

Chinese Travel Blogs in English

A Cross-Cultural Discursive Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Among the cohorts of China's netizens are there travel bloggers that write in English? If so, who are they, what do they write about and how? In order to provide a snapshot of this in-between discursive space, a digital ethnographic approach was adopted to circumscribe a data set of four English-language travel blogs about China, written by Chinese authors, or at least bilingual and bicultural ones, for an audience of international tourists. Consisting of 186 posts from 2010 to 2016, the textual selection was then queried by means of the Leximancer software tool to retrieve the main themes and concepts across the data set and their mutual semantic connections. Text-mining results were finally subjected to a discourse-analytic overview, aiming to illustrate a few pivotal points in the representation of China by social actors that are purportedly insiders of Chinese culture, though with varying degrees of engagement: to Western tourists' surprise, the emerging representation of the country defies preconceived cultural scripts.

Keywords: China, digital ethnography, discourse analysis, tourism, travel blogs.

1. STUDY DESIGN

This work sets out to map tourism discourse about China along a cross-cultural perspective, by focusing on travel blogs in English by Chinese bloggers. It thus combines a double focus on tourism and new media communication, aiming to address existing knowledge gaps from the point of view of discourse studies. Because of the predominance of business-oriented paradigms of tourism impact, facilitated by China's turn to a market economy, "the investigation on China's tourism media discourse is [...] a blank slate" (Yan and Santos 2010, 203), while "the subjects of

travel and social media in China are both in the development stage if viewed academically” (Kristensen 2013, 169).

Tourism and the Internet are key factors in, and expression of, the modernisation of contemporary China, a theme which was put at the centre of the stage with the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s leadership in 1978 (Xiao 2006), and both are bringing about a “rapid change in China’s values landscape” (Hsu and Huang 2016, 239). While inbound tourist flows see the country as one of the world’s most popular tourist destinations (Xing-Zhu and Qun 2014)¹, the emergence of a Chinese middle class with disposable income has expanded the ranks of outbound tourists, flocking to international destinations in increasing numbers.

The rise of tourism is connected with the staggering growth of Internet use in the country. This has been building up year after year, the latest estimate being of 731 million users in 2016 (*Internet Live Stats* 2016; *South China Morning Post* 2017), with a large proportion of consumers that is active in social media through mobile devices (Shao *et al.* 2016), “more than in the US and Europe combined” (Kemp 2015). Though access to Western media like Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram and several websites and apps is blocked by the aptly named ‘Great Firewall’, China’s netizens form the largest cyberspace community (and market) globally, with the Chinese blogosphere being “the largest blogging space in the world” (Tai and Zhang 2012, 369). At the same time, China’s own digital platforms have quickly become popular ways to organise travel, especially among young people and backpackers, or “donkey friends”² (Chen and Weiler 2014). Recent studies have illustrated the diverse phenomena of online bulletin board systems (BBS) as “early electronic meeting points” (Kristensen 2013, 176), blogging platforms like *Blog.163*, *Blog.sina* and *Blog.qq* (Tang 2015), individual blogs (Calzati

¹ “Although there were occasional severe declines in international tourist arrivals because of political, economic and social events such as the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, Asian Financial Crisis in 1998, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome epidemic outbreak in 2003 and Global Financial Crisis in 2008, China’s inbound tourism bounced back up rapidly. Despite significant growth in China’s inbound tourism, tourism has not developed equally across the country because of the large geographical dimension, diversity of development conditions and variety in tourism resources” (Xing-Zhu and Qun 2014, 303).

² In Mandarin Chinese ‘travel’ (旅 *lǚ*) and ‘donkey’ (驴 *lǘ*) have the same sound but different tones, with a reference to a traditional form of transportation, donkey carts. Backpackers who gather together to travel are called ‘donkey friends’ (驴友 *lǘyǒu*), which is a partial homophone of ‘tourism’ (旅游 *lǚyóu*).

2016) and social media like Weibo, WeChat and Youku (Fei 2016; Shao *et al.* 2016)³. Social media strategies for destination marketing are on the rise in China, where the biggest web portals launch their own microblog services⁴.

