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# Liminal experience of East Asian backpackers

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## LIMINAL EXPERIENCE OF EAST ASIAN BACKPACKERS

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# LIMINAL EXPERIENCE OF EAST ASIAN BACKPACKERS

## **ABSTRACT**

Acknowledging the increasing popularity of independent travel from East Asia, this paper explores the backpacking experience of young travellers of the region from a socio-anthropological angle. Using liminality theory as a guideline and adopting a qualitative investigative approach, thirty one interviews with East Asian backpackers were conducted. The findings suggest there are dual facets of the liminal experiences of the backpackers. On one hand, young travellers were motivated to escape from temporal, spatial and social pressures at home. On the other, their narratives reflected strong commitment to home through a sense of filial piety, an awareness of their identity and positive evaluation of home. These findings advance our understanding of the liminal experiences in an Asian backpacking context.

**KEY WORDS:** Liminality, backpacker, Asian, escape, connection, home.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

Backpacking as a form of independent travel has grown from a handful of “drifters” (Cohen, 1972, 1973), “wanderers” (Vogt, 1976), and “backpackers” (Pearce, 1990) into the phenomenon of “global nomads” (Richards & Wilson, 2004a). The term “backpacker” has, over the last decade, become synonymous with a travel style that emphasises freedom and mobility (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004). Backpackers are defined as those who have a preference for budget accommodation, look to meet other backpackers, independently and flexibly organise their trips, take longer rather than brief holidays, and participate in informal and interactive holiday activities (Pearce, 1990). The backpacker tourism trend is no longer just from Europe and other developed economies, but also from the emerging economies of Asia. Acknowledging this increasing trend and the need to better understand the phenomenon, this paper researches the liminal experience of East Asian backpackers.

The research reported in this paper approaches backpacking experiences from a socio-anthropological perspective. The study bases on the theory of liminality (Turner, 1969) and is supported by the studies of Graburn (1977, 1989, 2001) on the notion of tourism as a sacred journey. International travel facilitates the contrast of daily profane at home with the sacred period of travel away from home (Graburn, 2001). This argument leads to the connotation of backpacking as a liminal experience, which is evident in literature of Western backpacker travel. For example, backpacking is to liberate oneself from home (Richards & Wilson, 2004a) in search for authenticity elsewhere (Elsrud, 2001; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003; van Egmond, 2007). However, backpacking is also argued to be an extension of the home experience (Richards & Wilson 2004b) and the motivation to reconstruct home via customised services and familiar comforts is particularly evident among Israeli backpackers (Cohen, 2004; Uriely, 2005; Uriely Yonay & Simchai, 2002).

In backpacking research, (Southeast) Asia has been recognised as preferable destination for Western backpackers (Spreitzhofer, 1998; Westernhausen, 2002). Whilst the majority of studies have focused on Western guests and their encounters with Southeast Asian hosts (Winter, Teo & Chang, 2009) far less attention has been paid to young Asians as travellers in their own right (Cohen, 2004). Research on Asian backpacker travel has appeared in tourism literature since the early 2000s, with analyses covering their geographical travel experience (Teo & Leon, 2006), their ethnographic performance (Muzaini, 2006) and the dialectical spheres of Japanese independent travellers (Takai-Tokunaga, 2007) and virtual community of Chinese backpackers (Oong & du Cros, 2012). Although the meaning of backpacking has been recognised as liminal experience among Western travellers, there has been a paucity of literature addressing this for individual East Asian (Cohen, 2004). The gap signifies potential to advance our understanding of the liminal theory applied in the East Asian backpacking context.

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

This research is grounded in a socio-anthropological approach in the study of backpacking experiences. This paper provides justifications for the theoretical perspective of the research followed by the literature on backpacking in relation to liminality and the context of East Asian society.

This research is grounded in liminal theory (Turner 1969, 1973). The term “liminal” was first introduced by van Gennep (1908) into the anthropological literature with primary reference to the spatial transition from central to peripheral space in the ritual ceremony. Liminality was later defined as “units of space and time in which behaviour and symbolism are momentarily

enfranchised from the norms and values that govern the public lives of incumbents of structural positions” (Turner 1969, p. 166).

