Negotiating the impacts of policy interventions among tourism organizations: Adaptation and sensemaking

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A B S T R A C T

Adaptation, as a response to changes in business environments, is imperative for organizations. Despite the significance of this issue to tourism businesses, the link between sensemaking and organizational adaptation is rarely studied in the context of policy intervention. This study investigates tourism organizations' adaptation strategies, using policy interventions for environmental protection in China as an example. Drawing upon interviews with 23 business owners and secondary documentary data, the results identify two stages of adaptation. In the first stage, there are convergent interpretations, and the sensemaking leads to reactive adaptions. In the second stage, the inconsistent policies stimulate various patterns of sensemaking among different types of businesses and lead to three approaches to adaptation: cost-based approach adaptation, targeted approach adaptation, and resilience-oriented approach adaptation. The analysis suggests livelihood diversification, occupation switching, and joining issue networks are common adaptation actions. Implications for policymakers and tourism organizations are discussed.

1. Introduction

The adaptive capacity of business organizations in the face of rapidly changing business environments is critical for meeting various challenges (Elliott, Swartz, & Herbane, 2002; Faisal, Albrecht, & Coetzee, 2020). The ability of businesses to adjust to surprises is often believed to be particularly important in a turbulent environment such as during crises and new policies (Bryce, Ring, Ashby, & Wardman, 2020; Ritchie, 2009). High magnitude shocks in the operating environments of businesses inevitably place new demands on their adaptive capacities. Moreover, the government, as a principal actor, plays a critical role in the socio-economic environment of tourism destinations (Hall, Malinen, Vosslamber, & Wordsworth, 2016). Without an inclusive policy framework, businesses may fail to adapt to unprecedented changes triggered by policy interventions in tourism business environments. Nevertheless, business resilience—specifically, the reactive strategies undertaken to cope with any policy interventions in the tourism sector—is little known, poorly documented, and often not taken into account in the policy instruments of government agencies involved in tourism destinations. Consequently, it is of important for a government who wishes to make interventions in the development of the tourism industry to

understand how organizations make sense and adapt to the changes produced by the policy interventions.

A number of studies have examined the business adaptation strategies used during crises at tourism destinations (e.g., Avraham, 2020; Faulkner, 2001; Hall, Prayag, & Amore, 2018; Ritchie, 2009). Speelman et al. (2014) noted various types of adaptation approaches, including short-term coping responses and long-term adaptation strategies. The adaptation actions are impacted by many factors, among which businesses' interpretation of changes is identified as an explanatory mechanism for the adaptation process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Regulatory policy changes in the industry environment are one of the common sense-making triggers (Palmer & Hartley, 2006). Mayson and Barrett (2017) argued that interpretations of cues indicating changes in the business environment inevitably affect the proactive and reactive strategies used to sustaining business continuity. However, there is a dearth of knowledge about how businesses interpret government interventions.

Drawing on the existing knowledge of organizational adaptation and sensemaking, this study aims to explore how tourism organizations negotiate the impacts of policy interventions. Specifically, this research employs a qualitative method to explore the adaptation approaches to

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policy interventions using the example of the nationwide environment protection campaign in China. Moreover, it investigates the roles of sensemaking, with retention-enactment-selection microprocesses in the adaptation activities. The findings provide much-needed empirical support for the often implied yet rarely explored adaptation approaches among tourism organizations. This issue is of significance from a theoretical standpoint and for the tourism practitioners and stakeholders related to making and implementing government policies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Government interventions

Governance organizations, especially state institutions, play an essential role in regulating economic and political systems. Regulation helps to balance instabilities and capital over-accumulation caused by market forces. In the tourism sector, government agencies are identified as the key actors in destination development and management (Bramwell, 2011; Nunkoo, 2015). Political economy, which focuses on how politics affect choices, is a common concept for exploring tourism governance (e.g., Gao, Ryan, Cave, & Zhang, 2019). The political economy literature identifies government as a critical aspect of tourism planning and development (Schmidt & Uriely, 2019; Wang & Bramwell, 2012). Sustainable tourism in particular has been an area of academic interest, although no clear consensus about the role of government has been reached (e.g., Rasoolimanesh, Ramakrishna, Hall, Esfandiar, & Seyfi, 2020; Siakwah, Musavengane, & Leonard, 2020; Spenceley, 2019; Tyllianakis et al., 2019). Some scholars argue that the local authorities represent the interests of the local community impartially and support and facilitate the objectives of sustainable tourism, while others criticize that inappropriate policy interventions and governance can inhibit the sustainable development of tourism destinations (e.g., Kubickova, 2019; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013).

Empirical studies in the existing literature support the notion that governments tend to prioritize economic development over the environmental sustainability of tourism destinations (Harvey, 2010; Zhao, Ritchie, & Echtner, 2011). However, governments also often intervene to protect the natural environment. Government-sponsored environment protections are often prompted by the aim of sustaining long-term economic returns and securing the balance between economic development (including tourism) and environmental sustainability (Gibbs & Jonas, 2000). Unavoidably, government interventions cause tensions and conflicts among key actors who have their own specific interests and interpretations of government policy implications. The tourism industry "often opposes government interventions that aim to protect the environment" due to the intense commercial pressure to generate immediate economic returns (Bramwell, 2004, p. 34).

