

Complexities of Representation: Chinese Outbound Tourists as De Facto Ambassadors in Southern Africa

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Abstract

Exploring the representational effect of tourism, this study examines factors that influence perceptions that Chinese outbound tourists are representatives or de facto ambassadors of the Chinese government advancing its national objectives abroad. The paper finds that the Chinese government is ambivalent, and at times inconsistent about endowing individual tourists with the responsibility to serve as its de facto ambassadors. In addition, the paper argues that the role of tourism in China's bilateral relations with South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe influence general perceptions among bureaucrats and elites in the three countries that Chinese outbound tourists are representatives of the Chinese government.

Keywords: Outbound Tourism, Tourists, Representation, China, Bilateral Relations

Introduction

For political elites in select Southern African countries, what does Chinese tourism represent? Do they regard Chinese tourists as representatives of the Chinese government, advancing its national objectives abroad?³ What is the representational power of Chinese tourists to the making of Sino-African people-to-people engagement and foreign policy relations? In general, the study of interlink between tourism (and tourists) and a country's national interests is crucial to understanding the 'instrumentalisation' of tourism, which increasingly, beyond the revenue and tourism statistics, has 'representational meaning' in state-to-state relations. This is essential because as put by Linda Richter, tourism is generally seen "largely in economic terms, with little awareness of its potential political impact" (1989:3). Important to note is that, the representational meaning is not universal but contextual and relatable to a country's national interests and foreign policy objectives. It is therefore an idea that is given localized geospatial meanings. For instance, in basic terms and based on findings of our empirical research in China and Southern Africa, for Beijing, burgeoning outbound tourism *represent* national rejuvenation and realisation of the 'China Dream', evoking nationalism and legitimation of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The fact that in 2018, Chinese travelers made a total of 149.72 million outbound trips, spending over US\$120 billion, solidifies the image of a prosperous and confident China on path to becoming a 'moderately prosperous society'. For Zimbabwe, an

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³ In this paper, we use the term [unofficial] representatives, agents, and [unofficial or citizen] ambassadors interchangeably mostly for our analytical framing, although sometimes Chinese literature also refers to these terms.

Approved Destination Status (ADS) and subsequent hosting of Chinese tourists represent its burgeoning bilateral relations with Beijing, and its regional competitiveness - proving to the West that it has political legitimacy. On the other hand, in Namibia, Chinese tourists represent its independence from a historical dominance by South Africa over its tourism industry and economy - suggesting its ability to compete with Pretoria for Chinese tourists as an equal-status sovereign nation. In sum, the three examples, which are discussed in detail in this paper, imply that the same group of Chinese tourists can represent and have different meanings attributed to them in relation to a country's national interests and foreign policy objectives.

The representations are, however, the consequences of actors and processes often situated outside the contours of the state and its foreign policy making processes. They depend on flows of tourists, and their individual and collective behaviour abroad. In addition, perceptions of national tourism agencies and other stakeholders in the hospitality industry regarding tourists from abroad matter, and feed into production of the representations. Suggesting the critical role played by tourism in advancing national objectives and shaping of states' foreign policies. Existing scholarship in International Relations (IR) and foreign policy analysis eschews this political and representational role of tourists and tourism, particularly outbound tourism. This is because tourism, whether inbound or outbound, has generally been considered too private and ad hoc to systematically influence foreign policy or national objectives; or in cases where a link is made between tourism and foreign policy, it is regarded as a soft power instrument (Kwek, Wang & Weaver, 2013; Tse, 2013; Chen & Duggan, 2016; Xu, Wang & Song, 2018). However, the rise of China's state-driven outbound tourism is demanding a relook on the role of tourism in foreign policy. This paper contributes to this critical and emerging debate on the instrumentalisation of tourists by states to advance foreign policy objectives. Specifically, it explores how and why Chinese outbound tourists have come to be seen in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia as representatives or de facto ambassadors of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Notably, there is no lack of impressionistic observations framing Chinese tourists as instruments of China's soft power. For instance, Kwek, Wang and Weaver, by using "analytical auto-ethnography to explore the package tour experience of overseas Chinese," argue that China's "international tourism policies highlight the interdependency between inbound tourism growth, economic development and soft power projections" (2013:37). Similarly, Xu, Wang and Song maintain that through its ADS scheme, promotion of tourism culture activities abroad, use of tourism as a form of foreign aid and strengthening of bilateral tourism cooperation, the Chinese government is increasing "China's soft power through outbound tourism" (2018:6).