The liminal phase of ritual was developed into an autonomous and independent process. The liminality has three major components: (1) communication of *sacra* - the Latin word for sacred things such as exhibitions, actions and instructions; (2) the encouragement of *ludic* recombination – a ritual play element (Latin word *ludus*) and (3) the fostering of *communitas*, a direct, spontaneous mode of social relationship (Turner & Turner, 1982, p. 202). Although Turner’s (1969) work is originally from the anthropology of religion, it indirectly contributes to the study of tourism when liminality is applied to the away from home tourist experience.

In evaluation of Turner’s contribution to tourism, Cohen (1988) states that liminal theory has integrated the analysis of individual experiences with social dynamics and elaborated the cultural symbolic meaning of the touristic experience within the broader social process. The most important contribution that the theory made is the combination of “the Centre” and “the Other” (Cohen, 1988, p.43). Specifically, liminal inversion in one sense expresses otherness, but in another they also expresses some central social (or human) concerns and values repressed in everyday life.

The notion of sacred travel and profane home is interpreted in a tourism context in Graburn’s (1977, 1989, 2001) works. The theory first considers how the study of tourism fitted into socio-cultural anthropology in 1977. In its later revision, Graburn (1989, 2001) claims that the temporal structure of the secular ritual of tourism was applicable to all forms of tourism. The core element of this theory is encompassed in the concept of “ritual of reversal” (Graburn, 2001, p. 44). It proposes that the motivations and compensations of tourism

involved both push and pull factors. Tourists leave home because there is something that they want to get away from, and they choose to visit a particular place because they will experience something positive there that they cannot easily experience at home. In this regard, Wagner (1977) argues that the experiences of Swedish vacationers in Gambia are a “normlessness” that frees them from stressful routines whilst Gottlieb (1982) describes how the structures of everyday life are turned upside down when American vacationers on holiday.

Besides the meaning of an inversion of everyday life as contrasting between sacred and profane, liminality has also been interpreted as “ludic recombination”. This line of interpretation departed from the work of Shields (1991) in *Places on the Margin*, where carnivalesque and dirty weekends are interpreted as liminal experience. More recent works often referred to liminality as the inversion of daily life restrictions, in the sense of sexual freedom (McKercher & Bauer, 2003).

Although the argument on liminal inversion has had a long history in tourism research, it has recently been faced with critique that the ritual inversion theory is too simplified a construct (Lauring, 2013). This is mainly because it does not include the social and cultural dimensions of everyday life such as a response to the holiday experience, rather it explains behavior of the tourists by psychological mechanisms. In line with this, Edensor (2000) argues that tourism should not be seen only as time of play and fun away from everyday life. Instead of being inversion of everyday life, tourism may also be mundane because “it extends across an increasing vast range of time and places, is characterized by being performed via a normative array of enactions, and largely take place in regular touristscapes” (Edensor, 2007, p. 200) . Similarly, Lengkeek (1996) argues that the meaning of tourism is not primarily generated



locally but by interpretations made in the tourists' home countries. The reality of otherness is not necessarily directly opposed to sameness but rather constructed from the same frame of reference. Hence the tourist studies should focus more on the interaction of the extraordinary and the ordinary (Lauring, 2013).

Liminal theory has been revitalised in the context of globalisation and rapid social change (Franklin, 2003; 2009). In particular, tourism is viewed less as a phenomenon that is understood, predictable and governed by a set of known parameters and processes, and more as a dynamic and complex multiplicity (Franklin & Crang, 2001; Franklin, 2009). This leads to the need to reconfigure the duality of the centre and the peripheral liminality. Due to the differences between here and there, home and away, working life and leisure becoming blurred or collapsed; tourism is no longer something that happens away from everyday life in a liminal space. Instead, "tourism is *infused* into the everyday and has become one of the ways in which our lives are ordered, and one of the ways in which consumers orientate themselves, or take a stance to a globalised world" (Franklin, 2003, p. 2). This argument is also reflected in McCabe's (2002) suggestion that the complexity of the tourist experience is created by a number of developments predicated on the changing character of society in a post-modern era.

