



## Conceptualizing volunteering in tourism in China

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### ABSTRACT

The current literature on volunteering in tourism is very Western-centric, and volunteering in different cultural contexts needs to be further explored. This study is devoted to exploring the local understanding of tourism-related issues in China so as to give critical tourism by engaging local epistemology. Through a qualitative design, this research explores how volunteering is conceptualized in the context of tourism in China. Findings identify that the highlight of voluntary spirit, serving others by giving time/skills/knowledge and mutual help are three dimensions of conceptualization. It indicates that there are different meanings of volunteering in the Chinese context. This research takes a further step and reflects the applicability of the Western conceptualization of volunteering in the Chinese tourism context. This research presents a contribution to the epistemological decolonisation of tourism knowledge production in Chinese context.

### 1. Introduction

Volunteering in tourism is an important branch of tourism academy. Due to the significance of volunteers for the tourism industry, a variety of research on volunteering in tourism from around the globe has emerged (e.g., Kim & Cuskelly, 2017). The concept of volunteering is originated from Western countries and the existing studies in this field are mainly conducted by Western scholars and the study contexts are still in developed countries (e.g., Baillie Smith, Laurie, & Griffiths, 2018). Relatively little scholarly effort has been devoted to exploring how volunteering manifests similarly or differently with volunteering in other cultural and global contexts, leaving a crucial knowledge gap (Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010). With the belief that all knowledge is contextually situated and that there are no universal truths independent of culturally specific contexts, this research aims to explore how 志愿 *zhi yuan* activities (volunteering) is conceptualized in the context of tourism in China.

As Silverman (2005) contended, only after establishing how people construct meanings and actions can the analyst pursue other issues. Asking the question of conceptualisation allows the researchers to come back to the very origin of volunteer work, which is the basis for conducting other research in this field. By drawing out more fully the complexities and nuances of what volunteering in tourism in China involves, this research will enrich the volunteering literature in a non-western context. Through exploring the local understanding of volunteering in tourism in China, the current research provides a good opportunity for the traditionally marginalised scholars (i.e., Chinese) to give critical tourism voice and this is also a good platform to introduce

the knowledge of Chinese local volunteering in tourism to the scholars globally.

China is considered a suitable context to explore the conceptualization of volunteering in tourism. On the one hand, the tourism industry has been rapidly evolving in China. This has been accompanied by a growing body of literature related to tourism in China globally (e.g., Leung, Li, Fong, Law, & Lo, 2014; Li, Liu, & Song, 2019; Wen, Josiam, Spears, & Yang, 2018; Wen, Lin, & Peng, 2018), which demonstrates the widely recognised significance of understanding different issues in the tourism field in China. As an essential part of tourism knowledge, volunteering in tourism needs to be further examined in light of the lack of research of this field and the growing importance of China in the global tourism industry. On the other hand, China is a good example of the traditionally marginalised and it is still largely the objects of tourism research rather than the producers of tourism knowledge (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). The quest for demarcating the Western colonialism in tourism academy is an elusive task that has baffled scholars for years. The privileging of Western philosophy induced the domination of Western/Euro-centric ideologies in tourism knowledge. Indeed, it is regarded as the only way to produce “universal” knowledge, while the non-Western ways produce “particularistic” (Aquino, 2019). Researchers have increasingly acknowledged within the tourism academy that “our existing knowledge about tourism is Eurocentric and therefore ignores and negates the knowledge which emanates from other cultures and from traditionally marginalised groups” (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015, p.2). Volunteering in tourism, as an essential part of tourism knowledge, is not exempt from the domination of Western/Euro-centric epistemologies.

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As for the scope of volunteering in tourism, Holmes, Smith, Lockstone-Binney, and Baum (2010) proposed that “tourism volunteering encompasses individuals volunteering in their own community (i.e., host volunteering) and tourists volunteering at a destination (i.e., volunteer tourism)” (p.1). In the same vein, this current study takes an inclusive approach in considering the concept of volunteering within the tourism context and it includes two spectrums: 1) volunteering in the local community such as volunteering at i-sites, museums, and events; 2) volunteering at a destination further afield, encompassing some degree of leisure travel within China. However, at the onset it should be noted that the behaviours of travelling overseas with doing volunteering are not included in this research due to the fact that it is beyond the Chinese context.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualization of volunteering