However, there is a dearth of empirically grounded scholarship on the role of tourism, in particular, Chinese outbound tourism in Beijing’s foreign policy. In arguing that the Chinese state instrumentalises outbound tourism to achieve its national objectives, this paper goes beyond the tourism-as-soft-power argument and contributes to the development of empirically-based research by focusing on Chinese tourism in three Southern African countries; South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The three countries were selected for two reasons. Among the 16 countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) - a regional organization of countries in the Southern Africa region, the three are among Southern Africa’s biggest tourist destinations with the most significant tourist attractions; Kruger National Park (South Africa), Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and the Namib Desert (Namibia). Between 2009 and 2017, according to the World Bank, Zimbabwe and South Africa were Southern Africa’s top two receivers of international tourists (see table 1 below).

Second, although Mozambique and Botswana received more international tourists than Namibia, their national tourism boards do not focus on Chinese tourists. Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa have the ADS, enabling them to market their tourist destinations in China and, among the 16 SADC countries, they have had the most significant tourist marketing campaigns and have tourism marketing offices in China (Chen & Duggan, 2016). Their interaction with Beijing and contact with Chinese tourists make them useful in investigating factors influencing perceptions, in the three countries, that Chinese tourists are representatives of the Chinese government.

Table 1: International Tourism - Number of Arrivals (in thousands)

Rank (2009- 17)	Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	TOTAL
1	South Africa	7 012	8 074	8 339	9 188	9 537	9 549	8 904	10 044	10 285	80 932
2	Zimbabwe	2 017	2 239	2 423	1 794	1 833	1 880	2 057	2 168	2 423	18 834
3	Mozambique	1 461	1 718	1 902	2 113	1 886	1 661	1 552	1 639	1 447	15 379
4	Botswana	1 721	1 973	..	1 614	1 544	1 966	1 528	1 574	..	11 920

Table 1: International Tourism - Number of Arrivals (in thousands)

Rank (2009- 17)	Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	TOTAL
5	Namibia	980	984	1 027	1,079	1 176	1 320	1 388	1 469	1 499	10 922
6	Mauritius	871	935	965	965	993	1 038	1 151	1 275	1 342	9 535
7	Tanzania	695	754	843	1,043	1 063	1 113	1 104	1 233	1 275	9 123
8	Eswatini	908	868	879	888	968	939	873	947	921	8 191
9	Zambia	710	815	920	859	915	947	932	956	1 083	8 137
10	Malawi	755	746	767	770	795	819	805	849	837	7 143
11	Lesotho	344	426	398	423	433	1 079	1 082	1 196	1 137	6 518
12	Angola	366	425	481	528	650	595	592	397	261	4 295
13	Seychelles	158	175	194	208	230	233	276	303	350	2 127
14	Madagascar	163	196	225	256	196	222	244	293	255	2 050
15	Congo, Dem. Rep.	53	81	186	167	191	334	354	351	..	1 717
16	Comoros	11.3	15.3	18.8	22.8	21.9	22.8	23.6	26.8	28	191.3

Source: World Bank

Considering that the three countries have the most elaborate campaigns to attract Chinese tourists (Kromberg, 2014; Chen & Duggan, 2016), we selected them to examine whether they regarded Chinese tourists to be representatives of the Chinese government, able to advance its foreign policy objectives in the countries. Furthermore, we explore whether the Chinese government regard Chinese tourists as its representatives abroad. In investigating these issues, we argue that the representation of tourism in China's bilateral relations with the three Southern African countries influence perceptions that Chinese outbound tourists are agents of

the Chinese government. This argument is based on findings deduced from expert interviews we conducted in China and the three countries. Details of the interviews and the sensitivity of conducting research on China in the three countries is discussed in the next section. The sections that follow analyse the incorporation of Chinese tourists into Beijing's foreign policy processes; the instrumentalisation of Chinese outbound tourists and factors influencing perceptions that Chinese tourists are representatives of Beijing. The conclusion sums up the main implications.

Researching Chinese tourism in Southern Africa: the tourists, elites and the sensitivities

Research on China related matters in Africa is often problematic due to the secretive nature of some African governments' engagement with China (Asongu & Aminkeng, 2013:12). From our experience, even the seemingly 'politically unencumbered' subject of Chinese outbound tourism is considered sensitive by some government officials in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia making access to information on the subject a challenge for researchers. At the same time, Chinese tourists in group tours, such as the ones we encountered in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe simply have too strict and heavy-laden itineraries to spare a moment for an interview. For instance, the two groups that we managed to informally engage with were seemingly uncomfortable discussing in public whether they represented the Chinese government's national interests in their touristic activities. The sensitivity and discomfort of both the government officials and Chinese tourists suggest, in some respects, the political and diplomatic signification of Chinese outbound tourism to Africa.