The early work conceptualising modern backpacking dates back to the 1970s. The seminal work on tourist typology (Cohen, 1972, 1973) distinguished between institutionalised tourism (organised and individual mass tourists) and non-institutionalised tourism (explorers and drifters). The conceptualisation of the "drifter" continued in the following two decades through the integration of age and other characteristics. The emergence of the term "backpacker" was not simply a semantic variation, but a fundamental shift from viewing backpacking as a socio-cultural phenomenon to addressing its growing economic significance

(Pearce, 1990). Beyond the range of research on the internal dynamics and culture of backpacker travel, was a body of literature analysing the impacts of backpacking on socio-economic development. The most recent decade has experienced an exponential growth in publications concerning backpacker tourism. Recent research into backpacking has varied between socio-anthropologically based and market-based approaches (Richards & Wilson, 2004c). On one hand, anthropological studies sought to understand the meanings of backpacking (Binder, 2004; Bell, 2002; Noy, 2004), mobilities (Hannam & Diekmann, 2010), or transgressive behaviour (Jayne, Gibson, Waitt & Valentibe, 2012). On the other hand, market-based studies emphasised the economic gains, markets, product designs and operational issues involved in managing this travel style (Wilson, Richards & MacDonnell, 2007). These studies were subjected to criticism for having insufficient theoretical bases and also for the assumption that backpackers represent a homogenous group (Wilson & Richards, 2007).

In viewing backpacker travel as a liminal experience, Cohen and others argued extensively that Israeli backpacking journeys represented a cultural rite of passage (Cohen 2004; Noy & Cohen, 2005; Obenour, 2004). More specifically, the young backpackers left their normal lives, separating themselves from their family and community to enter an unfamiliar, liminal situation abroad, where they had to prove themselves by resolving the problems encountered on their trips. Their successful resolution of problems and the eventual completion of their trip was an indicator of their competence (Cohen, 2004). Regarding the characteristics of the backpackers' liminal experience, Cohen (2004) also notes three mitigating factors in its applicability. First, a complete immersion of backpackers with their co-travellers in the *communitas* is not expected. Second, the apparent inversion of home is not fully experienced while on the trip due to the institutionalisation of the backpacking industry and modern

communications technology. Finally, backpacking is not a complete reversal of daily life, but in many aspects, it is an extension of youth subcultures in home societies.

This argument lays the foundation for the suggestion that backpacking is a suspension of everyday life at home (Richards & Wilson, 2004b; Wilson & Richards, 2008). In particular, the ideology of consuming differences has to be maintained in order to justify travel, but the practice of travel is often a 'home plus experience' (Richards & Wilson, 2004b, p. 254).

Modern backpacking involves elements of both extension and reversal. Therefore, backpacking provides a temporal and spatial suspension from the norms and values of the home region. The suspension from home is evident in the narratives of young Israelis. They are often critical of various aspects of their home society (Cohen, 2004), as the political and social tensions are the main push factors influencing them to backpack overseas (Haviv, 2005). However, they are basically committed to their home society (Noy & Cohen, 2005; Uriely et al., 2002) and seek a reconstruction of home while travelling (Anterby-Yemini, Bazini, Gerstein & Kling, 2005; Maoz, 2007).

Backpacking from different societies, though it may take superficially similar forms, may be motivated by different problems and tensions in respective home societies (Noy & Cohen, 2005). This is reflected by what Cohen (1995) claimed: "contemporary Japanese, Taiwanese, Koreans and members of many Third World societies are also tourists in the Western sense of the term, even though their specific mode of travelling may incorporate elements from their own cultural tradition" (p. 12).

The growing trend of travel by youth from East Asia has become evident with an increasing number of free independent Asian travellers. This trend has resulted from changes in

contemporary Asian society (Reisinger & Turner 1998, 1999) where younger generations are now more independent and Westernised (Watkins, 2006). Notably, an increase in Korean backpackers has been recorded in Australia since 2006 (Tourism Research Australia, 2007) and young travellers from Korea have become second only to the Japanese as the main market of people travelling for the purpose of learning English (World Tourism Organisation, 2008). Studies of Japanese outbound tourists indicated a growth in the number of independent young travellers from Japan (Japan Travel Bureau, 2005; Takai-Tokunaga, 2007; Yamamoto & Gill, 1999). This growing trend has been evident in China as well, where a small but increasing number of young people choose to travel on their own (Nyiri, 2006).

