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Examining tourist gaze in a highly controlled destination: A study of Chinese tourists to North Korea

Abstract

Extant literature has rarely examined the temporal characteristics of tourist gaze in the context of a highly controlled destination. Guided by the gaze theory and studying Chinese tourists' gaze upon North Korea, this study aims to reveal the process of how tourists' gaze upon a highly controlled destination is organized and developed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and interview data was coded and analyzed. It is found that Chinese tourists' gaze represents a temporal process composed of three stages, each of which has the same structure of 'gaze object-gaze strategy-gaze consequence.' In a highly controlled destination, tourists respond with 'obedience' or 'empowerment' as their gaze strategies. The findings of this study contribute meaningfully to the gaze literature by presenting the temporal process and features of tourist gaze in a highly controlled destination.

Key words

Tourist gaze; object-strategy-consequence; highly controlled destination; North Korea; Chinese tourists

1. Introduction

British sociologist Urry proposed the concept of tourist gaze by ‘borrowing’ the term *medical gaze* conceptualized by Foucault (Urry, 1990). As a product of social construction, tourist gaze not only refers to the action itself, but also denotes the integration and abstraction of tourists’ desires, motivation, and behaviors, which represents tourists’ force on the tourism destination, especially local residents (Urry, 1990). During the past decades, the gaze subject has expanded from tourists to hosts, and the gaze type has developed into local gaze, reverse gaze, intra-tourist gaze, mutual gaze, among others (Lin & Fu, 2020). The tourist gaze has become an important theoretical lens in tourism research to understand tourist experience, tourist behaviors, host-guest relationships, sociocultural changes in a destination, and other tourism phenomena (Lin & Fu, 2020; Yu & Xu, 2018; Gillespie, 2006; Maoz, 2006).

A thorough review of past research suggests that tourism researchers have solely studied the gaze of a single gaze subject (i.e., tourists, local residents) or the gaze that take place at a certain stage of tourists’ travel itinerary (Lin & Fu, 2020), ignoring the temporal dimensions of the gaze (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2020). Furthermore, most of previous studies have been conducted in the context where tourists have hierarchical and repressive gaze power over a destination. However, questions such as ‘what are the temporal characteristics in the construction of tourist gaze?’ and ‘how do tourists’ gaze in a highly controlled destination where they are strictly regulated and gazed upon?’, although important, still remain largely unanswered.

Chinese tourists’ gaze in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea, can potentially provide a context to address the aforementioned questions. North Korea, an isolated and totalitarian country, is still considered by most people as a dangerous, mysterious and unique place (Buda & Shim, 2015; Connell, 2019; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017). In North Korea, the political, economic, and social aspects are strictly governed and guided by the *Juche* Ideology. Connell (2019) regarded North Korea as a ‘theatre-state’, in which political practice has been turned

into a tourism product, and tourism is a wholly scripted and performed show and is expected to attract tourists' participation. Besides, the country strictly manages and controls its tourists by restricting their personal freedom, restricting their photography, monitoring their daily activities, restricting their contacts with local people, and controlling their travel itinerary (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017; Li & Ryan, 2020; Li, Li, & Ryan, 2020; Li & Wang, 2020). All these measures serve to ensure the success of the performance and fulfil its political propaganda. Therefore, North Korea as a tourism destination is significantly different from conventional and mainstream destinations, as the host (i.e., the authority) has more agency and power than the guests (i.e., tourists). Consequently, North Korea forms a typical context of a highly controlled destination.

In addition, during the past decades, due to political and geographical reasons, China has become North Korea's largest and dominant source market (Nanyang Sin-Chew Lianhe Zaobao, 2018). Previous studies have also indicated the periodical characteristics in different stages of tourist experience in North Korea (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017), and Chinese tourists' attitude changes through visiting North Korea (Li & Wang, 2020). As a result, for Chinese tourists, North Korea represents a highly controlled destination, in which they would strategically construct their gaze.

As such, this study, adopting the qualitative research approach, aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do Chinese tourists respond through gaze to North Korea as a highly controlled destination?
- (2) How do Chinese tourists organize their gaze strategically in the whole process of their visit to North Korea?

The findings of this paper are supposed to deepen the theoretical understanding of the temporal process of tourist gaze in a highly controlled destination and to provide meaningful practical implications for destination management and marketing.

2. Literature review

2.1 Gaze in the tourism context

Tourist gaze was conceptualized by John Urry by introducing Foucault's *medical gaze* to tourism research (Urry, 1990). Since then, tourist gaze has rapidly become an important concept in tourism research. Tourism researchers have accumulated a rich body of knowledge on tourist gaze. By the subject of gaze, tourist gaze can be divided into three categories (Lin & Fu, 2020), namely tourist-initiated gaze (Willis, Ladkin, Jain, & Clayton, 2017; Everett, 2008; Ong & du Cros, 2012; Yu & Xu, 2018), host-initiated gaze (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019), and mutual gaze between hosts and tourists (Maoz, 2006; Monterrubio, 2019).

More specifically, tourist-initiated gaze can be further categorized into tourist gaze, where the object of gaze is the destination (Yu & Xu, 2018), and intra-tourist gaze, where the object of gaze is other tourists (Holloway, Green, & Holloway, 2011). Tourist gaze was the first type of gaze proposed in the tourism context and has been considered critically important in developing tourist experience. Prior research on tourist gaze, which has been dominant in the existing gaze literature, reveals the power and authority of tourists over their hosts and the destination (Lin & Fu, 2020). The discussed themes in this regard include tourist photography, recognizable signs, imaginative mobility, and destination image (Lin & Fu, 2020). This type of gaze can not only be performed at a destination, but also be constructed and sustained through various media platforms (e.g., magazines and videos; see Mahn, 2014; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Aramberri & Liang, 2012). The intra-tourist gaze demonstrates the roles of both gaze subjects and gaze objects that tourists play within their interactions with each other (Schwarz, 2018). This type of gaze is authorized and authenticated through tourist-to-tourist social encounters (Schwarz, 2018).

