

# What are Second-Generation Migrant Tourists Seeing?

Tourists who visit their ancestral homelands carry with them personal connections that “influence how they gaze upon its people, culture and landscapes”, according to Dr Wei-Jue Huan, Professor Brian King and Dr Wantanee Suntikul of the SHTM. Through interviews with second-generation Chinese-Americans who recently visited China, the researchers found that searching for the “exotic”, as tourists normally do when visiting a foreign country, migrant tourists tend to seek out similarities that help them to feel connected with their families and heritage.

## Migration and Tourism

In the past, when international travel was expensive and time-consuming it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for migrants to visit their home countries. Yet many migrants now remain connected to their ancestral homelands by making frequent trips abroad. Migrants have a “diversity of travel motivations” when visiting their home countries, according to the researchers, including visiting family and friends, tracing their family roots and reinforcing their “ethnic and cultural identity”.

Migrant tourists thus differ from regular tourists in various ways. For instance, the researchers argue that there is less of a distinction between “‘home’ and ‘destination’ and ‘self’ and other”, particularly for second-generation migrants visiting their ancestral countries. This prompted them to explore whether these differences influence migrant tourists’ perceptions of their homelands, using the concept of the “tourist gaze” to understand

“how and why they look at the destination in a particular way”.

## Migrant Tourist Accounts

To provide deeper insights into how international migrants “gaze upon the destination when visiting the homeland”, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with second-generation Chinese-Americans who had visited China. Twenty-six people took part in the interviews, in which they discussed their trips to China, including their overall impressions, what they liked and disliked, what was similar and dissimilar to what they expected, whether they visited relatives while there, and whether their parents had talked to them about their lives in China.

The participants were aged between 19 and 28, and had visited China between 1 and 10 times. As 21 of the participants had relatives living in China, visiting family and relatives was a main purpose for travel, although many also visited for touring and sightseeing and to learn Chinese. Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong were the most frequently visited destinations, together with the hometowns of the participants’ parents.

## Positive and Negative Views

The interviews revealed a general consensus among the participants about what they liked and disliked about China. The top “likes” included the delicious food, cheap prices, shopping in local markets and the scenery, whereas the top

“dislikes” included the hot and humid weather, poor sanitation, “crazy driving” and “people trying to trick them out of their money”. However, the participants expressed a “variety of preferences” for different places, with some preferring the rich history of Beijing and others preferring Shanghai’s city life and cultural diversity, while for some, the greatest pleasure was visiting their parents’ hometowns.

Their views seemed to be influenced by their attitudes towards China’s development, with some participants expressing pride at China’s “progress as the second largest global power”. Yet the lack of preservation measures and the modernisation of historical areas, with the loss of traditions and heritage, were also a concern for some.

Because of their family connections, the participants seemed to feel a “sense of obligation to like China”, and found different ways of “explaining and justifying” their negative experiences. After describing their negative perceptions, many participants concluded with more positive statements.

One, for instance, expressed shock at the population density, but then commented that this actually felt “really safe” as “you’re surrounded by people, so you’re always being watched”. Even when discussing issues such as human rights and the lack of democracy in China, the participants “often reminded themselves about not seeing things from an American perspective” and tried to see the positive side.

## **Visiting Friends and Family**

The participants also described both positive and negative interactions with friends and family. Some of them commented on the value of sharing “unique experiences” with their local relatives, such as fishing, sightseeing and “tea house music performances”. Others enjoyed participating in family traditions such as visiting local markets and eating the noodles their parents ate, as well as more spiritual activities such as going to the local temple, which formed an important part of their cultural experiences.

Nevertheless, some participants also described “awkward or disappointing” interactions with their relatives. Such situations were often caused by language difficulties, as many of the participants’ families spoke an unfamiliar local dialect. When family members used local dialects to discuss family issues that were “not intended for the ears of children”, some participants described a feeling of exclusion, which somewhat reduced the quality of their experience.

## **The Tourist Gaze**

Having “gathered an understanding of participant perceptions about China”, the researchers went on to explore what the participants knew about the country before they visited. They explain that pre-conceptions acquired through watching films and TV and reading magazines and literature are important because they “affect the way that travellers will perceive a place” and establish their expectations. An even more important source of information in “shaping the gaze” of migrant tourists is the information they receive from friends and family.

In fact, the researchers found it striking that the participants

barely mentioned the influence of the media, but instead were “overwhelmingly influenced by parents, education and peers in school”. Many participants said that they had learnt about China in history, sociology and Chinese language classes, and that this had given them a generally positive “feeling of attachment to China”.

In contrast, the messages they received from their parents were “predominantly negative”, and often stemmed from their “unpleasant memories or explanations of why they left China”. Although this meant that many participants had a negative image of the country before they travelled there, they left with the perception that it was “better than they had been led to expect”.

As they were born and raised in America, the participants took particular note of the cultural differences between the US and China, but because they were tourists in their parents’ homeland they also looked for similarities. One participant described how her mother became excited about her childhood while travelling in China – “no matter where they went, her mother was able to compare what they saw and her own memory”. Although the participant was aware of the differences between this and her own country, the mother seemed to “serve as an interpreter” and made the daughter feel more connected to the places they visited.

As the researchers note, travellers visiting their homelands do not see the local people as “exotic others” but as part of their family or their “self”. Rather than feeling distant from others, as regular tourists often do, the participants felt they could relate to the locals, and witnessing the difficulties they coped with in their daily lives made them realise that “this could have been their life”.

## **Tourism Transformed**

The researchers provide a fascinating insight into the perspective of Chinese-American tourists visiting their ancestral homeland. As they note, visiting family and friends is “arguably the world’s largest tourism segment”, and their findings study provide a theoretical framework for understanding such tourists’ perceptions. By focusing on the particular experiences of second-generation migrants visiting their ancestral country, the study opens up an interesting discussion about how the tourism concept is transformed and “de-exoticized” when the “dichotomy between home and away, self and other, and tourism and everyday life” is challenged.

### **POINTS TO NOTE**

- Second-generation migrants often travel to ancestral homelands to visit their friends and family
- These tourists tend to look for similarities rather than differences in an attempt to feel connected
- Their parents’ views have a stronger influence on their pre-travel perceptions than less personal media sources
- Although their destination experiences were overwhelmingly positive, migrants tended to offer a defence for any negative aspects or impressions out of a sense of obligation

Huang, Wei-Jue, King, Brian and Suntutkul, Wantanee. (2017). “VFR Tourism and the Tourist Gaze: Overseas Migrant Perceptions of Home”. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 19, pp. 421-434.