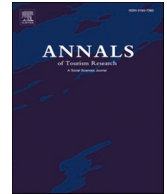




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Sustainable tourism cannot be harmonised

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1. Introduction

The international tourism research body overwhelmingly relies on Anglo-Western concepts. Although, the contribution of non-Anglo-Western scholars and concepts has increased dramatically in recent years, further progress is needed in adopting concepts from cultures other than Anglo-Western to alleviate the dominance of Western paradigms in the field. Thus, [Weaver et al. \(2020\)](#) present a timely and valuable experiment in the synthesis of ideas from East and West in an attempt to endogenise sustainable tourism. The study injects certain Chinese cultural norms and expectations into [Weaver's \(2014\)](#) concept of "enlightened mass tourism". [Weaver et al. \(2020\)](#) might merely aim at using China as a context for a proof-of-concept, however the framing of the paper around overcoming Western dominance suggests the power relations within the concept and the context proposed should be also addressed. Arguably, the paper does not confront the dominant modes of tourism production and consumption, nor the dominant narratives in the context of China. Thus, [Weaver et al. \(2020\)](#) merits a commentary that critiques hegemonies within the proposed concept of enlightened mass tourism and within the context of China, including cultural values and the Xi Jinping thought.

2. The extreme middle way

[Weaver et al. \(2020\)](#) augment [Weaver's \(2014\)](#) enlightened mass tourism concept with selected Chinese cultural values, and align intended sustainable development outcomes with selected intended policy outcomes as presented in the Report to the 19th National Congress of Communist Party of China ([Xi, 2017](#)). The paper argues in detail for the need for enlightened mass tourism, as opposed to scaling up alternative forms of tourism. It proposes that incremental reforms in mass tourism are a more effective way to sustainability than a push for a radical change. Opinions on this point within tourism academia are divided. A number of recent commentaries in the journal *Tourism Geographies* point towards aspirations for significant changes to take place in the tourism sector post COVID-19 pandemic and suggest how to achieve them, i.e. resetting, re-imagining, and transforming tourism ([Lew et al., 2020](#)). These are in stark contrast with the earlier discussions on achieving sustainability through tourism as a utopian idea, i.e. desirable but unrealistic (e.

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g. McCool et al., 2013; Wheeler, 2007). One important aspect of sustainable tourism barely mentioned in Weaver (2014) and Weaver et al. (2020) is the aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to mitigate climate change. The only mention of climate change in both Weaver (2014) and Weaver et al. (2020) is the suggestion that alternative tourism increases per-capita carbon emissions, thus it is supposedly worse for environment than mass tourism. This is inadequate in the time when world's scientists warn of climate emergency (Ripple et al., 2019).

Weaver (2014) suggests that enlightened mass tourism is not a "middle way" model. However, in practice, it appears to have this mindset. The approach proposed throughout the articles is similar to that of corporate social responsibility, which is acknowledged by Weaver (2014) and Weaver et al. (2020). It is mass tourism that is nudged to be more sustainable without a need for significant changes in how tourism operates. Overall, Weaver (2014) and Weaver et al. (2020) maintain the concept of enlightened mass tourism within the hegemony of the conventional tourism production and consumption.

Gautama Buddha argued for the middle way, as extremes lead to vices rather than virtues. Thus, temperance and not giving-in to desires is the road to enlightenment (Ambedkar, 2011). Climate change is a result of an unconstrained push for economic growth and conspicuous consumption. Tourism is a large contributor to the world's carbon footprint (Lenzen et al., 2018), thus significant changes to how tourism operates are required to address this great challenge not only to tourism but to civilisation (Prideaux et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019). The middle way in this context is not viable, and promoting business as usual might be considered extreme.

