

Chinese domestic tourism, the blogosphere, and travel writing: Assessing the literary and political status of Chinese travelogues in print and online

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Abstract

By connecting among them the data concerning (1) China as a travel destination for domestic tourists, (2) the Chinese net population and (3) print and online travel writing, this article aims at exploring the potential of Chinese travel blogs as literary and political texts. In order to do so, the analysis draws upon, on one hand, Richard Strassberg's study about classic Chinese travel writing – from Middle Ages to the 19th century – and, on the other hand, Michel Hockx's findings concerning contemporary Chinese Internet literature. According to Strassberg, classic Chinese travel writing privileged a passive representation of the experience, focusing on either nature or the celebration of the country's status quo. On his part, Hockx's study suggests that, more strongly than the publishing sector, the Web constitutes a space where Chinese writers can renegotiate political and ethical boundaries. This article proposes the close reading of three contemporary Chinese travel books and travel blogs and implements it with interviews with authors and bloggers. The analysis shows that print travelogues are very politicized, thus departing sensibly from the tradition of the genre. By contrast, travel blogs, despite being published online, are chiefly focused on lights topics or the appreciation of the country's natural beauties, more in line (paradoxically) with classic texts.

Keywords

Blogosphere, China, committed literature, politics 2.0, tourism, travel writing

Introduction

This article lays at the intersection of cultural studies and digital humanities and takes China as its object of study. It connects among them three sets of data: (1) those coming from tourism studies

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about China as a travel destination, (2) those related to Chinese Internet users and the blogosphere and (3) those about (print and online) Chinese travel writing. In order to clarify the objectives of the analysis, it is first necessary to unpack these three sets of data.

According to the 2014 United Nations' report of the World Tourism Organisation (United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2014), for the first time in history, 'tourist arrivals [worldwide] reached 1,138 million in 2014, a 4.7% increase over the previous year. [...] The best performance was recorded in North-East Asia and South Asia (both +7%)'. If we look specifically at Chinese domestic tourism, Statista.com (2016), an independent website on which statistical analyses by governmental and non-governmental sources are gathered, shows that during the decade 2004–2014 the aggregate expenses of domestic Chinese tourists went from 471 billion yuan to 2627 billion yuan, while the number of domestic trips reached 3262 million in 2014 (10 years before they were 1102 million). This means that, following decades of booming economy, Chinese people – or at least the new Chinese middleclass – set off on a new (touristic) march.

In terms of the Internet usage, China has by now more than 560 million active Internet users (China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), 2012), constituting the greatest net population in the world. Although – or maybe because – of this population, in order 'to maintain the CCP's legitimacy and to protect national interests, the Chinese government continues its efforts to build a national "e-border," also known by some in the West as "The Great Firewall of China"' (Yuan, 2010, p. 493). The efficacy of such strategy is however debated. For instance, while scholar Wenli Yuan (2010) notes that 'even foreign Internet companies, such as Yahoo! and Microsoft, have cooperated with the Chinese government in monitoring and reporting inappropriate online activities' (p. 493); according, instead, to Michel Hockx (2015), the Internet is – much more than the publishing sector – a privileged space of negotiation of what is considered morally and politically acceptable in today's China, in particular concerning (fiction and non-fiction) literature.

Within the Web, the blogosphere is an extremely active realm and platforms dedicated to travel blogging represent a highly popular online genre (Technorati, 2011). In fact, despite all the Cassandras that periodically predict the death of 'real' travel, both print and online travel writing continue to enjoy nowadays a commercial success, whose fortune rests on two key factors. On one hand, the exponential rise of tourism mobility worldwide has fuelled – rather than weakened – its appeal. On the other hand, the intrinsic formal looseness of the genre makes it highly adaptable to the market's requests and the readers' tastes. Specifically concerning this latter point, Nicholas Clifford (2001) wisely points out that

above all, there is about the travel account a directness, even a physicality, that is lacking in the work of the expert or the journalist. For the experts are bound by their academic sources, which are alien to us [...] while the journalists are trained to see tomorrow's story, which too quickly becomes yesterday's. (p. 8)

Differently from other figures, then, travel writers tend to be more flexible and open in their writing than other professionals, mixing registers and styles, anecdotes and descriptions, personal reflections and historical facts.

When it comes to the study of Chinese travel writing, one major academic work must be referenced: Richard Strassberg's (1994) *Inscribed Landscapes*. Strassberg investigates the evolution of the travel writing genre within China. By providing translations into English of texts authored by Chinese poets, aristocrats and scholars from the 1st century AD to the 19th century, Strassberg identifies the emergence of two canons. The main differences between the two have to do with the texts' purposes and their characterizing discourses: 'at one pole', Strassberg points out, 'was the

objective, moralizing perspective of historiography; at the other, a mode of expressive and aesthetic responses to the landscape derived from poetic genres that could be termed “lyrical” (p. 10). At the same time, to make these canons similar is the fact that they both offer a static representation of the experience. Indeed, in the case of ‘historiographic’ travel accounts, the travel narrative was largely subservient to the reassertion of the social, cultural and political status quo through a celebration of Confucianism and its founding precepts of waiting, detachment and balance. Similarly, those texts that praised landscapes provided a flattened representation of the journey in which the subject was merely a gazing ‘I’, rather than an evolving and (self)questioning figure. In both cases, then, China appears as a country to be contemplated and admired by keeping a certain critical distance from it and certainly not one to be challenged in its basic principles through the peripatetic experience of the traveller. In fact, as Strassberg notes, ‘whereas Western travel writing, with its novelistic orientation, emphasizes social events and portraits of noteworthy characters, the poetic underpinnings of Chinese travel writing tend to stress objects and qualities perceived in the landscape’ (p. 31). This means that Chinese travel writers tended to resort to the genre to chiefly indulge themselves and celebrate the country.

