Unpacking Tourist Experience: A Case Study of Chinese Tourists Visiting the UK

Guanhao Tong, Li Li, Ben David

Abstract—This study aims to provide an explanatory account of how the leisure tourist experience emerges from tourists and their surroundings through a critical realist lens. This was achieved by applying Archer's realist social theory as the underlying theoretical ground to unpack the interplays between the external (tourism system or structure) and the internal (tourists or agency) factors. This theory argues that social phenomena can be analysed in three domains - structure, agency, and culture (SAC), and along three phases – structure conditioning, sociocultural interactions, and structure elaboration. From the realist perspective, the world is an open system; events and discourses are irreducible to present individuals and collectivities. Therefore, identifying the processes or mechanisms is key to help researchers understand how social reality is brought about. Based on the contextual nature of the tourist experience, the research focuses on Chinese tourists (from mainland China) to London as a destination and British culture conveyed through the concept of the destination image. This study uses an intensive approach based on Archer's M/M approach to discover the mechanisms/processes of the emergence of the tourist experience. Individual interviews were conducted to reveal the underlying causes of lived experiences of the tourists. Secondary data were also collected to understand how British destinations are portrayed to Chinese tourists.

Keywords—Chinese Tourists, Destination Image, M/M Approach, Realist Social Theory, social mechanisms, tourist experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

TOURISM as a social phenomenon is lacking analysis in relation to the tenets of critical realist thinking. The existing theories have examined the tourist experience related to several factors from internal (cultural background) and external (social-cultural) influences [1]-[4]. However, the knowledge gap lies in how these factors interact with each other to generate tourist experience. In other words, the existing theories make an attempt to identify the influential factors on tourist experience, but the process that makes things happen is overlooked. This study argues that the processes on how tourist experience was generated could provide an insight into tourist experience as an outcome of social conduct.

Critical realism offers a fruitful way to look through the social phenomena and to facilitate the identification of the mechanisms that bring about tourist experience. Therefore, this study aims to provide an explanatory account of the emergence of tourist experience from tourist interactions with the external environment and their personal social-cultural values. The study will identify the causes from the structure, agency, and their interplay in the domains of structure, culture and agency, which operate to manifest tourist experience. This will be

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achieved through the application of Archer's critical realist theory within critical realism. Given the contextual nature of tourist experience, the research will focus on Chinese nationals who have visited London in the UK as a destination for leisure purposes. This is because the Chinese outbound market has significant economic and socio-cultural impacts on the UK's tourism industry, and London, as the capital city of the UK is recognized as the most popular place for Chinese tourists [5].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Realism (CR) is a contemporary philosophy of natural science and social sciences. It advocates that the world consists of three domains, namely empirical (the observed and experienced), actual (the observed but not necessarily experienced), and the 'real' (structures and mechanisms, which are often less observable). The 'observable' refers to the world which could be understood by human perceptions and experiences, while the 'real' world is dependent on the internal structure of an entity, such as a social structure or a person or a relation between two elements [6]. In the realist perspective, the structure and mechanisms in the 'real' cause observable events - what are actually happening (i.e., the actual domain). Some of these may be experienced by people (i.e., the empirical domain). Thus, social phenomena could be understood in depth by examining the actual and lived experience. Critical realists hold that the world is an open system; events and discourses are irreducible to present individuals and collectivities. Therefore, identifying the mechanisms or processes are key to help researchers understand how social reality is brought about.

Archer developed her critical realist theory to analyse social phenomena from three domains: structure, agency and culture (SAC), and along three phases – structure conditioning, socio-cultural interactions, and structure elaboration. These three domains could be analysed independently/distinctly while they interact with each other to generate a new social phenomenon, which is known as 'analytical dualism' [7]. Archer developed her morphogenetic approach (M/M) which resonates with Roy Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Action (TMSA). The former highlights *time* as a critical mechanism in social development. Morphogenetic approach embraces the notions of morphogenesis and morphostasis. In that, morphogenesis refers to the transformation of the existing system whilst morphostasis refers to the reproduction of the existing system [8]. M/M approach has been widely used in different disciplines to explain how a social phenomenon of interest emerges. Archer argued that the pre-existing structure at T1 possesses causal powers, and these causal powers could condition agency level, known as "structural conditioning".

