Ageing, volunteering and tourism: An Asian perspective

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ABSTRACT

As global populations age, there is need to deepen understanding about old people as both hosts and tourists. This paper draws on critical gerontology to examine the experiences of elderly volunteers at tourism sites in China. Through exploratory interviews with volunteers, we identify the importance of cultural context for understanding the experiences of old people as volunteers and hosts. We argue that Chinese philosophical traditions, combined with eastern collectivist values, shape old people's experiences of involvement in tourism volunteering. This study illustrates the value of critical gerontology for questioning the role tourism plays in both challenging and reinforcing normative ideas about ageing and being old, and the importance of cultural context for understanding elderly people's experiences of tourism.

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Introduction

The global population is ageing, with almost every country experiencing an increase in both the number and proportion of older people in their population. In 2019, there were 703 million people aged 65 or older, a figure that is projected to double to 1.5 billion by 2050 (UN, 2019). Population ageing is not uniform globally; Europe has an ageing population and low fertility rates in contrast with Africa which has the highest rate of population growth and a large number of young people (UN, 2019). However, 62% of people over 60 live in developing countries and by 2050 this is set to rise to 80%, suggesting that ageing is a global issue that may disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries (Age International, 2020). The UN (2019) lists population ageing as one of four 'mega-trends' that characterise the global population today, along with population growth, urbanisation and international migration. All these factors have significant implications for tourism, yet there has been surprisingly limited attention placed on older people's experiences of tourism and the implications of ageing populations for the tourism industry (Sedgley et al., 2011). As the so-called 'silver tourism' segment is set to increase as global populations age, there is need to think more about older people as both tourists and hosts. In this paper we begin to address this gap through focusing on older people as hosts, volunteering within the tourism sector in southern China.

China has the fastest ageing population in the world, a result of the combination of falling birth rates and steeply increasing life expectancy. In 2020, approximately 17.4% of China's population was aged 60 or over, increasing from 12.2% just 10 years previously (Textor, 2020). The Chinese tourism market has rapidly expanded, supported by an emerging affluent middle class and lessening of travel restrictions for both locals and foreign visitors, with the Chinese travel market worth an estimated €618.03 billion (Thomala, 2020). Older people form an important part of this growing travel market. As in other parts of the

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world, China's elderly population are often living longer post-retirement and so look for activities to engage with. Travel is one option, but may not be possible for all older people due to restrictions in terms of mobility, health and availability of financial and other resources. Volunteering to support tourism in the local community provides another option for older people to interact with tourists from around the world.

The limited body of research on older tourists is relatively narrow in focus, approach and theoretical orientation. Hung and Lu's (2016) review of ageing studies in the top tourism and hospitality journals from 1984 to 2013 showed that ageing was not a popular topic during that period, with only 0.29 papers per year published in each journal. Otoo and Kim's (2020) review supported this, identifying the dominance of studies on segmentation, decision-making and motivations. In terms of theoretical perspective, major psychosocial theories such as disengagement theory and activity theory have been applied to inform understanding of the 'senior tourist' segment (Kim et al., 2015; Lefrancois et al., 1997). However, such approaches may offer limited insight into older people's lived experiences through tourism.

In this paper we adopt critical gerontology as a framework to guide our analysis of the experiences of older volunteers in tourism in China, responding to the calls of Sedgley et al. (2011) for tourism researchers to engage with critical gerontology to question dominant ways of thinking about older people and ageing. Gerontology generally is the study of ageing and old age whereas critical gerontology recognises ageing as a socially constructed event, impacted by global, structural, cultural and individual factors that differentially impact the experiences of ageing and being old (Phillipson, 2003). Moody and Sasser (2018) describe critical gerontology as a 'meta' framework that is less about a specific theory or praxis and more "a life-wide critical and emancipatory sensibility and process for inquiry and action" (pp. 37–38). As Doheny and Jones (2020) note, 'critical gerontology' is an umbrella term for a range of approaches that focus on the social construction of ageing and question the values associated with ideas about ageing and the old. We thus see critical gerontology as a guiding framework, rather than a specific theoretical approach, and one that orients us to exploring the subjective experiences of ageing and being old in specific historic and cultural contexts, and the power relations that shape those experiences (see Wellin, 2018).

Based on interviews with older volunteers at a tourism site in Guangzhou city, China, we explore older people's experiences of volunteering in tourism in their home community. Building on Qi's (2020) argument that the western concept of volunteering requires reconceptualization for eastern cultures like China, we explore how neoliberal ideas such as 'healthy ageing' and 'volunteerism' are reworked on the basis of Chinese philosophical traditions and propose a hybrid model of volunteering to underpin understanding of how older people in China engage with tourism as hosts and volunteers. We argue that volunteering in their home community provides a viable opportunity for many older adults to engage with tourism and experience the benefits of meeting people from different places and cultures, as well as sharing their own local knowledge, even if they cannot travel themselves due to mobility, financial, social or other restrictions. It is vital to recognise the variety of ways in which older people can and do engage with tourism and to understand more about how specific cultural contexts shape their tourism experiences, whether as tourists, hosts or volunteers.