Specific to China, government interventions in the tourism industry have drawn great scholarly attention. Previous studies have explored the government's role in rural tourism development and heritage protection in the Chinese context, among which the influence of authoritarian values, power, and trust in government are identified as factors in influencing residents' support for tourism development and policy implementation (e.g., Liu, Dou, Li, & Cai, 2020; Wang & Ap, 2013; Wang & Bramwell, 2012; Zuo, Gursoy, & Wall, 2017). In this body of knowledge, several Chinese features are identified due to the uniqueness of China such as the centralized governance system, among which the cooperation between government organizations is the key for effective tourism policy implementation (Wang & Ap, 2013).

Tourism governance is ubiquitous, and responsible government agencies govern the interactions among groups influencing the formulation and implementation of tourism policies (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Hall, 1994). Although government interventions have been extensively studied by political economists, there are still substantial knowledge gaps in the tourism literature. Extant literature addresses tourism and governance from the perspectives of the local community and residents

(e.g., Bramwell & Meyer, 2007), destination success (e.g., Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014), tourism policy making (e.g., Krutwaysho & Bramwell, 2010), cultural tourism (e.g., Yan & Bramwell, 2008), and sustainable tourism (e.g., Paddison & Walmsley, 2018). However, tourism literature on the organizational perspective of government interventions—specifically how tourism businesses interpret and respond to policy interventions in a context of climate change governance—is merely in its infancy. This research aims to address this gap.

2.2. Adaptation

The concept of adaptation usually refers to the set of actions undertaken to maintain the capacity to deal with changes, surprises, and system renewal (Daft & Weick, 1984; Ortiz-De-Mandojana & Bansal, 2015). Adaptation involves building the capacity of individuals, groups, or businesses to adjust to surprises, which means any discontinuity between actual processes and those that were expected to occur (Gunderson, 2003). Within the current literature, there are various classifications of adaptations based on the purpose, mode of implementation, or the institutional form (Hall et al., 2018; Smit & Pilifosova, 2003).

Eakin, Tompkins, Nelson, and Anderies (2009) identified three adaptation forms: social vulnerability approaches, which address underlying social issues; resilience approaches aimed at enhancing the resilience of systems; and targeted adaptation approaches focusing on specific risks, which have become one of the most common and now widely cited frameworks (e.g., Meerow, Newell, & Stults, 2016). However, existing studies predominantly focused on adaptation to climate change and disaster-induced crises (e.g., Hoogendoorn & Fitchett, 2018; Hopkins, 2014; Loehr, 2020). Within a wider scope, research on business resilience to crises, policy, and technology was also prevalent (e.g., Jiang, Ritchie, & Benckendorff, 2019; Orchiston, Prayag, & Brown, 2016).

Subsequent studies have revised the organizational adaptation process in different contexts (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Hall et al., 2018). As interpretation systems, organizations viewing the meaning imposed on the business environment are central in explaining when, why, and how organizations make changes within the adaptation process. Hence, sensemaking by an organization plays a large role in its adaptation process. Improving an organization's adaptive capacity by transforming initial coping responses into adaptation strategies is an elusive goal that has baffled scholars for years; investigating the adaptation approaches of various organizations has been the basis of most of the research in this direction. In the tourism context, researchers have predominantly focused on adaptation to climate change with a recognition of the vulnerability of the industry (e.g., Knowles, 2019; Kutzner, 2019; Little & Blau, 2020; Loehr, 2020; Steiger & Scott, 2020) and sustainability tourism (e.g., Kutzner, 2019; Valdés, Álvarez, Spila, & Santa Soriano, 2019). Until very recently, few studies have explored tourism organizations' adaptation to government regulations, leaving a crucial knowledge gap.

2.3. Sensemaking

Sensemaking refers to the process by which individuals enact an environment to make sense of the world or to understand issues that are novel, ambiguous, or confusing (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020; Weick, 1995). When actors encounter surprise and ambiguity, they seek to clarify what is going on by extracting and interpreting cues from the environment (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Schildt, Mantere, & Cornelissen, 2020; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking serves as a springboard into action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), and how cues are interpreted affects how they are responded to. Hence, the interpreted information leads to different but "loosely coupled" actions (Schneider, 1997, p. 95). Sensemaking has been explored as an explanatory mechanism for many organizational processes, such as

strategic change and decision-making (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

The sensemaking process is described by the enactment-selection-retention model (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking starts with noticing and bracketing flux. Enactment examines the question of how actors notice and bracket raw data and connections between cues. Individuals then select plausible stories between punctuated moments and interpret cues. Retention uncovers the key question of how the previous experiences shape sensemaking. Sensemaking is treated as reciprocal exchanges between actors (enactment) and the environments that are made meaningful (selection) and preserved (retention) (Weick et al., 2005). Weick's (1995) enactment-selection-retention model has been widely applied in various fields (e.g., Kalkman, 2020).