In the light of the mammoth bulk of travel-related Internet traffic in Chinese, made impenetrable to the *laowai* writer of this chapter due to the language barrier⁵, the scope of this work concerns English-language blogs authored by Chinese nationals or, at least, Chinese-speaking subjects with an Asian background. Consequently, the focus is on inbound tourism flows (from other countries to China), which differ in pattern from outbound flows and include “international tourists and tourists from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan” (Xing-Zhu and Qun 2014, 311), whose numbers are not easily disaggregated.

The ultimate reason to strictly delimit the field of inquiry is to offset, at least temporarily, the predominance of travel blogs written in English by non-Chinese (frequently expats), who are inevitably informed by a Western mindset (Li and Wang 2011; Tseng *et al.* 2015), despite the fact that research on international tourists’ destination images is still nascent. At the same time, “in contrast to other emerging tourism destinations worldwide, China seems to be underperforming in facilitating greater understanding of sites and environments through the use of English and other major foreign languages” (Tseng *et al.* 2015, 356). This choice, in turn, will help to place the attention on the in-between discursive space that is opening, “considering that travel destinations are usually composed of tangible and intangible heritage and national symbols for the purpose of constructing the nation” (Yan and Santos 2010, 209). Therefore, “the selections and representations of China’s tourism destinations provide a valuable resource to understand China’s exploration of cultural identity in tourism discourse” (Kristensen 2013, 171).

³ Sina Weibo is a microblogging site; Weixin (or WeChat) is the most popular messaging app, i.e. China’s WhatsApp. Youku is the top video-sharing platform and the Chinese equivalent of YouTube.

⁴ These include Sina, Sohu, Tencent and NetEase.

⁵ *Laowai* (老外) is a friendly word for ‘foreigner’.

2. DATA SET AND METHODOLOGY

This analysis concerns English-language, travel-related blogs, authored by Chinese bloggers or, at least, Chinese-speaking bloggers with an Asian background, thus disregarding travel blogs in English by native speakers. Since travel blogs are primarily considered here as forms of linguistic and cultural mediation, the main purpose of this criterion is to prioritise an insider's view on China. In light of the above, the focus is placed on inbound tourism flows of international tourists (from other countries to China), whose numbers and decision-making processes are different from those of outbound flows.

A word of explanation is required on how the data set was collected. The constraints on Internet use in China and the language barrier affected the unfolding of the digital ethnography that helped to identify a suitable selection of Chinese travel blogs in English by Chinese authors, or at least bilingual and bicultural ones, and not just expats who are fluent in Chinese. Google's PageRank system was ineffective in respecting this specific criterion. Thus, it turned out that data collection required multiple online search queries, critical cross-referencing and a one-to-one verification of bloggers' identity⁶. In the end four heterogeneous travel blogs, which are listed here (*Tab. 1*), were found suitable, for a total of 186 blog posts. The only blogger that does not possess a native-like knowledge of English is Peter Wang, the author of *China Whisper*. In terms of global media popularity the two female bloggers, Jenny Gao and Sue Anne Tay, are much more visible than their male counterparts, which is probably revealing of the emergence of a new assertive female identity among Chinese young women.

⁶ *China-Mike* and *Shanghai Street Stories* were recommended by blogger Tom O'Malley, a writer, editor and content creator based in Beijing. The latter blog has been defined as a "mix of street photography & photojournalism coupled with clever tips re off-the-beaten path travel in Shantou, Xiamen and Western China" (*WildChina* 2011). *China Whisper* was retraced on *Laowai Career*, a platform for international talent searching for professional jobs in China. *Jing Theory* was retrieved on *ChinaBloggers.info*, whose mission is to serve as a directory of the best blogs being written about China. Sue Ann Tay of *Shanghai Street Stories* has also been mentioned as an influential blogger on *Guardian Cities*, the newspaper's platform dedicated to urban issues. In citations the blogs will be abbreviated as *CM*, *CW*, *JT* and *ST*.