Healthy ageing, critical gerontology and volunteering in tourism

Dominant ideas of ageing traditionally associated later life with a period of decline and loss, positioning old age as problematic and older people as a burden to the rest of society (Foster & Walker, 2013). Such negative portrayals have been largely replaced in policy terms by the active or healthy ageing paradigm, which focuses more on what older people can still do and how they can contribute to their own well-being and wider society (Boudiny, 2013). The concept of active ageing was adopted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the late 1990s who defined it as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (WHO, 2002: 12). In 2015 WHO shifted to the associated concept of healthy ageing, which they define as "the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age" (WHO, 2020). With a focus on functional ability and continued engagement in activities that characterise young and middle age – such as work, physical activity, learning and civic engagement – the active/healthy ageing paradigm is a 'positive ageing discourse' which has become influential in national and international strategies, gerontological research and popular media discussions (Rudman, 2015). The terms 'active ageing' and 'healthy ageing' are used interchangeably in gerontology research (e.g. Zaidi et al., 2017), as they are based on the same positive ageing discourse that sees 'good' ageing in terms of continued functional ability, tied to an older person's health and ability to engage in activities independently. We also use the terms interchangeably throughout this paper. Active ageing has been adopted in studies of both ageing and tourism and older people and volunteerism, showing how travel, tourism and volunteering can all help contribute to fulfilment and mental and physical well-being in later life (Ferrer et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2015).

However, although the active/healthy ageing paradigm represents a positive shift in ways of thinking about old age in comparison to a deficit model, it has been widely critiqued by critical gerontologists for failing to acknowledge structural and individual constraints and many of the realities of old age. In focusing on activity and ability, active ageing implicitly promotes the healthy 'young old', further marginalising the 'old old' and those with poor health and other restrictions on remaining active and productive (Van Dyk, 2014). Van Dyk et al. (2013) argue this "effectively produces a new norm of ageing; a single standard that many will inevitably fail to live up to" (paragraph 6). This means that responsibility for success and failure in terms of 'ageing well' lies with the individual older person. As Rudman (2006) argues, this obliges old people to try and defy ageing through relentless projects of self-care and improvement. To age unsuccessfully – to become ill, immobile, inactive and 'unproductive' in the terms of this neoliberal discourse – is a personal failure.

Volunteering fits well within the active/healthy ageing paradigm, as it provides an opportunity for retired people to continue to engage in productive activities that will benefit wider society and keep them physically, mentally, socially and civically active. Tourism is a key arena for volunteering activities that can provide benefits for host communities, guests and volunteers themselves (Uriely et al., 2003). Volunteers perform a wide variety of different roles in tourism, both in their home communities and abroad (Holmes et al., 2010). Volunteering through tourism can contribute to improved social, cultural and community capital (Thompson & Taheri, 2020). Volunteer tourism is popular with tourists around the world, although it has drawn criticism for being more about the tourism experience for the volunteer than benefit for the host community (Sin, 2009). Volunteer tourism may sometimes reproduce racialised encounters that position host communities as 'other' and in need of assistance from the predominantly white, western voluntourists, disguising the structural inequalities on which voluntourism is often based (Conran, 2011; Henry, 2018).

To date, there has been limited attention paid to older people and volunteering in tourism. In their study of 'grey nomads' and volunteer tourism, Leonard and Onyx (2009) suggest that older travellers are motivated to volunteer in order to learn and interact with local communities, which resonates with the discourse of healthy ageing in which volunteer tourism can become an avenue for older people to remain functionally healthy while helping others. However, this kind of voluntourism may only be available to the healthy 'young old' who are able to travel. Volunteering in their home community may be more accessible for many older people who wish to engage with tourists and different cultures and practices.

The benefits associated with volunteering may not accrue to all older people and so there is need for more nuanced and critical understanding of the role volunteering can play in later life (Cattan et al., 2011). Critical gerontologists have highlighted problematic aspects of the promotion of volunteering as integral to 'good ageing'. Martinson and Halpern (2011) argue that the promotion of volunteerism and civic engagement for older people is ethically troubling because it suggests that productivity and contribution to wider society are necessary attributes for being a good (old) person and a good citizen. Volunteering is not simply a matter of choice, and structural barriers across the life-course, including into old age, create unequal opportunities for involvement. Those who do not volunteer in old age may thus be deemed to be failing in their civic duties to 'give back' to wider society, which may then have a negative impact on both people's self-image and society's images of what old age should look and be like (Martinson & Minkler, 2006).

We position our discussion of older volunteers in tourism within the framework of critical gerontology. This directs our focus towards recognising the social construction of ageing and the power relations that shape understandings of older people, and their worth, and of situating their experiences in particular cultural contexts, in this case China (see Wellin, 2018), and places less analytical focus on positive/healthy ageing discourses than would a mainstream social gerontological lens. As a collectivist society with weak traditions of volunteering, China provides a very different context through which to question the extent to which western, neoliberal ideas and concepts like active/healthy ageing and volunteerism are relevant in more collectivist societies.

China, ageing and volunteering

Within tourism, volunteering is a well-researched topic. The very idea of volunteering is linked intrinsically to altruism, and many tourists cite a desire to help others as a key motivator (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2017). Volunteer tourists often seek out intimacy and knowledge about other cultures and people (Conran, 2011). However, other factors also drive (mostly western) tourists' decision to engage in voluntourism abroad, or to volunteer to support tourism activities in their home community, related more to personal factors such as a search for new and exciting experiences, a desire to build social and cultural capital or to gain skills to support education and/or career goals (Coghlan & Fennell, 2009; Kim et al., 2018). Volunteering in tourism is thus underpinned by a mix of altruism, egoism and instrumentalism.