In terms of host-initiated gaze, the local gaze is based on how local people respond to the perceptions and behaviors of tourists. Local people's overall perception and even stereotypes of tourists consists of the local gaze, which influences locals' attitudes

toward and behaviors against tourists (Maoz, 2006). The host-initiated gaze is also referred to as the 'reverse gaze' in Gillespie's (2006) study, which conceptualizes local residents' gaze upon, including photography behaviors against, tourists who were photographing them. The type of gaze plays an important role in questioning or redirecting the visitors (Gillespie, 2006; Hockert, Lüthje, Ilola, & Stewart, 2018).

It is worth noting that, research on host-initiated gaze has shifted the focus of gaze research from tourists to hosts as well as the interaction between these two groups. In contrast to the hierarchical, one-sided, and repressive power that tourists have in tourist gaze as emphasized in previous studies, the host-initiated gaze manifests the agency and power of locals (Maoz, 2006), presenting a more complex binary picture, and further expressing itself as a mutual gaze. It should be noted that, gaze does not only refer to visual perception but also more complex psychological processes (Maoz, 2006). The concept of mutual gaze outlines the importance of tourist-host interactions, as each party acts and adjusts according to the perceptions and behaviors of the other and defends its identity constantly (Maoz, 2006; Monterrubio, 2019). Mutual gaze is therefore 'the ways guests and hosts view, grasp, conceptualize, understand, imagine and construct each other' (Maoz, 2006, p.222).

In their review of gaze research, Lin and Fu (2020) suggest that, within the tourism context, the host-tourist interaction (i.e., mutual gaze) should be given more attention in future research. In addition, as research focus on gaze subject has expanded from tourists to hosts and to tourist-host interaction, the agency and power of hosts have been increasingly revealed and valued. However, there is still a lack of understanding of tourists' gaze in the context where the hosts have relatively higher agency and power, i.e., where tourists are highly regulated by the host (i.e., the local authority). As elaborated earlier, gaze can be constructed not only through information channels prior to tourists' actual visits, but also through the performance by tourists in all travel stages (i.e., pre-trip, on-site, and post-trip). However, past research has been solely focused on the gaze of tourists in a specific stage of their travel (Yu & Xu, 2018; Aramberri & Liang, 2012), ignoring the temporal features in and stage-specific features of the

construction of tourists' gaze. Furthermore, as suggested by a recent systematic review of gaze research (Samarathunga & Cheng 2020), future research is urgently needed to explore the temporal dimensions of the tourist gaze, including how it forms, changes, or even decays under special circumstances.

2.2 Highly controlled destinations and travel experience

Tourism research in relation to a highly controlled destination has been focused on socialist countries. Researchers have examined tourism development in the former Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and North Korea and revealed the pervasive political influence in it (Buckley & Witt, 1990; Böröcz, 1990; Hall, 1990; Kreck, 1998; Ivy & Copp, 1999; Light, 2013; Connell, 2019; Kim, Timothy, & Han, 2007). Despite their own development paths, similar patterns can still be identified in these countries (Wang, Van Broeck, & Vanneste, 2017). First, there is a high degree of governmental intervention and regulation of the tourism sector. Second, tourism development was manipulated by the communist regimes to achieve a set of political and economic objectives. Third, numerous initiatives were taken to avoid Western influences so as to preserve the purity of the communist ideology. As a result, these countries have posed strict restrictions and controls over both outbound tourism (Light & Dumbrăveanu, 1999) and inbound tourism (Böröcz, 1990; Hall, 1990; Buckley & Witt, 1990; Kreck, 1998). Specifically, inbound tourists can only conduct limited tourism activities that are strictly regulated by the government (Hall, 1991; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017).

With the changes of regime, such a tourism development pattern has gradually disappeared in the former CEE countries. However, this pattern still plays an important role in today's North Korea. Against the backdrop of increasing globalization, openness, and freedom in relation to travels around the world, tourist experience in a highly controlled destination like North Korea is undoubtedly unique and thus deserves in-depth investigation. Tourism researchers have examined tourists' shopping experience (Li & Ryan, 2018), hotel experience (Li & Ryan, 2020), dimensions of travel

experience (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017), travel satisfaction (Li & Ryan, 2015), perceived destination image (Li et al., 2020), and change of attitude toward North Korea (Li & Wang, 2020). Prominent characteristics identified with tourist experience in North Korea included high control (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017; Li & Ryan, 2015, 2020; Li, et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2020) and reflections on authenticity (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017; Li & Ryan, 2015, 2020; Li & Wang, 2020). On the one hand, high control has been manifested in North Korean authority's restrictions on tourists' personal freedom, restrictions on their photography practice, strict monitoring of tourists' trajectory, strict limits on their contacts with locals, and strict control of their travel itinerary (Wassler & Schuckert, 2017; Li & Ryan, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2020), which contributes largely to tourist dissatisfaction (Li & Ryan, 2015).

On the other hand, since staging, performance, and participation are pervasive and comprehensive in this theatre-state, authenticity available for tourists to experience is limited (Connell, 2019). As a result, in this destination of rigid control and performance, reflections on and practice of authenticity have played an important role in tourists' experience, which included doubts about the information obtained, observation of staged phenomena, and interactions with government-chosen elites (Li & Ryan, 2015; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017; Li & Wang, 2020).

Therefore, the interactions between hosts and guests with varied purposes and considerations in North Korean tourism have formed a 'hidden game'. In North Korea, the officially guided and regulated presentation and management of gaze content determines what tourists can and cannot 'see', while tourists take various measures to choose what they want to 'see' and what they do not want to 'see'. Consequently, international tourism in North Korea provides an appropriate context for enquiries into the temporal process of the tourist gaze in a highly controlled destination.

3. Methodology

Following previous studies on tourist gaze (Li & Wang, 2020; Lin & Fu, 2020;

Samarathunga & Cheng, 2020; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017) and considering the exploratory nature of this study (Aronson, 1994), qualitative methods were used to explore the gaze of Chinese tourists visiting North Korea. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and interview texts were coded and analyzed through content analysis manually with the help of Nvivo 11, a content analysis software.

