

The spread of Chinese tourism in France, the methodological contribution made by Tour-Operator's brochure

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Abstract—this paper aims at presenting the exploratory methodology the author used to identify her fieldwork location, and the first findings about the factors affecting Chinese tourist's mobility in France.

Keywords—Chinese tourism; France; spread of Chinese tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

At a time when it is becoming globally important, Chinese tourism would appear to be a real opportunity for destinations such as France which are hoping to reap the economic benefits.

Despite the clear interest expressed by tourism professionals, the media and public bodies in attracting these clients, there have been few scientifically-grounded studies devoted to it.

The geography-orientated thesis which I am undertaking itself appears unprecedented, with regard to both its subject-matter as well as its area of study and organization. In the absence of any other in-depth scientific work on the subject, identifying my fieldwork location required the application of a methodology based on the analysis of Chinese Tour-Operators' brochures. The purpose of this presentation is to set out this methodology, use its results to outline what it has achieved and potentially generate links to further areas of research.

II. BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS AND THE THEORICAL FRAME

My thesis on Chinese tourism in France focuses on three main points:

1. How has this tourism spread over the French territory?

2. What are the social, professional and political characteristics of these tourists, and can we relate their activities to such influences?

3. What is the relationship between these tourists and the space they occupy? (Their mental representations and activities)

My approach necessitates the use of concepts coming from different social sciences. Indeed, even if my thesis is attached to geography as a discipline, I also rely upon concepts inspired by sociology and psychology, such as the tourism capital¹ and the affordance².

With regard to the theoretical approach of my fieldwork, I have made the choice of an inductive and qualitative process. I approach the fieldwork through the questionings I previously exposed, in order to make generalizations based on the raw data I collected.

¹ « The whole of the resources accumulated by an actor and enabling him to advantage, according to his strategy, of the use of the spatial dimension of society » Jacques Levy, Dictionnaire de la géographie édition 2013

² «potentialities of actions, offered by the environment, to an observer » Tamara Leonova L'approche écologique de la cognition sociale et son impact sur la conception des traits de personnalité. In: L'année psychologique. 2004 vol. 104, n°2. pp. 249-294

I am using a qualitative approach in order to get a in-depth insight of the interviewees' personal path, of their experience as tourists and of their representations about France and the places they visit. I'm also interested in the meaning they give to their practices. In order to collect this kind of data, I interview Chinese tourists, since this methodology allows the interviewee to give developed responses and to revisit his or her personal, social and professional experiences. This is why it is of utter importance for me to pick a fieldwork location where I can meet tourists.

III. THE METHODOLOGY TO IDENTIFY THE FIELDWORK LOCATION

The procedure I followed was guided by the identification of places with an important presence of Chinese tourists, in order to access to the biggest variety of profiles. In order to operate relevant comparisons, these areas of study have to highlight the phenomenon under many aspects, in terms of tourists' profiles, frequentation and types of practice.

As explained in the introduction, when undertaking this exploratory search, I found there was a distinct lack of in-depth scientific study with regard to Chinese tourism in France. Knowledge of this phenomenon is sparse, produced and distributed by a range of sources, both official and unofficial, as well as often being poorly documented. In terms of scientific publications, I relied primarily on a small selection of articles and master thesis, most of which were produced at the University of Angers.

I then cross-referenced three categories of source material: the press, government statistics and the analysis of Chinese Tour-Operators' brochures. None of these sources is reliable, alone. They need to be cross-referenced in order to determine the places where Chinese are the most likely to go to.

With regard to the French press (national and local newspapers), it often echoes the breadth of Chinese tourism in France, it relays news related to it and also initiatives taken locally, in order to attract this public to French regions. These sources represent an empirical approach of the phenomenon. They are often pervaded by sensationalism and approximations, but they nonetheless informed me about the tangibility of the phenomenon in French regions, through news, analysis and reports about local tourism industry's performances.

I obtained these newspaper articles through diverse media: on-line newspapers, and local and national newspapers websites. I collected a big quantity of publications (more than 200), trying to be exhaustive. I then categorized the articles by region, according to qualitative (subject of the article, does

it prove the presence of Chinese tourists?) and quantitative (number of articles) criteria.