Qi (2020) suggests that the concept of volunteering in tourism needs some modification when applied to eastern cultures such as China. Wang and Zhou (2016) explain that volunteering is a relatively new phenomenon in China, emerging during the early stages of reform in the mid-20th century and increasing more rapidly from the 1990s. Tourism has played an important role in the popularisation of volunteering in China, as the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games rapidly extended participation and understanding. Xiao (2014) argues that although volunteer spirit is not an explicit aspect of ancient Chinese culture, the source of this spirit can still be related to traditional Chinese ethics. This volunteer spirit incorporates ideas about 'benevolence', which in Confucianism can be linked to notions of loving others, goodness and mercy. Zhuang (2010) also suggests that volunteerism in Chinese culture is influenced by Confucian benevolence, Mohist universal love and Daoist philanthropy. Taken together, this suggests an idea of volunteerism that can be related to what western theorists have conceived of as altruism - helping others and working towards being a better person - but based on different philosophical foundations. Qi (2020) argues that volunteering in China is strongly related to socialist values of serving others, responsibility and sacrifice.

One of the key differences in volunteering in China in contrast to western contexts is the role of the state (Tian, 2004). Whereas in most western countries, the state plays a minimal role in volunteering efforts which are instead tied more closely to the third sector, in China most volunteering activities are initiated and controlled by the government and volunteer work centres on achieving political goals (Xia & Hu, 2008). Xu (2013) argues that the centralised political tradition in China leads to a very different context from western liberal traditions in which voluntary organisations spontaneously emerge to address social issues. Rather, in China, volunteering is a very 'top-down' practice which is often formally mandated. This 'compulsory volunteering' remains prevalent within China, making the practice much more formalised, controlled and scrutinised than is common in western ideas about voluntary service and volunteer experiences.

Consequently, we suggest that understanding of volunteering in tourism requires broadening to encompass non-western traditions and philosophical underpinnings that imbue both the concept and the practice of volunteering with different meanings for non-western volunteers in tourism. Shachar et al. (2019) argue that scholarly interest in volunteering has focused predominantly on motivations and managerial concerns, with few attempts to try and understand the phenomenon of volunteering, which is instead accepted as a fixed, unproblematic object. They suggest that volunteering is better understood as a hybrid phenomenon "which conflates actors that may have various and sometimes conflicting motivations and which are associated with various, seemingly distinct and separated, spheres and institutional domains" (p. 250). We suggest that this hybridisation goes beyond the western neoliberal context that Shachar et al. (2019) discuss to also embrace non-western social, cultural and philosophical underpinnings. Fig. 1 illustrates the hybrid concept of volunteering which we propose to aid understanding of volunteering in tourism in global contexts.

Western volunteerism is characterised by low state involvement and an individualistic focus. Drawing from the sometimes-competing bases of altruism, egoism and instrumentalism, western volunteerism encompasses a desire to help others but within an overarching goal of helping the self through the pursuit of personal growth, accumulation of social and cultural capital, skill development and career or educational gains. Volunteer tourism is an example of this where tourists, predominantly from the Global North, travel to distant communities to gain personal benefits as much as to help those communities (Coghlan & Fennell, 2009; Kim et al., 2018). In contrast the Chinese volunteer spirit is characterised by high state involvement, a collective focus and philosophical underpinnings drawn from Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism. Chinese volunteer spirit thus foregrounds ideas of service and responsibility – to others, to the self and, importantly, to the state. This results in a collective ethos of solidarity and care, built around a strong sense of pride for the nation. We suggest that the Chinese volunteer spirit differs from western volunteerism in terms of meanings, although both converge through the practices of volunteering in tourism as hosts or guests.

Although volunteering has increased in visibility in China over the last 30 years, participation is still not widespread and relies heavily on two groups: students, and retired people (Liu, 2020). The majority of existing research focuses on youth volunteers and there has been minimal attention paid to older volunteers in mainland China (Shea, 2017). That which does exist uses mainly quantitative methods to explore the relationship between volunteering and health (Luo et al., 2018), volunteering and self-identity (Xie, 2015) and the characteristics of senior volunteers (Li, 2010). In contrast our study is informed by critical gerontology, which critiques the positivist paradigm as the dominant approach to researching ageing and older people within and beyond tourism (Moody & Sasser, 2018), and so we used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of older volunteers at a tourism site in mainland China.

Methods

Guided by a critical gerontological framework, we sought to understand the subjective experiences of older volunteers in tourism in a non-western context, China. This directed us to select an exploratory qualitative method, based on semi-structured interviews. This approach enabled us to retain focus on the individual experiences of our participants while ensuring the relevance of questions in relation to the purpose of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Research took place during the National Day holiday, from 1 to 7 October 2019, which was a week-long public holiday in China. National Day holiday is one of two Golden Week holidays, the other being the Spring Festival in January/February. Golden Week holidays are key components of the leisure lives of Chinese citizens (York & Ye, 2018). People usually travel home to reunite with family and friends during the Spring Festival holiday, and normally travel for leisure during the National Day holiday. The purpose of the National Day Golden Week is not only to celebrate the official establishment of the People's Republic of China, but also to encourage people to consume, travel, and promote socioeconomic development.

In 2019, National Day holiday was the primary time for Chinese citizens to travel, accounting for 13% and 10% of domestic travel flows and tourism receipts, respectively (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2019). During the holiday, festivities were held nationwide and public places were decorated in a festive theme. Our research was conducted at the Flower City Square in Guangzhou city, Guangdong province. Guangzhou was one of the most popular tourist destinations during the National Day holiday in 2019, and received 16.24 million tourists, including 7.26 million local tourists and 8.98 million national/international tourists, with a total tourism revenue of 12.91 billion yuan (Guangzhou Municipal Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism Bureau, 2019). In 2019, 70% of tourists who went to Guangzhou city visited the Flower City Square, which makes it the most popular tourist site in this city (Guangzhou Municipal Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism Bureau, 2019). The Square is located in the city centre and surrounded by other famous tourism sites including Guangzhou Library, Guangdong Provincial Museum and Canton Tower. As a "hub" for tourists, the Flower City Square has a volunteer station, the site of our research. This volunteer station was initially built for supporting the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games and was named as the Flower City Square Volunteer Station after the Games finished. The main activities of volunteers at the Station include directing tourists to various tourism sites, preparing and offering hot water to tourists (most Chinese tourists prefer to drink boiled water while travelling), and helping tourists with taking photos (see Fig. 2).