3.1 Data collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection. Specifically, two approaches were adopted to conduct interviews. First, in April 2019, one of the authors joined a four-day tour visiting North Korea, which was organized by a Chinese travel agency in Dandong, a border city in China. The researcher visited representative tourist sites, such as Panmunjom, Kim Il Sung Plaza, International Friendship Exhibition Hall, Kim Il Sung's Former Residence, and Children's Palace. During the trip, **23 interviews were conducted**. Due to strict restrictions of North Korean authority, the interviews were conducted during the trip in the hotel the tour group stayed (3 participants; marked with (d) in Table 1), in the return train to Dandong, China (9 participants; marked with (a) in Table 1), and in the train back to the city of Tianjin where tour members came from (11 participants; marked with (c) in Table 1), **respectively**. Secondly, another 17 interviews were performed with those Chinese residents who had traveled to North Korea. As travel memories fade over time, the researchers weighed the quality of interview data against the difficulty of recruiting qualified respondents, and finally determined that the target respondents should be Chinese residents who had traveled to North Korea within the past two years as of 2019 when the interviews were conducted, which meant no earlier than 2017. Guided by theoretical sampling, all interviews were conducted through a snowballing process.

Questions were first asked to understand how participants gazed upon North Korea, including their pre-trip impressions of North Korea and travel motivations, what they saw and heard during their trip, as well as what they thought and felt throughout the trip (including before, during, and after the trip). **It is worth noting that almost all the**

participants were asked the same questions regarding how they gazed upon North Korea before, during, and after their trips. Exceptions are the three participants interviewed in a hotel in Pyongyang on the night before their departure back to Dandong, who were mostly asked how they gazed upon North Korea before and during their visits. The researchers then followed up with questions about the details. A total of 40 interviews were completed, with over 140,000 words of interview text collected and compiled. Time for each interview ranged from 30-50 minutes. As the last six interviewees did not provide new concepts or categories, it was decided that data saturation was achieved and data collection was ceased. This process assured that data collected were sufficient and valid. The interviews were numbered, with the first respondent labelled P01, and so on (Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, male participants (60%) outnumbered their female counterparts (40%). The average age was relatively high (51 years) and 40% were retired; the age range was wide, with the oldest being 70 years old and the youngest being 19 years old. Half of the respondents had an educational background of bachelor's degree or above. There was a wide variety of occupations and normal places of residence. Most of the respondents traveled to North Korea in groups, and four respondents had family members who fought in the Korean War. The above sociodemographics were consistent with prior studies on Chinese tourists to North Korea (Li & Ryan, 2018; Li et al., 2020; Li & Wang, 2020).

Please insert Table 1 about here

3.2 Data analysis

Content analysis, which is a careful, detailed, and systematic way to identify patterns, themes, biases, and social science implications (Berg, 2001; Aronson, 1994), was performed on the collected interview texts. Specifically, in conducting context analysis, researchers are required to fully and manually read the text (Aronson, 1994). In this process, interview transcripts, according to their meaning unit, are manually coded into various themes and sub themes (King & Horrocks, 2010). The interview texts were

shared among the researchers of the study, so that they all read and developed full understanding. One of the authors, who is a well-trained coder, coded the interview texts manually with the help of Nvivo11, in successive phases. Coding results in each phrase were shared, respectively, to other researchers in the team, who then read and validated the coding results. An in-depth group discussion among the researchers was undertaken to solve disagreements with coding results referring to the below-mentioned Chinese tourists' 'obedient gaze'. All these measures allowed for validity, completeness, and consistency of data analysis. After such procedures, key themes and subthemes were identified and confirmed, forming a theoretical framework for understanding the temporal features of Chinese tourists' gaze upon North Korea (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

4. Research findings

A total of six themes were identified via data coding (see Figure 1). Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, Chinese tourists' gaze in North Korea consists of three stages, each with exactly the same structure of 'object-strategy-consequence'. Stage 1 (i.e., *information accepting, pre-trip image*) started before Chinese tourists' actual visit to North Korea, followed by stage 2 (i.e., *response strategies under the reverse gaze, destination in 'my' eyes*) during their on-site visit in North Korea, while stage 3 (i.e., *tendentious comparison, source country in 'my' eyes*) occurs both during and after their visit. Though the three stages of gaze do not strictly correspond to tourists' travel stages (i.e., pre-trip, on-site, and post-trip), they do contain obvious temporal characteristics and dimensions, which manifests that tourists' gaze in one stage could potentially affect their gaze in subsequent stages. Furthermore, the diversified and context-specific gaze strategies adopted by Chinese tourists in North Korea in each of their gaze types (i.e., empowering gaze, obedient gaze) are also illustrated in Figure 2.

Please insert Figure 1 and Figure 2 about here

4.1 Phase one: Acquaintance with the destination

4.1.1 Information accepting

The tourist gaze can be mainly constructed by the media prior to tourists' actual in-destination visit (Maoz, 2006). As indicated in Figure 2, Chinese tourists were more or less exposed to information related to North Korea in their daily lives. For example, an interviewee (P35) mentioned: *'I had seen many news reports and documentaries about North Korea.'* After making their travel decisions, some travelers take the initiative to gather information about North Korea to increase their pre-trip knowledge of the country, as respondent P03 said: *'I had a very, very good idea of what I was going to see after reading the (travel) journal.'*

4.1.2 Pre-trip image

Potential tourists had been influenced and guided in the process of pre-trip gazing, actively or passively, by North Korea-related information accessible to them, forming a preliminary image of this country. Twenty eight respondents (70%) indicated that their images of North Korea prior to their actual visit tended to be 'backward' (P02), 'closed' (P03), 'cult of the individual' (P07), and 'poverty' (P35).

In addition, 42.5% of the respondents indicated that they had a positive pre-trip image of North Korea as 'a friendly socialist neighbor country to China'. For example, two respondents (P08, P22) said, respectively:

North Korea is a socialist country, truly socialist.

The two countries are close neighbors and support each other. Besides, we've had so many Chinese volunteer soldiers who died there.

4.2 Phase two: (Re) understanding the destination

4.2.1 Response strategies under the reverse gaze

The tourist gaze is often described as a hermeneutic circle (Urry, 1992, 2002), whereby what is sought during the trip is a set of images previously seen in the media (Canavan, 2020). The aforementioned pre-trip image held by Chinese tourists had influenced the development of their gaze in North Korea. Therefore, it is understandable that during the in-destination visit, tourists will pay special attention to the phenomena closely related to the pre-trip image. Respondent P38 offered an example:

My main purpose of visiting North Korea is to verify the differences between what I read in books and the actual situation.