I finally determined that Paris, Burgundy and region PACA (south of France) had the highest number of articles, from a quantitative as well as qualitative point of view.

I then studied the statistics published by the DGE (Direction Générale des Entreprises). This organisation is attached to the French ministry of economy, and publishes in-depth statistics about several economic sectors: industry, cottage industry and digital sector. My analysis of these statistics allowed me to confirm the domination of Paris. I also noticed that Burgundy had supplanted the PACA region and certain regions had their frequentation increasing (especially Rhône-Alpes, Alsace, Aquitaine and Région Centre).

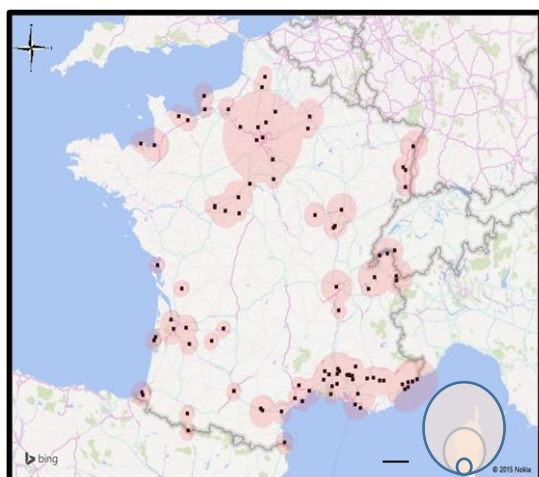
I finally cross-referenced the two former types of sources with a study of Chinese Tour-Operators catalogues. This analysis was carried out following a precise methodology perfected by Philippe Violier³. It aims to determine those places deemed to be tourist-orientated around the world, while skirting the definitional and methodological bias which affects those studies conducted by the UNWTO or national statistical agencies. It involves systematically identifying the occurrence of those cities where tourists spend the night and the occurrence of those cities where they undertake daytime activities. Once this information has been mapped, we get a clear view of the sites the Tour-Operators prefer to select on behalf of the tourists so that they may best enjoy their recreational activities.

Although this methodology does not provide tourist numbers, and is limited to those tourists traveling with tour-groups, this method nevertheless provides an idea of what the public perceives as being tourist-orientated. In fact, the tour-operators' brochures are put together by taking into account the demands of, and the trends popular with, their customers. This method also allows me to position my analysis on a smaller scale than that of administrative divisions (regions and counties) and thus more accurately determine which sites are associated with tourists' recreational activities and/or their accommodation.

³Philippe Violier, "Les lieux du monde.", *EspacesTemps.net*, Travaux, 22.08.2011
<http://www.espacestems.net/articles/les-lieux-du-monde>

I conducted my analytical work by examining the catalogues produced by 12 Chinese tour-operators and chosen from the list of the largest tourism companies in China, published by CNTA (China National Tourism Administration) in 2010 and 2011. I therefore looked at 342 programs divided into tours for groups, private individuals and cruises. This eventually resulted in a series of 5 maps which not only allowed me to determine my choice of area to study (Paris and the PACA region in the south-east of France), but also revealed various trends which Chinese tourism in France has followed.

Figure 1. Day-time activities (tour-groups)



IV. RESULTS

Beyond the identification of our fieldwork location, the analysis of the Chinese tour-operators made it possible for me to make a few observations. The first one is that the Chinese tourism in France spreads according to a reticular distribution, using the main railways and motorways especially between Paris and the South of France, Paris and the West of France, and France and Switzerland (see map above).

One of the five maps (see above) also revealed that many cities (including very small villages) were visited around the Mediterranean, which suggest an in-depth discovery of the region by the tour groups, and possibly, a perpetuation of the phenomenon in this area. Finally, this study of the brochures helped me to detect a discrepancy between the official government figures and the information provided by the Tour-Operators' brochures. In fact the official figures indicate significant increases in visitor numbers in certain regions (France-Comté and Lorraine), but these are not included in any of the tours I analyzed.