Although by now volunteer activities have been extensively studied, there are different perspectives on the nature of volunteering and the descriptions of this kind of activity are varied, depending on various factors such as culture, the identification of participants, and activity (Hustinx et al., 2010). Many scholars have explored the conceptualisation of volunteering but little agreement has been reached as to the breadth and depth of volunteer activities (e.g., Cnaan, Handy, & Wadsworth, 1996; Cordingley, 2000; Petriwskyj & Warburton, 2007). In order to answer the question of what volunteering is, some existing studies have focused on what is not volunteering and reached the agreement that volunteering is not paid labour, it is not slavery or forced labour, it is not kinship care or spontaneous help (Hustinx et al., 2010). Moving away from the way of describing the characteristics of volunteering which merit inclusion or not, Cnaan et al. (1996) suggested that the definitions of volunteering range from extremely “broad” to very “pure” and they proposed a continuum to describe the conceptualizations of volunteering from four dimensions: free choice, remuneration, structure, and beneficiaries (Fig. 1). This study laid a basis for subsequent volunteering research (e.g., Smith & Cordery, 2010).

Many definitions used in the existing research are narrow and result in the exclusion of a range of activities and behaviours (Petriwskyj & Warburton, 2007), and some culturally specific behaviours are not defined as volunteering. So McDonald and Warburton (2002) use “soft and fuzzy notion” and “container notion” to describe definitions of volunteering (p.49). Rochester (2006) identified three forms that are required to understand volunteering: unpaid work, activism, and serious leisure. In addition, the nature of volunteering is “undergoing radical changes because of broader social changes” (Hustinx et al., 2010, p.75). Research on the conceptualisation of volunteering continues to emerge, representing a coherent body of literature that has evolved and changes with new and emerging understandings. Some researchers especially those in the tourism field focus on conceptualizing volunteering as leisure (e.g., Lockstone-Binney, Holmes, Smith, & Baum, 2010; Stebbins, 2013), while others tend to understand volunteering

from the angle of exchange (e.g., Dean, 2015; Kelemen, Mangan, & Moffat, 2017).

To clarify the meaning of volunteering, this research identifies some widely used definitions found in the literature and the sources include international organizations (e.g., International Association for Volunteer Effort, 2013; United Nations General Assembly, 2001), national government and non-profit organizations (e.g., President’s Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives, 1982; Volunteering Australia, 2015), and academic researchers (Adam, 1985; Shure, 1991). Four core characteristics were identified: undertaken not primarily for financial gain, free choice/voluntary giving, giving talents/time/skills, and benefit others.

Much of the volunteering conceptualisation literature is North American or European focused (Hustinx, Meijs, Handy, & Cnaan, 2012), while little is known in other contexts including the Asia regions. As Rochester (2006) proposed, volunteering is a multi-faceted phenomenon, the boundaries of which are unclear, so whether an activity can be acceptable as volunteering is a matter of judgment and different cultures may have different interpretations. There is considerable variation regarding the definition of what is considered to be volunteering and the notions of volunteering and volunteers vary across countries (e.g., Handy et al., 2000). Some researchers have explored volunteering behaviours across different countries and cultures, among which Fairley, Lee, Green, and Kim’s (2013) study is a good example. In their study, they utilised Western literature to examine whether the Korean volunteer experience fitted with the Western experience of volunteering and the findings found that the model developed from Western countries did not fit in well with the Korean context which suggested that when examining volunteerism, culture should be considered. These studies demonstrate that volunteering is rooted in the local culture, which emphasizes the need for further research on a local culture’s interpretation of volunteerism.

2.2. Volunteering in tourism

Volunteering in tourism is a wide scope concept. There are different opinions as for the boundaries of volunteering in tourism (Uriely, Reichel, & Ron, 2003). Among these investigations, Holmes et al. (2010) proposed that individuals volunteering in their community such as volunteering at museums, tourist attractions, and local events/festivals (i.e., host volunteering) are essential parts of volunteering in tourism. This research provides a good framework to understand the range and complexity of the volunteer activities intertwined with tourism.