Most gazing practice is a team performance, where individual gazers are affected by and responsive to other gazers (Larsen & Urry, 2011). As a result, the positions of gazers and those being gazed upon, as well as performers and the audience, are interactive and fluid, while tourists are involved as both (Canavan, 2020).

For a ‘theatre-state’ like North Korea, tourism development totally serves for foreign currency earnings and political propaganda (Connell, 2019). Thus, rather than passively accepting the tourist gaze upon the tourism sector and the whole country, the North Korean authority determines on what tourism presentations/performances should be provided. Such decisions were based on empirical information the North Korean authority has accumulated over time about what foreign tourists wanted to see and how they wanted to see it, in combination with the main task of political propaganda. This is typically reflected in Chinese tourists’ gaze, as two respondents (P04, P16) mentioned, respectively:

When I booked the hotel, I told him I was going to stay at the Youth Hotel on Kwangbok Street... As soon as he saw this, he knew that you were trying to sneak away, and he wouldn't give you any approval... In the end, it happened. I was arranged in the Sosan Hotel... It's more distant... The guide didn't need to supervise you, because you couldn't see anyone even if you run out..... You can't interact with any locals, and you can't buy things from them.

Foreign visitors all think that North Korea is poor or something else, so the country wants to show that it is thriving under the leadership of its leader and is not as bad as you say.

Keeping foreign tourists under strong reverse gaze in their whole travel has been an important guarantee for the North Korean authority to achieve the purpose of political propaganda (Connell, 2019; Wassler & Schuckert, 2017). In the following analysis, we adopt a tourist perception perspective to understand the host-initiated gaze (reverse gaze) due to the following two reasons. First, due to the unique political system of North Korea, it is difficult and almost impossible for the researchers to conduct field work in relation to locals (e.g., staff working for the North Korean authority). Second, tourists can perceive strong reverse gaze that locals imposed on them during their trip. Therefore, the following analysis of host-initiated gaze in this study was based on Chinese tourists' perceptions. Unlike other destinations, tourists are at a disadvantaged position under North Korea's powerful reverse gaze. For instance, respondent P38 stated:

It is impossible to feel that you are being watched all the time and everywhere (in any other destinations than North Korea). However, here we were only 12 visitors, but we have two tour guides and a driver with us... I don't want to use the word 'unfree' to describe it, but the fact is that I felt like being under strict control.

In turn, North Korea's tourism performance and the reverse gaze the country imposed on tourists have triggered tourists' responses in the following two forms (Figure 1), which are further elaborated below. It should be noted that, different individuals under the same circumstance and even the same individual under different circumstance may adopt different gaze strategies (Maoz, 2006). For most Chinese tourists visiting North Korea, various strategies were alternately adopted.

The 'obedient' gaze. The 'obedient' gaze refers to the gaze that tourists conducted to accept the content presented by their North Korean hosts when they knew that their power was relatively weaker under the circumstances of mutual gaze (see Figure 2). For example, respondent P06 told her experience of carefully keeping in mind the travel tips informed in advance:

Whenever I wanted to take photos in some places, I would first ask the tour guide

if I could do so.

In addition, they would also comply with North Korea's display through tourism and make comparisons that are biased towards North Korea. For example, respondent P40 has expressed his appreciation for the strong mental power of the North Korean people, as follows:

North Koreans are very much united. For example, just like the group exercise I just mentioned, the tour guide said that the performers are students or workers. They are amateurs, trained for a period of time to perform. Tens of thousands of people, how difficult it is! If it weren't for unity, it wouldn't be in such a good order... We really need to learn from the North Koreans in this regard.

Respondent P29 even said with a sigh:

Here, in North Korea, the state takes care of everything. In China, we have burdens, such as studying, employment, marriage and buying a house. All these get involved with our parents' lifelong efforts.

The 'empowering' gaze. The empowering gaze refers to the gaze taken by tourists to alleviate the power imbalance under the circumstance of mutual gaze, where they felt that their power was relatively weaker (see Figure 2). North Korea's political performance and aggressive reverse gaze have created a sense of imbalance among tourists, as respondent P39 expressed:

Every person in every society or every country has good and bad things, and what does it matter if the bad ones are exposed? ... I felt rather depressed... we are being watched as if we are prisoners.

Such political performance and aggressive reverse gaze in turn have encouraged a number of tourists to respond with some 'empowerment' tactics. The reflection on authenticity has played a significant role in tourists' experience in North Korea. While

the whole country, guided by the North Korea authority, is intent on putting on a ‘magnificent play’, many tourists can easily spot the traces of political performance, which was clearly shown in Chinese tourists’ narratives, such as respondent P39’s: *‘Actually no one is stupid. We all know that what we saw there was mostly a show.’*

Therefore, a number of tourists would consciously divide North Korea into ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ for gazing. Some daring tourists were not content to be controlled in the ‘frontstage’ to see the ‘fake world’ (P39) and the ‘grand opera’ (P04). Instead, many of them wanted to break into the ‘backstage’ of the drama and see what was going on. Respondent P04 told her story:

We did not feel comfortable once we went in. Then we rested in the hotel room and went to dinner later. After dinner, we wanted to take a walk, so we walked around the hotel. I have looked over the fence there, and I thought it was not that high. At that time I was thinking about climbing it out.

In addition, some tourists would make comparisons in favor of China in their gaze upon North Korea. For example, respondent P40 once said: *‘Their lower living standard reminds me of China’s reform and opening up. Thanks to this policy, or else modern China would be the same as North Korea.’*

Some tourists would also cast their gaze upon other tourists and compare themselves with tourists from other countries/regions and those who were then conducting ‘obedient’ gaze, so as to alleviate the imbalance of power in their mutual gaze with the North Korean authority. Two representative respondents (P06, P14) are quoted below:

They were very friendly to Chinese tourists. Since we arrived at the customs, we haven’t felt under strict surveillance. There is a sense of relaxation instead... The tour guide also said that Chinese were good friends of North Koreans, and that the United States symbolizes imperialism. Haha!

Obviously the older generation, especially people over 30, were actually quite obedient to the tour guide there. There is nothing derogatory about such obedience.

They would abide by the rules. For example, once the tour guide did not allow us to go to a certain place, they would never go there..... And for me, I would definitely go and have a look.

