

Travels & tourists in the Middle Kingdom: two insider perspectives

Phenomena can be studied both as numeric data (trends) as well as practices, that is, cultural tendencies. When it comes to tourism in relation to China the first approach manifests a clear symptom: China is more and more at the centre of the global tourism sector, either as a tourism destination, or as the source of an increasing number of outbound tourists.

Stefano Calzati

ACCORDING TO THE MOST RECENT UN report,¹ “tourist arrivals reached 1,138 million in 2014, a 4.7% increase over the previous year. (...) The best performance was recorded in North-East Asia and South Asia (both +7%).” In particular, the World Tourism Barometer registers that “the total number of trips abroad from China is estimated to have increased by 11 million to 109 million in 2014,” which makes of the Middle Kingdom “the world’s largest outbound market since 2012 with a total expenditure of US\$129 billion in 2013.” In other words, the new Chinese middleclass – although still a privileged minority – is on a march; a global march.

However significant numeric data may be, the underpinning cultural framework of this phenomenon is more challenging to encapsulate. During my three-month PhD fieldwork,² first at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and later around China, I met with a number of travel writers, travel bloggers and experts on China’s travel practices. The aim was to explore how and why Chinese people travel, within their own country or abroad, and how they subsequently represent their travel experiences (e.g., in ‘classic’ travel books or online travel blogs). The interviews I had with travel photographer Leong Ka Tai, author of *On China: One to Twenty Four* (1988),³ and travel curator Zhang Mei, founder of the agency *Wild China Travel*,⁴ were among the most significant encounters during my fieldwork; the former offers the solo travel experience of an artist, the latter the testimony of an insider within the tourism sector.

The travelling artist

Leong has exhibited his works around the world, and in 1991 he received the Best Hong Kong Artist of the Year award.⁵ A native Hongkonger, Leong moved to the UK to work as an engineer in the 1970s, but soon abandoned his job and moved to Paris, in order to study photography. This was the decision that would change the course of his life. After three years of apprenticeship, he moved back to Hong Kong, where he opened his own studio. A few years later the peripatetic nature of his photographic activity came into being when he decided to embark on a long journey around Mainland China. In Leong’s *On China: One to Twenty Four* he grouped a strict selection of twenty-four snapshots taken during his wanderings, at a time in which the Middle Kingdom had just opened its doors to the world and Mao’s influence was still strongly felt around the country. Moreover, each snapshot is accompanied by a short poem in Chinese written by author Leong Ping Kwan (who passed away in 2013), and translated into English by Leong himself.

I met Leong at the Foreigners’ Correspondent Club in Hong Kong. Leong is a rather shy person and his photos convey this same introversion through the delicate investigation of everyday ordinariness. However, I soon realised that his inhibition during the interview was not a haughty disposition, but rather a self-protecting sentiment that needed to melt gradually. I asked him about his reasons for closing the studio in Hong Kong and travelling to Mainland China. “In the beginning,” he said, “I had planned to travel a few weeks, but then I went on, and on, and on... the book, in fact, is only one of the projects that came out from this experience; it is a sort of spin-off of an in progress experience.”

How was it to travel in China at that time? - “It was more difficult and slower. You needed patience and I had a lot of it. Patience and time. Hong Kong shares so many things with China, this is certainly true. But then, the first time I went there I realized that what I had learnt in schoolbooks about our common cultural and historical background was to remain on paper... They are so different! I felt as a stranger in some areas... Apart from that, differences are probably milder now. I think China has changed a lot recently, but mainly on a material level. I believe that the attitude and the spirit of Chinese people has not changed that much, after all.”

Each snapshot is accompanied by a short poem; what do you think the relation is between pictures and words? - “I believe that Ping Kwan’s words help to see the photos from a different angle. It was actually Ping Kwan’s suggestion to accompany the pictures with poems and I found this idea very effective, insofar as it added a layer to the possible meaning of the photo. There is this photo, for instance, of a man standing on the front balcony of his house; the house is painted in yellow, while the sky is deep blue and cloudless. The poem reads: ‘The bright

blue sky is boundless/You lit a cigarette at dusk/Looking at the yellow earth under your feet, the yellow walls/The yellow desert is boundless too/With bowed head you think of the distant hills beyond the distant hills/The ancient Yellow River meandering towards the bright blue sky.’ Well, that picture was taken in Ninxia, near the Yellow River. So, you could say that it is only through the poem that the proximity of the house to the great river is explicated.”