Regardless, in examining why the three Southern African countries regard Chinese tourists as representatives of China, it seemed prudent to focus on experts and policy-implementers. This is because our focus was to examine perceptions of national tourism agencies, who have a mandate to market their countries as tourist destinations in China; and actors in the hospitality industry, who host Chinese tourists. Yet, accessing these experts in Zimbabwe, China, South Africa and Namibia proved to be challenging, but surmountable because of gatekeepers who required convincing about the academic objectives of the research. Inevitably, there were several last-minute cancellations because some high-level government officials withdrew their consent to being interviewed. For example, an official in a local governmental tourist agency in Cape Town, South Africa cancelled a confirmed interview appointment without explanation and stopped responding to emails. Accordingly, negotiating for an audience with the experts and/or their gatekeepers constituted an integral part of our research preparation.

Regardless, our research was guided by qualitative approaches, and data collected

between June and October 2017 in Windhoek, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Victoria Falls, Harare and Beijing. The main sources of data were key informant interviewees selected for their expertise in Chinese tourism as well as their strategic and professional positions in government, national tourism agencies, the hospitality industry and tour agencies. In sum, respondents to our face-to-face, semi-structured qualitative interviews can be categorised into four distinct but interdependent tourism stakeholders. (1) Policymakers and implementers; directors in ministries responsible for tourism and directors at national tourism boards. (2) Tourism service providers; tourism agencies bringing Chinese tourists to the three African countries, hoteliers and hospitality associations. That is, umbrella bodies representing the interests of private hotels and actors in the hospitality industry. (3) Chinese tourists in tour groups in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia. (4) Academic experts on tourism and China's foreign policy.

To get an understanding of the PRC's foreign policy objectives regarding Chinese outbound tourists, we interviewed academics specialising in tourism and the foreign policy of China at the Renmin University of China, Peking University, Tsinghua University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). In Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, interviewing directors at the Namibia Tourism Board (NTB), the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) and the Department of Tourism in South Africa enabled us to expand our access in the field. The officials we interviewed pointed us to potential interviewees. As noted by Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig and Wolfgang Menz, when targeted experts who hold key positions in their organisations are willing to participate, they present: "opportunities for expanding the researcher's access to the field [...] and indicate additional potential interviewees with expertise in a particular field during the interview itself" (2009: 2). For instance, in Zimbabwe, a high-level official at the ZTA instructed a junior manager to give us access to statistical data that the junior manager had previously refused to give us access to. In Namibia, an official at the Hospitality Association of Namibia drove us to places where we could meet tour groups of Chinese tourists and referred us to other potential interviewees. However, to reduce the homogeneity of informants' views and voices in snowball sampling, multiple initial contact points representing a maximum variation were accessed.

Nonetheless, considering the sensitivity of China-related issues in the three countries, expert interviews proved to be a difficult but effective means of obtaining critical data that would have been impossible to get without the support of the experts we interviewed. In our case, the expert interviews shortened 'time-consuming data gathering processes [because we regarded] the experts as 'crystallization points for practical insider knowledge' and we

interviewed them “as surrogates for a wider circle of players” (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2009: 2). Accordingly, we gained extensive access to reports and statements on outbound Chinese tourism issued by the governments of Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe that were not easily accessible to the public. For example, we were given access to a Memorandum of Understanding signed by China and one of the three countries on the promotion of tourism between the two countries.

In sum, we interviewed more than ten expert informants in South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and China. Three respondents were heads of national tourism agencies in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia. One was a director of tourism in South Africa’s Department of Tourism. Two Chinese tour companies in Windhoek and Cape Town were interviewed. Three other informants work in the tourism industry as hotel front-of-house staff and in hospitality associations in the three countries. In Johannesburg, we interviewed a hotel staff member who participated in a public-private partnership initiative to instruct hotel staff in Mandarin and Chinese culture. In Windhoek, we interviewed, the head of the Hospitality Association of Namibia and in Victoria Falls we interviewed a hotel porter at the Kingdom Hotel. One of the informants is a traditional chief in Victoria Falls. In Beijing, we interviewed academics working on Chinese foreign policy and soft power strategies at the Renmin University of China, Tsinghua University, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Peking University. To ensure a holistic view of how China and the Chinese in general are perceived in African countries, brief interviews with locals and Confucius Institute staff at the University of Zimbabwe were also conducted, lasting between 10 and 30 minutes. They offered supplementary information for our analysis. The following sections discuss main factors contributing to general perceptions that the Chinese state regards its outbound tourists as its representatives.

