Conceptualising Three-Layer Cultural System in Mobilities: A Mobile Ethnographic Study of Chinese Outbound Backpackers in Europe

Doctor of Philosophy

Wenjie Cai
University of Surrey,
United Kingdom
E-mail: w.cai@surrey.ac.uk

Supervisors:
Scott Cohen
University of Surrey,
United Kingdom
E-mail: s.cohen@surrey.ac.uk

John Tribe
University of Surrey,
United Kingdom
E-mail: j.tribe@surrey.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to conceptualise the traditional three-layer cultural system (White, 1949; Keesing, 1974) in a mobile and intercultural setting through a mobile ethnographic investigation of Chinese outbound backpackers' travel experience in Europe. The traditional three-layer culture system is based on Marx's general evolutionary models, and is regarded as an integrated system formed by three subsystems: materiality, sociality, and ideology. This cultural materialist model of general evolution (Leavitt, 1986) has been metaphorically described as a 'three-layer cake' by Paris (2009) in his review of backpacker culture. In this 'three-layer cake', technological or material subsystem acts as the foundation, primarily provides the infrastructure and equipment through settle environment or media to communicate and negotiate. Secondary to material subsystem is the social subsystem, which is constructed by human systems such as social, recreational and ethi-

cal systems. This layer focuses on presenting interactions of human beings through their behaviours. The top layer is the ideological subsystem, which represents the perception, values, organisation of beliefs about human experiences.

This three-layer culture system has been widely applied in various disciplines to understand culture and experiences. In backpacker tourism, this theory has been adopted in the discourse of the backpacker culture (Anderskov, 2002; Paris, 2009). Although the interdependence among three layers has been mentioned, Paris (2009) understands the three-layer culture as a solid and stable system rather than a mobile and fluid one. However, embedded in a mobile and intercultural setting, it is essential to rethink the function of this system by breaking the hierarchy of the three-layer system of culture and re-positioning these three layers in a new order or perform in different model. While moving, the system of culture faces more complex scenarios, and relations, interactions among these three layers has been challenged; therefore, there is a need to re-conceptual the system of culture in a broader setting.

Chinese backpackers in Europe were chosen as research group for this study for the following four reasons. Firstly, Chinese backpackers in Europe creates an East meets West context. Negotiating ideologies between Chinese system of values and Western backpacker culture can be explored in this setting. In addition, this intercultural setting also facilitates investigations of sociality among backpackers, as well as backpacker and locals. Secondly, Chinese backpackers have distinctive characteristics of highly active online while backpacking, as well as group orientation. These characteristics helps to explore the intersecting network sociality and interactive relations of cultural values and materiality. Thirdly, methodologically, the dual identity of being a Chinese backpacker and a researcher have the advantage that quickly immerse with my informants. Without language barrier and cultural differences, issues such as misunderstanding and misinterpreting can be reduced. Fourthly, as an emerging market, studies of Chinese outbound backpackers in Europe has been overlooked. In the past three decades, backpacking studies mainly from a Eurocentric perspective focus on Western backpackers travelling to less developed countries. With the development of Chinese backpacker market, as well as responding the 'paradigm shift' of the mobilities (Cohen & Cohen, 2015), Chinese backpackers' experiences have been overlooked and required further studies. By investigating Chinese outbound backpackers' travel experience to explore the reconstruction of three-layer cultural system, it helps to fill the literature gap of Chinese outbound backpackers in Europe.

Mobile ethnography as the research strategy was adopted in this study. An ethnographic approach is preferred firstly because this study is about understanding Chinese backpackers this group of people, as well as exploring the structure of a culture system. In this case, ethnography provides an opportunity for me to immerse in Chinese backpacker groups to observe their daily activities and travelling together in order to understand their travel experiences. Secondly, although given three-layer culture system, this study determines to reconstruct the traditional

three-layer culture system and purpose a new format of culture in the mobile set-ting; therefore, the inductive nature of ethnography ensure the adequacy for ex-ploration in this study. Thirdly, adopting multiple research techniques in ethnog-raphy (Hammersely, 2006) provides more flexibility for the researcher to combine various research techniques according to the research setting and occasions. In this study, assisting participant observation as the dominant research technique, semi-structured interview was utilised particularly to explore the ideological lay-er, which is difficult to access through participant observation. Combining various techniques in this study ensure the quality of data and the richness of the writing account.

When investigating Chinese backpackers, traditional ethnography, which stresses on immersing in one location fails to understand the dynamic, sociality and culture of the group; on the other hand, emerging ethnographies such as mul-ti-sited ethnography and netnography make relevant research possible in this con-text. For Chinese outbound backpackers, the field is not only sited across multiple destinations they have been travelled, but also across multiple virtual locations, such as travel discussion forum, blogs, social networking sites, which requires the researcher to fully engage in their backpacker journey by moving with Chinese backpackers across both physical and virtual spaces. To clarify, mobile ethnogra-phy in this study includes multi-sited ethnography following backpackers corpo-rally from site to site, as well as netnography tracking Chinese backpackers' online behaviours in online forum and social networking sites.