Exogenous changes (e.g., organizational crises), major technological advances and changes in regulatory policies are all sensemaking triggers (e.g., Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Mayson & Barrett, 2017). Researchers have extensively examined the sensemaking processes of organizations (e.g., de Rond, Holeman, & Howard-Grenville, 2019) and the impacts of sensemaking on organizational adaptation strategies (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Konlechner, Latzke, Güttel, & Höfferer, 2019; Nazir & Islam, 2020; Schildt et al., 2020). While a plethora of research exists to understand sensemaking in crises as well as organizational changes (e. g., Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995), empirical studies on the sensemaking processes of tourism organizations and their responses to government policy-induced changes in the business environments have been limited. This empirical study identifies the policy interventions in tourism business environments and how the business owner-operators make a sense of and respond to the related impacts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study context

Erhai Lake, the largest highland lake in China, is an alpine fault lake with an area of 250 square kilometers in Dali, Yunnan province, China. The ancient city of Dali enjoys a reputation as a "poetic and faraway (诗和远方)" place, widely popular for its beautiful landscape, ancient culture, and laid-back atmosphere. The scenic Erhai Lake is one of Dali's primary tourist draw cards, and in 2018 the city attracted 47.1 million tourists (Li, 2020). The city of Dali has experienced rapid growth in tourism over the years, and thousands of tourism businesses, including accommodation and restaurants, cluster along the lakeside, which has become the economic hotspot of the city.

However, due to various pollution sources, including agriculture, aquaculture, and tourism activities, the water quality in Erhai Lake has worsened, and three large outbreaks of toxic blue-green algae occurred in 1996, 2003, and 2013 (Cao, 2019). Consequently, the local government has undertaken a number of measures to curb pollution in the lake, which is part of the central government's nationwide environmental protection campaign.

3.2. Research design

This qualitative case-based study aims to develop a systematic understanding of how tourism organizations negotiate the impact of policy interventions and adapt to its environmental protection policies, among which sensemaking plays a key role in influencing their adaptation strategies. This entails an interpretive qualitative research paradigm informed by social constructivist ideologies, assuming a relativistic ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic method (Komppula & Gartner, 2013) for an in-depth understanding of the issues being studied (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). The case study provides an opportunity to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem, and facilitate describing, understanding, and explaining a research problem or situation (Baškarada, 2014).

Primary data sources were in-depth qualitative interviews with 23 small and medium tourism business owner-operators with fewer than 15

employees in the restaurant and tourist accommodation sectors of Dali. Purposive sampling that based on the researchers' expert judgment and snowballing techniques of identifying information-rich research participants were used to select "information-rich cases" within a reasonable cost and time (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016); the background knowledge of the participants "legitimized spending time on the interview" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 171). As for the demographic profile of the interview participants, 19 research participants were from the accommodation sector, and 18 of the 23 participants were male. Work experience of the participants ranged from two years to over 20 years, which is believed to be a good representative of the business owner profiles in the region. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to have a general framework for interviews but also enabled the interviewees to freely express their opinions on the topics raised (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Due to the explorative nature of this research, open-ended questions (e.g., "Tell me 'stories' about your business over the past few years."; "How did the policies impact your business?"; "What kind of strategies/actions did you take?"; "How did you adapt to that?") encouraged "unanticipated statements and stories to emerge" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). The interviews ranged from 45 min to 100 min. Data saturation was reached and no additional novel aspects emerged when interviewing the last few participants. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin—the native language of the interviewees and two investigators. One of the authors grew up in Dali and was thus familiar with policy changes and local languages, and had good networks, which was helpful in interpreting the research participants' perceptions and "ensure[ing] first-hand knowledge" (Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2017, p. 30). The interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview data were transcribed verbatim at the end of the interview stage.

Document analysis served to complement the interviews and as a means of data triangulation. Documents, which included both printed and electronic material, were qualitatively analyzed using a systematic procedure (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis helped the researchers uncover meaning, develop understanding, and gain insights relevant to the research problem and provide a confluence of evidence that increased credibility (Merriam, 1988). Documents provided data and background information on the context within which the research participants operated (Rapley, 2008). This method had the advantages of efficiency, coverage, exactness, and lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity (Bowen, 2009). Therefore, this study further draws on secondary data from the local and national mainstream media (e.g., Xinhuanet, Sina), industry reports, and official websites of local bureaus (e.g., Dali Government website) regarding the environmental protection policies in China.

The use of multiple and varied sources, methods, and investigators to provide corroborating evidence was the primary validation strategy for this qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). Two of the researchers read the interview transcripts and the secondary data without taking any notes. Following that, a systematic coding process was conducted independently with the facilitation of NVivo. Table 1 illustrates the coding process: concrete surface texts that were open-coded and then placed into categories that conveyed structural meaning (Qi, Smith, & Yeoman, 2018). This method allowed for deductive analysis of the established theoretical constructs while also allowing themes to emerge from the data. After that, two researchers discussed any inconsistent codes. A third researcher, experienced in tourism and hospitality studies and qualitative research, has been involved throughout the study and reviewed the data analysis process with the objective of refining the identified themes and minimizing the influence of the researchers' personal bias.