Two of the authors went to the Square every day during National Day holiday to observe the participants interacting with tourists and conduct interviews. We observed each participant for 3–4 h prior to the interviews, which were conducted inside the Volunteer Station. Our approach can thus be understood as a form of 'microethnography' as it combined observations and in-situ interviews over a relatively short period of time (see Mitas et al., 2012). Microethnography enables tourism researchers to immerse themselves in the research context and try and understand the experiences of participants at least partly on their

CHINESE VOLUNTEER SPIRIT   **WESTERN VOLUNTEERISM**

Collective ◄──────────────────────────────────────► Individualistic

CONFUCIAN
BENEVOLENCE

SERVICE
• To others
• To the state

HELPING
• 'Give back'
• Help less fortunate

ALTRUISM

DAOIST
PHILANTHROPY

RESPONSIBILITY
• To others
• To the self
• To the state

VOLUNTEERING

PERSONAL GROWTH
• Social and
  cultural capital
• New experiences

EGOISM

MOHIST
UNIVERSAL
LOVE

LOVE/CARE
• Collective solidarity
• Self-care
• National pride

SELF-DEVELOPMENT
• Career/education
• New skills

INSTRU-
MENTALISM

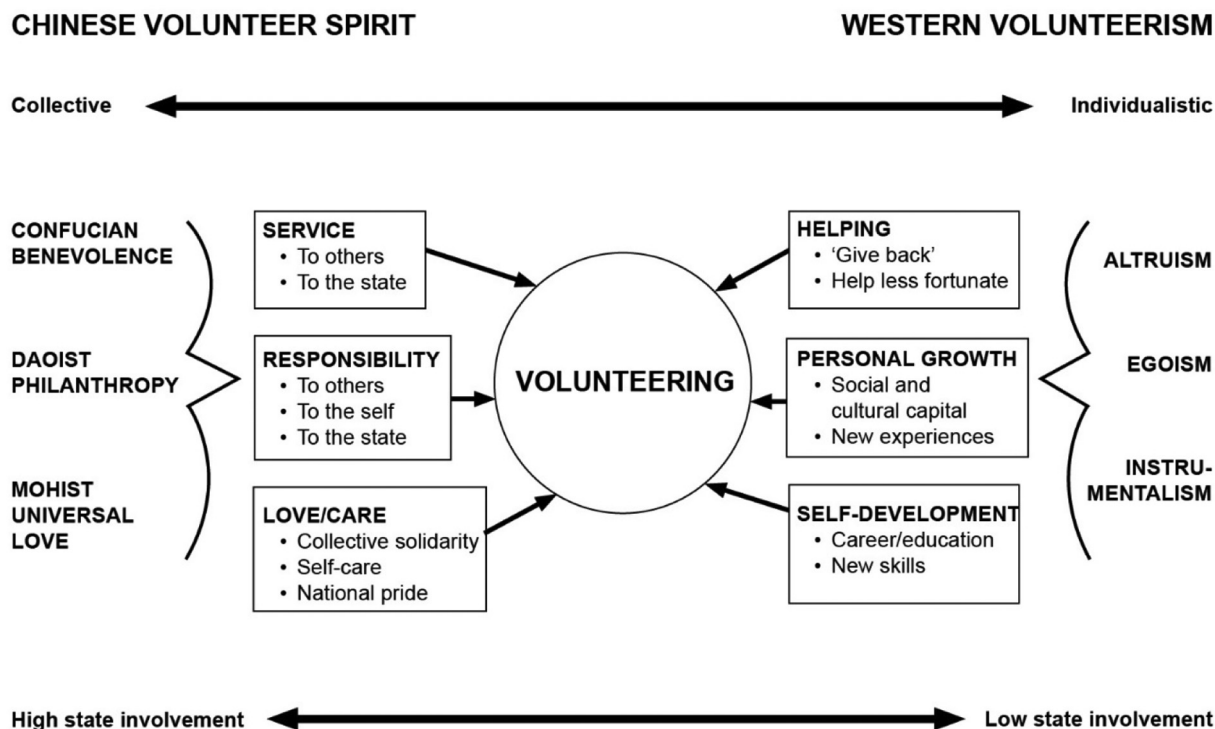High state involvement ◄──────────────────────────────────────► Low state involvement

Fig. 1. A hybrid model of volunteering (Proposed by the authors).

own terms (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Observations informed the interviews, provided context for analysis and interpretation and helped us establish rapport with participants.

Purposive and snowball sampling was used in order to interview individuals with relevant knowledge and experience (Cresswell, 2007). Our focus was on the experiences of older volunteers only, so all participants were retired. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 min. Table 1 shows the demographics of the 13 participants. The sample reflected the demographics and characteristics of the volunteers who were predominantly female and in their 60s, which is considered 'old' in Chinese society. When interview responses became highly repetitive, indicating that saturation was reached, data collection was completed (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Permission to conduct the interviews was obtained from the volunteer station leader and an ethical certificate for this project was approved by the academic board of the School of Tourism Management of the authors' University. All names are pseudonyms.