Table 1. 1 Research Design

	Before the trip	**During the trip**	**After the trip**
Netnography			
Research technique	Participant Obser-vation	Participant Observation	Participant Observation
Research Locale	Qyer.com, Wechat	Wechat (Group chat & Wechat Moment)	Qyer.com
Multi-sited ethnography			
Research technique		Semi-structured interview, Participant Observation	
Research Locale		Spain, Portugal, UK, Poland	

The process of data collection is divided by three main stages: before, during and after the trip (Table 1-1). Various research techniques were adopted among these three stages. Between June to November 2014, I followed three groups of Chinese backpackers travelling in Europe by conducting participant observation and in-depth interview corporally and virtually. In the digital enclaves, Qyer.com, as the leading Chinese backpacker forum was chosen as online field to approach

potential informants, and also acted as the online field for data collection. In addition, online data collection also covered Chinese backpackers' posts and conversation through instant messengers and social media posts on Wechat, which currently is the most popular Chinese social media. All data was collected after informants' consents. In order to justify the role of myself in the data collection process, a reflexive journal was kept along the data collection process. Various source of data including field notes, interview recordings, pictures, travel journals, online posts and written itineraries were collected.

A thematic analysis was followed by adopting an abductive approach for analysing collected data. Deductively, the three-layer cultural system suggests a scope of the ethnographic fieldwork, and guides the coding as a theoretical reference; on the other hand, an inductive approach of coding was adopted parallel to the deductive coding in order to investigate the dynamic and re-construction of the three-layer cultural system in mobilities. 10 themes were emerged by combining ideas among and beyond three layers of the cultural system. They were clustered into three groups and allocated in three finding chapters by looking specifically at issues of mobile sociality, negotiating ideology, and materiality of Chinese backpackers.

The first finding chapter discusses the mobile sociality of Chinese backpackers by looking at Chinese backpackers forming travel group online to issues of harmony in backpacker group communications. Mobile sociality also looks at interaction with locals and other backpackers. This chapter although focus on sociological layer from the three-layer cultural system, but largely discuss roles of Chinese cultural values of harmony, guanxi, and risk avoidance, as well as Western backpacker influence of group dynamics and perception of intercultural perception. This chapter explores relationship and group dynamic of tourism, and gives new interpretation of harmony. This chapter also contributes to untouched literature of group forming behaviour and group dynamics of Chinese backpackers.

The second finding chapter looks at issues of negotiating ideologies by discussing the identity construction of Chinese backpackers, investigating how Chinese backpacker interpret and practice backpacker culture, and analysing how Chinese backpackers perceive and practice backpacking as a 'rite-of-passage'. Focusing on ideological level of the three-layer cultural system, this chapter emphasise in mobilities and the intercultural context, how Chinese backpackers' identities is paradoxically merged, negotiated and constructed by contradicting Chinese system of values and backpacker culture. By looking at negotiating ideologies, this chapter also argue the embedded Chinese culture influence the way Chinese backpacker perceive backpacking as a transformative journal, and conflict of these two cultural systems create a new practice of their backpacking journey.

The third finding chapter focuses on the materiality from the three-layer cultural system to analyse how this fundamental layer at bottom of the hierarchy redefine and re-construct its role in the mobilities by discussing various roles it

plays not only towards backpackers' experience making, but also its relationship with sociality and ideology. This chapter argues materiality in the mobilities is no longer only at the bottom of hierarchy as foundation, but also highly engage in mediated communication and play an active role of facilitating togetherness and connectedness of social network beyond distance. An intersecting network sociality interweaving between digital and corporal worlds was emphasised in this chapter to showcase strong linkage of material culture and sociality. This chapter also shed lights on relationships of materiality and ideology, which has been overlooked in previous studies. In this study, attentions were paid in looking how Chinese values as well as backpacker culture influence Chinese backpackers' consumption of materials, and how materials help to construct Chinese backpackers' identities. On the other hand, how material plays its part intercultural contacts.

This PhD thesis unpacks three-layer cultural system from a solid and hierarchical 'cake' into a fluid, liquid and dynamic network. It is a mobile social network mediated by ICTs, supported and facilitated by material culture, and highly governed and influenced by different streams of cultures and values. It is an interweaving network compressing time and space, and connecting togetherness virtually and corporally throughout mobilities. This PhD theoretically creates a new understanding of this cultural system and suggest an interpretation of this new cultural system in understanding travel experience. Practically, this PhD explores to the untouched literature of Chinese outbound backpackers, and contributes to both Chinese outbound tourism literature and backpacker literature. Methodologically, this PhD suggests a framework strategically combining multi-sited ethnography and netnography by following patterns of backpackers' activities to study a wider trend of interactive network and multiple identities.

REFERENCES

Anderskov, C. (2002). *Backpacker culture: Meaning and identity making processes in the Backpacker culture among backpackers in Central America*. Research report, Ethnography and Social Anthropology, Arhus University, Denmark.

Cohen, E., & Cohen, S. A. (2015). Beyond Eurocentrism in tourism: A paradigm shift to mobilities. *Tourism Recreation Research*, (ahead-of-print), 1-12.

Hammersley, M. (2006). Ethnography: problems and prospects. *Ethnography and education*, *1*(1), 3-14.

Keesing, R. M. (1974). Theories of culture. *Annual review of anthropology*, 73-97.

Leavitt, G. C. (1986). Ideology and the materialist model of general evolution: A cross-cultural test of subsystem relationships. *Social Forces*, *65*(2), 525-553.

Paris, C. M. (2009). The virtualization of backpacker culture. *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism*, 25-35.

White, L. A. (1949). Energy and the evolution of culture. *American Anthropologist*, 45, 335-56