What are your projects now? - “I have been travelling in South America with my wife for five months. Nowadays, many people travel, even Chinese people. What still makes a difference are patience and time; the time and the patience you need for a good snapshot. And I have a lot of both, thankfully.”

The expert traveller

I met with Zhang Mei in a coffee shop in Cheoyang, a rather wealthy area of Beijing where her office is also located. Zhang was born and raised in Dali, Yunnan, in the south-western part of China. *Wild China* is a travel company born out of Zhang’s goal to promote China as a tourist destination. The company aims at providing customized and off-the-beaten-track trips around the Middle Kingdom to foreigners and Chinese people alike. Talking with Zhang helped me to better understand how Chinese people (and westerners) see China and how they consider travelling as a practice.

“I come from Dali, in Yunnan. When I founded *Wild China* 15 years ago my goal was to sustainably promote cities like Dali as a tourist destination, because I felt that China could not be reduced to the classic itinerary Hangzhou-Shanghai-Xian-Beijing. China is much more than that; it is much more composite and contradictory, although these destinations still remain on the list.” Having read an interview that Zhang gave to Forbes in 2013,⁶ in which she suggested that the tendency of Chinese tourists was to travel in groups, I was curious to hear if this is still the case: “Today it is no longer true that Chinese people travel only in groups. Maybe this is true for older people because they feel more secure, but as soon as you look at those Chinese tourists who are now in their forties and fifties things are different: more and more often Chinese travellers want to go where other people have never gone before and do what others cannot do.” I asked Zhang whether she agreed with my suspicions that this approach to travel and life is, in a way, ideologically imported from the West, and a consequence of the spreading of wealth at various levels within the Chinese society. “Chinese society is and has always been very competitive. You always hear that family is at the core of the Chinese society, which is true, but the individual too has his importance. Both in the past and in the present, there were and there are plenty of ways to seek to express one’s own individuality; for instance, by trying to be the best on the workplace, or the richest in your neighbourhood... Travelling differently, adventurously, is an option that has come up in the last few decades, but it is part of the same discourse...”

How then to keep a balance between the bursting tourism sector and the saturation of those places around the country that attract a multitude of visitors? What about that never-ending debate between tourism and travel, between the massified and the ‘authentic’ experiences. “If you are asking me about authenticity, I do not believe that visiting, let’s say, the Forbidden City is not an authentic experience: it is Beijing, it is China, you cannot avoid it. But Beijing is also Sanlitun and Chaoyang, two very wealthy and modern areas. Authenticity, then, can be found both in the different perspective from which you look at the Forbidden City, as well as in the overall travel experience that derives from all these apparent paradoxes. Many tourists, mainly foreigners, think of China in terms of its imperial past; my goal is to show them that besides this legacy, China is something else nowadays.”

I was curious about differences, if any, between the Western and the Chinese (self)perception of the Middle Kingdom: “Here you have to make some distinctions. As I said, foreigners who come to China for the first time have an already formed imagery of it; one that needs, to some extent, to be shaken. Their impressions of the country undergo a shift: in the beginning they usually have a very positive attitude towards the Chinese, then with the passing of weeks they begin to see those petty anomalies and annoying defects that are part of our society as they are part of any society... As for the Chinese people looking at themselves, I think we are very critical towards ourselves. The level of tolerance is much lower than with foreigners, but then, it is also true that if you, as a foreigner, ask a Chinese person what he thinks of China, they will always show you a great patriotic spirit. These are the contradictions we are caught in!”

What do you, as an expert traveller, look for when on the road? - “I mainly look for traditions, that is, all those disappearing everyday practices that are often enshrined in small towns and villages. Let me be honest: when it comes to Chinese big cities, they are all alike. It is in small realities that you can find differences. I am writing a book now, which is in a way a travel book, although I am not a fan of the genre, maybe because I know China too well and when I begin reading one of them I rarely finish it... Anyway, this book is about the production of local ham in a Yunnan community. You know, food is a central topic anywhere you go in China, but understanding how it is made is something we tend to forget or overlook. So I went to this village and I talked to people, I stayed in their houses, I learnt from them. They live such different lives from mine, although we are not that far culturally speaking. This, for me, is the most enriching way of travelling. But you need time and knowledge to accomplish it.”

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References

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- 2 An informal record of the fieldwork can be read at www.stefanocalzati.com; the fieldwork was funded by the Worldwide University Network (WUN; www.wun.ac.uk) and the Universities’ China Committee in London (UCCL; www.gbcc.org.uk/universities-china-committee-in-london-uccl.aspx)
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- 5 www.camera22.com
- 6 tinyurl.com/forbeszhang



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