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Within this specific condition, socio-cultural interactions take place from T2 to T3. These doings can act back to structure in two ways at T4: transformation (morphogenesis) and reproduction (morphostasis) [Fig. 1].
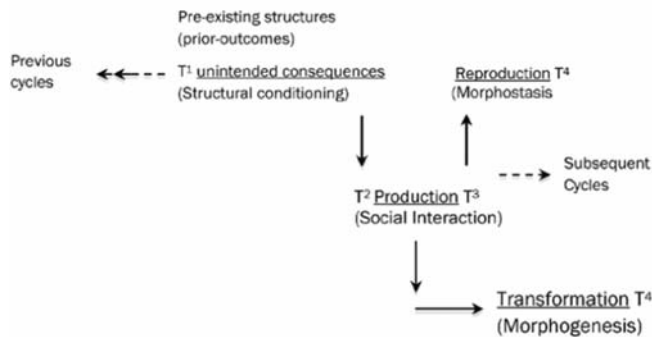

Fig. 1 Archer's morphogenetic/static cycle [8]

In line with the principles of Archer's SAC trilogy and her M/M framework, this study treats destination image as a cultural item at the structure level, meaning it has evolved from the past and is exerting its generative power to influence current social doings. This is because tourists would have the impressions or perceptions of a destination based on the information from different sources (e.g., websites, social media, and word of mouth) before the trip. During the trip (T2 to T3), tourists might interact with several properties from the destination such as the residents, other tourists, and attractions. Based on their observations, they would have evaluations which may/may not generate new experience, so this could be the same as their perceptions (morphostasis) or changed acknowledgement (morphogenesis) at T4 after the trip.

Due to the pandemic (COVID-19), outbound tourism has suffered a significant negative impact from travel restrictions policies. As such, tourist experience was unavoidably affected by these regulations. Therefore, this study focuses on the period before the pandemic from 2017-2019. China was reported as the 2nd largest country of spending (£1.7bn) and ranked as 13th for the UK's inbound market in 2019. Furthermore, 58% of Chinese tourists visited the UK for leisure purposes (holidaymakers) in 2019 [5]. Therefore, this study adopts Chinese tourists as a case to look through mechanisms of their tourist experience when they were visiting London, the capital city of the UK.

III. Methodology

In the critical realists' perspectives, social phenomena could be investigated in two methods, intensive and extensive. Intensive research aims to explain how the causal process/mechanism operates in particular cases, while extensive approach tries to discover the common properties and general patterns of a population as a whole [9]. This research adopts an intensive approach as it helps with the discovery of processes of the emergence of leisure tourist experience. The methodology consists of two phases: (1) Ten interviews were conducted. The interviews were to capture lived experiences of the participants. This research used a snowball strategy to collect data. Each interview ran approximately 45-60 minutes in length. The interview questions were concerned with each participant's tourist activities, interactions, and feelings before, during, and after the trip. (2) Secondary data were collected from Chinese website Mafengwo to understand how UK destinations are portrayed to attract Chinese tourists for leisure purposes. In the realist perspective, this refers to the cultural structure level, which is independent of their identification, but provides an objective moment of culture [10], from which ideas are drawn to solve the unknown or uncertainty.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

According to the secondary data from the Chinese website Mafengwo during 2017-2019, several factors were identified from cultural structure level based on narrative analysis on how the websites portrayed London as a destination to attract Chinese tourists to visit London [Table I]: (1) four main factors (Attractions, Entertainment, Hospitality and Transportations) were identified, and 71% of the descriptions tend to attract Chinese tourists from a culture perspective. This is because many Chinese tourists prefer to experience diversity of culture and evaluate these culture differences for outbound travel [11], [12]. For example, "museum & gallery" was seen as a separate code from the "sights' highlights" because it could be seen as a special element for Chinese tourists' motivations. (2) The coverage of these descriptions illustrated that the top three activities for Chinese tourists were sightseeing including the museums and galleries, shopping for luxuries at a lower price including the vintage market, which is rare in China, and experiencing different foods including local food like English breakfast and afternoon tea as well as diversity of choices from all over the world. Surprisingly, these top three activities have also been proved by the authentic report before the pandemic [5].