The study of the backpacking experience should not be separated from the socio-cultural context of the home society of the backpackers (Cohen, 2004). Asian backpacking has emerged from a different historical and social background to that of the Westerners. The development of Asian backpacking, chronologically, is a much later phenomenon. While European backpacking emerged from the social upheavals in the 1960s (Cohen, 2004), Asian backpacking emerges within highly stable societies and a period of long-term economic growth, where Japanese backpacking has been noticed since the 1980's (Andersen, Prentice & Watanabe, 2000) and from Korea, China and countries of Southeast Asia since early the 2000's. Consequently, there is a need to interpret the theory in regard to Asian backpacking with particular reference to the East Asian social and cultural elements. The travel behaviour of young travellers reflects cultural traits and current trends in contemporary East Asian society. For instance, the tourism literature addresses the collective orientation of Japanese travel where the tourist is "sent as a representative of an enduring group" (Graburn, 1983, p. 46). Noticing that people from different cultures have strikingly different senses of self, Markus and Kitayama (1991) identify the Western "independent construal of self" has a

distinctive conception of individuality in contrast to the fundamental relatedness of individuals to one another in Asian culture, which is termed “interdependent construal of self” (p. 227). Thus, for the youths of the Asian nations that value collectivism, extended independent travel has been generated from an entirely different social context compared to Western society where individualism is valued and encouraged (Prideaux & Shiga, 2007).

Acknowledging an increasing independent travel trend by young East Asians and the gap in regards to liminality and its application, this paper explores how the liminal experience is demonstrated in the East Asian backpacking context. Within this, liminality is understood as the away from home travel experience, in which the behaviour of tourists is not governed by taken for granted norms and values of public lives at home. The current paper delves into this topic of Asian backpackers liminal experiences by adopting an exploratory qualitative approach.

### ***STUDY METHODS***

The current study employed qualitative methodology and conducted semi-structured interviews along with observation, keeping field notes and holding informal conversations with Asian backpackers from Northeast and Southeast Asia. A key advantage of in-depth interviews is the flexible nature of this approach (Silverman, 2009) that assists in reducing misunderstandings between researchers and the informants (Babbie, 2004; Bryman, 2006). While the interview technique allows the researcher to understand the world from the participants’ point of view (Kvale, 1996), field notes and informal talks supply additional information for interpretation. The field notes were taken soon after the interviews and served as a memory aid (Lofland & Lofland, 2006; Patton, 2005). In addition, informal conversations and observations during the field studies assisted in gaining valuable

knowledge investigated travellers' behaviour and their interaction with their environments (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit informants in the current study. These were travellers from countries in Northeast and Southeast Asia, who were staying at backpacker hostels while travelling independently. In addition, more than twenty informal conversations with Asian backpackers were conducted in various backpacker hostels.

A sample size of a minimum ten to fifteen interviews is suggested for credible research findings (Cresswell, 2002), while the generally accepted number is around twenty to twenty five (Charmaz, 2006). Exceeding these recommended informant numbers; the current qualitative investigation conducted thirty one interviews to reach saturation. Participants in this study included nineteen males and eleven females with an age range between twenty to thirty-seven years. Among thirty one informants, there were fifteen Japanese people; four Chinese; two each from Malaysia, Korea, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia; and one person from the Philippines. The dominance of Japanese in the sample reflected a mix of nationalities of backpacking travel at the two sites of the study. Japanese independent travellers do not need a visa to visit Australia and Vietnam if the trip is less than 90 days. They are also eligible for the working holiday visa scheme allowing them to stay for a year in Australia. However, these visa regulations are not available for other travellers from China and Southeast Asia. Thus, the imbalance in the number of informants can be attributed to the current visa provision for Asian visitors. Previous studies on Asian backpackers (Teo & Leon, 2006; Muzaini, 2006) also involved more Japanese, than other nationalities in the interviews.