Research on volunteering in tourism has grown steadily over the past decades. A review of the current studies demonstrated that scholars have predominantly focused on motivations (e.g., Olsen, Vogt, & Andereck, 2018; Paraskevaidis & Andriotis, 2017), to a less extent volunteer experience (e.g., Moore, Rodger, & Taplin, 2015; Shaw, Deery, & Jago, 1997; Stebbins & Graham, 2004), and volunteering at events (e.g., Downward & Ralston, 2006; Qi, Smith, & Yeoman, 2018). Uriely et al. (2003) proposed that “volunteering in tourism needs to be expanded beyond volunteering guests and include hosts who volunteer in

Dimension	Broad Definition	←————→		Pure Definition
Free choice	Obligation to volunteer	Relatively uncoerced		Free will
Remuneration	Stipend/low pay	Expenses reimbursed	None expected	None at all
Structure	Informal			Formal
Beneficiaries	Benefit oneself (as well)	Benefit/help friends or relatives	Benefit/help others/strangers	

Source: Cnaan et al. (1996).

Fig. 1. The scope and variability of volunteer definitions. Source: Cnaan et al. (1996).

the local tourism industry” (p.57). Due to the importance of volunteers in the local tourism industry and the lack of studies, host volunteering merits further investigation. This current research is a response for this.

Even as related studies have investigated certain aspects of volunteering in tourism, the fundamental conceptualization of the phenomenon has baffled scholars for years. A review of the existing body of literature found that most of the concepts are borrowed directly from the non-profit fields without reflections on the specialities of the tourism contexts. In addition, current research has been mainly conducted in Western countries and/or white people travelling and volunteering in other parts of the world. Limited effort has been devoted to investigating the phenomenon of volunteering in the domain of tourism in developing countries such as China. As Rochester (2006) proposed, volunteering is a multi-faceted phenomenon and different cultures may have different interpretations for their behaviours. Thus, exploration of volunteer in tourism in China provides an additional opportunity to further develop the literature beyond its specific contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon in a Western context.

### 2.3. Volunteering in China

“Volunteer” is a terminology that originated from Western countries and came to China in the early stages of reform and opening up in the 1990s (Cai, 2010). After that, terms like “volunteerism” (志愿服务 *zhi yuan fu wu*), “volunteering” (志愿 *zhi yuan*), and “volunteer” (志愿者 *zhi yuan zhe*) were literally translated into Chinese. There are some slightly different names. For example, in Hongkong volunteer(s) are named as 义工 *yi gong* and in Taiwan they prefer to use 志工 *zhi gong*. The first formal volunteer organization, China Youth Volunteer Association, was established in 1994 demonstrating the start of volunteer service in China. The concept of volunteer has been widely accepted in China since 2000s, especially after the Beijing Olympic Games and Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008.

Volunteering in China has had just a few decades' development and most of the ideas of volunteering have transferred from Western countries. However, the voluntary spirit like 仁爱 *ren ai* (the love thought), 慈善 *ci shan* (charity), 兼爱 *jian ai* (universal love), 博施济众 *bo shi ji zhong* (helping the public by bestowing something), and 行善积德 *xing shan ji de* (one good turn deserves another) has had over two thousand years' history in the traditional Chinese culture. Wang and Zhou (2016) proposed that there are five stages of volunteering development in China: The first stage (1949–1956) was from the founding of China and it highlighted the sense of service to the public, among which semi-official organizations led by the Communist Party played a key role. In the second stage (1957–1966) volunteering was called 义务劳动 *yi wu lao dong* (i.e., obligation, duty) during the Maoist period. The Chinese were forced to volunteer, which was a shift from the selfless devotion and free choice. The third stage (1978–2000) started with the Reform and Opening policy and its key feature was the socialization of volunteer service. The fourth stage (2001–2007) was the internationalization and localization process. The last stage (2008 onwards) was the national participation, starting with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and Wenchuan Earthquake.

The most important impetus for the emergence of volunteerism in contemporary China is the government (Cui, 2009). The government promotes volunteerism by establishing national monitoring systems as a policy maker, legitimatising the grassroots voluntary organizations, and creating volunteer schemes and organising top-down movements (Xu, 2017). Indeed, most volunteering activities in China are initiated and controlled by the government. That is, volunteering initiatives are driven from the top down. Hence, volunteer activities in China can be understood as state-sponsored efforts to achieve political goals through intensive and targeted mobilisation of active personal commitment (Yeakey & Bennett, 1990) and most of them are project-based, demanding little ongoing time investment. This is quite different from volunteering in Western countries. In China, volunteering is encouraged