Table 1. – Selected blogs.

BLOG TITLE AND SUBTITLE	BLOGGER	LINKS TO SOCIAL MEDIA	SECTIONS	NUMBER OF POSTS
<i>China-Mike</i> China travel, society & funny stuff!	Mike, US born, of Taiwanese origins	No	About, Best of China / Top Attractions; Tips and Resources, Practicalities, How to travel	40, no date
<i>China Whisper</i> You know China from here	Peter Wang, Chinese from Beijing. He works for an inbound tourism company, <i>Into China Travel</i> , and guest bloggers	Yes	About, Travel (mostly list of suggestions)	62, from January 2014 to date
<i>Jing Theory</i> (It is embedded within the Fly by Jing website).	Jenny Gao, from Chengdu, Sichuan	Yes	About, Food, City Guides	44, from October 2010 to date
<i>Shanghai Street Stories</i>	Sue Anne Tay, Singaporean, Shanghai resident	Yes	City of Shanghai	40, from March 2014 to June 2016

In order to identify what themes are shared in the blogs despite their different slants, the semantic analysis software Leximancer was used for preliminary text mining, as it fits with web-based corpora. Inspiration for this was provided by a recent research paper in which the software was applied to define China as a destination image in a large number of blogs from English-speaking countries (Tseng *et al.* 2015). Leximancer retrieves the main concepts and ideas from text and shows how they relate to each other, generating a concept list and families of associations between concepts. A thesaurus of words that are associated with each concept, showing its semantic or definitional content, is then created. Themes are visualised as coloured circles around clusters of concepts and take their name, which is placed at the centre of each circle, from the most frequent and connected concept within that circle (*Leximancer User Guide* 2017).

The preliminary remarks suggested by Leximancer were then tested in greater detail by means of the discourse analysis of the textual selection, with a focus on lexis and indexical signs of identity. The lists of the main concepts generated by the software facilitated the inquiry.

3. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The analysis was researcher-driven, as a preliminary pruning of auto-discovered concept seeds was carried out in order to avoid redundancy (for example “China’s” was deleted, given the presence of “China” as a concept seed). The new list of user-defined concepts generated the concept map below (Fig. 1). Visualisation parameters were also set manually, choosing to focus on five major themes for the interpretation of results⁷.

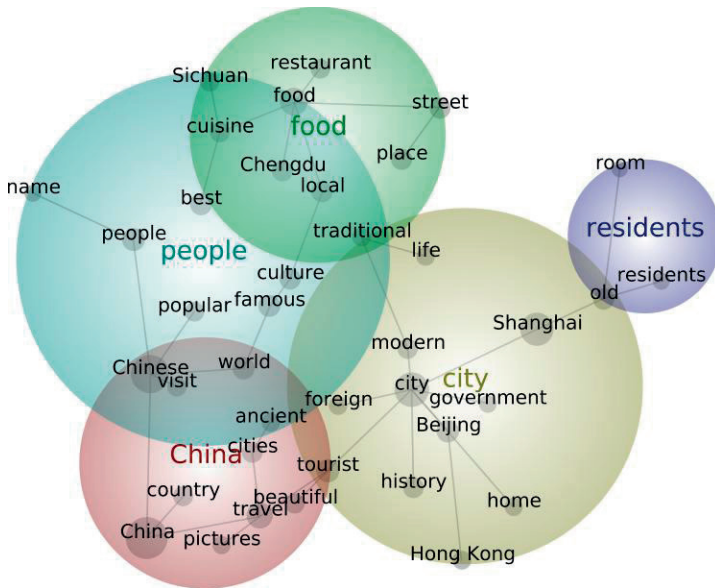


Figure 1. – Concept map of the selected travel blogs.

⁷ The visualisation settings are: “visible concepts” at 100% and “theme size” at 56%. Concepts are in black and themes in colour.

