between the Western and non-Western scholars mostly exists or is imagined as a hurdle for the non-Western scholars. Finally, research ethics or the question of what roles intellectuals have in today's society should be addressed more in the calling for non-Western scholarship in tourism studies. While this study focuses on individual scholars' internal processes of conference attending and knowledge making, future studies could be designed to understand such personal experiences in relation to broader arenas. For instance, a time perspective may shed light on how Chinese scholars' experiences at international conferences have changed in relation to how China as a nation is positioned in the world. The geopolitical perspective, as Rowen (2019) suggests, is also needed to reflect on tourism slogans regarding promoting peace and sustainability. It

should be noted that innovative and creative methodologies may be required to conduct research on this area of inquiry due to the sensitivity and responsibility involved.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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