as a tool to label participants as socially responsible individuals and a superior type of morality and respectable social behaviour (Fleischer, 2011; Xu & Ngai, 2011). The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games greatly promoted the development of volunteering and accelerated the pace of legislation of volunteer activities in China (Tang, 2007). In many provinces, there are rules that encourage government organizations, education institutions, and even companies to give preference to outstanding volunteers with many volunteering experiences. The Chinese government promotes volunteer service through a discourse that blends concepts of cultural competence and self-realisation with a concern for the common good and volunteer activity is officially promoted as a means of self-development (Fleischer, 2011; Rolandsen, 2008). Specific to the tourism field, there are many local concepts in tourism volunteering in China, such as 旅行义工 *lv xing yi gong* (travelling volunteers), 客栈义工 *ke zhan yi gong* (volunteers in the inns), and 旅游志愿者 *lv you zhi yuan zhe* (tourism volunteers).

Based on a systematic research on CNKI which is a key database in China, a large body of Chinese literature on volunteering is identified. Scholars have predominantly focused on volunteer service (e.g., Chen & Gao, 2006; Mu, 2005; Pu & Zhu, 2017), youth/university students volunteering (e.g., Deng, Xin, & Zhai, 2015; Tao, 2018; Wang, 2007), and volunteering and core socialist values (e.g., Cai, 2010; Qin, 2018). Among the current studies, volunteering as a way to achieve political goals has attracted great Chinese scholarly attention and also evidence there are Chinese characteristics such as implementing the socialist core values through volunteering. It appears, however, that this body of literature is still mostly descriptive in nature and that the phenomenon of volunteering needs to be further examined in light of both fundamental concept understandings and existing theories in related fields. Upon identifying the research gaps, this research aims to contribute to the volunteering and tourism literature by investigating the local understanding of volunteering in tourism in China.

### 3. Method

The purpose of this study was to gain a complex detailed understanding of volunteering in tourism in China and seek to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspective, and world views of the people” (Merriam, 2002, p.6), which met the criteria that Creswell (2007) proposed to use qualitative research: when a problem needs to be explored, when we need a complex, when we want to empower individuals, when we want to write in a literary flexible style, and when explain the mechanisms (p. 39–40). Hence, a qualitative approach was deemed an appropriate way to conduct this research. Especially, netnography and in-depth interviews were adopted in the present study.

This study was based on three research projects on tourism volunteering in China (i.e., volunteering at business events including exhibitions, conferences, and trade fairs; behaviours of travelling volunteers in the inn industry; and host volunteering in tourism). Data was collected by netnography and in-depth interviews. At the phase of netnography, keywords of volunteer & tourism, volunteering & travelling, volunteer & travelling, volunteer & event, volunteer & inn were used to search for blogs on the main social networking service websites in China including Douban, Sina, Tianya, and Mafengwo. 287 blogs were selected after assessing all the blogs, deleting those recording individuals' overseas volunteer experiences and the blogs exhibiting limited information.

For the interviews, one-to-one, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 54 volunteers and 25 tourism workers by criteria-based and snowball sampling method. The volunteer participants were selected based on the criterion of having the volunteer experience in the tourism industry; the tourism workers were those that had the experience of involving volunteers in their organizations. The interviewees were from over ten different cities in China. The interviewees were approached through the author's personal networks and then a

snowball technique was used, which has the advantages of shortening the time and diminishing the cost to gain sufficient size participant group efficiently. As for the demographic information of the volunteer interviewees, 30 of them are female and 35 of them have a Bachelor degree or above. Among the tourism industry workers, 11 of them are female, 6 work in local event industry, 4 in tourism-related associations, and 4 in inn field and other tourism fields. Broad open-ended questions about the understanding and conceptualization of the phenomenon were proposed to the participants with the aim of encouraging the “unanticipated statements and stories to emerge” (Charmaz, 2006, p.26). Questions such as “How would you describe the phenomenon of volunteering at business events/in tourism?”, “What do you think is volunteering at business events/in tourism?”, “Could you please give me some terms that can depict the characteristics of volunteering at business events/in tourism?” were proposed to the interviewees. However, due to the emergent and explorative nature of this research, the researcher did not follow the same step for each interviewee. The questions were changed, added or re-worded to clarify details and obtain more information for certain aspects. Probing questions were used to elicit more detailed responses from the interviewees (e.g., How do you understand that? Can you give me some examples?). The interviews were conducted in three years based on the different projects: volunteering at business events in 2016, behaviours of travelling volunteers in the inn industry in 2018, and host volunteering in tourism in 2019. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, ranging from half an hour to two hours. The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed into MS word for analysis.