Historical analysis of the development of tourism in China

China’s historical and political development since 1949 has led to the state playing a dominant role in tourism, controlling both domestic and international travel by Chinese nationals. Thus, tourism was regarded as both a political and strategic foreign policy matter such that, until 1978 the Bureau of Travel and Tourism (BTT), which managed travel agencies in the country was directly under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than the State Council. Yet, even with the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), the agency in charge of tourism now squarely under the State Council, the government continues to play a leading role in directing China’s tourism policy, developing the tourism industry and instituting domestic and foreign policies

that subtly influence travel patterns of Chinese tourists. Wooyeal Paik (2019) concurs that the Chinese government maintained, and still maintains a stringent control over these tourists and the tourism industry.

Prior to China's opening up, people-to-people exchange through tourism had a strong emphasis on fostering relationships with then allied countries, such as the Soviet Union and regions like Eastern Europe. The policy was favoured because of "both its long-run economic prospects and the immediate political goodwill and publicity the new hospitality may garner" (Richter, 1989:5). The trend was however, broken by dramatic domestic ruptures like the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident leading to a decline in inbound and outbound tourism (Uysal, Wei & Reid, 1986). At that time, outbound tourism was only limited to state-sanctioned tours, state visits and business travels. There was no self-paying ordinary Chinese. Deng Xiaoping's economic reform era was also a turning point because tourism began to be presented as a tool for economic development and source of foreign currency. From then on, tourism assumed a dual economic and politico-diplomatic role leading some scholars to describe it as "tourism with Chinese characteristics" (Zhang, King and Ap, 1999).

Despite the domestic and international implications of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen, China did not stop developing its inbound tourism industry through the use of various financial incentives and gradually opening up to outbound tourism. Linking inbound tourism to its diplomatic objectives, Beijing invited foreign dignitaries, students, and elites to visit China. The underlying logic was that these visits would increase foreign guests' acceptance of China, both culturally and politically, fostering mutual understanding and friendship. Despite warnings to the Chinese government by both Western and Chinese scholars that "to know us" does not mean "to love us" (Rawnsley, 2015), the government continues to invite and sponsor foreigners to visit China in an attempt to use tourism as a soft power tool to advance its national interest. Thus, as tourism's role in economic development grows, its political and foreign policy functions are being consolidated, making Chinese outbound tourism a diplomatic tool for Beijing (Tse, 2013; Chen & Duggan, 2016).

One of the elaborate ways that Beijing influences the traveling patterns of Chinese outbound tourists is by imposing tourist bans as a sanctioning tool against countries that happen to offend the PRC. For example, in 2018, China barred its citizens from visiting the Pacific island nation of Palau as a sanction for its diplomatic links with Taiwan. The ban significantly affected Palau's tourism-dependent economy because China is the country's largest tourism market. "Chinese tourists accounted for 47 per cent of international visitors to Palau in 2016,

with Taiwan making up 10 per cent” (South China Morning Post, 2018). In 2017, South Korean government said that “it had learned that Chinese authorities summoned representatives of travel agencies in Beijing [...] and instructed them to stop selling South Korean tours” (Mullen, 2017). The ‘tourism sanction’ was in retaliation to South Korea’s decision to host the THAAD missile defense system.

In the month after the THAAD launch, South Korea saw a sudden 40 percent plunge in Chinese tourists – who, previously, accounted for nearly 50 percent of all arrivals into the country (Coca, 2018).

This imposition of a ‘tourism sanction’ and the historical development of Chinese outbound tourism aid perceptions of interlink between tourism and China’s national objectives as espoused by the Communist Party of China.

Another approach that Beijing has used is to support tourism to certain strategically important countries or areas. Tse’s study (2013) gives ample examples such as encouragement of Mainland Chinese to visit the Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of Hong Kong and Macau to help boost their economies as a sign of the motherland’s good will towards the two regions. It is also not a coincidence that China heavily encouraged Chinese tourists to Southeast Asian countries after they were devastated by the tsunami in 2004 as a way of adding credibility to China’s diplomatic discourse that it is benevolent to its neighboring countries (Tse, 2013).

The tradition of seeing tourism as a key component of people-to-people exchange that has been in existence even before the Cultural Revolution remains, suggesting that tourism continues to be “an important part of the country’s diplomatic strategy [and] plays an active part in international relations and cooperation with other countries” (Zhang, 2016: 33-34). As further put by Wooyeal Paik, “the political dimension to Chinese outbound tourism expands and results in more political relations in a host country’s local, national, and international contexts” (2019:2). What is missing, however in the discussion of Chinese tourism as a tool for achieving economic, political and foreign policy objectives, is the role of Chinese outbound tourists. To date, there has been no significant inquiry on whether Chinese outbound tourists are indeed acting as unofficial representatives of the PRC in the countries that they travel to. Unless there is a nuanced understanding of the role that Chinese tourists play in advancing ‘perceived’ Beijing’s foreign policy objectives, assertions that China is using tourism as a diplomatic tool and soft power strategy remain abstract and unsubstantiated.