The individual interviews were analysed by discourse analysis, along with coding on three periods of the trip based on the time zones: before, during and after the trip [Table II]. "Knowledge" refers to the different period of Chinese tourists' acknowledgement, specifically, the expectations/impressions, "knowledge 1" being that before the trip, "knowledge 2" being during the trip, and "knowledge 3" being their evaluations as well as sharing their trips after it. These were also linked to Archer's three domains (mainly agents and culture level), along with structure conditioning (knowledge 1) where these properties were delivered from the Chinese website (culture structure level); social interactions (knowledge 2) and social elaborations (knowledge 3).

A. Before the Trip (Structural Conditioning - Knowledge 1)

Curiosity is the main reason that stimulates Chinese tourists visiting the UK (London) according to the interview data. Seven of ten participants stated that they are curious about the different cultures, the royal pageantry, the traditional British outfits, the lifestyle/life pace. "Have a look" appeared in almost every interviewee's account when they were asked why they wanted to visit the UK. Further, they pointed out that they are

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curious about whether it was true from the messages they have been delivered from websites and social media. The impressions of London/the UK could be concluded in four phases: (1) The UK is a developed country with a considerable amount of heritage buildings. As the capital of the UK, London is the most recommended city to visit. Tourists' perceptions include: "If you visit the UK, you must visit London, otherwise it is not worthy at all". (2) The weather is not good, for example, "London rains a lot" "I heard London is always foggy". (3) British traditional outfits and traditional English accent, "they wear very fancy clothes, men wear suits and ladies wear nice dresses with hats" "I watched films and British series, their traditional English accent is quite fascinating, because our English education is originally from American English". (4) The characters of British people, "It seems that British people are always gentle with good manners, but they are cold and distant" "I heard they are quite conservative and old fashioned". These impressions were mainly from social media and word of mouth.

TABLE I
FACTORS FROM CULTURAL STRUCTURE LEVEL

Name	Description	Files	References
Attractions	The attractions in London were portrayed by a Chinese website (Mafengwo), which could stimulate Chinese tourists' motivations.		
Books &Films	Popular British books and films in China (Harry Porter; Sherlock etc.)	1	6
Culture & History	British history and its heritage culture.	2	26
Museum & Gallery	Famous museums and galleries in London (British Museum; National Gallery etc.)	2	23
Sights' highlights	Top 5 most recommended sights: British Museum; National Gallery; London Eye; Tower Bridge; Tower of London.	2	31
Entertainment	Different activities from China that motivate Chinese tourists to visit London		
Festivals	Festival celebrations and parades (Notting Hill Carnival, Thames Festival etc.)	2	6
Opera & Theatre	World famous operas musicals in West End Theatre District	2	9
Pubs	Traditional British drinking culture (Soho, Hoxton area)	2	10
Shopping	Big shopping mall (Selfridges, Harrods etc.) with cheaper price for luxury products, as well as the vintage market.	2	22
Hospitality	Mainly from food and hotels, unique differences from China		
Food	Special British food based on the culture, English breakfast, afternoon tea etc.	2	19
Hotels	Some recommended hotels to deliver a message to Chinese tourists (price included)	2	16
Transportation	Public transportations including trains, tubes, buses and taxis	2	17

TABLE II
TOURIST EXPERIENCE FROM CULTURAL AGENTS LEVEL

Name	Description	Files	References
Knowledge 1	Tourist experience before the trip (Structure conditioning)		
Curiosity	Tourists get curious about the UK, and stimulate them to visit	7	10
Impressions	Tourists' impressions on London based on the information they had from websites, books and films, as well as word of mouth.	10	30
Knowledge 2	Tourist experience during the trip (Social interactions)	7	7
Hospitality			
Food	Tourists feelings / feedback for different food, British food and Chinese food in London	8	12
Hotel	Tourists feelings / feedback for hotels, comparing with Chinese hotels	8	10
Interactions & Observations	Tourists interact with residents / other tourists, mostly their observations during the trip.	9	24
Market & Festival	Some tourists may generate new tourist experience from the weekend's market and big festival (non-planed before)	4	6
Shopping	Tourists come to London for shopping during the trip.	7	9
Sightseeing	General attractions in London including museums, art galleries	10	34
Transportations	Transportations from tubes, trains, buses and taxis.	6	10
Knowledge 3	Tourist experience after the trip (Social elaborations)		
Culture & Traditions	Tourists generate the new experience from British culture based on the interactions with local	2	4
Evaluations	Tourists' evaluations after the trip including the comparisons between British and Chinese culture, the comparisons from their own expectations, as well as some thoughts for this trip.	10	26
Word of mouth	Tourists recommended to others or not	10	10