From these premises, this article aims at exploring the links between Chinese domestic tourism (or what are usually labelled as ‘home travels’) and Chinese-authored contemporary travel writing, both in print (i.e. travel books) and online (i.e. travel blogs). Travel books and travel blogs are regarded here as two differently mediated instances that realize the same generic matrix (Calzati, 2015). Hence, the article’s goal is to bridge the analogue and digital realms – the Chinese publishing market and the blogosphere – and explore, on one hand, how printed and online travelogues relate to the tradition of Chinese travel writing and, on the other hand, the potential of travel blogs as literary *and* political texts, in light of the greater freedom that travel writers – as suggested by Clifford – as well as online Chinese literature – as suggested by Hockx – seem to enjoy. To be sure, the proposed transmedial comparison between travel books and blogs does bear implications in terms of (different) meaning-making processes and communicative goals; yet, to address here these issues would transcend the literary and generic standpoint that constitutes the core of the analysis (for an exhaustive discussion of these issues, please refer to Calzati, 2016).

In order to explore the above-mentioned points, the close reading of three contemporary Chinese-authored travel books and three travel blogs is offered. A few words are required about the criteria followed for the selection of the texts. Despite taking China as its object of study, the analysis presents a ‘transition’ from the West eastwards which implicitly reasserts – rather than conceals – the Western stance that also my academic persona unavoidably embeds. The analysis starts from a travel book – *The Long March* (2006) – written in English by a Chinese-born and currently London dweller: writer Sun Shuyun; then, it focuses on the work – simultaneously in Chinese and in English – by Chinese-born and Hong Kong-based writer and artist Sheung Chuen Pak: *ODD ONE IN II: Invisible Travel* (2009; original title: 單身看II: 與視覺無關的旅行); finally, it concludes with the travelogue in Mandarin – *One Day in Beijing* (2004; original title: 在北京一天能走多遠) – authored by two Chinese writers and artists: Zhen Gao and Qiang Gao, also internationally known as the ‘Gao Brothers’. The close reading of travel blogs follows a specular path: first, it focuses on the English blog Chinanomads.com, created by two American and China-based bloggers Chi-Chi Zhang and Zachary Wang (2014) (whose surnames reveal clear Chinese roots); second, it takes into account the blog in Chinese by Hong Kong travel writer Kong Pazu (2015), found on the platform Ironshoetravel.com; third, it analyses the travel blog *Heading to Magnolia Yaowang Valley for a Photographic Immersion* (2016) by Chinese blogger (from the Mainland) Zhao’s Ghost, hosted on the popular platform Travel.sina.com.

By unfolding such transition, the analysis hopefully acknowledges also the presence of special administrative regions within China and, consequently, the extent to which both 'Chinese traveller' and 'home travel' become contested terms. In fact, the close reading will bring this to light in connection with the writers' own biographies, which will be discussed by calling upon the writers' own voices. These were collected through a number of interviews conducted in Hong Kong and Mainland China during a 3-month fieldwork from March to May 2015.

The Long March deconstructed

Sun Shuyun is a renowned Chinese writer and filmmaker. After studying English literature at Beijing University, she obtained a scholarship from the University of Oxford, where she moved to complete her studies. Having lived in the United Kingdom for decades, Shuyun occupies by now a privileged position from which to speak about the Middle Kingdom to both Chinese and Western audiences. *The Long March* (2006) recounts Shuyun's effort to retravel the whole itinerary of the Long March and, along the way, to meet up with the few surviving veterans who accomplished that endeavour. Shuyun's goal is to understand, from direct testimonies, if what is narrated in Chinese history books is plausible. In fact, reality turns out to be much more complex and contradictory than the one construed by the Communist Party about the March. It could also be suggested that the author's purpose, rather than being instrumental to a celebrative representation of China (as was the case with historiographical classic travelogues) is to exploit the journey in order to destabilize many of the commonly held assumptions about the country's recent history. In the book, indeed, at least three discourses about the Long March intertwine: the one of the interviewed veterans, the one that belongs to Shuyun (as a representative of her generation, which followed the Long March's one) and the official discourse promoted by the Communist Party. While at the beginning Shuyun's perspective is closer to the official one, largely due to her indoctrination since primary school, with the unfolding of the journey she realizes the extent to which veterans have a different story to tell. Each of these discourses is, at the same time, collective and individual; it frames the conception that a whole society has elaborated (and received) about the Long March, as well as the individual memory(ies) – direct or indirect – from which each subject derives his or her own representation. Emblematic is the fact that the book opens with a personal remembrance by the author: 'I was born to the sound of a bugle in the barracks of the People's Liberation Army where my father served; I grew up with stories of his battle' (p. 1). Acknowledging the cultural and autobiographical terrain on which the whole journey rests is of primary interest because it is precisely on such terrain that the author builds her desire to move beyond what she has been taught about the Long March. The discrepancies among these three discourses are overtly addressed by Shuyun while reporting the dialogue she had with a government clerk about Huang, one of the veterans:

'He [Huang] is only a peasant. You should really talk to old Wu. He used to be the Prime Minister's bodyguard. He knows things'. [...] I knew what he thought: it was only worth talking to the heroes and the big decision-makers; but their stories are already in our history books, told and retold until they have become symbols, the eternal refrain. Perhaps to him, Huang was not enough of a committed revolutionary, but his ordinary life as a foot soldier on the march was just what I was missing. (p. 28)