Demand for tourists to advance China’s national objectives

Socio-economic transformations in China increased the financial capacity of previously disadvantaged Chinese to travel abroad. McKinsey reported in 2018 that from 2010 to 2015,

the number of outbound trips from China more than doubled, growing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 15 percent (Dichter et al., 2018:4). In addition, the growth was necessitated by alteration of visa restrictions for Chinese tourists by approximately 66 countries. As more of them travel to Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, their general interest in exotic parts of the world, and taste for experiencing the outside world has grown. In light of these developments, to the Chinese government, outbound tourism demonstrates the prosperity of Chinese nationals and the economic power of China to the world (Arlt, 2016). Beijing has even designated tourism a strategic area of national interest, and therefore an enabler and expression of the China Dream and national rejuvenation. Accordingly, China's "new tourism-related regulations and policies and strategic interests" are geared towards "building its 'soft power' through outbound tourism" (Li, 2016: xxvii). But while there seem to be consensus among Chinese academics and government officials that outbound tourism can be of service to China's national interests and foreign policy objectives (Tang, 2014; Hu, 2009), there is disagreement over the actual role that outbound Chinese tourists should and are playing.

Chinese scholars often discuss the role of Chinese tourists in Beijing's foreign policy. Their approach is usually more normative and ideological, urging China to advance its soft power via outbound tourism. As China's tourism industry grows from domestic tourism to inbound tourism and then outbound tourism, more and more PRC foreign policy scholars are beginning to elaborate on their expectation for Chinese outbound tourism to serve the country's political interests (Hollinshead & Hou, 2012; Tse, 2013; Chen & Duggan, 2016). However, they tend to take an economic rather than international politics perspective. That means, articles on this topic are usually published in business-oriented and general social science journals. On the other hand, articles published in Western journals (even when published by Chinese authors) tend to eschew normative discussions. Instead, there is a tendency to describe Chinese outbound tourism as being 'tourism with Chinese characteristics' with suggestions that its service to politics has historical roots and continues to be directed by the Chinese state.

Nonetheless, in China's tourism legislation and policies, there is no clear mention of Chinese tourists being 'unofficial ambassadors' or representatives of China. Liu Haifang, a professor at Peking University argues that the "Chinese government has not embraced tourists as citizen ambassadors yet. It may take some time before the Chinese government might get this perspective. My reason is, I don't see any of this type of efforts to prepare tourists".⁴ To Liu Haifang, unless the Chinese government recognises outbound tourists as citizen

⁴. Email response from Liu Haifang on 22 September 2017.

ambassadors and prepares them to act as ambassadors, even in the cultural sense, they will not be such. This is understandable, because considering the nature of the Chinese state, and its penchant to regulate and control global perceptions about its image, the Chinese government may not be keen on officially designating Chinese outbound tourists as citizen ambassadors without a clear plan on how the messaging will be standardised and regulated. This however, does not mean that if they are not *de jure* citizen ambassadors they cannot be *de facto* citizen ambassadors.

Chinese outbound tourists are, in fact, *de facto* representatives of China, its culture, ideals and interests abroad. References to Chinese tourists as representatives of China can be inferred from speeches by senior government officials. Speaking to members of the Western Returned Scholars Association in October 2013, Xi Jinping urged Chinese citizens abroad to

Act as unofficial ambassadors to promote people-to-people friendship, and explain China's culture, history and points of view in such a way that people from other countries can understand and identify with China, and be ready to give it greater appreciation and support (Xi, 2017:66)

Although the speech was not directed to outbound Chinese tourists, generic references to Chinese abroad can be interpreted as inclusive of the tourists. A renowned scholar at CASS argued that although Chinese tourists are not regarded by the government as its representatives, they have a duty to promote a positive image of China abroad.⁵ This is however at odds with a statement issued by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism calling on Chinese tourists to behave properly because "when abroad, every tourist represents their home country" (Xinhua, 2019). Vice Premier Wang Yang also noted at National Tourism Law conference that "some tourists don't obey public rules while traveling and are hampering our national image" (Chang, 2013). By linking Chinese tourists' behaviour abroad with the national image and regarding them as representing the country, Chinese officials are imputing obligations and duties on Chinese tourists to act as its representatives. The implication is that outbound Chinese tourists are regarded as *de facto* representatives of China and are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that does not tarnish the image of China.