In the data set the most important theme is *China*, in red (1,707 hits), followed by *city* in yellow (1,395 hits), *food* in green (918 hits), *people* in blue (752 hits) and, much further down, *residents* in purple (150 hits)⁸. These five themes are clusters of the following concepts (Tab. 2), whose ranking in the textual selection is listed immediately after (Tab. 3).

What is conducive to, and helpful in, the discourse analysis of the textual selection is the fact that Leximancer elicits knowledge pathways between concepts. The lines or pathways navigate the most likely path in conceptual space between concepts in order to aid reading the map. When two concepts are placed at a distance from each other, it means that they are not used in the same context (*Leximancer User Guide* 2017).

Table 2. – Main themes and related concepts.

<i>China</i> : China, Chinese, travel, tourist, world, cities, beautiful, country, visit, ancient, pictures
<i>city</i> : city, Shanghai, Beijing, old, history, modern, Hong Kong, foreign, life, home, government
<i>food</i> : food, local, place, street, Chengdu, cuisine, restaurant, Sichuan, traditional
<i>people</i> : people, best, famous, culture, popular, name
<i>residents</i> : residents, room

Table 3. – Ranked list of name-like and word-like concepts⁹.

NAME-LIKE	COUNT	RELEVANCE
1. China	749	100%
2. Chinese	548	73%
3. Shanghai	465	62%
4. Beijing	165	22%
5. Chengdu	116	15%
6. Hong Kong	111	15%
7. Sichuan	90	12%

⁸ Hits are counted in relation to the concepts for the theme.

⁹ When using Leximancer, the concept ranking table appears to the right of the concept map which is generated.

WORD-LIKE	COUNT	RELEVANCE
1. city	367	49%
2. food	271	36%
3. people	212	28%
4. travel	211	28%
5. best	185	25%
6. place	167	22%
7. old	164	22%
8. world	148	20%
9. famous	145	19%
10. history	140	19%
11. tourist	137	18%
12. street	135	18%
13. local	134	18%
14. beautiful	114	15%
15. restaurant	111	15%
16. culture	109	15%
17. visit	104	14%
18. home	103	14%
19. country	101	13%
20. cities	98	13%
21. popular	92	12%
22. modern	85	11%
23. cuisine	82	11%
24. life	81	11%
25. residents	76	10%
26. ancient	75	10%
27. traditional	75	10%
28. room	75	10%
29. name	72	10%
30. foreign	71	09%
31. government	61	08%
32. pictures	59	08%

- (1) You should avoid making any perceived criticism about China, even against the government. (CM)
- (2) China is a strange land for many people and every traveller should do some homework before visiting the country. (CW)

An individual focus is placed on big cities only, Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Hong Kong. Besides, China is represented in a strong connection with what is “Chinese”, both adjective and noun, in particular the Chinese people and their culture. Though steeped in history, Chinese culture is also modernising at a fast pace, especially in cities, with major drawbacks such as traffic, pollution, internal migration from the rural to the urban areas, unregulated development uprooting old residents and food poisoning. Here and elsewhere in the textual selection the contrast between tradition and modernisation is frequently mentioned. It is amplified by the generation gap (example 5).

- (3) One result of this obsession with putting on a modern face – combined with out-of-control real estate development – is that Beijing’s old charm is being replaced by high-rises and shopping malls. (CM)
- (4) Beijing is an amazing city. It is old and young, traditional and modern. / China is a huge country with a huge population. Expect crowds, a lot of traffic and jams, especially in big cities such as Shanghai, Beijing or Hong Kong. (CW)
- (5) Shanghai is very atypical of a Chinese city. It is a hodgepodge of cultures, blending East and West in undecipherable ways and offering a frenetic view into the future. The urban middle class swells in cosmopolitan centers like Shanghai, and of these, *the younger generation is the first of a wave of hyper-connected, Western-influenced, sophisticated and discerning tastemakers.* / As lifestyles get increasingly busy, eating most meals out is not uncommon in Shanghai, and the single most pressing issue on people’s minds (above even abysmal pollution) is *food safety*. Yet *clean and safe food* is hard to come by; few restaurants are clear about where they source their ingredients, and the supply chain breaks down in so many places that it is often hard to even trace *food safety scandals* to their source. (JT; emphasis added)
- (6) The pace of urban development in Shanghai is as swift as it is unrelenting and its impact is far-reaching in both the positive and negative. / Nail House or “dingzihu” (钉子户), [is] a term coined by Chinese developers to describe the house whose residents refuse to make way for new construction. (ST)