To be of greatest importance here is the *modus operandi* that Shuyun professes: if a reliable understanding of what happened during the Long March can ever be achieved, it will be by avoiding mainstream voices and contrasting those with the testimonies that have not been heard

yet. It is, in other words, an archaeological matter: of excavation, research, collation and assessment of the ideological charge of the sources. In so doing, the more she travels, the more the author delves into the incongruities of the (social) myth. In the end, the clash/encounter between Shuyun's own memories and those of the veterans questions the status of official history and rescues the value of bottom-up counter-narratives. A crucial episode that sums up these tensions is the recollection of the battle on the Xiang River in 1934, when the Red Army was escaping from the Nationalists. Shuyun writes,

This is the general description of it in the official history of the Long March: 'The battle on the Xiang River was the longest and most heroic on the Long March. It involved the largest number of soldiers and the fiercest fighting, with the heaviest casualties for the Red Army, a loss of almost 50,000 men in five days'. [...] The official story says that the Red Army lost two-thirds of its 86,000 men, but it is implausible that they could all have died in battle. [...] Nobody wants to admit it but the majority almost certainly deserted. [...] As Liu remembered, he hardly experienced any fighting until the Xiang River; even then, his unit was mainly running rather than fighting. (p. 79)

From this passage, the thickness of the propaganda's fabrication of the myth clearly emerges: a fabrication that – Shuyun notes – is sometimes based on minor adjustments, but often rests upon radical distortion or suppression of events. Eventually, then, the journey represents a way to travel back in time; a rescuing endeavour for the sake of truth before the testimonies of the witnesses will be lost forever; an individually accomplished journey whose narration, informed by the voices of the unheard, aims at deconstructing the institutionalized, collective imaginary of today's China's founding myth. This, as Shuyun's own words explain, is political travel writing at its finest:

The discovery of the journey begins much earlier than the physical displacement. [...] But it was difficult because the Party controls the books published. Therefore, the journey really played a crucial role and allowed me to bring home a significant different view from the official one. (Shuyun, personal communication, 16 December 2014)

Ignorance and knowledge, oblivion and rediscovery – to connect these polarized terms is travel, intended as a practice that, if mindfully performed, acquires an intrinsic political value. In fact, far from merely gazing at her native country, Shuyun traverses it and brings to the surface of the text – through her writing and memories – as well as to the surface of the present, the unexpected contradictions related to China's recent past.

Rethinking travelling and writing

Sheung Chuen Pak is a Chinese writer and artist. He was born in Fujian but migrated to Hong Kong in 1984 when he was 7 years old. At the centre of Pak's various projects is travel (and writing) in a broad sense: 'Travelling is one of the core excuses for my art works. It is what triggers my imagination', he affirmed during the interview (Pak, personal communication, 25 April 2015). In the book *ODD ONE IN II: Invisible Travel* (2009; original title: 單身看II: 與視覺無關的旅行), the majority of Pak's travel projects are collected: from his wanderings around Hong Kong, to his attempts to get lost in Tokyo and Turin, passing through his blindfolded experience in Malaysia. These journeys are then recounted through words, drawings and photographs, which both anticipate and follow the travel per se and come to encompass Pak's whole life (Figures 1 and 2 exemplify how the page of the book look like).



Figure 1. Pictures and text.

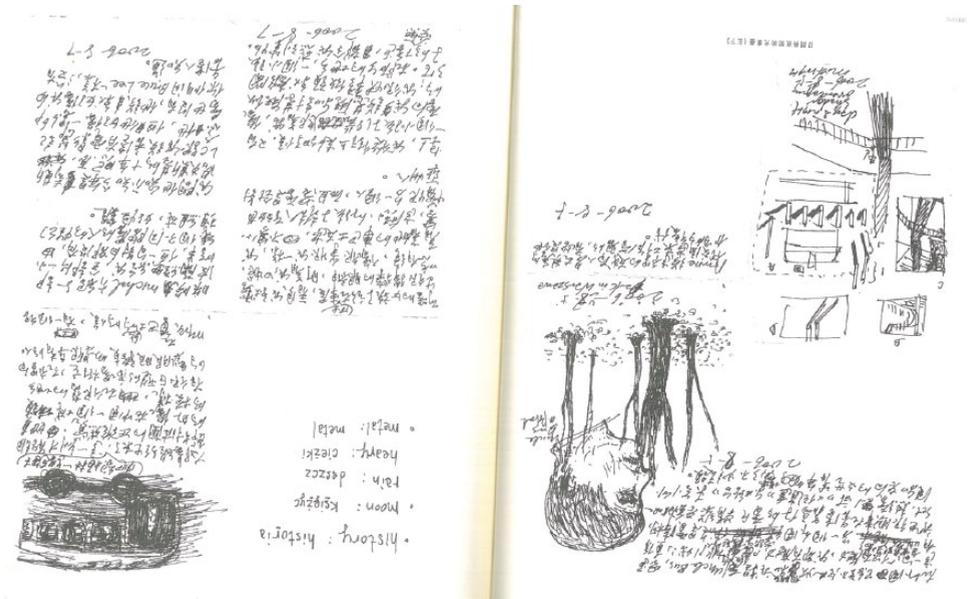


Figure 2. Drawings and handwritten text.