4. Findings

The results of the data analysis are presented thematically. To facilitate the understanding of organizations' adaptations, the key

Table 1
Example of the coding process.

Text	Codes	Categories
I've put several millions' investment to this business. If the policies continue like this, I'll do something else. I sell the business and have some cash. I can always start business in other areas like operating dairy shop, restaurant or a gym. There are different ways to live a life. I don't want to put too much pressure on myself.	Switching occupation	Targeted adaptation approach
I heard from a friend that there's an organization that was formed spontaneously among the business owners … I joined the group … The news of the group that negotiates with the government was also from the association. I am not sure who initiated the group but I involved some of their actions, including setting up the dialogue with the government in terms of gaining some subsidies for demolition, asking the government to help reducing the rent by talking with the property owners …	Joining the issue network	Resilience-oriented adaptation

changes in government policies (drawing on the findings from document analysis) are summarized, laying the timeline for the following adaptations of the following two stages.

4.1. Policy interventions

The systematic document analysis identified a storyline of environmental policies. The policies induced different adaptation and coping strategies among tourism organizations. A qualitative analysis of the documents pertaining to the policy interventions identified two main stages:

Stage 1: President Xi Jinping visited a village near Erhai Lake on January 20, 2015, and left a message for the local government: "I'll keep this photo as evidence. When I come back in a few years, I hope to see the water even clearer" (Li, 2017). The Dali city government immediately began seven comprehensive environmental management projects with an investment of 13 billion RMB over two years (Mao, 2019). As part of its sewage interception projects and sewage collection and treatment projects, most of the existing restaurants and accommodations were required to update and/or build related facilities. However, following an inspection by the Central Environmental Protection, a significant decline in water quality of the lake was reported. Subsequently, a set of regulatory policies significantly disrupted the local tourism business environments, so a "rescue mode" campaign started and the "Seven Actions" policy was proposed, which focused on sewage control.

Stage 2: March 2017 was a turning point; an Announcement N.O.3 was issued on March 31, 2017, which suspended business operations of all the restaurants and accommodations (with a total number of 2498 within the Erhai Lake Water Ecological Protection Area) until the sewage interception project was completed on June 30, 2018, which meant a 15-month lockdown period (Ma & Yu, 2019). However, the day before the end of the lockdown (June 30, 2018), the local government announced the "Three Lines Plan" and a critical decision to demolish a large number of buildings adjacent to the lake (mostly the accommodation and restaurant businesses) around the lake. The three lines—the blue line (Erhai Lake boundary—the line of the altitude of 1966 m), the green line (15 m beyond the blue line), and the red line (100 m beyond the green line)—were used to define the zones of control and changes in the spatial layout (Zhao & Ban, 2018). Buildings within the blue line had to be demolished and moved to the areas between the blue line and the green line. The demolition work was ongoing. The tourism businesses within the three lines were struggling with different challenges of demolition, displacement, closure, (re)licensing application, and

reopening.

4.2. Adaptation stage 1

At the initial stage, government policies mainly focused on updating and building sewage treatment facilities and planting trees. Tourism businesses understood these as "*being necessary*" and "*good*" for the future development of the tourism industry, and the interpretations were fairly convergent among the businesses. Therefore, they adopted reactive strategies of adaptation to support and implement environmental policies.

The adaptation strategies were impacted by sensemaking, which was based on the enactment-selection-retention process (Weick et al., 2005). For the enactment, most tourist accommodation businesses perceived the policies as "*just slogans*" (e.g., interviewee #5, #9, and #16) and did not expect "*big actions or changes*" (e.g., interviewee #21). When interpreting what the changes meant (i.e., selection), the research participants believed that environmental protection was necessary. In the retention of sensemaking, most participants expressed great support for government policies. Below are two examples from interviewee #2, who grew up in Dali operating a hostel near the Erhai Lake, and interviewee #18, the owner of a restaurant:

> Changing the current pollution situation is a good idea. Protecting the environment is necessary. I totally understand and support [the environment protection campaign] … Only by keeping the Erhai Lake clean can we attract tourists here, and our business is sustained. (Interviewee #2)

> At the beginning, we thought it [the environment protection campaign] is just a spontaneous policy … Although I totally understand and support [the anti-pollution actions], I did not expect the government would take it seriously. (Interviewee #18)

This subjective interpretation of the policy interventions convinced them to take the actions of building and updating related facilities as required. Most participants mentioned that they built new sewage treatment plants and septic tanks as well as updating the sewage pipes. Besides that, they took other actions required to comply with the guidelines provided by the government. Interviewee #16 provided notable insights:

> They [the government] asked us to paint all the walls and the handrails. The water tanks on the roof need to be changed to square ones. Also, they asked to plant lots of flowers … We changed water tanks and planted flowers, but due to the wet season, we have not painted the walls yet.