Fig. 2. Volunteer helping tourists with refreshments.

Table 1
Participant profiles.

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Volunteer work experience
Dong	Male	68	College	10 years
Wang	Female	60	Middle-school	1 year
Xue	Female	73	Primary-school	3 years
Li	Female	64	College	3 years
Wei	Female	69	Middle-school	1 year
Lv	Female	65	Middle-school	5-6 years
Guo	Female	58	High-school	9 years
Luo	Female	69	Middle-school	1 year
Chen	Female	66	Primary-school	5–6 years
Xu	Female	63	Primary-school	7–8 years
Zhao	Female	60	College	0.25 year
Pan	Female	62	University	6 years
Su	Female	61	College	1–2 years

Our aim was to understand the experiences of older people volunteering to support tourists during the National Day holiday, and the meanings this held in their lives. To address this, the interview guide included three main themes: a) participants' experiences of volunteering during the National Day holiday; b) their experiences of volunteer work in general; c) attitudes towards older people and volunteering.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into Chinese before being translated into English for analysis. To guarantee accuracy, some parts of the transcripts were cross-checked by authors at different stages of analysis. Data were then thematically analysed; raw data were organised under coded headings and then relevant categories were established and inter-connections built (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Table 2 shows how the core themes identified related to the guiding frameworks of critical gerontology and the hybrid model of volunteering (Fig. 1). Analysis was conducted manually by the first author, and then checked for reliability and consistency with the themes by other members of the team.

Two of the authors – young Chinese women - conducted interviews. There was disparity between the young interviewers and the older volunteers, which may have influenced responses and could thus be seen as a limitation. However, although we recognise that participants may have responded differently to older researchers, and/or men, we found that the youth of the interviewers was beneficial in this case. The older volunteers were keen to share their insights with us and to explain their experiences and perspectives which they imagined to be different to the much younger researchers. By including time for observations prior to interviews we were able to establish rapport, which encouraged participants to speak openly about their experiences. The age differences between the research team and the participants helped bring to the fore the importance of recognising the ways in which ageing and being old are social constructions, rather than fixed identities. Our critical gerontological framework sensitised us to these issues of power and representation and we have thus tried to ensure we prioritise the meanings older people themselves gave to their volunteering experiences, within the specific historical and cultural context of contemporary China (see Wellin, 2018).

Findings

Critical gerontology sensitises researchers to acknowledge the importance of older people's subjective experiences within specific historic and cultural contexts (Wellin, 2018). Our participants had all grown up alongside the development of the People's Republic of China, which shaped their relationships with their local city and the wider country, as we discuss below. They were now experiencing being old in a society which sees the elderly as a burden (Bai et al., 2016), which also shaped their attitudes to volunteering at the local tourism site. National Day is the most significant national holiday in China, and Guangzhou city welcomed 16.2 million tourists during National Day holiday, 2019. Volunteering to support the city in welcoming these tourists provided our participants with an exciting opportunity to engage with different people and showcase their own local culture and attractions. In the following sections we draw on the hybrid model of volunteering presented in Fig. 1 to consider how the meanings our participants attached to their experiences as host volunteers are closely tied to Chinese cultural traditions and their experiences of ageing within this society.

Volunteering as service

In Fig. 1, we propose three core elements that underpin the Chinese volunteer spirit, the first of which is the idea of service, which can be considered in relation to serving others and serving the state. The western concept of volunteering in tourism is rooted in a sense of helping others, even if this altruism is often accompanied, even replaced, by more individualistic motivations to do with personal development (Kim et al., 2018) or experiencing something interesting and meaningful beyond the volunteer's everyday life (Conran, 2011). For volunteers in our study, the idea of helping others was paramount, yet this was understood slightly differently to either western altruism or egoism. Rather than talking about altruism – the idea of doing good for no other reason than to help others - or helping others in order to gain personal advancement, for our participants this 'helping others' was based on more collectivist ideas, framed as service; to the local area, to tourists and to the country. To support tourists

Table 2
Thematic codes.

Critical gerontology	Hybrid model of volunteering
Lived experiences of volunteering	Reasons for volunteering
Meanings attached to volunteer activities	Meanings attached to volunteer activities
Experiences of interacting with tourists and other volunteers	Significance of National Day holiday
Role of volunteering in individual's wider life	Focus of volunteer activities (e.g. tourists, celebrating China)

visiting the city, the volunteers performed a variety of roles such as providing water, directions and local information. This made them feel useful, as Li explained:

> I'm very passionate, I think I am not old yet. I can still have a little role to serve others. I feel that I still have a little role. Here, no one will look down on me and no one will refuse me just because of my age. I didn't expect that I can still have a little use here, I can still play a useful role. At least I can pour some water for others and show them the way. You know that people from other provinces don't know the way when they come to Guangzhou, and not many understand Guangzhou dialect. I think it is good that I can speak Putonghua and guide others.

Martinson and Halpern (2011) have critiqued the positioning of volunteering as a valuable activity for making older people still 'useful' to society as it risks marginalising those who cannot volunteer due to poor health or other factors, and ties older people's worth to their 'use' to the rest of society. Li's comments reflect this, and illustrate Martinson and Minkler's (2006) concern that this will negatively affect older people's self-image, as she expresses apprehension that she will be looked down on and seen as useless if she does not serve. Li's comments hint at the ambivalent position of older people within contemporary Chinese society as she was keen to stress how she can still be "useful" and "serve others", despite her senior age. Volunteering to support tourists in their local area provides older residents with an opportunity to show that they can still play a productive role in society and are not a 'burden' to others.