By reading the book, it emerges that travel not only constitutes the spark for creativity but also represents the matter upon which to reflect, with the consequence of reshaping travel writing as a committed genre for both the individual and the society. A very good example of this comes from Pak’s project about Hong Kong. He superimposed a page from a calendar over a map of the city, so that the latter was eventually divided into 31 squares. Then, Pak explored one square per day

over a whole month with the goal to deconstruct the city and look at it with different eyes. The ethos of the project is to rediscover Hong Kong, to promote the possibility of a different, more aware gaze through which to look at the city. This spirit echoes the founding principles of action of the Situationist International (SI), a French avant-garde movement born in Paris in 1957 and active until 1972. One of the goals of the SI was to perform a critique of the urban space through the practice of the 'dérive', a walking strategy which allows both traversing the city serendipitously and keeping a critical mind-set about the aesthetic and political charges of the surroundings. In this respect, Pak is also distant from the late 19th- to early 20th-century European figure of the flâneur in that he does not limit himself to stare at the city – as flâneurs used to do – but wants to challenge it. After having lived in Hong Kong for years, Pak's plan is to deconstruct the city as a commoditized space and look at it with different eyes. This finds confirmation in Pak's own words:

I would not say that the experience around Hong Kong revealed something new to me, but it gave me a new layer, a new angle from which to look at and delve into the city. Novelty, after all, only comes out of ordinariness. (Pak, personal communication, 25 April 2015)

As far as Mainland China is concerned, Pak confessed in the interview that he feels uncomfortable any time he travels in there, despite the fact that this is where he was born. Such uneasiness has chiefly to do with a sense of insecurity and displacement: a distress that is personal as much as political, or better, it is political precisely because it has to do with the personal limitations imposed on his activity (it is worth mentioning that many of Pak's works are banned in Mainland China, as well as his websites¹). It is probably in order to give voice to this sense of oppression that Pak once seized the occasion of a visit to Beijing to turn the trip into a political gesture. This happened when the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong was at its peak: Pak collected in Hong Kong various yellow ribbons – one of the symbols of the protests – and then disseminated them around the capital. In so doing, he projected over Beijing the protest that was set up in Hong Kong, eventually contaminating the former with the ethos of the latter. Despite such mutuality, however, Pak's specification that he 'chiefly did it for Hong Kong people, not Chinese mainlanders' (Pak, personal communication, 25 April 2015) betrays the author's proneness to think of Mainland China as a radically different place to Hong Kong, and certainly one with which relations are a matter of necessity rather than will. More broadly, Pak's goal, through his projects, is to open up a space of investigation that unpacks the always unstable relation between the travel experience and its accounting; a relation that is, at once, a form of art and a form of criticism. It is clearer, then, that while he distances himself from the classical conception of Chinese travel writing as a channel for providing an undisputed celebration of the country, Pak follows up Shuyun in thinking of travel as a practice that can challenge the political status quo within China: 'Seeing is not merely a visual sense', we read in the preface to the book, 'but an eye behind my back watching the world. [...] What you see will change how you see the world and what you think will shape the way you look at things' (Pak, 2009, p. 7).

Reportage in Beijing

Zhen and Qiang Gao – the 'Gao Brothers' – are two Chinese artists who are well-known both in China and abroad for their provocative installations, sculptures and photography, often revolving around the recollection of the Cultural Revolution. Apart from their artistic works, the Gao Brothers have also sporadically ventured into writing. In their 2004 book, *One Day in Beijing* (original title:

在北京一天能走多遠), which is of interest here, they recount a whole day spent wandering around the capital, the city where they have been living for a decade now. Two main axes structure the work: one is the exploration of ‘authentic life’; the other has to do with the (inevitable) political implications of making a reportage in (and about) Beijing. Concerning the former point, the authors, who thought of themselves in relation to the project as ‘witnesses, recorders’ (Gao Brothers, personal communication, 12 June 2015), adopt various strategies to appear as the mere gazing subjects of scenes that would unfold in the same way even without their presence. In particular, they take pictures from unusual angles in an attempt ‘to capture the “authentic” expressions and moment’ (Gao & Gao, 2004, p. 17), and they refrain from judging what they see, so that their engagement with the scene remains marginal. This stance approaches the Gao Brothers, on one hand, to modern and pre-modern Chinese travel writers who, according to Strassberg, chiefly reported on their journeys by keeping a detached position towards their experience; on the other hand, their project gets close to Pak’s conception of travel as a self-reflexive wandering, fuelled by the purpose of destabilizing that ‘banal gaze’ with which dwellers usually look at their own cities. In fact, the work shifts along these two positions: a (supposedly) disengaged look at Beijing and a self-reflexive attitude projected over it. Ultimately, despite all efforts to conceal the camera and approach people discreetly, the transparency to which the Gao Brothers point is only ideal. When we delved into this issue during the interview, the Gao Brothers manifested a much more ambivalent opinion than the one straightforwardly declared in the book about authenticity:

Neither pictures nor texts are better or worse. The authenticities of the two are relative, limited, and difficult to identify. Our task was to try our best to document the day objectively, but we did not think about how to identify authenticity. (Gao Brothers, personal communication, 12 June 2015)

This claim reveals the authors’ awareness of the intrinsic instability of their goal to simply record the events. Authenticity is not to be found in the portrayed subject; rather, it is a social and medial construction. The role of photography and language, then, is to kindle the feeling of authentic life, complying with the way in which society think of authenticity. This leads the Gao Brothers to seek to neutralize the effects of photography and language as means-of-telling, and to convey through them a sense of non-intrusiveness and non-mediation. The interview with them made also clear the extent to which the relation between photos and words in the book is, itself, political. One question addressed the occasional discrepancy between the text and the pictures. The authors replied,

We do hope the pictures can match the texts as much as possible, but due to the censorship and editing issues before publishing, some pictures and texts had to be removed. So some pictures and texts are not really matched. (Gao Brothers, personal communication, 12 June 2015)

This is a significant statement in that it charges the publishing process with a stringently political burden. In fact, the Gao Brothers shed light on the varying degrees of censorship to which Chinese authorities can resort when it comes to sensible content; it is, indeed, a matter not of completely silencing dissidents’ voices, nor of promoting outspoken propaganda, but of an ongoing and ever-changing compromise. This is in line with Hockx’s (2015) analysis about the functioning of censorship in China – both in print and online – as a process that demands to be constantly renegotiated. It was not possible to know more about the missing pictures. However, the very fact that words and illustrations are sometimes discrepant stands as a blueprint of the untold story of censorship undergone by the book.