B. During the Trip (Socio-cultural Interactions - Knowledge 2)

At this stage, the interview results showed that Chinese tourists' leisure activities were sightseeing, shopping and experiencing foods, which met the results from the destination analysis. According to their interactions (interacted with residents or other tourists) and observations, it could be concluded from Chinese tourists' observations with evidence: (1) Sightseeing is the most satisfying activity during the trip, all of the interviewees stated that the attractions are exactly the same as their expectations. "I was surprised that all the places I visited were over 95% the same as the photos I saw online, for example, London Eye, Tower of Bridge." "The British Museum was stunning, even though I already saw the pictures

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online before, I was still shocked when I saw the displays, they were kept preserved very well." "I was a bit worried about the language, but I found it very convenient for tourists to visit these attractions. For example, the British Museum has an audio guide which helped me to understand everything." Besides that, ten interviewees all voted 9/10 for their sightseeing experience. (2) Shopping in London was another satisfying experience from interviews. "I went to Bond Street and Oxford Street, there were hundreds of clothing shops, this is crazy!" "I went to Selfridges and Harrods, each luxury store has Chinese sales assistants, there is nothing to worry about the language." (3) Views of British people and the general weather have changed from their expectations. Almost all the interviewees stated British people were very friendly and the weather was generally fine. "I was shocked when I visited London, people on the streets just wear normal clothes as us, hoodies, sportswear and trainers, it was totally different from what I thought." "They are very friendly, and they offered to help me with the luggage." "The weather was generally fine, even though it rained a bit, it didn't bother me." (4) Food and transportations were perceived as not meeting their expectations. All the interviewees stated that they were not satisfied with the food and transportations in London because of the culture differences. "English breakfast is good, but other foods were not satisfactory. I tried Chinese food in Chinatown. It was also not authentic at all." "We cooked ourselves in Airbnb because the food there was not tasty." "There is no security check in tubes, and I felt unsafe about that" "The tubes in London are very crowded, and there were no signals for phones, it was very inconvenient."

C. After the Trip (Socio-cultural Elaborations - Knowledge 3)

Evaluations are the major factor that generate the tourist experience after the trip, which refers to the social elaborations. where could be seen the social elaborations after the trip. All the interviewees were satisfied with the trip to London, seven of them voted 8/10 for the general travelling satisfactions. The reasons for the missing mark lied on the food and transportations. They also highlighted that London is a fascinating place for travel, either for sightseeing or for culture experiencing, even for shopping. The comparison between China and the UK lies in the culture differences, residents' manners, life paces and recent developments: (1) "I could feel London is a very elaborated city with people from different nations, which is different from any Chinese cities." "I could feel freer here while no one judges people from outfits while this is quite different from China." (2) British people are more friendly than Chinese to strangers, they are more willing to offer help. (3) People in London live at a slower pace than people in China. "You could always see people having afternoon tea or drinking beer outside around 4 pm." "It seems that they enjoy their life because some shops do not open on Sunday, even on weekdays, most shops close early." (4) However, the interviewees stated that China is still developing while the UK has stopped. "I feel like the UK was like an older man, you can tell it had a better development in the last century, but most of the things stopped at that time, and Chinese public facilities are much better than the UK recently." "I feel safer in China because the whole environment and the public facilities provide all the security strategies."