Although tourism businesses responded to adapting to the policy interventions, most were reactive adaptation strategies because they were timed relative to the stimulus—the policies. In the sensemaking process, interpreting the policy interventions as "formalism" (e.g., interviewee #4, #10, and #15) had many participants anticipate that the policies would not last long, so they focused on expedient or coping actions. Overall, these planned or steered adaptation approaches were found to be short-term coping strategies rather than systemic changes in mindset or long-term strategies of building business resilience and sustainability.

4.3. Adaptation stage 2

The threshold event triggering the second adaptation stage was the government issuing the lockdown announcement in March 2017, despite all the previous effort of building and updating facilities, followed by the "Three Lines." The inconsistency and ambiguity in regulatory policies caused uncertainties and stimulated various patterns of sensemaking among tourism businesses. Surprise caused by the gap between tourism business owner-operators' anticipation and the

evolving policy instruments became apparent, and this contributed to shock and a loss of trust in the government interventions, leading tourism businesses to adopt different adaptation strategies. This research identified three adaptation approaches (Table 2).

4.3.1. Cost-based adaptation approach

The first type of adaptation relates to "sideline-job" businesses. Most of these types of businesses were owned by local residents. As a sideline job to farming, they own-operate restaurants and tourist accommodation businesses, some of which only open during the peak season of tourism. For this type of business owner-operator, tourism was not their primary source of income. Moreover, most of them were farmers, so they did not understand policy cues. They were not aware of potential disruptions caused due to the policy interventions. In most cases, they did not realize the changes until there were any significant impacts on their businesses. Interviewee #6 was a good example; he owned a tourist accommodation business by the lakeside and commented:

> I was born and grew up here. I don't have a good education and have no idea about "big theories". But I believe the environmental protection policies are just excuses … If I am not allowed to do business here, I go back to my village.

This enactment-selection-retention sensemaking process made the sideline-job business owner-operators unable to understand the values and transformative impacts of the related environmental policies. Hence, they adopted the most cost-effective coping strategies and shifted attention to other livelihoods.

They were reluctant to build or update facilitates. But in order to meet the minimum requirements and continue their business, they chose to take some "small" actions that did not cost much. Among the interviewees, four of them (interviewee #5, #6, #15, and #19) mentioned that they repainted the walls and planted greenery as a response to the requirement of ecological greening. According to interviewee #19:

> [The local government] asked to repaint the walls. We did it as required … A few months later, they asked us to plant flowers and trees. Despite all our efforts, they did not allow us to open for business. We were closed for over one year! Then, they asked us to update the sewage disposal systems. We don't have money and don't want to do it anymore …

As a way to maintain livelihood, some of the business owner-operators chose to continue their businesses secretly during the lockdown period. As interviewee #9, the owner-operator of a small homestay near Erhai Lake, mentioned:

> We did not know how to do deal with the policy … Life needs to continue. We do some business secretly during the lockdown. If tourists come to us, we take them.

Another strategy for adapting to the impacts of the policy changes was livelihood diversification. As tourism could not be the focus, the sideline-job business owners tended to shift attention to other occupations, such as farming and working in other cities as migrant workers. Interviewee #18 explained:

> After the business was closed, I came back to do my farming and then went to Dali to work … If they allow us to reopen, I'll come back. Otherwise, I'll do something else.

Findings from the news reports on how the restaurants and accommodation business owners had to change their livelihoods reconfirm that the adaptation actions of sideline-job business owners shared the feature of cost sensitivity. They tended to adopt the most cost-effective coping strategies and expedient means of implementing policies within an affordable scope. Secretly operating the business for livelihood was another common adaptation action. In addition, to avoid the increasing cost of complying with regulatory policies, many tourism business owners adopted the strategies of livelihood diversification to circumvent the impacts of policy interventions. Hence, this approach was named the cost-based adaptation approach.

4.3.2. Targeted adaptation approach

The second adaptation approach was identified to be common among lifestyle tourism entrepreneurs. Eight of the research participants belong to this group. These lifestyle entrepreneurs immigrated to Dali and started tourism businesses in the Erhai Lake region, mainly because they enjoy the natural beauty, the atmosphere, and the low-pressure lifestyle. For them, enjoying life was more important than business growth and profit maximization. Most of the lifestyle tourism entrepreneurs were from other big cities (interviewee #3, #12, and #21). The tourism businesses were not their main income sources; instead, they were more of a way to live life.

In terms of perceiving and acting on changes (enactment) in the sensemaking process, these types of business owners tended to actively seek, analyze, and develop policy-specific information in different ways, but especially through personal networking. Based on the information they gained, they could anticipate policy changes and prepare alternative plans. Interestingly, most of them interpreted the environmental protection policies as "an unavoidable trend" (e.g., interviewee #4, #17, and #22). They understood and supported the idea, although they

Table 2
Three adaptation approaches.