As never before, travelling and writing come to represent for the Gao Brothers two conflictive practices, which can never be entirely coupled. Pleasures and duties, enjoyment and self-awareness, commitment and disengagement – to write about one’s own travel experience – be it around the whole country or in its capital – seems to be a matter of mutually exclusive options. Ultimately, the authors, possibly in reason of their own biographies – during the Cultural Revolution, when they were aged only 12 and 6 years, their father was unwarrantedly imprisoned – have chosen the committed side of the story.

Looking for China’s hidden gems

Chinanomads.com is a travel blog conjointly written (in English) by Chi-Chi Zhang and Zachary Wang (2014). Zhang and Wang, whose last names clearly betray their Chinese roots, are two Americans who spent roughly 6 years in China. We read on the ‘About’ page on the blog that Zhang worked as a research ‘fellow for the Institute of World Affairs’ with the goal to explore ‘how urban migration is affecting China’s economic, cultural, and political landscape’; Wang, on his part, ‘taught at Chongqing University Law School and worked as a transactional lawyer in Beijing’. The bloggers launched the blog in September 2012 when they moved to China, and they kept updating it until June 2014. The last entry, dated 2015, explains the motives which led to the suspension of the blog: ‘as you might have noticed due to the lack of new posts recently, we’ve moved back to the U.S. permanently. As always, we will hold China near and dear to our hearts. And hopefully we will be back eventually’. Such notation reasserts the deep connections that both bloggers maintain with China, which is considered – if not as their country of origin – at least as a second home. To an extent this also means that the bloggers’ travel tales spring out of a hybrid self-positioning; an outsider/insider stance according to which they are, at once, foreigners and dwellers in China; they are Americans, but they know China quite well and can fluently speak Mandarin. From this position, the bloggers speak to both Chinese and foreigners, at least those who can read English. In fact, many posts of the blog reflect such in-between positioning by being enriched with notes in Mandarin (e.g. locations names, accommodations and other travel information):

Name: Stops included the town of Yibin, the Western Grand Canyon Hot Springs (西部大峡谷温泉) and the Da Shan Bao Reserve in Zhaotong (大山包, 昭通). *What to Do:* See beautiful terraced farmland, soak in a hot spring, enjoy scenic mountain landscapes, and catch the elusive black neck cranes. (Zhang & Wang, 2014)

The primary intention of the bloggers – stated in the top left corner of the homepage – is to provide users with travel tips, by offering ‘a collection of our favourite treks across China, our honest takes on our experiences, and the hidden gems we find along the way’ (Zhang & Wang, 2014). Specifically, they aim to achieve this by looking at China differently, that is, beyond that tourist gaze, which often characterises those experiences limited to the most popular places. The passage above, which lists small towns and natural beauties to see in northern Yunnan, stands as an example, as does the subdivisions of the post by ‘hikes’ and ‘temples’, which is found on the left column on the homepage. In other words, Zhang and Wang trips are driven by the desire to plunge into China’s nature and escape major itineraries and metropolises, while providing an alternative look at the country. To be sure, they do also visit tourist places, but they always try to find an original point of view from which to recount the experience. For example, when visiting the popular city of Dali, they note,

China, our honest takes on our experiences, and the hidden gems we find along the way.

Northern Yunnan

HIKES

- AMNYE MACHEN
- YADING
- TAGONG GRASSLANDS
- KARISILA
- THE BLACK LAKE
- KUASHAN
- TIGER LEAPING GORGE
- ZHANGJIAHE
- SHANDEILA
- LUSHAN

TEMPLES

- KOHE
- REIBONDG
- TAGONG
- JASA
- JANGMAUSI

BY LOCATION

- BEIJING
- CHONGQING
- FILIPIN
- GUANG
- GUANGDONG
- HENAN
- HUNAN
- JANGXI
- QINGHAI
- SHANXI
- SICHUAN
- XINJIANG
- YUNNAN
- ALL DESTINATIONS

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ENTER YOUR EMAIL TO RECEIVE NOTIFICATIONS OF NEW POSTS BY EMAIL.



China is an extremely easy place to travel. Between high speed trains and cheap flights, the entire country is conveniently accessible at relatively low cost. And while we've traveled thousands of miles on the road as well, most of that has come

Figure 3. The post about Northern Yunnan.

Yes, there are a fair share of tourist shops in the Old City (大理古城), but the surrounding area feels authentic and connected to the stunning landscape. For us, Dali was a two night visit, but one could easily spend a week. (Zhang & Wang, 2014)

In fact, the whole post that follows is dedicated to Dali's countryside, which remains largely unexplored by Chinese people and foreigners alike. More broadly, the way in which Zhang and Wang think of their trips – usually weekend escapades from the city of Chongqing where they lived – as well as how they recount these trips revolve around a leisure and contemplative stance. This means that the posts are usually very rich in travel advices and descriptions of the places visited. It is no coincidence, in this respect, that photography plays a relevant role in the blog (Figures 3 and 4 show the opening of two posts: the text is relegated at the bottom of the pictures).