In terms of identity work two different stances are perceivable. In a number of occurrences the four bloggers do not discursively identify with the Chinese people, who are analysed from a cultural distance. In these cases, references are formulated through the third person plural (examples 7 to 10).

- (7) *The Chinese* are not comfortable with physical contact. / *The Chinese* – particularly the younger generation – are enthusiastic about learning English. / The good news is that *the Chinese* give *laowai* (foreigners) a lot of leeway when it comes to etiquette. *They* almost all expect foreigners to be clueless to their customs so any possible offenses will be overlooked. / For better or worse, *many Chinese* have a perception of Westerners (especially Americans) as being overly naïve, especially when it comes to haggling (probably mostly due to inexperience). (CM; emphasis added)
- (8) *Most Chinese people* don't speak English. / Generally there is a high probability that *people under the age of 25* can speak Mandarin and English. / *Chinese people* keep to help foreigners in most cases. / *Chinese people* often speak loudly and talk passionately in public. / Fried rice is like staple food of *Chinese people* as this is part of *their* daily intake. (CW; emphasis added)
- (9) As much as *the Chinese* love to eat and discuss what they're eating [...], cooking is still decidedly unglamorous, and coupled with the crushing costs of starting a restaurant in China, *young people* face endless obstacles getting into the field. / It seems misguided to accept that food safety is something *the Chinese* should just live without. (JT; emphasis added)
- (10) I photograph and collect stories in Shanghai, seeking to capture the lives of *ordinary Shanghainese* and 外地人 or “waidiren”¹⁰ in the city, as well as the process behind the city's rapid urbanisation. / As *Shanghainese* move on to more modern housing, *they* rent out their rooms to migrants who choose to live close to work, old shikumen lilongs. / *Younger Shanghainese* tend to be more eager to upgrade from crumbling stairs, poorly lit communal kitchens and public toilets for more spacious and modern apartments in fresh-aired suburbs. *The older generation*, having adapted to decades of cramped living conditions and the convenience of nearby hospitals and parks, are more reticent about leaving the tight-knit communities they grew up in. (ST; emphasis added)

¹⁰ *Waidiren* are literally people coming from outside of the city, i.e. internal migrants and non-native residents.

Alternatively, inclusive deixis whenever present reveals greater involvement, as in examples 11 to 13, with reference to the Internet issue and the pace of modernisation (example 14).

- (11) In China, *we* miss a normal and stable Internet Connection. (*CW*; emphasis added)
- (12) [*Young Shanghainese*] embrace the contradiction that is modern China, and are overwhelmingly nationalistic, as evident in the rise of “Innovated/Designed/Created in China” movement, notably within the realms of tech and fashion. *My friend and I* share a lot of the same sentiment; despite having grown up in the West, *we* have fully formed identities in our Chinese cultural heritage. (*JT*; emphasis added)
- (13) The 1990s may not feel too long ago for *many of us* but with the pace of modernization in Shanghai, it feels like a different era. (*ST*; emphasis added)

A notable exception is China-Mike, whose stronger identification ultimately lies with being a US citizen. Though more insightful, maybe, than other bloggers writing in English about China, his attitude is ultimately that of an experienced Western traveller

- (14) Bicycle theft is still a big problem. If you happen to be traveling with an expensive bike, always bring it indoors (professional thieves in China can open most locks quickly). And it's a good idea to lock your luggage to a rack when traveling by train [...]. *Many of us* tend to let our guard down around other seemingly friendly foreigners who we meet on the road. (*CM*; emphasis added)

Simple ingredients, strong popular roots as well as cheap prices and massive immigrant flows (Pisker 2016) have made Chinese food popular all over the world (example 15).