During the data collection, the first author spent four weeks with Asian backpackers by staying in youth hostels and going on tours with them in Australia and in Vietnam. The researcher's ability to speak Chinese and Japanese in addition to English made it easier to establish trust and rapport with participants during the interviews. The topics covered in the interviews and informal conversations included the reasons to undertake the journey, the perception of the trip and the experience of being on the road. The questions for the interviews were underpinned by the theoretical framework of the sacred travel and profane home of the liminal experience in travel. In particular, the informants were asked to elaborate on the contrasts between freedom while travelling and restrictions at home, activities that were out of their daily routine and the feelings about and re-evaluation of their home culture and society from afar. The interviews, field notes from observation and informal conversations were translated (when they were not in English) and transcribed into English. The material was then systematically examined through thematic content analysis. This method of analysis was appropriate for this study, because it assisted in the categorisation of themes in the interview transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998).

## ***FINDINGS***

Analysis of the narratives of Asian participants in this study suggests both a desire for freedom from home and a strong commitment to home. The liminal experience of the Asian backpackers is a negotiation between the motivation to escape from home and the sense of connection to home.

### ***A sense of escape***

While travelling, the backpackers were set free from temporal, spatial and social constraints of their daily routines at home. The first dimension of the freedom is in regards to the

motivation to escape from time pressures. Young Asians rarely have gap years between their study and work, as in the case of Western travellers. A competitive study environment, in addition to a rather poor social security system in East Asia, results in young people being placed under pressure to rush for good jobs immediately after their graduation, to earn their living and save up for their future. Consequently, young Asians often embark on long-term international travel in their late twenties after they have saved enough money, or get bored or burnt out due to pressure at work. In contrast to Western backpackers, who travel in their gap years before going to university in their early 20s, young Asian travellers in this study took their gap year in their late 20s. This is reflected in the average age of the participants in this study being around 27. Two third of the respondents had completed their tertiary education and gained a few years of work experience before travelling. In addition, many respondents in this study perceived the gap years as the time before getting married.

For example, a married male respondent in his early thirties wished to go back to the time of his youth without worries and travel as much as possible. The relatively short period to be free from the constraints made the trips more valuable to him.

I travel mainly to get away from work, from family and responsibilities. If I was younger and had not got married, I would have spent a year travelling provided that I had enough money for accommodation and food. Sometimes, I do not care where I am going.

Even though female travellers were less concerned with work and income they also tried to take gap years before they get married. The desire to live their own dream before taking on the responsibility of life as married women was evidenced in a narrative of a 26 year old female informant.



I am lucky because I am a girl. Being a girl I do not have to take the responsibility to have a good job and earn enough money to support my family. I can have time for myself to travel before getting married. After this trip, I will find a partner and possibly get married.

The second aspect of freedom identified was in relation to an escape from spatial constraints, which was evoked from comparisons of home with a foreign destination in terms of physical space. Respondents from China made comments on the crowdedness and rapidity of life at home, where they could not slow down or relax.

I love to hang around in Hanoi. I usually walk around the small streets to see things... There is something different from China that I can feel. It is the breath of the old Hanoi, the lives of people in transition. Everything here is peaceful as compare to China. There are people everywhere and everyplace is a crowded.

A Singaporean participant mentioned a busy life leaving limited time for socialisation and human contacts. The friendliness and hospitality of the Vietnamese people gave positive impressions, which they could not find at home.

In Singapore, everyone is so busy and in such a hurry that many times people forget the small, yet important things in life – such as spending time with family and friends. Although I only been here for a little under two weeks, I made lots of friends because everyone is so friendly. Every morning I buy a “banh bao” from a lady across from my hotel and she always greets me with a smile. She’s great! I will miss her and her “banh bao” too.

The freedom they enjoyed during travelling accentuated their emotional transformation as described by a Chinese female respondent.

The most memorable thing is when I visited Ham Rong Mountain in Sapa. You know it is a very nice mountain, being on the top of the mountain you can panorama the whole city of Sapa. I will never forget that feeling, when I felt totally relaxed and I could almost touch the cloud. It's so amazing.

The feeling of freedom and relaxation can make life more meaningful as a Japanese male amateur photographer, revealed about his renewed feeling for life "I love and appreciate this life".

The third dimension of the escape identified is the freedom from social regulations. Those who quit jobs to travel loved to compare a carefree life when travelling and the social burdens of a "just working life". Travel was an escape from a strictly regulated life at work.

It has been much easier and relaxing. I can wake up late, I can go anywhere I like...When I was working, everyday was the same...