Pictures are of a very good quality, in a rather big size, and in all posts they come to occupy a primary position with regard to the written text (which is usually centred on informative details). This is how some users commented on the pictures:

In the Fields of Dali



Dali is one of those special places in China that everyone seems to love, westerners and locals alike. To those that have been there, Dali is synonymous with tranquility, nature, yummy food, and of course, beauty. And unlike its somewhat

China Nomads

Photo: matthieu. Edited: Dali Nomads. Photo by You. Proudly powered by WordPress Theme: Twenty Twelve Child.

Figure 4. The post dedicated to Dali.

[China Newz]: The pictures on your site are breathtaking!

[Francis]: Great photographs and blog

[Camila Ochoa]: Hey guys! Thanks for the great tips on your website, super helpful, and the photographs are beautiful!

[Maria Hochleitner]: Hey guys your photos are absolutely stunning! I think they are totally representing the 'real' China and not only the touristic point of view! (Zhang & Wang, 2014)

The last comment is significant in that it reveals the extent to which photographs mimic on a visual level the bloggers' attempt to travel alternatively around the country. According to the user, indeed, the pictures show how China 'really' is, beyond the image that tourism (and touristic guide)

delivers. Yet, to travel differently does not necessarily mean to travel critically. Overall, indeed, the ethos that permeates the blog is that of a respectful admiration for China; a sight-driven exploration that leads to discover natural beauties and cultural diversification. This approach vividly resonates with the canon of classic Chinese travel writing in that it favours a picturesque representation of China, avoiding to engaging directly with delicate political issues. Any effective form of critical reflexion that travelling and writing, as practices, might fuel is marginalized. This aspect emerges most emblematically in the posts that the two bloggers dedicate to Chongqing, where they lived:

It's sometimes difficult to document and reflect upon the city you live in. Because everything is so close to you and simply part of your daily routine, it's hard to step back and take things in as an objective observer. In an effort to take a more deliberate look at Chongqing, with this post we'll start to document the oft referred to mega city that is, upon an only slightly deeper inspection, more of a provincial place (though not in any pejorative sense), despite its concrete and steel skeleton. (Zhang & Wang, 2014)

Similarly to what happens in Pak and the Gao Brothers' works, readers are confronted here with the bloggers' attempt to write about their own city. However, differently from the cases analysed so far, in Zhang and Wang this project remains on a chiefly descriptive plane, without entering into a contextualized discussion – that is, historical, social and political – of the city's present. Put differently, the self-reflexivity embedded in Pak and the Gao Brothers' urban explorations vanishes; this is so despite the fact that, as seen, the bloggers have a deep knowledge of Chongqing and, more broadly, today's China (also due to their occupations). One user indirectly points to the 'superficiality', so to speak, of the bloggers' accounts when commenting on a post dedicated to the Tibetan region:

[J]: I really like your posts, but have you considered using Tibetan names for Tibetan places? Machen instead of Maqin, Ragya instead of Lajia, etc? I know it seems like a small thing, but linguistic imperialism can be a very real force sometimes. (Zhang & Wang, 2014)

In his intervention, the user unveils the underpinning ethnical and cultural tensions between the Han majority and the Tibetan minority, supporting the need to adopt Tibetan names in order to smooth China's imperialism over the region. In their reply, the bloggers agree with the user, and they mention that they resorted to the Chinese because they do not know the Tibetan equivalent. This is, no doubt, a fair reason. More generally, however, it is important to stress that the bloggers tend by and large to avoid to overtly addressing political themes, even when these are an inalienable aspect of the place they visit. The whole blog privileges a disengaged, leisure-driven and nature-oriented stance. In this sense, Chinanomads.com ties itself to the tradition of classic Chinese travel writing in which the celebration of China's natural beauties and cultural richness constituted the polar star of the writing.

'Light' travel writing

Kong Pazu is a Hong Kong-born travel writer and blogger. In 2010, he published his first travel book, *Spinning in Tibet – Selling Coffee in Lhasa* (original title: 風轉西藏 – 我在拉薩賣咖啡), in which he recounts his 6-month bike tour from Thailand to Tibet.² The title refers to the coffee shop that Pazu opened in Lhasa once he reached his destination: 'I settled down [in Lhasa] because I liked it very much', he explained in the interview, 'and I have launched this coffee shop, which

stays open half a year. Now, I usually spend six months in Lhasa and then I split the other half of the year between travelling and staying in Hong Kong' (Pazu, personal communication, 14 May 2015). This choice puts Pazu in a rather unique situation as a Chinese travel blogger: not only is he a sort of long-distance, seasonal commuter between Lhasa and Hong Kong but also what he writes inevitably bears the mark of his own provenance – Hong Kong – with regard to a region – Tibet – that entertains bumpy relations with Mainland China, similarly to his home city. When asked to elaborate on his perception of Mainland China and Tibet as a Hongkonger, first, Pazu's reply stressed similarities and differences: 'I found many resonances with what we have to study in school. We share a good deal of cultural background. But, at the same time, the way of thinking, the people, their behaviours are different' (Pazu, personal communication, 14 May 2015). Second, Pazu turned his attention to the political implications of being a Hongkonger in Tibet:

In Tibet I am part of the society and I have to be more careful and responsible for the people that surround me: for example, because I am the Hongkonger that has lived the longest in Tibet, it occurred to me to see that my words about Tibet are sometimes reported or quoted matter-of-factly. I am considered a kind of expert, so I have to be aware of this exposure. (Pazu, personal communication, 14 May 2015)

