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# Retail tours in China for overseas Chinese: Soft power or hard sell?

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### ABSTRACT

We used analytical auto-ethnography to explore the package tour experience of overseas Chinese in China. Soft power and hard sell both emerge as integral aspects of this *sellscape*. Soft power capitalizes on participant motivations of cost, culture, curiosity and consumerism and is manifest in high quality and low cost facilities and services. Hard sell occurs in shopping venues and is characterized by aggressive sales tactics and captive settings. Dissatisfaction with hard sell, however, is 'negotiated' and does not outweigh overall satisfaction, suggesting that tours contribute positively to the geopolitical sustainability of the Chinese state. Optimal mobilization, however, is more likely through more explicit government involvement.

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## Introduction

China is the third most visited destination-country, with international arrivals reaching 57.6 million in 2011 (UNWTO, 2012). A large proportion derives from the 45 million overseas Chinese (Liu, 2011), who are a critical source of foreign investment (Li, 2012) and play an important role in mediating relations between their country of origin and China, increasingly through tourism-related contexts (Cao & Zhang, 2012). One of these contexts involves selling-intensive package tours, advertized as government-sponsored, that target overseas Chinese in developed countries. Conscious that China is mobilizing its cultural and tourism resources to extend its strategic influence (Overseas

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Chinese Affairs Office, 2010a, 2010b), the first two authors, who are both overseas Chinese, each participated in such a tour. They used modified autoethnographic techniques to better understand the factors that inform and influence the touring experiences of tour members. We concluded from analyzing the collected field evidence that these tours situate at the intersection of soft power projections and hard sell imperatives, thereby presenting a form of tourism with both geopolitical and economic sustainability dimensions. Having introduced the study, the paper now provides appropriate context from the literature, including geopolitical projections of soft power, travel by overseas Chinese to China, and issues associated with Chinese tour operations.

### Soft power projections and retail tours for overseas Chinese

Contemporary narratives of sustainable tourism normally invoke ‘triple bottom line’ outcomes wherein destinations strive to respectively minimize and maximize economic, environmental and sociocultural costs and benefits. Weaver (2010) adds a *geopolitical* dimension that recognizes tourism’s capacity to sustain attendant political structures. International markets are implicated through the projection of a country’s positive cultural and environmental images. Other nations, including former antagonists, thereby gain understanding of and connection to the projected state, which is also strengthened by increased foreign exchange earnings. Domestically, geopolitically sustainable tourism is manifested in the promotion, to residents, of nationhood icons or events to build a common sense of pride and belonging. Solidarity is also promoted by encouraging citizens to visit other regions of the state (Ding, 2011; Weaver, 2010). Building a positive national image is particularly important as a branding strategy for the globalized marketplace and is essential to maximize environmental, economic and sociocultural benefits for the nation (Ding, 2011). One way that governments achieve these geopolitical objectives, and hence other facets of sustainability, is by projecting soft power.

Soft power is the ability to get others to want what you want through co-option. Hard power, in contrast, is coercion exercised typically through military threats and trade sanctions (Nye, 2008a). Soft power attempts to influence the behavior and preferences of others to achieve a specific goal, essential in a political context to allow others to see the same goal (Nye, 2008a, 2008b). Thus, soft power is an “authority or power-to-act which is used to invoke centuries-old thought lines and longstanding ways of seeking and knowing the world” (Hollinshead, 2011, p. 1115). Soft power is a key factor in the development of contemporary China, which is re-emerging as a superpower (Liu, 2011; Wilkins, 2010). China’s economy has restructured from socialism to quasi-capitalism and entrepreneurship with ‘socialist characteristics’. Amazing economic results have ensued (Zhang, 2002), and China is projected to overtake the United States as the leading economic power by 2030 (World Bank, 2012). Accompanying this transformation are strong intentions to use indigenous cultural and economic influences to promote Chinese ideology as an attractive alternative to Western values, and to construct a positive external national image (Nye, 2005).