Adaptation to:	Sensemaking	Three types of tourism organizations	Adaptation approach	Adaptation actions
Environmental protection policies	Enactment: missing important policy cues No bracketing local political environment Selection: didn't realize the changes until the policies were issued Retention: avoiding changes by shifting attentions	1. Sideline-job business	Cost-based adaptation approach	• Adopting the most cost-effective and expedient means of implementing policies to an affordable level • Secret operation • Livelihood diversification
	Enactment: actively bracketing and making connections to develop policy-specific information Selection: anticipating policy change and improvising an alternative plan Retention: drawing on skills and knowledge developed previously	2. Lifestyle business	Targeted adaptation approach	• Targeting for trade-offs between policy implementation and personal benefits • Wait-and-see attitude • Switching occupation and transferring investments
	Enactment: analyzing and using policy information Selection: anticipating policy change and surprise (reflecting-in-action) Retention: learning from policy surprise to improve improvisation skills	3. Main-job business	Resilience-oriented adaptation approach	• Updating and building facilities as required • Working on required certificates/licenses to reopen business • Joining the issue network

had complaints about the inconsistency of the policies. These lifestyle tourism entrepreneurs were good at drawing on their prior knowledge and experience in the sensemaking process. Interviewee #10, who is from Guangzhou and own-operates a tourist hostel in Dali, stated:

> Dali is a tourist city. Making sure the Erhai Lake is not being polluted is important, and this is the basis for the long-term development of the tourism industry. This is related to everyone … I support this but what I cannot understand is the changing attitudes, no transparency and unrealistic …

Interviewee #22, a tourist hostel owner on the edge of Erhai Lake, had a similar view. He and his family sold one of their houses in Beijing and moved to Dali around 10 years ago. He mentioned:

> I am not surprised to see environmental policies. Beijing had already started several years ago … The government has given many signals in the past few years. I think we really need to care about the environment now … but policies need to be realistic and consistent.

This sensemaking process impelled lifestyle tourism entrepreneurs to take a targeted adaptation approach to deal with the impacts caused by policy interventions. They had a relaxed, even indifferent attitude. In their adaptation actions, they were keen to make trade-offs between implementing policies and personal benefits. As interviewee #12 proposed:

> I totally support the idea. As required, I have repainted the walls, planted trees and flowers, fixed the roads outside the building, and built seven septic tanks … These updates were also useful for future business.

Besides taking actions that would benefit themselves, most of these businesses had a wait-and-see attitude. More than half of them mentioned that they moved back to their hometown during the lockdown period and used this opportunity to travel around with their families. On the other hand, they wanted to see what the next change in policies would be before making decisions. Interviewee #21, who operated a homestay in the lake area and was also the head of a well-established company in Zhejiang Province, noted:

> It has already taken me over one year to get all the licenses. But I still cannot get the legal operation rights. I am going back to my hometown with my family to have a long holiday until the new policies become clear.

Another widely mentioned adaptation action was switching occupation and transferring investments. Several participants proposed that they were thinking about shifting to other sectors such as dairy shops and takeaway restaurants if the policy changes continue. Interviewee #3 was a typical example:

> Last year I came back [to my hometown] and took a break for the whole year … I've put several million investments into this business. If the policy changes continue like this, I'll do something else …

4.3.3. Resilience-oriented adaptation approach

The resilience-oriented adaptation approach was identified as common among business owner-operators that had tourism as their main source of income. In this study, this type of business is labeled as main-job business owner-operators.

For their perceptions of and actions towards the environmental policies (enactment), these business owner-operators analyzed the policies at different stages and gained an understanding of the aims and logic of the policy interventions. In the interpretation of policies (selection), they believed that "*strengthening environmental protection is an avoidable trend*" (e.g., interviewee #1, #13, and #23) and "*the policies will become tighter and tighter*" (e.g., interviewee #7, #8 and #14).

Interviewee #20 referred to the nationwide environmental campaign

and predicted that "*the policies won't end and this is just a start … The requirements for food sanitation and safety and the hygiene of hotel rooms will be the focus of future policies. We need to prepare for that.*" Hence, the main-job business owners not only responded to the impacts of the related policy interventions but also anticipated future changes, which was reflected in their actions. In terms of retention in the sensemaking process, they tended to use prior experiences and learned from past surprises in order to prepare for future changes, although anticipatory adaptation actions were not evident.

This sensemaking process led to resilience-oriented adaptation actions. The first and most common adaptation action was to build or update their facilities as required. During the lockdown period, six interviewees in this group (i.e., interviewee #1, #8, #11, #13, #20, and #23) explained the efforts to obtain the required certifications and licenses before their businesses could reopen. Interviewee #11 shared some notable insights:

> We are keen to get all the necessary licenses to reopen the business … I have invested over two million and signed a ten-year contract … In the past few months, I went to different departments: industry and commerce bureau, police, fire department, planning and national resources bureau.

Another adaptation action was joining networks of other business owners in order to gain information, enhance their negotiation ability, and maximize the protective effect. Nine of the research participants mentioned that they had joined groups, mostly known as "issue network" (Zhang & Xiang, 2015), formed to negotiate with the government in terms of demolition subsidies, rent reduction, and so on. Findings from the document analysis, specifically the media reports, reconfirmed the activities of the several groups (issue networks) of business owners. As a member of the local Hostel Association, interviewee #7, shared:

> One of the main reasons to join the association is to gain information, including the dialogue with the government in terms of gaining some subsidies for demolition and asking the government to help reduce the rent by talking with the property owners.