Last, some tourists mentioned their good interaction with local receptionists. When the roles of North Korea tourism receptionists in the minds of Chinese tourists changed from ‘surveillant’ to ‘friends’, the original power disparity was weakened, and the sense of discomfort or imbalance was alleviated. For example, female respondent P33 said:

We had a safety officer in each bus, who seemed to be supervising us not to move around freely, and we were a little bit nervous in the beginning. When we got familiar with him...we thought the safety officer was rather cute. Well, it was just his job, and he was cute in person.

4.2.2 Destination in ‘my’ eyes

Tourists’ experience of self-reflection, mutual respect and understanding could replace the shallowness of gaze from their initial perceptions and behaviors (Maoz, 2006). This is also the case to Chinese tourists’ gaze in North Korea. It is found that Chinese tourists tried to express their own opinions, along with both the prevalent negative media reports and the positive display by the North Korea authority, so as to verify, correct or improve their pre-trip image of North Korea, and then (re)construct a North Korea in their own eyes. Respondent P04 provided a persuasive example:

I hope that everyone who has visited North Korea can see what North Korea is really like. It is not necessarily the one described in our country’s official magazines, or by Europeans or Americans, or by Trump. It would be what you see in person. That is what travel should bring to people.

Verification. On the one hand, a few respondents (17.5%) indicated that the real-world situation of North Korea actually matched their negative pre-trip perception of North Korea. For instance, respondent P30 said:

Life in North Korea was really as closed and hard as we imagined. People there live a hard life by faith. If you lived there for a few days without Internet and just eat potatoes, you would be eager to return home.

On the other hand, 45% of the respondents also claimed that they were able to feel the deep friendship between China and North Korea during their travel to North Korea. Respondent P22 served as an example, who said:

Let' take our tour guide as an example. After the arrival of Chinese tourists, it occurs to her that she can never forget the complex relations between China and North Korea. They will never forget China, won't they?

Some changes in mind. More than half of the interviewees (67.5%) indicated that even if North Korea did lag behind China in some respects, the travel experience had indeed relieved their negative perception of North Korea to some extent. In this regard, respondent P05 once stated: *'We felt that the real North Korea was much better than expected'.*

The seemingly superficial gaze in stage one may be replaced by multiple host-tourist encounters, which were based on tourists' self-reflection and mutual respect. During this process, mutual understanding may have been established in gaze that respects different cultural backgrounds. P04 shared her experience:

After I saw those things, I thought that was enough for me to match the reality with my impression. But it touched me in a way beyond my imagination... I had been cynical about North Korea before I got there, and thought it was just a joke. After I went there, my understanding of this country was deepened. I began to understand why they made such a choice, why they pose such a gesture to make others think about their strange existence.

In addition, 17.5% of the respondents expressed that their visits to North Korea gave them a new perspective on China-North Korea relations. For example, respondent P38 told:

I think their attitudes towards Chinese people are very complicated, but I would never describe them as 'enthusiastic and friendly', as I feel that North Korea is

deeply wary of China, and is not friendly enough like they said.

4.3 Stage three: (Re)examining tourist source country

Tourism experience is not absolutely separated from everyday life (Edensor, 2001), and neither is the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). The gaze carried out in North Korea has also influenced Chinese tourists' reexamination of their home country, i.e., China. In this stage, Chinese tourists gazed upon the differences between China and North Korea both during and after their in-destination visit. Such comparisons in turn have influenced Chinese tourists' views of their homeland.

4.3.1 Tendentious comparison

Tourism represents continuities with everyday life rather than a separate realm (Edensor, 2001). Therefore, it is not uncommon for tourists to compare the visited destination with their home environment based on their in-destination experience (Li & Ryan, 2015, 2018, Li & Wang, 2020; Li et al., 2020). The comparison refers to not only the destination, but also tourists' source country. First, the gaze that Chinese tourists carried out in North Korea further allowed them to re-examine China in a comparison, which possessed both positive and negative aspects. For example, respondent P36 said:

China has implemented reform and opening up, while North Korea did not. We are totally different in terms of stage of economic development and the social climate... Although China has achieved economic development, there are still many spaces for improvement, such as people's personal qualities, the spirit of solidarity, and national cohesion. I think China is not as good as North Korea in these aspects.

Second, after returning to China, Chinese tourists' gaze conducted in North Korea would affect their gaze upon their daily life through comparison. Respondent P39 was an example:

Everything became lovely when I was back to China. People there had no vitality in their faces, maybe because they are under quite strict surveillance. After I came back, I felt that some of the behaviors I could not tolerate before become bearable,

such as talking on the phone or screaming or shouting on the train or in the bus. I got used to these behaviors. At least I think we Chinese are happier and freer, while North Koreans did not dare to do so.

4.3.2 Source country in 'my' eyes

The role of travel experience in shaping and strengthening tourists' identity has been widely confirmed in the tourism literature (e.g., Park, 2011; Packer, Ballantyne, & Uzzell, 2019; Zhang, Tucker, Morrison, & Wu, 2017). Social comparison represents one of the most commonly used ways to fulfill such an identity change (Zhang et al., 2017). Comparisons conducted between China/Chinese people and North Korea/North Koreans during and after Chinese tourists' visit have caused them to take a second look at their homeland. This re-examination has two aspects of consequence. First, an overwhelming majority of respondents (77.5%) reported that their positive perceptions of China had significantly increased. For example, many respondents expressed a sense of pride and happiness in being Chinese, as P37 said '*I am fairly proud to be Chinese.*' Respondent P36 elaborated in a more detailed way:

It has changed my view on the world. I get to know that the world has many aspects, which enables me to view my country and our people from a more objective point of view.

In the aforementioned process, transformative learning also took place through critical reflection and rational discourse (Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Mezirow, 2003). Some respondents spoke of a more tolerant attitude toward people and things in their daily lives after returning to China. Respondent P39 served as an example:

It has changed my view on China in some aspects..... Things that were unacceptable to me here before has become quite acceptable after I came back from North Korea.

Second, many respondents (42.5%) began to reflect on problems that China was currently faced with, such as education for patriotism. For instance, respondent P01

stated in a detailed way:

Education is rather important. North Korean people keep Huang Jiguang (a super hero of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army) and all other national heroes in their hearts. What about our younger generations in China? Do they know about them (Chinese national heroes)? ...Take a look at our education and see how much it has spent on tuition classes for our kids nowadays...They know nothing about the heroes of the past.