All the blogs and interview transcripts were input NVivo for thematic analysis. Various codes and categories emerged. The emerged codes and categories, and the cited quotes were then translated into English. To enhance the trustworthiness of this research, some of Creswell and Miller's (2000) strategies were adopted: prolonged engagement in the field by encompassing three projects; making use of multiple and different sources and methods including netnographic data and in-depth interviews; member checking of taking the interview data and interpretations back to the participants to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account. To give a critical voice, a self-reflexive approach was used as a component of the study and this research took a further step to reflect about applying the Western conceptualization of volunteering in the Chinese tourism context.

## 4. Findings

After analysing all the data, it identified three themes on the conceptualization of volunteering in the tourism context in China:

### 4.1. The highlight of voluntary spirit

Voluntary spirit emerged as a highlight and the most important feature of being a volunteer in tourism in China. Participating volunteering in the tourism industry was mainly a behaviour of serving others and it was still seen as “noble” in the Chinese culture. The voluntary spirit was an aspect that emerges vividly among the online blogs. From the stories recoded in the blogs, terms such as “serving others”, “dedication”, “willing to do”, “sense of responsibility”, “spirit of sacrifice”, and “responsibility consciousness” were commonly mentioned. Most interview participants believed that their volunteer behaviours had certain aspects of noble characteristic. From the interviews, many indicators of voluntary spirit as one key characteristic of volunteering in the tourism context in China were identified. For example, V8 characterised volunteers at local events as “someone who must have the spirit of sacrifice”. V20 had the similar opinions that “having a strong sense of responsibility... we are happy for others' happiness”.

Several participants believed that the voluntary spirit was the most important prerequisite of being a volunteer in the tourism field. The

voluntary spirit was important for individuals to see themselves as volunteers and behave accordingly and do what a volunteer should do and deliver good service. For example, V3 described her volunteer experience at the First World Conference on Tourism for Development in Beijing:

The sense of treating myself as a small crew of the whole conference to ensure its success was important for doing the job well, and only with this voluntary spirit could I feel this activity deserved all the devotion... Compared with the part-time work experience, I feel I was forced to do something for part-time work and there was no voluntary spirit, while volunteering was initiative, willing to devote, meaningful and noble.

The tourism organizers claimed that most volunteers have the spirit of helping others inside. To illustrate this, O9 who worked at a local event association gave an example of how the youth volunteers helped an old lady during a festival in Jinan. O18's comment confirmed this:

I have worked widely with volunteers. I like them. They are so dedicated to their roles... They see themselves as volunteers and willing to help.

Overall, voluntary spirit constituted one of the most important dimensions for conceptualizing the phenomenon of volunteer activities in tourism in China.

### 4.2. Serving others by giving time/skills/knowledge

Data analysis demonstrated that serving others by giving time, skills and knowledge was one key characteristic of being a volunteer in the tourism industry. From the collected netnographic data, it was noted that individuals have devoted great time and helped the tourism industry from different perspectives, including serving the tourists, helping with the festivals and events, and providing labour work for the guest house owners. Notably, when individuals described their experiences, they emphasized the “serving” aspects of their volunteering behaviours, instead of just “helping”. Several nuances were identified: the volunteers in the tourism industry are not just doing good; they are serving other people using their professional knowledge and skills. For example, among the selected blogs, the descriptions of “provide on-site service (at events)”, “doing the registration (at the local hostels) for guests from all over the world”, and “guiding and interpreting to the visitors at the museums” were common, which demonstrated the serving nature and were beyond the scope of helping. These points from the netnographic data led to further clarifications in the following interviews. In the interviews, volunteer participants believed that volunteer activities in the tourism industry is essentially a behaviour of serving others. The following excerpt from V8 illustrated this:

Let me take the First World Conference Tourism for Development for an example. I cannot do anything else except for preparing for it (this conference) during the last half month. I need to go to class, do homework, and I also need to do my supervisor's project. I need to prepare for it [the conference] during my breaks. As a team leader, I have some extra work every day.