Related to the above is the imposition of fines and other forms of punishment by the Chinese government on Chinese tourists that behave badly when abroad. In 2013, China's National Tourism Administration published a 'Guide to Civilized Tourism and Travel'. The

⁵. Interview in Beijing, 13 September 2017. Interviews for this article in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe were conducted by Yu-Wen Chen and Obert Hodzi. Interviews in Beijing were conducted by Obert Hodzi. To preserve anonymity of interviewees, we do not identify them with their names except in cases where they expressly agreed to be identified.

finances and punishments accompanying the guide are aimed at compelling Chinese tourists to act in a manner that does not bring the reputation of China into disrepute. This is because the ‘bad behaviour’ of Chinese outbound tourists is regarded by Chinese officials as tarnishing the image of China, thus imputing representation responsibilities on Chinese outbound tourists (Waldmeir, 2015). Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui succinctly put it:

The uncivilised behaviour of some Chinese tourists abroad, including talking loudly in public places and carving characters on cultural relics, has seriously harmed the country’s image while annoying local residents (Zheng, 2013).

The fact that tourists’ misbehaviour attracts high-level government attention and action shows that the Chinese government realises that Chinese tourists are, in a way, China’s ambassadors. Accordingly, the official line seems to be that “the way Chinese tourists behave while overseas will affect the international image of China being a country of courteous and good manner” (Tse & Hobson, 2008:150). In addition to government sanction, there is increased citizen-led shaming of tourists that tarnish the image of China by behaving badly abroad. The naming and shamings mostly done by ordinary Chinese citizens on Weibo and other social networking sites, because there is a growing awareness, driven by nationalism and patriotism, that Chinese people represent China abroad, even as tourists. Jiang Chang, a professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Tsinghua University noted in an interview that “Chinese nationals oversee the behaviour of Chinese tourists by criticising and shaming tourists that tarnish the image of China by behaving badly abroad.”⁶

The sentiments of Chinese nationals on social networking sites are similar to those of the Chinese tourists that we interviewed in Cape Town. A Chinese tour operator based in Cape Town, whose company has organised several high-level Chinese tours to South Africa confirmed that although Chinese tourists are not official representatives of the Chinese government with a specific mandate to advance Beijing’s foreign policy objectives, they do so out of their own volition. He asserted that “Chinese tourists are very patriotic and have a great sense of nationalism [...] so they will not act against Chinese interests.”⁷

The factors raised above, more-so, attempts by the Chinese government to control the behaviour of Chinese tourists mean that there is no optimal distance between itself and the Chinese outbound tourists. The implication is that it has created the impression in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa that Chinese tourists are representatives of China. Similarly, in China, over the past five years, there has also been a growing realisation among government

⁶.Interview in Beijing, China, 6 September 2017.

⁷.Interview in Cape Town, South Africa, 23 June 2017.

officials that Chinese tourists should be regarded as representatives of the Chinese people in countries they visit. Notably, this is because of the ‘bad behaviour’ of some Chinese tourists is directly imputed on all Chinese people. For instance, an official at the Hospitality Association of Namibia suggested that hotels and lodges in Namibia were not keen on taking in Chinese tourists because they left restaurants and hotel rooms messy.⁸ An official in the Namibia Tourism Board suggested that “even though Chinese tourists in Namibia may not be regarded as official representatives of China, Namibians will come to know China and form perceptions of the Chinese and the PRC based on the behaviour of the Chinese tourists.”⁹

Perceptions of the representativeness of Chinese tourists are also fueled by media reports in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa. Suggesting, as in the case of poaching, that Chinese tourists are mostly involved in illicit ivory and rhino horn trading as well as poaching. In 2016, the Namibian Chamber of Environment, on behalf of 40 Namibian environmental organisations delivered an open letter to the Chinese embassy in Windhoek, which was also published in the newspaper, *The Namibian* complaining about

ongoing commercial wildlife and ecological crimes committed by Chinese national in Namibia [and] the apparent lack of action being taken by the Chinese embassy in Namibia and the Chinese state to put to a stop the unlawful actions of their nationals (Brown, 2017)

Of importance to our discussion is the link that the Namibian Chamber of Environment made between the alleged Chinese nationals and the Chinese state. They stated in the letter that:

We do not claim to fully understand the relationship between Chinese nationals and the Chinese state. It appears that Chinese nationals are not at liberty to obtain passports and travel independently around the world, bringing their personal capital and starting businesses in their own names in whatever country would have them, independent of the Chinese state. As such Chinese nationals in Namibia appear to be part of state-supported system (Brown, 2017)

According to an official at the Namibia Tourism Board, Xin Shunkang, the Chinese Ambassador to Namibia was forced to convene meetings with the press and residents to dispel perceptions that all Chinese were poachers working with Beijing’s tacit approval. However, even though the Chinese government does not consider Chinese tourists as its official representatives, there seem to be a realization outside and within China that they ‘unofficially’ represent China and the Chinese people.

Instrumentalisation of tourism

The Chinese government frames outbound tourism to developing countries as a public good; a

⁸ .Interview in Windhoek, Namibia, 19 June 2017.