5. Discussions

By analyzing the gaze of Chinese tourists to North Korea, this study has developed a framework of understanding tourist-initiated gaze in a highly controlled situation, which is consisted of three stages, each with an 'object-strategy-consequence' structure. As shown in Figure 2, the Chinese tourists' pre-trip image of a highly controlled destination, such as North Korea, is formed by their actively or passively accepting information inputs about the destination from information channels; subsequently, in a highly controlled destination, tourists strategically 'adapt' to the situation by adopting a 'obedient' or 'empowering' attitude toward the actual destination and other tourists to get to 'know' the destination in their own eyes. The tourists' gaze on the destination (i.e., North Korea) allows them to start to re-examine their source country (i.e., China) in a comparative manner. Through a detailed account of how Chinese tourists respond through gaze to North Korea as a highly controlled destination and deciphering the temporal process of those tourist gaze, this study contributes meaningfully to the extant literature on tourist gaze and has provided practical implications for destination marketing and management, which are further discussed below.

5.1 Theoretical implications

First, this study has presented the temporal features in the forming of tourist-initiated gaze, which deepens our theoretical understanding of the gaze in the tourism context and echoes the call for future research to explore the temporal dimensions of the tourist gaze (e.g., Samarathunga & Cheng, 2020). Specifically, the construction of the tourist gaze can be both media-based (Aramberri & Liang, 2012) and destination-based

(Everett, 2008; Maoz, 2006). Unlike existing studies which have tended to focus solely on one stage of gaze, this study found that the tourist-initiated gaze runs through the whole process closely linked to the tourist experience (including pre-trip, on-site, and even post-trip). Tourists' gaze in one stage affect their gaze in the next stage, and also influence their gaze cast upon their origin country. In addition, unlike most previous studies that have focused solely on a single gaze subject, this study has shed light on the mutual gaze among key stakeholders, such as hosts-tourists gaze and between-tourists gaze, and their response mechanisms. In this regard, this study has echoed the call for more empirical studies that explore tourist–host interactivity in the gaze (e.g., Lin & Fu, 2020).

Second, this study has advanced our understanding of the gaze in a highly controlled destination context, as existing gaze research has mostly focused on the more conventional contexts where the tourist-initiated gaze is dominant and exerts power and authority over the visited destination (Willis et al., 2017; Yu & Xu, 2018). In fact, the tourist gaze is not always hierarchical, unidirectional, or repressive. Our analysis of the gaze of Chinese tourists to North Korea has showed that in a highly controlled context, the hosts have greater agency and power to (re)direct and influence the gaze that tourists are about to exert or have already exerted. Within such an unusual circumstance of gaze power, tourists would strategically adopt appropriate gaze strategies as a response. The result of this mutual gaze is that, in such host-tourists encounters, neither the dominator nor 'the dominated' actually exist; that is, both sides are experiencing and exercising their gazing power simultaneously.

5.2 Practical implications

This study also provides implications for North Korea's destination marketing and management. First, the official media of North Korea as a propaganda tool is suggested to improve their destination publicity and promotion. The negative images of 'backwardness', 'isolation', and 'cult of personality' in the minds of potential Chinese tourists should be changed, and a more positive image is to be established. Especially,

the destination image of North Korea as ‘China’s socialist neighborhood’ should be strengthened, so that the Chinese market, as North Korea’s largest and dominant market, can be further motivated to facilitate tourism development and the corresponding economic growth in North Korea.

Second, in order to improve tourist experience, it is vitally important for the North Korea authority to try to present a real North Korea, which could meet many Chinese tourists’ emotional needs of nostalgia and could be more conducive to rouse Chinese tourists’ positive emotions associated with North Korea, for example, the understanding of and sympathy for North Korea’s history and people. Of particular importance is that the excessive ‘political performance’ and ‘propaganda wrapping up’ conducted in North Korea may dissatisfy Chinese tourists. On the contrary, future tourist experience design should be focused on presenting the real ‘advantages’ and attraction of North Korea to many Chinese tourists, such as ordinary people’s spiritual outlook and personal qualities, as well as China-DPRK friendship. In addition, it should also been considered by the North Korea authority to gradually loosen its control over inbound tourists so as to avoid their emotional and behavioral resistance and subsequent dissatisfaction.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged in determining future research directions. First, due to the realistic difficulties in researching the hosts in North Korea, the host-initiated gaze in our analysis are actually based on Chinese tourists’ perceptions during their visits. Future research, if possible, could adopt a perspective from the hosts’ lived experiences. Second, we collected data by asking the respondents to recall their experience with North Korea to unveil their gaze in different stages of visiting this country. Future studies, when condition permits, could collect data in different phrases of tourists’ travel experience (i.e., pre-trip, on-site, and post-trip) in a stricter and real-time manner. Third, determined by the qualitative nature of research and the constructivist paradigm lens adopted in the data coding and analysis, research

findings of this study are not immune to subjectivity from both the researchers and the respondents. Fellow researchers are therefore encouraged to conduct subsequent research following a design to circumvent any subjectivity bias in findings. Last, due to its exploratory nature, this study selected Chinese tourists' gaze in North Korea as a context. Future empirical studies within other destination contexts of high controls are encouraged to further verify the theoretical framework established in this study.

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Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Number	Gender	Year of birth	Educational background	Profession	Usual place of residence	Annual income (RMB)	When traveled to DPRK/ companions	Family members who fought in the Korean War and the relationship
P01 ^(a)	Female	1955	Bachelor	Veteran	Beijing	200,000 (household)	2017, alone; April 2019, with her comrade-in-arms	Yes, her father
P02 ^(a)	Female	1956	Bachelor	Veteran	Beijing	200,000 (household)	April 2019, with her comrade-in-arms	No
P03 ^(b)	Male	1995	Master	Engineer	Shenzhen	280,000	February 2019, alone	No
P04 ^(b)	Female	1981	Master	Enterprise manager	Guangzhou	300,000 (household)	June 2018, tailor-made trip with friends	No
P05 ^(c)	Male	1984	Master	Students	Tianjin	100,000 (household)	April 2019, alone	No
P06 ^(b)	Female	1975	Doctorate	University teacher	Yanji	250,000 (household)	January 2019, with kids	No
P07 ^(b)	Male	1989	Bachelor	Sports photographer	Beijing	288,000 (household)	January 2017, with girl friends	No
P08 ^(a)	Male	1949	Primary school	Businessman (Veteran)	Ningbo	250,000 (household)	April 2019, with family	Yes, his father
P09 ^(a)	Male	1951	Junior high school	Businessman (after retirement)	Ningbo	100,000 (household)	April 2019, with family	No
P10 ^(a)	Male	1952	Primary school	Private entrepreneur (retired)	Ningbo	200,000 (household)	April 2019, with family	No
P11 ^(a)	Male	1951	Primary school	Staff of State Grid Corporation of China (retired)	Shenyang	100,000 (household)	April 2019, with family	No