3. Harmonising cultural values

In addition to embracing a dominant mode of tourism while dismissing more radical, but necessary, alternatives, Weaver et al. (2020) embrace dominant cultural values of the dominant ethnic group in China, the Han Chinese. Their argument for this stance is similar to the argument for mass tourism: large scale phenomena deserve the attention. This is rather unsettling considering issues that other ethnicities in China, often termed "ethnic minorities", currently face. Survival of local languages and potentially whole cultures is reportedly threatened (Roche & Suzuki, 2018; UN OHCHR, 2018; Zenz, 2019). Weaver et al. (2020) appear to be dismissive of the knowledge of different indigenous groups, not only in China but across the world as well, as indicated in the introductory section of the article. This is at odds with academic research on sustainability which embraces indigenous worldviews as important for achieving sustainable development (Carr, 2020), as well as the prominence given to indigenous knowledge by international organisations, e.g. UNESCO (Magni, 2017).

Weaver et al. (2020) have not used any specific framework to assess Han Chinese cultural values. They have cherry-picked values from various literature sources. Weaver et al. (2020) refer quite frequently to Faure and Fang (2008), who discuss changing cultural values in China and demonstrate the complementary opposites that co-exist in Chinese culture in a true yin-yang fashion. Unfortunately, this yin yang approach, which is a conceptually and philosophically interesting lens to understand the contradictions within a culture, is not embraced in Weaver et al. (2020). Instead, paradox is acknowledged as one of the values rather than an overarching approach. Other studies of Chinese cultural values could have been applied for a more systematic review. E.g. Hsu and Huang (2016) have developed a list of contemporary Chinese cultural values, and have discussed their tourism implications.

The first value mentioned by Weaver et al. (2020) is harmony. The harmony here is presented as harmonious existence of people with nature, the inseparability of culture and nature, and oneness of the universe, the themes commonly found amongst both Taoist and Confucianist philosophers (Wang & Juslin, 2009). However, another aspect of harmony in contemporary Chinese culture is not mentioned, and that is harmony as conformity. Considering the article involves a political report later, discussing the political use of the term would be appropriate. Striving for harmony is promoted by the State. It was a favourite value of the former leader, Hu Jintao (Wang et al., 2016). Harmony is invoked to suppress critics and opposition to the dominant discourse (Wang et al., 2016). Effectively, contemporary references to harmonious society aim to legitimise censorship and prevent dissent while invoking the language of Confucianism and Taoism that is retained in the second value: creative transformation. Censorship of online posts and comments has been sarcastically referred to as "harmonising" the discussion (Nordin & Richaud, 2014). Ironically, the word *harmony* has become censored itself (Wang et al., 2016).

Working together with other values mentioned in the article, i.e. collectivism, face and self-cultivation, the striving for a harmonious society through suppression of dissenting voices leads to a uniformity that leaves very few paradoxes and complementary opposites to embrace. This form of harmony is at odds with the natural spontaneous transformation towards harmony that the revered classical Taoist and Confucian philosophers envisioned (Tu, 1985). Instead, any transformation will only be possible via a top-down decision-making by Central People's Government and approval by the National People's Congress.

4. Xi Jinping thought as objective of enlightened mass tourism

The National People's Congress features in the *Outputs* section of Weaver et al.'s (2020). The inspiration for the outputs derive from the Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Xi, 2017). Surprisingly, very little context for the Report is provided, the report and its author do not appear in the reference list: only the updated constitution is cited. The report was prepared and delivered by President Xi Jinping (2017). The 19th National Congress cemented the authority of Xi Jinping, by including Xi Jinping Thought (his personal doctrine) in the constitution of the Communist Party of China, and removing term limits on the presidency (BBC, 2018). Here too Weaver et al. (2020) do not address the existing hegemony, but rather go along with it justifying the use of the Report (Xi, 2017) by it being one of the most authoritative documents in China's political system.