The tourism organizer interviewees appreciated the large number of volunteers' involvement and commitment, which was believed to be an indispensable part in the tourism field in China. For example, W16, a manager of a local museum in Qingdao, shared some insights about the big number of involved volunteers in the museum every year:

Although they (volunteers) don't have much work experience, they join us and provide service... There are about 300 volunteers that come to help us every year... if we calculate, they devote several thousands of hours per year... They devote a large amount of time, serving the visitors... So we give them a certain amount of payment as an allowance for their devoted time, lunch, and transportation.



(W16).

Providing volunteer service in the tourism industry was not just a way of spending time, but a type of service through providing related skills and knowledge. The following excerpt gave a glimpse of this:

The volunteers have their own talent, so they can provide more professional service than us. For example, some of them are experienced ritual personnel and they play an important role at the opening ceremony [of the event]. (W7).

#### 4.3. Mutual help

Volunteer activities in the tourism context in China was conceptualized as a mutual help process, rather than purely altruism behaviour. It was not only beneficial for the helped (e.g., tourism organizations and visitors), but also for the helper (e.g., volunteers themselves). From volunteers' perspective, they provided time, skills, and knowledge to help the organizers but at the same time they also expect something in return for their efforts such as learning opportunities, personal development, and even free accommodation. The typical example was travelling volunteers, who provided certain hours' service (usually around 4 h per day) at hostels, inns or guest houses to get free accommodation. Among such online blogs, it was evident that volunteers understood it as an exchange between their devoted time/service and free accommodation, instead of the traditional helping and giving behaviour. In addition, volunteers at the local community believed that gaining learning opportunities (e.g., V3, V7, and V41), developing skills (e.g., V1, V10, and V28), build CV (e.g., V15, V38, and V49), and networking with stakeholders in the tourism industry (e.g., V5, V16, and V54) were common motivations for them to provide volunteer service in the tourism areas.

From the tourism organizations' perspective, volunteers were essential to the tourism industry and they were a valuable workforce to overcome the limitation of lack of workforce, reduce operation cost, and improve service (e.g., W3, W16, and W20). For example, W9, who was an event organizer in Beijing, said:

Once there is an event, there would be a lot of tedious work on-site. The volunteers could share some work...Many volunteers are university student with good education and they see this [providing volunteer service at event] as a good opportunity for social practice and gathering the latest industrial information.

Hence, volunteer activities in tourism could not only help the organizations and the public (e.g., tourists, visitors, and event attendees) but also help volunteers themselves to achieve their own goals. Hence, it was a reciprocal process.

## 5. Discussions

This study aims to investigating the local understanding of volunteer activities in the tourism context in China. By drawing out more fully the complexities and nuances of what the Chinese context volunteering involves, this research problematises Eurocentric ways of conceptualization and introduces the local knowledge of volunteer activities in tourism in China globally. This research identifies that there are three key dimensions of the conceptualization of the phenomenon under research: the highlight of voluntary spirit, serving others by giving time/skills/knowledge, and mutual help. The voluntary spirit is found as the antecedent of being volunteers in the tourism field. The value of benefiting others is the nature of voluntary spirit. Voluntary spirit does not simply equate to altruism, but to a civic service awareness based on social responsibility (Cao & Ren, 2009). In China, voluntary spirit has been widely mentioned in practice and it is believed that this is the core value of volunteers in all fields (e.g., Li & Lin, 2018). Scholars have highlighted the importance of cultivating voluntary spirit

among volunteers (e.g., Mu, 2005). However, very limited scholarly attention both in China and Western countries has been given to the relationship between voluntary spirit and conceptualization of volunteering (e.g., Mu, 2005). The second dimension of serving others by giving time/skills/knowledge emphasizes the serving nature of volunteer activities in tourism. Although this dimension shares certain similarities of contribution with other forms of volunteering, it highlights the results of serving others. This could be explained by the fact that tourism is essentially a service industry. The last dimension of mutual help indicates that the nature of volunteer activities in tourism is of mutual-benefit and reciprocal. Volunteer activities in tourism is not just a pure helping or giving behaviour, rather it is an exchange relationship and individuals expect something in return as an exchange for their devoted time and skills. This makes it in the same vein with the school of opinion, who understands volunteering as an exchange (e.g., Booth, Park, & Glomb, 2009; Burgess & Durrant, 2019; Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Paraskevaïdis & Andriotis, 2017).