(Continued)

Number	Gender	Year of birth	Educational background	Profession	Usual place of residence	Annual income (RMB)	When traveled to DPRK/ companions	Family members who fought in the Korean War and the relationship
P12 ^(d)	Female	1956	Bachelor	School staff (retired)	Wuhan	240,000 (household)	April 2019, with her husband and comrade-in-arms	No
P13 ^(d)	Male	1953	N.A.	Veteran	Wuhan	240,000 (household)	April 2019, with family and comrade-in-arms	No
P14 ^(b)	Male	1999	Bachelor	Student	Guangzhou	200,000-250,000 (household)	January 2019, alone	No
P15 ^(d)	Male	1988	Master	Staff of Hong Kong Airport	Hong Kong	240,000 (household)	April 2019, alone	No
P16 ^(b)	Male	1955	Doctorate	University teacher	Quanzhou	500,000 (household)	June 2018, with family	No
P17 ^(c)	Female	1953	Junior high school	Civil servant (retired)	Tianjin	200,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	Yes, her father-in-law
P18 ^(c)	Male	1952	Junior high school	Warehouse keeper (retired)	Tianjin	100,000 (household)	April 2019, alone	No
P19 ^(c)	Female	1951	Primary school	Retired	Tianjin	100,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No
P20 ^(c)	Female	1957	Junior high school	Retired	Tianjin	150,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No
P21 ^(c)	Female	1961	Senior high school	Retired	Tianjin	150,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No
P22 ^(c)	Male	1950	Bachelor	Civil servant (retired)	Tianjin	100,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No

(Continued)

Number	Gender	Year of birth	Educational background	Profession	Usual place of residence	Annual income (RMB)	When traveled to DPRK/ companions	Family members who fought in the Korean War and the relationship
P23 ^(c)	Male	1949	Junior high school	Civil servant (retired)	Tianjin	100,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No
P24 ^(c)	Male	2000	Junior college	Student	Tianjin	N.A.	April 2019, with families	No
P25 ^(c)	Female	1950	Primary school	Retired	Tianjin	100,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No
P26 ^(c)	Male	1950	Primary school	Civil servant (retired)	Tianjin	200,000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	Yes, his father
P27 ^(a)	Male	1954	Junior high school	Peasant	Zhangjiakou	N.A.	April 2019, with relatives	No
P28 ^(a)	Male	1955	Senior high school	Peasant	Zhangjiakou	N.A.	April 2019, with relatives	No
P29 ^(a)	Male	1957	Senior high school	Peasant	Zhangjiakou	20000 (household)	April 2019, with relatives	No
P30 ^(b)	Female	1986	Doctorate	University teacher	Guangzhou	400,000 (household)	July 2018, with colleagues	No
P31 ^(b)	Female	1986	Doctorate	University teacher	Guangzhou	360,000 (household)	July 2018, with colleagues	No
P32 ^(b)	Female	1983	Doctorate	University teacher	Kunming	170,000-180,000 (household)	July 2018, with colleagues	No
P33 ^(b)	Female	1978	Master	Teacher	Guangzhou	200,000	N.A., with college teachers	No
P34 ^(b)	Male	1968	Junior college	Freelance photographer	Changsha	300,000	June 2019, with trainees	No

(Continued)

Number	Gender	Year of birth	Educational background	Profession	Usual place of residence	Annual income (RMB)	When traveled to DPRK/ companions	Family members who fought in the Korean War and the relationship
P35 ^(b)	Female	1985	Bachelor	Foreign enterprise staff	Nanjing	300,000	June 2018, alone	No
P36 ^(b)	Male	1994	Master	Student	Tianjin	N.A.	July 2018, with schoolmates	No
P37 ^(b)	Male	1981	Doctorate	Teacher	Yinchuan	300,000	July 2018, with colleagues	No
P38 ^(b)	Male	1978	Bachelor	Foreign enterprise staff	Shanghai	Over 3 million	August 2019, with families and friends	No
P39 ^(b)	Female	1971	Junior college	Civil servant	Nanjing	500,000	N.A., tailor-made trip with friends	No
P40 ^(b)	Male	1976	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	October 2019, with friends	N.A.

Note: ^(a) indicates the 9 participants interviewed when they were on a train back to Dandong, China; ^(b) denotes the 17 Chinese residents who had traveled to North Korea no earlier than 2017; ^(c) refers to the 11 participants interviewed when they were leaving Dandong, China, shortly after their North Korea trips; and ^(d) indicates the 3 participants interviewed in a hotel in Pyongyang the night before departure.