This passage unpacks the contradictions of Pazu's persona as both an insider and an outsider in Tibet. Because Pazu shares with (or has acquired from) Tibet what he perceives as a common situation, the blogger is able to delve into the region and write about it with a good degree of accuracy. In so doing, however, Pazu finds himself in a delicate position, insofar as the things he writes are recirculated among Chinese people and Hongkongers, as well as those same Tibetans who are the focus of his attention. Hence, he must be able to keep a detached perspective in order to be not only sensible towards locals but also attentive to how his pieces are received outside of Tibet. The interesting aspect to note is that, while the conception of travel writing as a form of ethical commitment returns here, it is precisely Pazu's deep involvement with Tibet that compels him to favour light topics over more political ones in his online writing. In this regard, Pazu revealed that

Online is kind of more spontaneous. I can touch upon a lot of different topics, without going into depth or worrying about the coherence of what I write. It is maybe more superficial, but wider in scope. When I wrote the book I had to plan the writing more carefully. I think printed publications are more accurate. (Pazu, personal communication, 14 May 2015)

When we met in May 2015, Pazu had published only a few posts on the platform Ironshoetravel.com. The homepage of the platform presents the heading at the centre, two navigational bars – one above and one below the title – and then the latest updates directly below (in the form of a slideshow). By reading the labels of the major navigational bar below the title – 'Latest News', 'Walker Mood', 'Local Riders', 'On Travel', 'Top Travellers' – it is evident that the platform mainly revolves around travel and travellers, marginalizing other informative or commercial aspects (Figure 5).³

Pazu's pieces provide readers with insights into the behind-the-scenes of his long experience as a traveller and seasonal dweller in Tibet: they go from one dedicated to his acclimatization in Tibet – *My Sharing on How Breathing Keeps Me Warm in Lhasa* – to his confession to no longer using shampoo in order to save some space in his backpack – *In the Past 12 Months, I Used No Shampoo or Shower Gel* – passing through a post in which he gives some suggestions on how to keep fit while on the road: *In the Past 6 Months, I Spent 7 Minutes Doing One Exercise Everyday*. In line with what he said in the interview, Pazu's posts provide most of the time a spurious collection of



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- 行者心情
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標籤

Figure 5. The homepage of Ironshoetravel.com.

‘light’ topics. This is so even when a comparison between Tibet, Mainland China and Hong Kong – which might lead to address their delicate relations – is overtly constructed. The following extract, for instance, connects them on a gastronomic plane:

Traveling was supposed to be about seeing different worlds, but I still kept going to places that looked familiar. [...] Some people asked me if Tibetan drivers spoke Cantonese, and some people asked me why coffee shops in Lhasa did not serve Hong Kong noodles. Do not get me wrong, I do not oppose doing these things that give us the feeling of safety while traveling, and I am not against eating Chinese food when overseas. In Lhasa I might eat pizza too, but when I go back to Hong Kong I might go to Tibetan Buddhist Centre, because I miss Tibet. What I am concerned is that I might be looking for this sense of familiarity so hard, that I might not feel and appreciate the new environment. (Pazu, 2015)

No doubt, a post like this one fits well within an online travel blog platform, insofar as it gives – as the Web demands – an enjoyable and brief aperçu into the petty difficulties of travelling. Yet, it is significant that also a committed travel writer such as Pazu – his long journeys allow him to plunge into the hosting culture and write from a self-conscious position – refrains from offering any critical insights. In the passage above, Pazu does show a good degree of self-reflexivity: his, after all, is not a plain description of the places visited or the things done when on the road; yet, despite weaving a thread among three realities whose tensed relations are a constitutive part of their everyday life, the discussion is maintained on a ‘safe’ plane. While this approaches Pazu to Zhang and Wang, it seems to be ultimately discordant with Hockx’s (2015) findings about online Chinese literature, which is considered as significantly more audacious than print publications due to the Web being a space where more easily negotiate the boundaries of ethics and political activism. Rather, in Pazu’s case, it seems precisely the potentially global exposure of his posts that urges him to be more cautious about addressing delicate issues.



Figure 6. The homepage of the platform.

Disengaged online travel writing

Sina.com.cn is the main online service provider for the Chinese-speaking world. Its section dedicated to travel – Travel.sina.com.cn – is rich in a varied array of information. The main bar at the top of the homepage contains the following links: ‘Top’, ‘Destination’, ‘Theme Breaks’, ‘Travel Raiders’, ‘Pictures’, ‘Air Tickets’, ‘Hotels’ and ‘Blog’ (Figure 6).

Blogging, hence, is only one aspect of the whole website and travelling constitutes a mere section within the broader conception of mobility as entertainment. In fact, even from a cursory survey of the platform’s blogs, it appears that the majority of them report tourist-related and leisure-guided experiences. In order to investigate more closely what is written in these accounts (and assess the extent to which they follow those studied so far), one case study is analysed: the blog *Heading to Magnolia Yaowang Valley for a Photographic Immersion* (2016) by blogger Zhao’s Ghost. The journey, which counts five stages, takes place in Sichuan, just out of Chengdu, in one of the greenest and naturally best-preserved provinces of China. As the title of the blog already suggests, the journey involves the plunging into nature and the admiration of the vivid colours of Chengdu’s countryside at springtime. Since the outset, then, the trip is aesthetically connoted. This finds proof both in the text and in the pictures. An extract from the first post reads as follows:

Every year, when magnolias blossom, the Yaowang Valley organizes a Magnolia Festival. In the past, Qiang people would come here to worship the mountain. Artists, witches and shamans, acrobats, and craftsmen would all come from nearby villages and towns to show their skills and art. Yaowang Valley is rich with tourist attractions and beautiful scenery. Its vast seas of pink petals and flowery rains were enough to make us surprised, excited and lost. After we got tired, we went to Luofu Mountain Hot Springs. This is a quite popular location in Mianyang due to its emerald green spring waters. [...] Since places in China with such unique medical and health benefits are rare, its slogan is ‘Holy water of Fushan Mountain, the world’s one and only’. (Zhao’s Ghost, 2016)

The blogger motivates his trip to Chengdu’s surroundings with the blossoming of Magnolias, which once a year turn the whole region into a ‘sea of pink petals’. To support this, the pictures show a pink-saturated landscape. Moreover, their presence dominates the page and relegates the



Figure 7. The opening screenshot of the blog by Zhao's blog.

written text, as it was the case with Chinanomads.com, to a secondary explicative role. Figure 7, which constitutes the top part of the blog's homepage, demonstrates the extent to which it is photography to guide the reader's experience.