⁹ .Interview in Windhoek, Namibia, 20 June 2017.

form of Beijing's contribution to their economic development, showing that both outbound and inbound tourism are soft power advancement tools (Kwek, Wang & Weave, 2014; Guo, Li & Wang, 2014; Stumpf & Swanger, 2015; Weaver, 2015). Such framings are aimed at fostering the identity of China as a benevolent global power, whose economic growth is not a threat but an opportunity for all countries. Yet, to fully benefit from Chinese outbound tourism, countries must be granted the ADS, which is based on their bilateral relations with China. The combined effect of the ADS as an inclusionary-exclusionary tool and framing of Chinese tourists as an integral part of Beijing's development assistance strategy supposes a subtle instrumentalisation of outbound tourism by China. The effect is that the ADS is a geoeconomic instrument that China uses to expand its influence abroad under the guise of promoting people-to-people exchange (Hollinshead & Hou, 2012; Tse, 2013; Chen & Duggan, 2016). Furthermore, other studies have shown how the Chinese government uses ADS to influence the international policies "by co-opting nations into activities pertaining to their agenda" (Xu, Wang & Song 2018: 7).

The instrumentalisation of outbound tourism for national interest and foreign policy ends is reflected by the eligibility criteria that countries must meet before they are granted ADS. The eligibility requirement was raised by China when it urged more eligible African countries to apply for the ADS to increase their inflows of Chinese tourists. In making the decision whether to grant ADS, the Chinese government, through the CNTA considers, among other factors, a country's diplomatic relations with China and the country's adherence to the One-China Principle.¹⁰ As diplomatic ties with China are a pre-requisite to being designated an ADS, Taiwan's last diplomatic partner in Africa, the Kingdom of Eswatini, may never have the ADS because "China has not hesitated to use ADS awards as 'soft power' tactics to gain political advantage in international affairs. No country that politically recognises Taiwan has received ADS, even though China granted ADS to Taiwan itself in 2008" (Bonham & Mak, 2014). The implication is that Taiwan's diplomatic partners in Africa and elsewhere are excluded from state-driven 'tourism for development' initiatives such as China's "plans to send 150 million travellers to countries along the One Belt, One Road in the next five years" (Dasgupta, 2016) that Li Jinzao, head of the CNTA announced in 2016. Thus, although not explicit, tourism and the ADS are aimed at enhancing China's national interests abroad.

¹⁰ .Other criteria include hosting countries' tourism amenities, safety, easy access to transportation, and guarantee for reciprocity, meaning that visitors from African countries to China should also increase when the number of Chinese tourists to African countries increases (Kim, Guo, & Argusa, 2005).

In China's relations with Africa, tourism is among areas given priority in promoting mutually beneficial cooperation. In that respect, it has two major objectives. First, to promote bilateral relations through people-to-people exchange, and secondly to enhance economic growth in African countries as part of China's economic development programs for Africa. These two objectives were first set at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Ministerial Conference held in Beijing from 10 to 12 October 2000. Ministers from China and Africa declared that "tourism is an important economic activity which has potential for generating financial resources that will help Africa's accelerated economic growth, the creation of employment and the alleviation of poverty" (FOCAC, 2015a). The declaration was further emphasised at the 2015 Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation where both African countries and China agreed to use tourism to deepen "understanding and friendship between the peoples of China and Africa" (FOCAC, 2015a). They then pledged to "continue to facilitate travels by their nationals between China and Africa and promote activities in each other's countries and regions" (FOCAC, 2015b).

A few months after the FOCAC summit in Johannesburg, China hosted the first World Conference on 'Tourism for Development' held on 16 May 2016 in Beijing. In that conference, Premier Li Keqiang described tourism as "the new driver of economic growth in China" in addition to being "the most direct and natural way of people-to-people exchange" that "holds the key to state-to-state relations" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). The result is that in the past two decades, a narrative of tourism as a tool for enhancing bilateral relations and enabling Africa's economic development has taken root, making Chinese outbound tourism to Africa a state-driven rather than a people-driven matter. An official in the Department of Tourism in South Africa argued that because tourism is part of China's bilateral engagements with South Africa, their focus on Chinese tourists is aimed at strengthening diplomatic ties with Beijing and open doors for other forms of bilateral engagement. It therefore seems that how many Chinese tourists visit a country has become a measure of the bilateral relations between that country and China.