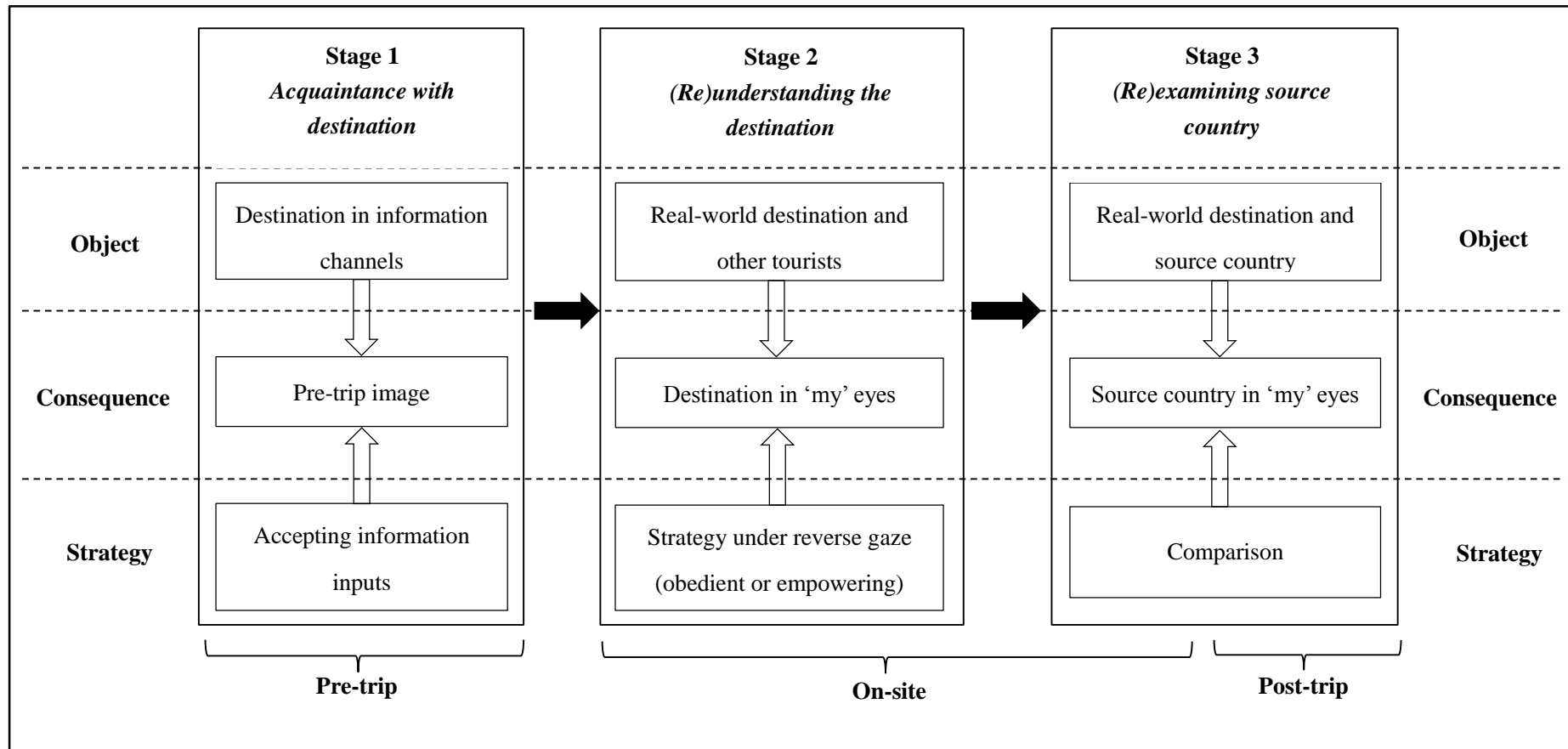


Figure 1
Temporal construction of Chinese tourist gaze in a highly controlled context.

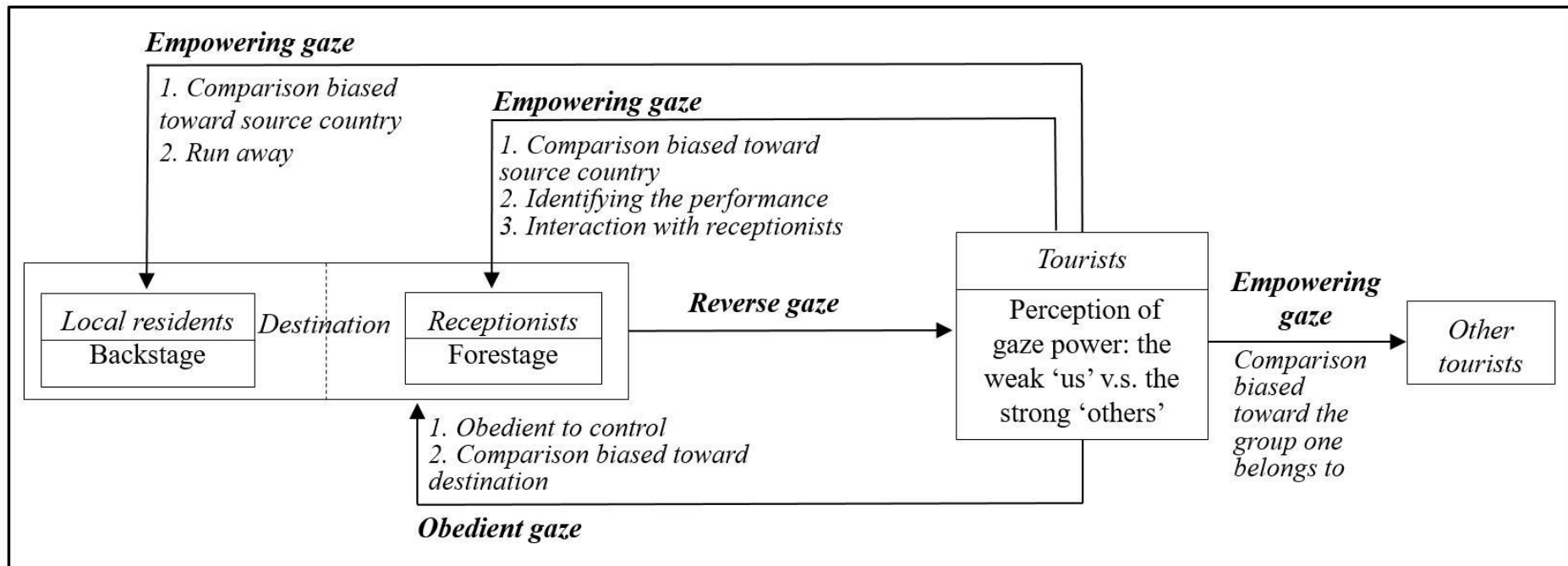


Figure 2

Gaze strategies of Chinese tourists in a highly controlled context.

Note: The arrows indicate the directions and objects of the gaze; the dotted line indicates that there is a difference/separation between backstage and forestage of a highly controlled destination. Empowering gaze refers to the gaze taken by tourists to alleviate the power imbalance in a mutual gaze, where they feel their relatively weaker power; obedient gaze means the gaze that tourists perform to accept the content presented by their hosts when they have a relatively weaker power in a mutual gaze; reverse gaze refers to locals' gaze upon and behaviors against tourists who were photographing/gazing upon them.