

Title: Challenging Eurocentrism in Tourism Studies: How Performative and Embodied Empirical Insights into Chinese Backpackers and Professional Hosts Can Contribute to Discussions of Eurocentrism in Tourism Research

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Abstract:

In recent years, critics have increasingly accused modernist approaches in tourism of being ‘Eurocentric’ or ‘Anglo-Western Centric’ in their focus and epistemological underpinnings (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). Such arguments have arisen in part from the rise of Asian tourism and its associated focus (e.g., Ong, 2005; Muzaini, 2006; Chan, 2006; Teo & Leong, 2006; Ong & du Cros, 2012), but also from Critical Tourism’s earlier calls for a more general fundamental rethink about the paradigms and norms which shape scholarship on tourism (Winters, 2009). Building on Tourism’s critical turn’s criticism of the positivistic nature and ‘business laden prerogatives’ of tourism studies (Pritchard & Morgan, 2007; Ren et al., 2007), proponents of the Eurocentrism critique such as Winter (2009) and Cohen & Cohen (2015) have been calling for a paradigmatic shift in the field of tourism, whether on the epistemological or the theoretical level, to deal with the issues raised in this critique.

However, academics are still very much at the stage of proposing a range of innovative approaches in their own attempts to find suitable ways of re-orienting tourism (using a range of Critical Theories), and it is this author’s opinion that, as yet, no one dominant approach or paradigm has emerged as a clear front runner. This paper and this author’s ongoing research studies aim to explore how performativity and embodiment, based on empirical insights into Chinese backpackers and professional hosts, can contribute to discussions of Eurocentrism in tourism research.

Contextually, this author’s research is investigating whether the use of performance and dramaturgical analysis can provide an insightful way of understanding and conceptualising backpacker–host encounters. Earlier studies of host perceptions towards tourism have been criticised on a number of fronts: firstly for their positivistic, business-orientated nature; secondly, for their limiting notions of representation; but thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, for their over-dependence on theories developed from the experiences of western sociology and then western tourism (Cohen, 1995; Winter, 2009; Moufakkir & Reisinger, 2013; Cohen & Cohen, 2015).

In an attempt to conceptually and empirically reorient tourism, recent ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Thailand aims to assess the contribution of the performative turn and provides an exciting way of reconceptualising tourist–host encounters, where ‘gazing’ and ‘performing’ (through host–guest encounters, which act as the embodied actions of the gaze) become hybrid practices, almost indistinguishable from one and another according to Larsen (2011). On an empirical level, early analysis seems to indicate that the study of host–guest encounters as the corporeal and embodied actions of the gaze (host and tourist) can facilitate a deeper and more meaningful understanding of gazes. But perhaps more important is whether this study of ‘performing bodies’ and ‘corporeal actions’ can contribute in some small way to providing a more universal understanding of tourist behaviour, one that is not constrained by western sociology and its roots in western tourism.