In addition, 90% of interviewees would like to revisit the UK in other cities, for natural sights and culture experiencing. All the interviewees shared the trip to others, either on social media or word of mouth to friends and relatives.
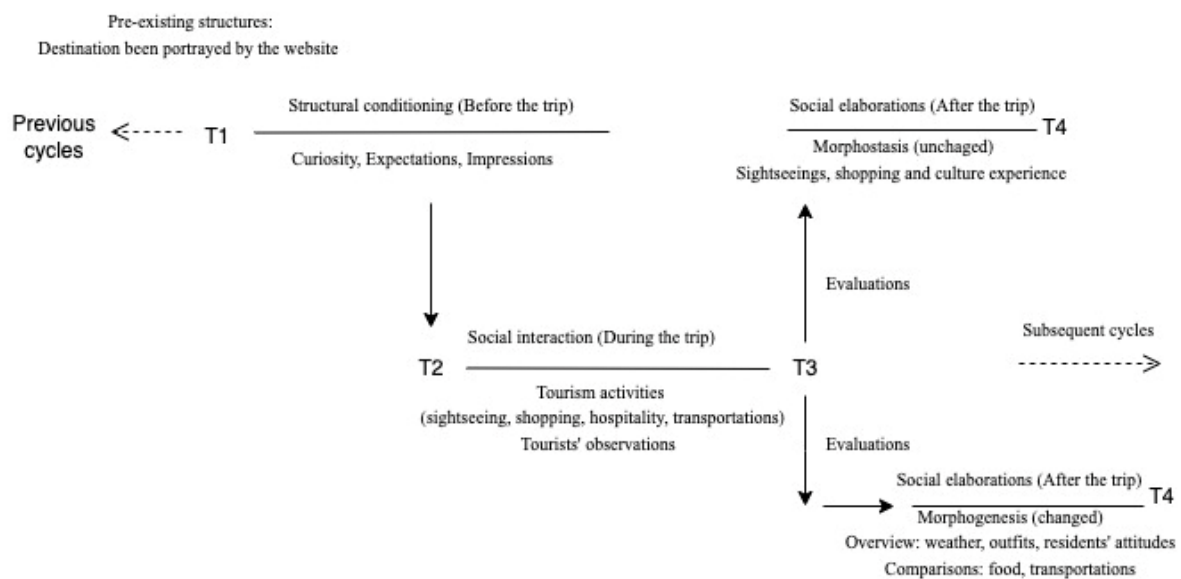

Fig. 2 Tourist Experience through Archer's M/M approach

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provided an explanatory account for the emergence of the Chinese tourist experience when they visited London during 2017-2019. It has been achieved by applying Archer's realist social theory, along with the morphogenetic approach (M/M). Archer's realist social theory helped critical realists to look into the 'real' world via three domains: structure, agents and culture, along with structure conditioning, social interactions and social elaborations. This study has examined how the Chinese tourist experience was generated by several factors at different stages: before, during and after the trip [Fig. 2]. These factors may have been identified from the existing theories, such as expectations/impressions, destination image and culture differences, but this study filled the gap on how these factors generated the tourist experience, which identified the mechanisms/processes of it. Four stages were investigated in this study. In each stage, new properties emerge, such as the impressions when they were delivered the information from the website before the trip, the observations from food experience during the trip, and the evaluations comparing between the UK and China after the trip. The results show that the sightseeing, shopping and culture experience stay the same as Chinese tourists' expectations/impressions. However, their view about the weather in the UK, the impressions for the residents' outfits and attitudes have changed. Further, after the evaluations and comparisons, their experiences with food and transportations in London do not meet their expectations.

Theoretically, this research provides a direction into social analysis of tourism, specifically, tourist experience. CR is known as a branch of philosophy and several researchers have applied it to different subjects (i.e., education, biology, and medicine). However, it has not been widely adopted in tourism research. Tourist experience has been defined in different perspectives (i.e., marketing, sociology, psychology). Yet, we argue that the tourist experience is a social phenomenon generated from human actions and beliefs vis-à-vis the surroundings. Therefore, CR helps to discover the mechanisms/ processes that operate to bring about tourist experience. The practical implications of the study lie in tourism managerial strategies. Acknowledging the key influential factors and how the tourist experience is generated is beneficial for destination management (the UK in this study). With this research, managers or travel agents could improve or even change their strategy on how to attract more Chinese tourists, especially in a growing market after COVID-19.

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