Volunteering has different philosophical underpinnings in eastern cultures like China in comparison to the western settings of most volunteer literature (Qi, 2020). Zhuang (2010) argues that Confucian benevolence is a key aspect of this. At the individual level, Confucian benevolence advocates kindness to others as individuals, their family members and wider connections. This kindness also extends to the state, and it was apparent that our participants viewed their voluntary activities as service and kindness to both other individuals (tourists) and to the state of China, as Luo explained:

> for sure I will [keep volunteering] *because I feel so happy*, to be honest. I just want to live like this. Our country is good to us so we should also devote our remaining years to the service of the people.

While many of our participants spoke about service and emphasised their desire to help others over and above achieving personal gain, many did find volunteering enjoyable and are happy to support tourists visiting their city, as Lv went on to explain:

> I am proud, proud, it's beautiful. Many people want to visit here. Especially at night, the night scene here is very beautiful and many people come to the Square at night. You can see that although our volunteers are doing volunteer work from 8.00 in the morning to 8.00 in the evening, we are very tired, we are even sleeping in cars, but we feel very happy psychologically and help a lot of tourists. We are very happy.

Volunteering was hard work, and many of our participants spoke about being tired, getting very hot, and suffering from sunburn. However, this was tempered by the obvious pleasure they gained from these experiences and the pride they felt in showcasing their city to tourists, domestic and international. That their home city was an attractive tourist site gave them opportunities to volunteer in activities they found enjoyable, while also providing service to the local community in helping tourists understand the local dialect and cultural practices, as well as directing them to sites of interest.

Volunteering as responsibility

The second key element of the Chinese volunteer spirit in the hybrid model of volunteering (Fig. 1) is that of responsibility, which can be understood in relation to the self, to others and to the state. Many of our participants spoke about how volunteering offered them benefits in terms of their physical and mental health, echoing the discourse of active/healthy ageing which suggests 'ageing well' requires active participation in society. Xue expressed this in terms of avoiding loneliness:

> It's better for health. It's not good for our health to stay at home for a long time.

Lv expressed a desire to reciprocate the care she felt she had received from the country through volunteering to help others:

> I joined the volunteers of the Asian Games in 2010. I have been a volunteer since the Asian Games. Since then, I have participated in many projects … I feel that in voluntary service, we should do our best. Why? Because I want to repay our society. In 2008 and 2009, when I was ill, the government helped me out throughout my difficulties, so I decided to repay society. That's why.

Lv felt an obligation to "repay society" for the government's help when she was ill. Volunteering is one way to enact this reciprocal duty and perform service to help both other people and the state. Zhuang (2010) suggests that Daoist philanthropy is another key philosophical underpinning of Chinese volunteering. Daoists believe that achieving the supreme state, the ultimate goal, is predicated on accumulating merits and practicing philanthropy. Everyone, but especially those who have received help themselves, should devote themselves to helping others. For Lv, who had received such help herself 10 years prior to when we met her, volunteering provided a route to accumulate merits and give back, while demonstrating her love and benevolence for both individuals and the Chinese state.

Our participants adopted many of the facets of the active/healthy ageing paradigm by seeing it as their individual responsibility to take action to remain as well as possible, physically and mentally, and volunteering was a good way to achieve this. However, although healthy ageing is a concept that has been adopted on a global level by organisations such as the World Health Organisation, it is a western concept, as is volunteerism, and is built on neoliberal ideas of productivity and individualism. The ways in which our participants discussed the links between volunteering, health and well-being reflect a different cultural and philosophical underpinning, based on the ideas that inform their wider understanding of volunteering, linked to notions of service, duty and collectivism. For example, Dong linked his physical health with his duty to help others:

> I will do voluntary work until my body can't bear it. If my health is not good, there is no way I can help others. So we need to exercise and take good care of ourselves to help more people in need. The body is the most important aspect.

Many people volunteer through tourism in order to learn – about other people and cultures, and about themselves (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011). The same was true of our participants, and many told us how they had learned so much more about their city in order to be able to share that knowledge with tourists. We asked Li what she had learned through volunteering and she explained:

> Very rich knowledge. I can tell people a lot of interesting stories about Flower City Square. For example, I know that the dinosaurs in the square can move. I came here so many times before without knowing that they can move.

Participants enjoyed learning more about their locality, and saw this as important in order to be able to support tourists properly. As Li went on to tell us, to be a good volunteer and be able to help tourists effectively "*you need to know a lot of things and learn things for yourself.*"

Xue also saw it as her responsibility to ensure she was knowledgeable enough to be able to help tourists:

> Now I'm a volunteer here, I'm more knowledgeable. I give out leaflets and guide the way for tourists. I do what I can to help.

Learning was not a one-way process, and Li told us how she and her fellow volunteers also learned from interactions with tourists, as in this encounter with a tourist from Shanghai:

> a man came and wanted to find a monument to the national uprising, which many people don't know at all. He said the map showed that the monument was near here. We all didn't know. In fact, we passed by it every day, a black stone which was set up in the middle of these flowers and plants is the monument, which we had never noticed.

For our participants, volunteering at the tourism site in the city square provided opportunities to learn and enact responsibility towards their own well-being, that of other people (including tourists) and the Chinese state.

Volunteering as love/care

Our participants spoke about their volunteering activities as meaningful and important to living a 'good life'. Their explanations of their experiences echoed many of the eastern philosophical underpinnings of Confucianism and Daoism, as outlined above, in addition to other influences - notably Mohist universal love, which incorporates reciprocity and love for others as well as oneself (Zhuang, 2010). Zhao called volunteering "*a spiritual pillar*" while Pan spoke about the transformational effect volunteering had on her own sense of self and happiness:

> I think it's a change in my heart. Sometimes when I think of something unhappy, when I come here, I feel like I have forgotten everything, and it feels natural.