It is only when the blogger links the Magnolias Festival to the ancient traditions of the Qiang people, who inhabit the valley, that the text disjoins itself from the photographs and provides information that pictures cannot convey. In turn, these latter notations contribute to shape the blogger's persona, if not as an expert of the Yaowang Valley, at least as a traveller who is able to knowingly tour around the region, at the right time of the year, and to give useful suggestions to other travellers.

After that, the opening post unveils the entertaining reason behind the journey: the blogger mentions some good resorts where to relax and reinvigorate the body (and the pictures further supports this). Overall, the blogger shifts between a description of what is worth seeing in Sichuan (beyond the typical landmarks) and a more self-indulgent, entertaining attitude (which indirectly winks at other travellers). This blog is, of course, just one example out of the thousands that are hosted on the platform. Yet, it is evident that the blog follows the trend of the others analysed so far in that it overtly unfolds a conception of the travel experience (and its accounting) as an activity aimed at enjoying the natural beauties of the country while taking a break from the city. Similarly to Zhang and Wang – and in line with classic travel writing – it is landscape to which the blogger dedicates the greatest attention and he does so by maintaining a descriptive standpoint. This has the consequence to flatten out any critical perspective and enclose the whole experience within a touristic frame.

Conclusion

This article proposed a transmedial comparison between three contemporary travel books and three travel blogs about China, authored by writers with Chinese origins/background. The article aimed at understanding the extent to which these texts follow the canon of classic Chinese travel writing

– as a genre to which writers resorted to celebrate the country either historiographically or naturally – as well as the extent to which travel blogs, being published on a hypothetically more democratic space, can be politicized texts.

Findings subverted, at least partially, the premises. On one hand, contemporary travel books manifest a decisive politicization. This happens on varying levels and also depending on the authors' biographies: Shuyun digs into China's recent past, dismantling one of its founding myths, the Gao Brothers question, instead, Beijing's everyday life and let the 'political' emerge from their wanderings, while Pak turns travel and writing into political tools, in the broadest sense, for challenging either his own sense of familiarity with Hong Kong, or the oppressive shadows of China's central power. Beyond these differences, it is clear that contemporary Chinese travel authors distance themselves quite radically from the tradition of classic Chinese travel writing, as surveyed by Strassberg, in that they refrain from resorting to the genre as a vehicle for an uncritical admiration of the country.

On the other hand, the tendency to maintain a contemplative stance towards the experience reappears in Chinese travel blogs. Here, the hegemony of visual elements, together with the fact that posts are chiefly descriptive, conjure up a representation of China as a place to be looked at, rather than one to challenge (and certainly one where political issues are marginalized). Again, differences among the bloggers analysed can be retrieved: if Pazu opts for overlooking sensible political issues in order not to displease the Tibetan people among whom he lives (and he favours 'light' topics), Zhang, Wang, and Zhao's *Ghost* all deliver accounts which praise the aesthetic beauty of China and reassert the idea of travel as an escapade from routine.

The results concerning travel blogs are in contrast with Hockx's argument on the Internet Chinese literature, according to which online fiction and non-fiction texts are more audacious than printed works because the Web, differently from the traditional publishing sector, is a space where political and moral boundaries are more easily renegotiated. It must be acknowledged that Hockx's analysis focused exclusively on websites and writers from Mainland China, while this article trespassed the continent addressing also the work of authors from Hong Kong (and who showed a hybrid self-positioning). This might explain in part the discrepancy of the findings. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering, as a counter-example, that also Pak's websites, despite simply showcasing his artistic works and the prizes he has received over the years, are censored in Mainland China. This seems to reveal a certain instability and arbitrariness of China's online censorship, irrespectively of whom the blogger is or what the content published is about.

Overall, from this study emerged that travel bloggers tend to be much more reluctant (than their peers in print) to address sensible issues. This, as seen particularly in Pazu and Zhang and Wang, lead bloggers to dilute the political differences and tensions that endure between regions (i.e. Hong Kong, Tibet and Mainland China). However small the present analysis might be, it revealed the necessity to further investigate the links between print and online Chinese literature, as their mutual influences, which are constantly evolving, could be telling of paradigmatic shifts in the censorship activity, of new literary trends, and also of the ways in which writers negotiate – consciously and unconsciously – what is to be included in their print and online works in order to be socially and politically accepted.

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Notes

1. Please refer to <http://www.oneeyeman.com>
2. To the book, Pazu also adds the publications of travel articles on magazines and the regular posting on his Facebook page and the platform Ironshoetravel.com.
3. Fred Fai Lam, the founder of the platform, described it as follows:

We wanted to create a website that included mainly travel blogs and also some news about travel, but not guide-related information such as transport costs or accommodation. We want to provide stories: good articles, literarily speaking; in-depth analysis or inside stories. (Lam, personal communication, 18 April 2015)

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