The relaxing lifestyle and easy-going working atmosphere in Australia sharply contrasted with the workaholic culture in Japan, where long working hours, punctuality, high levels of responsibility and strict service quality is commonly expected. In particular, male travellers enjoyed the drinking and party culture of backpacking. For example, a twenty-five year old male respondent described his freedom life in Australia.

I do not have to wake up early, get in to train from Kanagawa to Tokyo. More drink here, you know. I get more time. In Japan I cannot drink, I have to work.

While enjoying a dream-like working environment in Australia, a female Japanese respondent was constantly worried about her ability to reintegrate into Japanese society after having "too much freedom" in Australia. Differently, male respondents were worried about

excessive drinking as a consequence of too much freedom and without being “observed” by their parents, friends or colleges. The narrative of a 27 male informant from Japan is an example.

I came to Australia to learn English. I want to stay here for 2 years. I came here on my working holiday visa. My first job was to collect fruit or vegetable but I quitted my job two days ago. It was such as boring job. For almost two months, I keep drinking every day. My life here is getting terrible.

The sense of freedom perceived by the backpackers while travelling was connected to the three motivations of escape from the temporal, spatial and social constraints of daily routine. While the escapes from the pressures at home are justifications for travelling, being away from home strengthened the sense of connection to home amongst young Asians in this study as elaborated in the following section.

### *A sense of connection*

A round-the-world trip for six months or a year has increased in popularity amongst Asian youth, particularly amongst Japanese and Koreans. The differences between the homeland and destinations overseas provoked new attitudinal perspectives. The connections to home were expressed in their nostalgic feelings about cosy home, an awareness of identity and a positive attitude about home.

Firstly, filial piety was reflected in Asian backpackers’ narrative about their parents. Young travellers were reminded of their mother’s cooking and the cosy atmosphere at home. The appreciation of home was most often noted amongst female participants. To some extent, the

experience of a long-term trip had strengthened family ties, as twenty five years old female Japanese said.

When I was in Japan, I hardly helped my Mum with housework such as cleaning, laundry, stuff like that. In New Zealand, I have to do everything by myself. But now I start to think: Oh my God, why did I not help my Mum? I really, really feel sorry for that. And now I really appreciate my family for what they have done for me, they have treated me so well. I hope that I will do more housework with my Mum when I go back to Japan.

Contrasting between the experience of places, cultures and people of the destination also helped these young people to realise their identity. The awareness of who they were and where they belonged to emerged when they were in contact with those outside of their community. In particular, Asian backpackers were conscious about the distinction of the home and non-home sphere. For example, a Chinese male respondent in his late thirties remarked how his confidence changed when he moved between the homeland and a foreign place on international travel. His sense of self- confidence was enhanced when he was a bridge between the Westerners, who could only speak English and knew little of the host, and the locals in China, who had plenty of things to offer but were unable to speak English. While travelling outside of China this dominant position was no longer available and, he then felt a lack of confidence.

If I travel in China, I feel more confident travelling with Westerners, firstly, because I can speak English and I can be a translator for them. I have good knowledge of the locals, so I am more confident. If I travel outside China, I want to go with other Asians, because if I go with Westerners, they seem to be dominant in decision making and that makes me uncomfortable.

The journey to find out about oneself was described in the narrative of a 25 year old Japanese informant. The journey began when she was suffering from acute homesickness during the first few weeks in New Zealand. She realised that the cause of her homesickness was something inside her, a feeling of being separated from her Japanese community in a far away and isolated place. The dilemma was common among her friends as well.

I thought probably because there were not many Asian and Japanese in Dunedin, and the city is small. So I went to Auckland, a bigger city to see if it would be different...I realised that it wasn't the city that made the difference. It was something inside me. It was my homesickness.

Findings from participant observation assisted interpreting the realisation of a shared identity among travellers. The backpacking industry in has developed a range of products and facilities supporting co-national network establishments. Observations and informal talks with the service providers indicated that Asian travellers preferred to stay in particular hostels with staff and tour providers that were recommended in the guidebooks of their own languages. For example, this cultural bubble can be found in Cairns in relation to Japanese, where Japanese hubs to introduce part time jobs and accommodations to working holiday makers were popular in the fieldwork sites. Plenty of private advertisements for Japanese share-mates and jobs were found on the public notice boards of these hubs. The Japanese 'enclave' was designed not only to assist those who have language difficulties but also offer a home-like environment, and thus, strengthening their ties to home.