Some of our participants explained their volunteering activities in ways that draw upon the collectivist culture of China, as with Li's description of her fellow volunteers as 'comrades' to whom she has a collective responsibility:

> We call volunteer colleagues comrades. Volunteers should have a sense of responsibility and take care of each other.

Volunteering was thus identified as beneficial to both the individual volunteers and wider society. This has some resonance with western ideas of altruism and self-improvement, but for our Chinese participants this was built upon eastern concepts of universal love and collectivism (Qi, 2020).

A striking aspect of our discussions with volunteers was how their participation in these activities was understood as an act of national pride and dedication to China. This collectivist attitude, where activities are focused outwardly towards the state rather

than to addressing personal objectives or even just helping those in need, reflects a different attitude to those usually considered in discussions of western volunteers in tourism. Tourism may be a particularly important site for the expression of such national pride as it offers older volunteers a rare opportunity to engage with people from different places and cultures, showcasing their own local practices, traditions and places of interest. For Lv, volunteering to support tourists in her home city was an expression of pride that in turn made her feel happy:

> My mood is very excited, our society has become more and more civilised, Guangzhou has become more and more civilised, it's really good … I will devote my last limited life to serving the people and helping more people in need. I will try my best to help more people, help them and improve them.

Our study took place during the National Day holiday, during the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This added additional symbolism to the volunteering activities of our participants, as Wang told us:

> In the future I want to help many more people and do more for the country. During the National Day, doing a volunteer job is also a kind of dedication for our country.

As one of two Golden Week national holidays, National Day is a key time for domestic tourism in China and helping tourists to learn more about the city and its attractions was a source of pride for many of our participants, as Lv explained:

> we can see our Flower City Square. It's really beautiful. There are flags everywhere. We can see the people cheering… You can see that every building here has its own meaning. You can see that the exterior building of the museum is like a treasure chest, which means that the museum has a lot of treasures in it. That building looks like a small hat, the Canton Tower looks like the slim waist of a pretty lady, and every building has its own characteristics. A lot of people come here to visit. We will guide them in the square. Some people ask us, and we will explain the meaning of each building to them. As a volunteer activity, it's so meaningful. Let's show them how to buy tickets to visit, how to take a car, and to guide them.

Fig. 3 illustrates one way in which our participants supported tourists during the National Day holiday:

Although volunteering in general was understood as an expression of dedication and service to China, the added importance of National Day brought about "a special significance", as Wang explained:

> Today is different. We do the same volunteer work as usual, but today there are more tourists and we are happier. Because everyone is excited about the 70th anniversary of our country's foundation. Our country is getting better, and so am I. Of course, I'm happy.

The inseparability of duty to the state and volunteering in tourism expressed by our participants reflects the close relationship between the Chinese state and voluntary activities in the country. Although there is much variation in relationships between the Chinese state and different voluntary organisations, for our participants their involvement in volunteering to support tourists provided an opportunity to perform their duty to the nation. The National Day celebrations heightened this symbolism and increased the visibility of patriotic displays, and the presence of large numbers of tourists increased the opportunity to showcase the city and the country as rich, strong and special.

Fig. 3. Volunteers and tourist celebrating the National Day holiday outside the volunteer station.

Discussion

The three elements of the Chinese volunteer spirit presented in the hybrid model of volunteering in Fig. 1 – service, responsibility and love/care – can be related to the different ontological underpinnings of volunteering in tourism in China in comparison to western contexts, based on ideas drawn from a variety of philosophical traditions including Confucian benevolence, Daoist philanthropy and Mohist universal love. Combined with collectivist values and a prominent role for the state, this shapes participants' involvement in tourism volunteering in ways that differ somewhat from dominant conceptualisations based on predominantly white, western volunteer tourists. Most research on volunteers in tourism focuses on the experiences of western tourists and/ or western concepts of volunteering and so these conceptualisations may be accepted uncritically as universal ways of understanding volunteering in tourism. The experiences of participants in our study suggest that this is untenable and point to the necessity of recognising the cultural specificity of volunteering within tourism in different cultural contexts.

Western volunteerism is a complex phenomenon incorporating altruism, egoism and instrumentalism but has a largely individualistic focus that prioritises the experiences and meanings of the individual tourist (Coghlan & Fennell). This can result in a form of cultural imperialism, where (mainly) white western tourists pay to volunteer in poorer communities to reap personal benefits as much as to help those communities, ignoring the structural inequalities on which these voluntourism encounters are often based (Conran, 2011; Henry, 2018). Even when volunteering takes place within western contexts and the volunteer's own community, such as volunteering at major tourism events and festivals, the combined underpinning of altruism, egoism and instrumentalism of western volunteerism shapes those practices in highly individualised ways which are in sharp contrast to the experiences of the Chinese volunteers in our study. To understand why our participants chose to volunteer to support tourists in Guangzhou, what those experiences mean to them, and how the opportunity to showcase their city to domestic and international tourists provided them with opportunity to perform their service to their city and their country requires acknowledging the different meanings of volunteering in China as opposed to western contexts.