To a give critical voice, this research takes a step further and reflects about applying the Western conceptualization of volunteering in the Chinese tourism context. Following that, it will discuss how to open up a wider understanding of volunteering in tourism in China. The discussions are interspersed with some self-reflexivity on the author's own journeys and insider perspective as a researcher and practitioner in the tourism industry.

### 5.1. Reflections of applying the Western conceptualization in the Chinese tourism context

By comparing the findings in this research with the conceptualizations of volunteering in Western countries as explained in the literature review section, this research reflects on the applicability of Western knowledge to the Chinese tourism context. There are many similarities in the understanding of volunteering in Western countries and China such as giving time/skills/knowledge and producing public good to benefit others. Also, several differences are also identified compared with the Western-centric view that has dominated the literature.

#### 5.1.1. Unpaid & paid

Undertaken not primarily for financial gain is a core characteristic of conceptualization of volunteering in Western literature as discussed in the literature review. However, in this current research it does not emerge as an essential dimension of conceptualizing the volunteer activities in tourism. Even, the interviews demonstrate that it is a common practice for volunteers to receive a certain amount of payment as a recognition for their help in the tourism industry especially in the event field in China. This does not influence them to be called volunteers as they have great voluntary spirit.

The existence of payment for volunteers leads to the blurred boundaries between volunteering in tourism and part-time jobs. Moreover, volunteers and part-time workers have similar roles in the tourism industry, which makes the boundaries of volunteer activities in tourism more vague. However, the interviews in this research demonstrates that the voluntary spirit differentiates volunteers from part-time workers in tourism. The normalization of payment in volunteer activities in China has led to the classification of *you chang zhi yuan zhe* (volunteers with payment) and *wu chang zhi yuan zhe* (volunteers without payment), bringing a hot discussion among scholars (Tian, 2004).

#### 5.1.2. Free will & "compulsory" choice

Free choice/voluntary giving is identified as important for understanding volunteering in Western literature. However, the dimension of free will did not feature as a theme in the current research. Even, the analysis of the netnographic and interview data demonstrates that some individuals choose to participate in volunteer activities in the tourism and event fields due to the external pressures such as school policies.

Although the decision is not their pure free choice, they still see them as volunteers. This could be explained from the dominant role of government in the non-profit field and top-to-bottom volunteer participation in China.

### 5.1.3. Benefit others & benefit self

Benefiting others has been seen as one of the key dimensions of volunteering with the Western-centric view. Instead of highlighting the benefit to others, this research finds that individuals believe that volunteer activities in the tourism field is a reciprocal process, producing public good and meeting personally related needs.

The data analysis demonstrates that individuals participate volunteer activities in tourism with the motives of learning, personal development, and enhancing their employability skills. Terms such as “internships”, “practice” and “work experience” were mentioned widely when they describe how they understand the phenomenon. These imply that volunteering in China include some elements of work-integrated learning (WIL), which is an umbrella term that describes the learning approaches and teaching models that provide students with opportunities to engage in learning connected to the world of work (Peach & Gamble, 2011). The phenomenon under research also demonstrates several similarities that international volunteering can offer, such as service learning, development (e.g., Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Devereux, 2008; Diprose, 2012).

In addition, this research identifies that some volunteers get involved in the volunteer activities in tourism as part of their qualifications which shares commonalities with compulsory educational service learning. The complexity and ambiguity led to the blurred boundaries of volunteering in tourism in China. As Cohen (1974) argued in relation to tourism, it is the fuzziness of tourism categories and the blurred margins that enable the advancements to be made with other forms of social and cultural activities. Hence, the conceptualization of volunteer activities in the context of tourism in China needs to adequately reflect the complexity and fuzzy boundaries separately.

## 5.2. Voices emanating from Chinese scholars for future research

To open up a wider understanding of volunteering in tourism in China, Chinese scholars need to take on the challenge of engaging more fully with tourism epistemological perspectives emanating from China. Publishing in international journals is a good way to give critical voices and argue for the privileging of indigenous knowledge. However, to start this journey of (re)discovering another understanding of volunteering in tourism, the following aspects need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the Chinese scholars need to put emphasis on original, as Meijs et al. (2003) proposed “reclaim our resources ourselves” (p.30). Volunteering is a contextual concept. In China, there are many features that are believed to be contradictory to the traditional understandings of volunteering in tourism. For example, the wide existing organization/government pressure on the young generation or university students' volunteer participation makes what the extent of voluntary participation is in China to be a question; the normalising of payment for volunteers in event field blurs the boundary of volunteering and part-time jobs. Although these features are not consistent with the understandings in Western countries, they are the existing facts in China. Investigations of such issues could help to develop a different “epistemic grounding” and give critical voices to the Eurocentric academy (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015).