Similarly, an official at the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority argued that in focusing on the Chinese tourists, the government of Zimbabwe sought to strengthen its bilateral relations with Beijing, while sending a message to the West, which has designated Zimbabwe a pariah state, that it has political legitimacy. Chinese tourists were therefore accorded special treatment that was not given to tourists from other countries. Along the same lines, an official at the Namibia Tourism Board asserted that besides using Chinese tourists to bolster bilateral relations with China, Namibia sought to assert its independence from South Africa, which regarded itself the

leaders of tourism in the region. Accordingly, Chinese tourists represented not just revenue, but state-to-state relations, compelling governments in the three African countries to regard them as ‘unofficial’ representatives of the Chinese government.

Perceived preferential treatment of Chinese tourists

In Zimbabwe and South Africa perceptions that Chinese tourists are representatives of the Chinese government are not just based on their individual or collective behaviour but on the preferential treatment they allegedly get from the Zimbabwean and South African government. Although none of our interviewees in both countries could specify the forms that the preferential treatment took, they were adamant that the police and immigration officers treated the Chinese better although China is not even their biggest market at all.¹¹ Part of the reason as put by an official at the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority is that there was an impression that Chinese tourists had to be treated better because the Zimbabwean government did not want anything to happen to them that could jeopardise its bilateral relations with China.¹² In South Africa and Namibia, government officials made the same assertions, arguing that their focus on the Chinese tourism market was state-driven rather than market-driven. The effect is that Chinese tourists were regarded as representing the broader interests of both China and each of the three Southern African countries hence they were ‘representatives’ of the PRC.

In addition, the intervention by government officials in criminal matters involving Chinese tourists contributed to perceptions that the tourists represented China. In all three countries, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, some Chinese on tourist visas were arrested for attempting to smuggle ivory or rhino horns. The cases were reported in local media in a manner that suggested the accused Chinese persons were representative of all the Chinese nationals. While in Namibia the Chinese ambassador issued a statement arguing that the arrested Chinese were not representative of the Chinese government or the Chinese people. In Zimbabwe, some government officials attempted to assist the arrested Chinese to evade justice. This fueled notions that the arrested Chinese were officials or representatives of the Chinese government. Accordingly, based on their association with government officials in Zimbabwe,

¹¹In 2016, 117 144 Chinese tourists visited South Africa making the 6th largest source of tourists. The highest number of tourists to South Africa came from the United Kingdom (447 840), the United States (345 013), Germany (311 832), France (154 226) and the Netherlands (147 973). In comparison, only 9 164 Chinese tourists visited Zimbabwe, making them Zimbabwe’s tenth largest source of tourists, way behind other countries from Asia, such as Japan (22 566) and South Korea (12 956). In Namibia, Chinese tourists (9 722) were not even in the country’s top ten tourists market.

¹²Interview in Harare, Zimbabwe, 30 June 2017.

some Chinese on tourist visas are regarded by locals as representatives of China. In sum, there is a strong perception even among officials in government that the Chinese tourists were representative of the Chinese government in that any harm on them would result in a break-up of diplomatic relations with China hence, in their view, they ought to be treated well to avoid complicating their countries' diplomatic relations with China.

Conclusion

As states scramble for a share of China's outbound tourism, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia are leveraging on their diplomatic, economic and political relations with Beijing. In the process, they are imputing representative responsibilities on Chinese tourists. What is also emerging from our research is that Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa are also using Chinese outbound tourism to achieve their foreign policy objectives, particularly enhancing their bilateral relations with China. The distinctive importance of Chinese outbound tourism to bilateral relations between China and Africa was confirmed by interviewees at the NTB, ZTA and the South African Department of Tourism. The officials at the three institutions suggested that the push to attract more Chinese tourists was an executive decision taken by the respective countries' political leadership. Both the Chinese government and governments of South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe are pushing for Chinese tourists as a tool for enhancing bilateral relations, making Chinese tourists a function of international relations and politics. As part of the people-to-people exchange, Chinese tourism to the three countries complements traditional and formal diplomacy. It has significant impact on relations between nations.

Accordingly, the Chinese government and Chinese outbound tourists in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia have an implied principal-agent relationship. The Chinese government recognise the implications of badly behaved outbound tourists on its international image, hence it expects Chinese outbound tourists to represent China well. On the other hand, through a combination of patriotism, government sanction on bad behaviour, naming and shaming by fellow Chinese citizens, and perceptions of their representativeness in host countries, Chinese tourists in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia assume the role of de facto representatives of China. Beyond the conduct of Chinese outbound tourists, the use of tourism by the Chinese government to expand bilateral and diplomatic ties with African countries and the exclusion of other countries from the ADS scheme create impressions that Chinese outbound tourists are China's soft power agents. Furthermore, the narrative of tourism as an instrument for achieving economic development and enhancing state-to-state relations add to the impression that Chinese tourism to Africa is more state-driven and aimed at achieving

foreign policy objectives than would tourism by, for instance, British tourists to African countries.

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