Travelling was a way to open a door to see how the world outside was different to their home. However, from the perspective of the respondents, the differences from home in their

travel 'world out there' were not necessarily charming. They were exposed to the less desirable aspects of human life that they might not have seen at home. This experience was illustrated by a male Japanese respondent, who travelled to the former Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia). In this place he encountered a society suffering from poverty, despair and post-war effects that were disillusioning. This experience changed the way he thought about developing countries and better appreciated his life at home.

When I came to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, many things reminded me of the war.

People are so poor because of the war. I know more about the war and its sorrows... In Japan, we live in peace.

In addition, from the perspective of Asian backpackers, the outcome of travel was not only to enjoy life, but also to accumulate knowledge, skills and social relations that would be invaluable for their future lives at home. For instance, a male Japanese respondent found travelling useful for improving his English, since he had to speak English all the time, even in a non-English speaking country such as Vietnam. A better command of English was perceived to be an advantage in finding a good job at home.

I want to learn English. Here nobody speaks Japanese so I have to try to speak English. That is good for my English.

It is an advantage...I guess more people want to learn English. I can have a better job in Japan.

Future job concerns, apart from language issues, also appeared to be an important consideration. The backpackers tended to look for relevant experiences that would enhance

their career at home. For instance, a Chinese musician took opportunities to listen and learn about the local music.

I am a musician. I just want to listen to the local music. I am interested in music from all over the world. Vietnam is a good place to learn of traditional music.

Music here has a long history and many interesting things to know about.

Thus, for young Asians, travel was not entirely for pleasure, participants took the opportunity of travel to accumulate knowledge in relation to their interest or future jobs at home as home was perceived as a better place where their parents lived, where there was a community to belong to and a place to live and work upon returning from their travel.

## ***DISCUSSION***

The liminal experience of Asian backpackers in this study contains two inseparable facets. While spatial, temporal and social pressures of daily life pushed them away from home, the familial piety, the identity realisation and positive aspects of home pulled them back. The interplay between the motivation to escape from home and the desire for connection was evident. The homeland is an indispensable part of the away from home experience for young Asians. This interrelationship is displayed in Figure 1.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

In liminality theory (Turner 1969), international travel is a sacred period when travellers are temporally and spatially enfranchised from the norms and values that govern their public lives at home. In a tourism context liminality is considered as a ritual of reversal from everyday life (Graburn 1977, 1989, 2001), and as playful, transgressed behaviour (Shields, 1991). Findings from this study suggests on the one hand, the experience of Asian

backpackers reflects the ritual of reversal as the travellers sought freedom from temporal, spatial and social constraints, and thus reflects Graburn's (2001) interpretation of liminality. On the other hand, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the ludic elements, such as excessive drinking, commonly found among young backpackers, which is in line with the conceptualisation of liminality as playful period initiated by Shield (1991).

Backpackers often travel in a longer period, sometimes up to a year as in the case of working holiday makers in Australia. With an extended holiday, the level of mundane which developed along the trip may overcome the transition period of liminality, making the extraordinary period of travel become the ordinary period of everyday life. Therefore, backpacking travel reflects the mundane nature of travel as argued by Edensor (2007). In fact, the 'pseudo home' in popular touristscapes such as backpacker enclaves functions as a mundane element in Asian backpacking experiences.

The interplay between the motivation to escape and the desire for connection identified in this study verifies Franklin's (2003) argument on the complexity of the tourism experience, where the separation of the sphere of sacredness and profane is unclear. Indeed, the apparent inversion of home is not fully experienced while on the road due to the institutionalisation of the backpacking industry, such as the enclaves, which makes the separation from home less severe. Backpacking in many aspects; it is an extension of the youth subcultures of home societies. Backpackers may seek reversal of the home environment, but the practice of backpacking is bound by the cultural norms of life at home. The pressures of daily life at home push them to travel, but the familiarity and commitment to the home environment pull them back.