While our participants' experiences are influenced by their culture, they are also shaped by their age and their position as 'old'. Older people are marginalised in most societies, but the ways in which this happens, the consequences for different groups of older people, the kind of resources and support available to them, and the meanings attached to ageing and being old will vary widely. For our participants, volunteering provides an opportunity to engage actively in society, perform their sense of duty to others and the country, and improve their own mental and physical well-being. It can be problematic to associate the worth of older people with their capacity to give back and contribute actively to wider society as this further marginalises the 'old old' and those with health and other limitations that prevent them from volunteering (Martinson & Halpern, 2011). The majority of participants in our study would not be classed as 'old old' in wider gerontological terms, but in the context of China, where people officially retire at 60 for men and between 50 and 60 for women, depending on their job, they certainly are considered to be old and, therefore, potentially to be seen as useless and a burden to others (Bai et al., 2016). Volunteering to support tourism activities offered them an opportunity to challenge such perceptions and to show that, despite their senior age, they are still active members of society. It is thus important to acknowledge that both volunteering and what it means to be old are contextually specific, and our discussion has illustrated how in the context of China these terms are imbued with different philosophical and contextual meanings than in western societies.

Research on older people and tourism focuses predominantly on the market potential they offer and on understanding what services and experiences they desire to engage with (Otoo & Kim, 2020). However, not all older people can be tourists in the sense of travelling to new places, due to limitations of health, mobility and economic and social capital. Volunteering within their home community offers opportunity for such people to still be involved with tourism and to gain some of the benefits of meeting diverse people and sharing interest in places and culture. The participants in our study enjoyed their involvement in tourism in this way, and there is need to recognise the diversity of roles that older people play within tourism, including as volunteers within host communities. Local volunteers, of any age, often play a vital role in supporting tourists in their home community. As Helgadóttir (2019, p. 336) notes, "the resident has a long-term, even lifelong and transgenerational investment in the destination culture" and so local volunteers are important stakeholders that can contribute substantially to local tourism efforts, helping build connections between national and international tourists, local residents and the city.

Conclusion

In this paper we have drawn on interviews with older volunteers at a tourism site in China to illustrate the importance of cultural context to understanding the experiences of older volunteers as important stakeholders in tourism in local communities around the world. The paper makes two original contributions to tourism studies and understanding of ageing, volunteering and tourism.

First, we argue that it is important that studies of volunteering and tourism acknowledge cultural/philosophical differences and do not assume that volunteering means the same everywhere and to everyone. We propose a hybrid model of volunteering (Fig. 1) that recognises the different bases and meanings of the Chinese volunteer spirit in contrast to western volunteerism, which is usually accepted unproblematically as the norm (Qi, 2020; Shachar et al., 2019). We suggest that the Chinese concepts of benevolence, duty and universal love that underpin the Chinese volunteer spirit have similarities to the western concept of altruism but are not the same. The Chinese interpretation places more importance on duties to others and the state, reflecting the collectivist nature of Chinese society and government. We encourage other researchers to consider the hybridity of tourism volunteering in different social, cultural and political contexts.

Second, we argue that current research on older people and tourism needs to expand to consider the various ways in which different older people can and do engage in tourism, whether as tourists, hosts and/or as volunteers. We have focused on a group largely overlooked in tourism research – older volunteers supporting tourism activities within their local communities. For many older people, this is their only opportunity to engage directly with tourism and interact with tourists from different cities and countries. A variety of restrictions – such as mobility, economics, health, social capital – may prevent some older people from travelling and being active tourists, or hosting tourists in their homes, but host community volunteering provides an opportunity to be involved with tourism and showcase their own locality to tourists, which can be rewarding, as it was for our participants. We call on other researchers to recognise host community volunteers as important stakeholders in tourism, worthy of further attention. We suggest that critical gerontology provides a useful meta framework through which to explore the complexities of tourism for older people, and to deepen understanding of how tourism helps both reinforce and challenge dominant, often negative, views of older people and being old. Our decision to adopt a critical gerontological framework has directed our attention towards questions of power and the contextual limitations that many older people face in their ability to engage with tourism. This means we may have placed less emphasis on some of the positive discourses of ageing that focus more on the many things older people can still do and the mechanisms that enable their involvement in tourism. Alternative approaches may focus attention differently. For example, community gerontology would focus more on the role of communities – whether local communities in which older people live and volunteer, or transnational communities of tourists and volunteers – in the experiences of ageing (Greenfield et al., 2019). Crăciun (2019) notes that pluralism of theory inspires different views on ageing, and so we suggest that tourism research would benefit from adopting a diversity of theoretical approaches (including but not limited to critical gerontology) to understand the diversity of experiences of older people within tourism and to expand appreciation of both the challenges that older people can face and the many opportunities and positive impacts that tourism can have on people in later life.

Our study has limitations as it is based on research with a relatively small group of mainly female volunteers at just one tourism site in southern China and more research into volunteering, ageing and tourism in other non-western contexts is needed, including with participants who represent the 'old old' group not present within our sample. Future research could usefully draw on the hybrid model of volunteering presented in Fig. 1 to consider similarities and differences between experiences in different local, regional and international contexts. Our research took place in October 2019, just weeks before the first confirmed case of COVID-19. In the time since, the pandemic has swept the world, with profound consequences for global tourism (Gössling et al., 2020). It is too early to say what the long-term impacts will be, but it is apparent that older people are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and are likely to suffer the most restrictions on their mobility and engagement in public spaces and events. Our study has shown how important engagement in tourism through volunteering is for the older people we interviewed. In the (post) COVID-19 world, it is vital that older people are not excluded from tourism spaces and volunteering opportunities, which we have shown are important to their well-being and connections to wider society. Balance will need to be struck between protecting older people's physical health and ensuring their continued participation in the public sphere of tourism, and critical gerontology provides a strong framework for considering these complex issues.

Declaration of competing interest

All authors declare that no conflict of interest exist.

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