It is not clear how use of Xi (2017) achieves the aim of confronting the hegemony of Anglo-Western concepts when the Communist Party of China follows Marxist-Leninist socialism albeit with Chinese characteristics (which mostly manifest themselves in adoption of

elements of market economy). The outputs are presented in the form of a (traditional Anglo-Western?) triple-bottom-line model of sustainability. Each dimension as related to Xi (2017) appears to conform to the typical Western notions of sustainability. Regarding the sociocultural bottom line, Weaver et al. (2020) quote Xi (2017) statements, such as “The original aspiration and the mission of Chinese Communists is to seek happiness for the Chinese people...” Unfortunately, the paper does not provide any critical comment, analysis nor definitions of happiness and quality of life, nor does it mention the progress made towards achieving happiness in China. Is the understanding of happiness and quality of life espoused by the Communist Party of China leadership different from international standards, such as those established in Human Development Report (UN HDR, 2019), in which China is ranked 85th out of 189 countries, or World Happiness Report (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020), in which China is ranked 94th out of 153 countries? The second of these two reports is especially interesting in terms of non-Anglo-Western paradigms in sustainability, as it represents an international adoption of a framework based on the Bhutanese Gross National Happiness (UN, 2013; Ura & Galay, 2004) ethos. Gross National Happiness index serves as a great example of a non-Western sustainability concept being developed and applied internationally.

The economic dimension seems to be limited to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1: Poverty Alleviation (UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, 2015). A reference is made to “well-rounded” human development, which is similar to UN HDR (2019). Moreover, the ecological bottom line seems to refer to Anglo-Western/general environmental conservation (e.g. Newman et al., 2017), rather than anything specific to Chinese culture and society. In practice, the approach taken by Weaver et al. (2020) appears to be that of focusing on some Basic Policy statements that appear fitting to Anglo-Western/general triple bottom line discourse. Considering hybridisation of cultures due to globalisation (Pieterse, 2015), disentangling endogenous concepts from exogenous might be a futile task. It is indeed a challenge in the case of Weaver et al. (2020).

Since Weaver et al. (2020) analyse a political document, it is appropriate to engage with a fourth dimension of sustainability, namely governance. Governance issues are included in UN Sustainable Development Goals 16 and 17 (UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform, 2015). At the micro-level, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council utilises above mentioned goals in the sustainable management section of the sustainable tourism criteria (GSTC, 2019). Much of Xi Jinping Thought is about the centrality of the Communist Party of China to all aspects of life in China. Other institutions are subject to Communist Party of China’s control, while the Party is supposed to have self-discipline amidst the lack of accountability to other institutions. Concerns over corruption, human rights abuses, and flaws in the legal system (all of which Xi Jinping Thought acknowledges) persist. No commentary on accountability, monitoring and evaluation, or reliability of the governance mechanisms in China in achieving sustainable development is provided by Weaver et al. (2020).

Not only in China, but in other settings tourism research should also take a more sceptical and critical view of government’s role in tourism development than it often does. The international academic community should also maintain scepticism when presented with manuscripts that appear to lack critical analysis of political issues, use doctrines actively promoted by the state, as is the case of Xi Jinping thought (Taber, 2018), and appear unreservedly positive about the political leadership of any nation, be it China, Russia, UK, USA etc. It is difficult to imagine the academic community embracing a speech by US President Donald J Trump without a critique (e.g. Rudden & Brandt, 2018), or discussing the potential impact of recent amendments to Russia’s constitution on cultural tourism (certain amendments are related to history, culture and religion), without discussing issues with the whole process (Higgins, 2020). While diversification of concepts and theories to move away from Anglo-Western dominance is a noble aim, internal power relations that pertain to those alternative concepts need to be carefully considered.

5. Conclusion

Weaver et al. (2020) set out to endogenise enlightened mass tourism in Chinese context as an exemplar of how to move away from Anglo-Western hegemony in tourism research. This commentary overall approves of the idea of tackling the dominance of Anglo-Western concepts and theories, but it warns that hegemonies internal to the alternative concepts and contexts need to be critically analysed. The concept of enlightened mass tourism with or without Chinese characteristics sides with dominant conventional practice of tourism production and consumption. Akin to Corporate Social Responsibility programs, it may provide limited progress towards sustainability (Alves, 2009). In the context of China, Weaver et al. (2020) use dominant discourses without acknowledging existing issues of power. In summary, it is important to acknowledge where culture and politics intertwine and how political power impacts cultural worldviews. All topics should be approached with a sceptical and critical mindset, not harmonising any theme by promoting already-dominant narratives while excluding more radical alternatives that are needed to overcome great environmental and social challenges.

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