The official figures also indicate that Burgundy is the second region after Paris, in terms of arrivals. However, my analysis of the tour-operators

brochures suggest that this region is more likely to be frequented for logistic reasons, than leisure (one overnight stay on the way between Paris and Switzerland, and Paris and the south of France). This observation was confirmed by a manager of the local tourism administration, who explained me that there was no real marketing strategy toward the tour-groups, since they only stay for one night. Instead, the region prefers to focus on Chinese individual tourists and small groups.

My study also aims at identifying the factors which influence the spread of Chinese tourism. At the moment, my fieldwork at the Louvre highlights the fact that Chinese tourists' intentionality has an impact on the spread of the phenomenon. This intentionality is fuelled by their representations about France and by the competences they gained during their socialization and previous trips, and which give them more autonomy (foreign language, familiarity with European cities, driving licence, etc.).

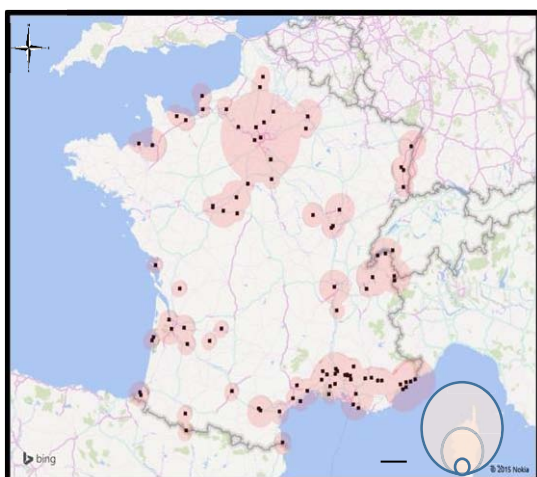
So far, I have interviewed 7 independent travellers. All cases were either people displaying a certain familiarity with Europe (business trips, studies, practice of at least one European language...), or people accompanying relatives who already knew Europe or at least could speak English. 4 of them were young Chinese studying in a European country closed to France (e.g United Kingdom or Germany) and guiding their parents to France. Some of them not only visited Paris on their own, but also travelled to other parts of France such as Normandy and Loire Valley, sometimes by driving a car.

Conversely, tourists travelling in tour-groups prefer this option out of safety (fear of pickpockets) and because of their lack of autonomy in a context of alterity (people with little experience of tourism and speaking Chinese only). This observation suggests that the choices operated by Chinese tourists during their trip, partly depend on their autonomy level. This autonomy will be fuelled with their previous travelling experiences in foreign countries (individually or in tour-groups) and with objective competences (foreign language, driving licence). If they enjoy a lot of autonomy, they are more likely to visit more places and to go off the beaten tracks. It also reminds us that being a tourist is not innate, it is something that we learn through experiences and socialization.

In relation to that, tourism professionals should adapt their infrastructures to the diverse levels of autonomy of their visitors. Almost all of the Chinese tourists I interviewed complained about the absence of Chinese audio-guides to visit the museum (some of them used English and German audio-guides instead). Many of them also complained about the fact that most of the plaques

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are in French. Without references about European history, ancient mythology and Christian religion, very few of them can understand the paintings and sculptures, and take benefit from the visit. These examples show that to really appreciate a place, tourists need it to be adapted according to their knowledge and competences. This refers to the concept of affordance I evoked earlier. Places should provide tourists with leverages of action, to allow them to enjoy their visit (adaptation of the language, explanations, contextualisation of the pieces, etc.).

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The use of the Chinese tour-operators' catalogues not only helped me to decide on my choice of study area, but also allowed me to make some observations which build upon or question the previously-used journalistic and statistical data. If applied to other fields of research, this method could be used to overcome the bias and stereotypes prevalent in the official figures and media. Our research about the spread of Chinese tourism in France and the factors influencing it (tourists' intentionality and tourism professionals' strategies) might also allow us to check the validity of the concept of "tourist capital", which could be defined as the resources and competences we gain and use to realize our recreational plans.

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