Secondly, local academics should engage in “conceptual decolonisation” in their research. This research delves into the fuzziness to examine the blurred boundaries between volunteer behaviours in tourism and other activities and consider how each relates to or challenges the traditional conceptualisations of volunteering. This research finds that some activities classified as volunteering do not fit into the Western concepts of volunteering. For example, the group of travelling volunteers who combine travelling (within China) and doing volunteer

activities doesn't simply equal to the concepts of working holiday tourists or volunteer tourists in Western contexts as individuals don't travel overseas, although it exemplifies a manifestation of the interaction between work and tourism (Uriely, 2001). The China-contextual derived terms offer an established set of concepts that can be applied in enriching the understanding of the nuances of volunteering in tourism. The local tourism volunteering concepts in China (e.g., *lv xing yi gong* and *lv you zhi yuan zhe*) exhibit both similarities and differences with concepts in Western countries. As tourism experiences are mainly constructed through social exchanges and interactions, I propose that the Chinese local concepts can serve as the foundational framework for future research in the field of tourism volunteering. Also, the local scholars need to be cautious when translating the local concepts into English.

In addition, Chinese scholars need to consolidate cultural confidence and explore more about the local understandings. The concept of volunteering has already emerged in ancient China thousands of years ago, such as the idea of the love thought and charity. There are also several stages of volunteering development in the history of China, including the highlight of *先公后私* *xian gong hou si* (i.e., individuals give priority to the public) in Eastern Han, the concept of *义务劳动* *yi wu lao dong* (i.e., compulsory participation) at the early stage of China, and the current voluntary spirit of *奉献* *feng xian*, *友爱* *you ai*, *互助* *hu zhu*, and *进步* *jin bu* (i.e., contribution, friendship, mutual help, and progress). The Chinese scholars need to act as bridges to open up a wider understanding of volunteering in tourism in China and to investigate how concepts and theories from China can provide insights and help to advance knowledge of volunteering in tourism.

## 6. Conclusions

This current research explores the understandings of volunteering in an Asian context. The findings demonstrate that the highlight of voluntary spirit, serving others by giving time/skills/knowledge and mutual help are three dimensions of conceptualization of volunteering in tourism in China. Comparing with volunteering in Western contexts, volunteering in the tourism context in China manifests both similarly and differently. The Western conceptualization provides a useful framework to understand volunteering in the tourism context in China. However, several Chinese characteristics such as the highlight of voluntary spirit are identified as important to understand the phenomenon in the Chinese context. This research also reflects the applicability of the Western conceptualization of volunteering in the Chinese tourism context. The present research contributes to the volunteering and tourism literature by exploring the understandings of the phenomenon in a China context. It presents a response for the ongoing call for the epistemological decolonisation of tourism knowledge production in Asia (e.g., Aquino, 2019; Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Russell-Mundine, 2012). It gives critical voice of “local” Chinese scholars, who have the power to understand the contextual-based experiences in the tourism areas, construction of tourism knowledge using their own cultural perspectives. In doing so, the paper provides valuable insights for future research that wishes to engage in exploring volunteering in tourism outside of China and even volunteering in general.

Due to the context-specific and exploratory nature of this study, the epistemological insights are confined within the China socio-cultural context. Caution should be exercised in attempting to adopt the current conceptualization of volunteering in other cultures. This study also opens many avenues for future research. For example, in order to relay the decolonial endeavours in tourism, scholars from other developing countries especially Asian regions with similar cultures can explore the local understanding of volunteering to justify and extend the findings of this current research. In addition, it would be worthwhile to assess how the socio-cultural individualization process in China impacts the conceptualization of volunteering given the fact that the nature of volunteering is “undergoing radical changes because of broader social

changes” (Hustinx et al., 2010, p.75). Lastly, future research should be encouraged to change the pathway of conducting research from welcoming foreign thoughts or just applying the existing theories into a different context, to the way of setting the research from uncovering tourism realities and issues that emerged in practice (e.g., the growing number of individuals who combine working/volunteering with travelling within their own countries).

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