- (15) Over the years, Chengdu has transformed, my grandparents have aged, and I've grown comfortable straddling a multiplicitous rope of cultural identity. *One thing that has remained constant though, is the food, and the way that a perfect meal can bring us all together around a table.* (*JT*; emphasis added)

Quite understandably, therefore, food is prioritised as an opportunity for cross-cultural encounters, with “regional cuisines”, the “chic restaurant scene”, the “local food scene” and a number of local dishes a key attraction for tourists (examples 16 and 17).

- (16) In Beijing, the capital of China, you can find almost *all kinds of foods* from China and the world, but if you want to enjoy authentic Chinese dishes, you should go to the places that the *local food lovers* often gather – the food streets in Beijing. / Shanghai has a *big, colorful and noisy street food scene where you can easily eat like a local* in every single corner of the city. (CW; emphasis added)
- (17) There are literally thousands of mouthwatering dishes in Sichuan cuisine, but some of the simplest ones, which trace their beginnings to street carts, are also the tastiest. Ask *locals* about their favourite dishes, and the answer is likely *xiaochi*, the nostalgic street snacks from their childhood. (JT; emphasis added)
- (18) If you travel to Shanghai or live in Shanghai, you must want to pamper your stomach with *authentic local Chinese food*. Here collected is a list of the best Shanghai Chinese restaurants ranked on *Dianping.com*, the largest Chinese food review websites. The ranking is based on diners' comments, taste, environment, service and other factors. (CW; emphasis added)

Though not yet available in English, looking up Dianping or downloading its app on smartphones (example 18) is a spreading practice among foreign tourists to find locations on maps and inspect pictures of recommended dishes. In other words, food works as a more easily shareable identity trait than the difficult language (see the use of the universal quantifier “everyone” in example 19).

- (19) For a food-crazed city like Chengdu, the answer to that question is boundless. A place where ancient food culture meets the dizzying pace of new dining trends, and where the term ‘foodie’ makes no distinction at all because everyone is a certified 吃货 [chihuo], it’s no wonder that Chengdu’s food scene is constantly evolving. (JT; emphasis added)

4. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis of four travel-related blogs in English by two Chinese bloggers, Peter Wang and Jenny Gao and two Chinese-speaking bloggers with an Asian background, China-Mike and Sue Anne Tay, is a probing attempt to discover the yet unmapped discursive and cross-cultural space that new media are opening up in China’s destination branding, when addressing inbound tourist flows. In comparison with the huge bulk of travel blogs about China authored by English native speakers and the

immense output of travel and tourism commentary produced by Chinese netizens, these four blogs are quite unique, as their not-so-easy retrieval on the Internet would seem to prove. A possible explanation is the bloggers' deeper cross-cultural engagement, due to a number of biographical and cultural factors that lead them to express an insider's viewpoint on China, or at least, not so much of an outsider's, despite the conventional nature of the themes they deal with, elicited by Leximancer and then reassessed through a discourse-analytic perspective. Unlike *China-Mike* and *China Whisper*, which are more cursory and practical also because they address the whole tourist experience, *Jing Theory* and *Shanghai Street Stories*, with their narrower focus, show greater introspection in dealing with the themes of Chinese food and urbanisation as catalysts for change.

This analysis began by observing that “cultural dialogues between China and the rest of the world take place after years of political isolation” (Yan and Santos 2010, 209). It is evident that travel commentaries hint at something deeper than mere tourism trends and flows, something that could be summed up as the translatability of China into other cultural categories. All bloggers respond to China's fast-moving social scene, not just mediating it in English for potential visitors, but choosing to identify with its values and people with varying degrees of engagement, as recurrent lexical choices and discursive strategies in the textual selection illustrate. With its geographical, sociocultural and political complexity and with its language barrier, China escapes ready-made explanations, which sound inevitably unsatisfactory. It is simultaneously old and modern, traditional and progressive, undecipherable and user-friendly. China or, rather, being Chinese, needs to be known over and over again.

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