Interviewee #14, who owned two hostels and also served in the executive team of the association, said that the environment protection campaign had a large impact on the tourism businesses, but they couldn't "raise their voice" individually. A group of people initiated the group to negotiate with policymakers. They believed they needed to be "big enough" to draw the government and media's attention, which could also "protect" them. Interview data and document analysis reflect that the collaborations and collective responses of the tourism organizations were critical to negotiating the policy interventions and supporting the businesses in surviving and thriving.

5. Discussion

This study sets out to explore how tourism organizations adapt to policy interventions through the lens of sensemaking. Fig. 1, based on the emergent two different stages and three adaptation approaches, demonstrates tourism organizations' adaptations to policy interventions:

The findings are in line with the previous adaptation studies, both within the organizational adaptation field and adaptation in climate change, suggesting that there are different adaptation approaches among organizations (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Previous research has shown the need for adaptation in order to enhance organizational ability to withstand disruption and maintain operations (e.g., Zhang, Welch, & Miao, 2018), and this is echoed in this study. The identified adaptation approaches among tourism organizations are insightful and significantly contribute to the current literature on organizational adaptation. While the literature is replete with organizations' adaptive
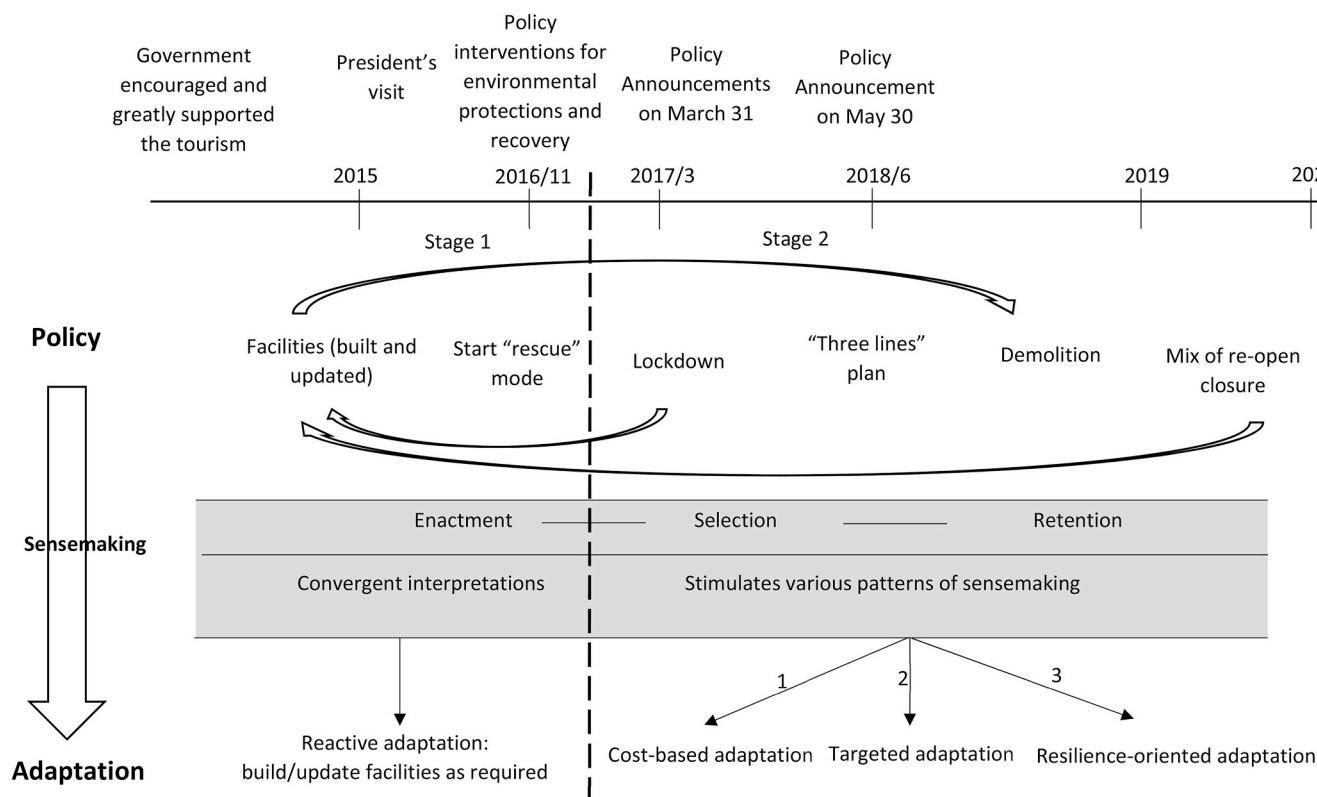
Fig. 1. Tourism organizations' adaptation to policy interventions.

responses to environmental changes, this study builds specifically on the enactment-selection-retention sensemaking process, and seeks to shed light on the importance of sensemaking in organizational adaptation activities from the perspectives of tourism organizations. Although previous studies explored the organizational adaptation processes and found that organizations change their adaptation strategies based on their interpretations of the business environments (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Daft & Weick, 1984), there have been only a few attempts to investigate how sensemaking impacts organizations' adaptation activities, and even less in the tourism context. Findings of this study explain how organizations interpret and make sense of the environment impacts on various organizational processes, including adaptation approaches.