In relation to the backpacking literature, the findings from this study supported the argument that backpacking is a temporal and spatial suspension of everyday life (Richards & Wilson, 2004c). The suspension of reality is found to be universal among Asian and Western backpackers, thus, realigns the argument of Richards and Wilson (2004c) on the existence of backpacker subculture. In particular, commitment to home elements is commonly found as vital in shaping the travel experiences of both the Asian backpackers in this study, and of Israeli backpackers. Both Asians and Israelis strongly commit to their home societies. The social pressures are found to be common push factors of travelling for youth from Asia and Israel. In addition, the awareness of a shared identity among those of the same culture is evidenced in both Israeli and Asian youth.

However, they are different in their attitude towards home. The Israeli youths often embark on long-term backpacking trips after military service (Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004) to get away from social tension and political pressure at home (Haviv, 2005). In contrast, Asian backpacking has emerged from within a highly stable society during a period of long-term economic growth (Andersen et al., 2000; Prideaux & Shiga, 2007). They escape from home because of pressures at work and boredom at home. The differences in the social context of home experienced by Asian and Israeli backpackers might explain the discrepancies in the critical evaluations they offer of their homeland. For the Israeli backpackers, home appears to have a push effect (Haviv, 2005) whereas for the Asian backpackers home tends to reinforce more positive pull values and to project their future at home.

East Asian backpackers also display certain characteristics that are shaped by their home cultures. As Cohen (2004) emphasises the analysis of backpackers should take into account the context of their home culture. In particular, the related and interdependent nature of Asian

culture might offer an explanation for the backpackers' attitudes towards social identity and filial piety. The context of Asian culture within which this study is placed can provide some explanation for the dual facets of the liminal travel experience. This Asian backpackers' commitment to home may be explained by adopting the theory of Asian interdependence to the notion of self and the collectivism in Asian culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

### ***CONCLUSION***

This research contributes to furthering our knowledge on travel as a liminal experience from an Asian perspective. The findings of the study align the attention of scholars and marketers to a relatively new phenomenon and capture its dynamic nature at early stage of research into Asian backpacking, an increasingly important segment of tourism. Analyzing the facets of the liminal experience of these young travelers from Asia, the study recognises the complexity of liminality in the travel experience through the coexistence of two contrasting elements of escape from, and connection to, home that were evident in the narratives of East Asian backpackers. The complexity of the travel experience of the young Asians is reflected through the intertwining of the sense of escape from home and the sense of connection to home. The Asian homeland is often represented in their travel experience narratives and recounted as an indispensable part of the experience. In other words, the liminal experience of Asian backpackers on one hand shares the universal characteristics of the sub-culture, but on the other it also reflects unique elements of Asian culture, where young people from the region are committed to their homeland, and home culture both on travelling and upon completion of the trip.

Theoretically, the dualism of sacred/extraordinary travel and profane/ordinary everyday life might be less relevant than described in Graburn's (2001) theory of tourism as a sacred

journey. Instead, the findings from this study reinforce the view that backpacking is a suspension of everyday life (Richards & Wilson, 2004c). Practically, the findings suggest some unique characteristics of Asian young travellers that are useful for the industry. For example, the playful elements in Asian backpacking are less significant than those of Western backpackers. The motivation for experience accumulation that contributes towards a better future implies a need to design different types of product for this market.

This study has limitations that provide opportunities for further research. Future research can investigate how male and female Asian backpackers differently perceive their travel experience. Moreover, a longitudinal study may provide greater understanding on how Asian backpackers reintegrate into their home society upon completion of their travel.

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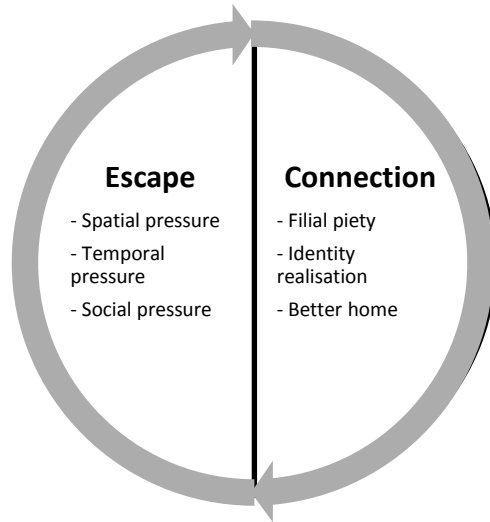


Figure 1. Interplay of escape from home and connection to home.