Interestingly, this research finds that the sensemaking process and adaptation activities of tourism organizations are strongly impacted by and linked with the changeable environmental policies. Generally, two stages are identified. At the first stage, tourism organizations make sense of the environmental protection campaign in a positive way and support the policy by building and updating related facilities. But when moving to the second stage, the inconsistent and untransparent policies stimulate different sensemaking processes, which eventually leads to various adaptation activities among tourism organizations. The background of environmental policies makes this research represent the first attempt to explore organizational adaptations in the context of governance interventions, which is different from the traditional extreme events that have been widely investigated (e.g., Zhang et al., 2018). The lack of policy information and communications between local authorities and tourism organizations results in the disjointedness of sensemaking, sensegiving, and sense receiving (Shi & Zhang, 2006). This can be explained from the conventional command-and-control approach to environmental policy and top-bottom administration mode in China (Mol & Carter, 2006), which is a Chinese feature.

This study further identifies three types of tourism organizations and explores different adaptation approaches. The identified adaptation strategies share similarities in terms of the actions of livelihood diversification and occupation switch (e.g., Nelson, Adger, & Brown, 2007). But the context of policy intervention also brings some uniqueness such as trade-offs between regulatory compliance and personal benefits and joining the issue networks. In particular, it confirms some findings from previous studies, for example, lifestyle entrepreneurs primarily focus on the natural beauty of the destination, small-town atmosphere, and no-pressure lifestyle (e.g., Wang, Hung, & Bao, 2015). In the case of policy interventions, lifestyle entrepreneurs in the tourism sector choose a targeted adaptation approach and seek trade-offs. The views expressed by the lifestyle entrepreneurs in this study are parallel to the findings of Ateljevic and Doorne (2000) and Sun and Xu (2017), but this research contributes to the literature by focusing on lifestyle tourism entrepreneurs' adaptations to policy interventions.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study enhance understandings of tourism organizations' adaptation approaches to policy interventions by empirically supporting the validity of sensemaking in the adaptation activities (Vough & Caza, 2017). Drawing on interview data and document analysis, two-stage adaptations to the environmental policies were identified. In the first stage, tourism businesses had convergent interpretations, and they believed that protecting the environment was beneficial to the future development of the tourism industry as well as their own businesses. This stage of sensemaking enabled tourism businesses to adopt reactive adaptation strategies of building and updating facilities as required by the government. Moving to the second stage, the inconsistency and ambiguity of policies stimulated various patterns of sensemaking. Three adaptation approaches were identified: the cost-based adaptation approach in sideline-job business owners, the targeted adaptation approach by lifestyle business owners, and the resilience-oriented adaptation approach used by main-job business owners. Moreover, this study finds that joining the issue networks improves the negotiation ability of tourism organizations. To the best

knowledge of the authors, this is the first study in tourism that posits issue networks, which is a popular concept in the public sector. Furthermore, livelihood diversification, occupation switching, and trade-offs between regulatory compliance and personal benefits are the emergent adaptation actions.

This paper presents an exploratory discussion of tourism businesses' adaptation strategies to policy interventions. It shifts scholarly attention from adaptation to climate change, achieving sustainability to governance policy. In doing so, the paper complements the work of researchers such as Beaumont and Dredge (2010) and Stoffelen, Ioannides, and Vanneste (2017). The research findings contribute to tourism and organizational adaptation literature. Of note is that this study is the first to investigate tourism organizations' adaptation to the nationwide environment protection campaign in China. It is expected that the study contributes not only to tourism literature but also to the broader body of organization adaptation knowledge.

In terms of practical implications, the findings provide a base from which policymakers and practitioners can advance a nuanced understanding of the complex dimensions of the tourism business adaptation processes. On the one hand, the various patterns of sensemaking stimulated by the inconsistent and untransparent policies provide insights for authorities. Findings indicate that when making policies to intervene and manage the development of the tourism industry, authorities and policymakers need to ensure the policies are consistent and transparent with minimal ambiguity, which can help organizations implement and adapt to the policies smoothly. On the other hand, the experiences shared by the tourism businesses demonstrate that joining issue networks and expanding social networks have a protective effect.

This qualitative study is subject to the following limitations. Most of the interviewees represented small tourism businesses, mainly in the accommodation sector. Therefore, further research is required to explore whether other business sectors of tourism make sense of policy interventions in different ways or adopt different adaptation approaches. Moreover, the research context—policy interventions for environmental protection in China—is ongoing, although this current research has incorporated tourism organizations' adaptation activities over the past few years. Considering the fact that tourism organizations may adopt other adaptation strategies for the ongoing policy interventions and changing business environments, further research could incorporate sensemaking and adaptations at the recovery and repositioning stages through longitudinal studies.

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