A key resource for building national image is compelling culture (Nye, 2008a), and one important component of soft power is the positive communication of cultural values to foreigners (Gill & Huang, 2006). China uses soft power to spread its culture globally, from sponsoring Chinese cultural festivals to promoting economic development based on a country’s own characteristics, with “ruthless willingness to innovate and experiment” (Ramo, 2004, p. 4). Also relevant are the establishment of Confucius Institutes and increased China Radio International broadcasting in native languages (Nye, 2005). International tourism policies highlight the interdependency between inbound tourism growth, economic development and soft power projections. Policymakers have acknowledged that “China’s continuous economic and social development, steady reform and opening-up, increased foreign economic and cultural exchange, enhanced overall national strength, and improved international image as a peaceful, secure and developing nation, have brought new opportunities for inbound tourism development” (China National Tourism Administration, 2007, p.1). Inbound tourism, in turn, promotes China’s overall image, culture, and civilisation (China National Tourism Administration, 2007). The 2011 establishment in Australia of the first Tourism Confucius Institute recognizes the growing strategic importance of international tourism as a geopolitical tool.

Research on the effectiveness of China's national image in attracting foreign tourists reveals that culture and nature influence intentions to visit more than gains in economic development (Shani, Chen, Wang, & Hua, 2010). China's improving national image has also elevated the confidence of its people (Shih-Ping, 2010) and its global standing as a preferred destination (China National Tourism Administration, 2007). Mega-events, in particular, convey a positive national image (Mangan, 2010) and counterbalance negative external perceptions of Chinese actions in Tibet and its treatment of internal dissidents. The 2008 Beijing Olympics, for example, allowed China to progress its political agenda of integration and internationalization by fostering key relationships and developing structures and policies that together help to articulate national identity. The latter was then projected to national and international audiences through the opening ceremony, venue architecture and efficient organization (Manzenreiter, 2010). Such mega-events allow hosts to sell their national identity to a world focused on that one country (Manzenreiter, 2010). The Beijing Games, abetted by a strong Chinese medal performance, fostered a positive national image among Mainland Chinese as well as overseas Chinese (Mangan, 2010).

### *Overseas chinese tourism*

'Overseas Chinese' are the 45 million people of Chinese heritage representing "different generations, places of origin, tenures outside China and political and ideological stances" (Li, 2012, p. 2249). Southeast Asia has the largest and longest-established Chinese communities (e.g., 75% in Singapore, 24% in Malaysia, and 14% in Thailand; CIA, 2012) and accommodates three-quarters of all overseas Chinese. However, this regional dominance has declined in recent decades with other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea recording more rapid increases. Newer and smaller populations in North America, Europe and Oceania have also grown rapidly. It would be inappropriate given this geographic diversity to view overseas Chinese as a homogenous group with common tourism motivations and behavior. Nevertheless, most retain some Chinese cultural identity and play an important role in China's global national image building. For decades China has benefited from such relations (Liu, 2011), facilitating efforts to effectively reincorporate itself into the global economy (Smart & Hsu, 2004).

Attracting overseas Chinese has therefore been a logical and crucial component of larger strategies to re-empower China, facilitated largely through soft power. Carrying out China's public diplomacy through overseas Chinese is in the purview of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (Xie, 2011), which encourages, sponsors, and organizes visits. In 2010, the sponsored mega-event themed "Overseas Chinese come *home* [italics ours] and watch the World Expo" attracted hundreds of thousands of overseas Chinese (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, 2010a). An annual roots-seeking summer camp in 2010 attracted 6,000 young overseas Chinese from over 50 countries to Beijing to learn Chinese and experience Chinese culture (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, 2010b). Both events, at least superficially, situate as genealogical (Santos & Yan, 2010), ancestral (Ray & McCain, 2009), root-seeking (Higginbotham, 2012) or legacy (McCain & Ray, 2003) tourism, which involves travel to one's ancestral homeland in search of ethnic or family reconnection. Weaver (2010) omits this consideration of attracting foreign 'countrymen' in his configuration of geopolitically sustainable tourism practices, referring only in general to inbound tourists. Other countries with similar large foreign connections, such as Ireland and Scotland, also strategize to attract those markets, though with more subtle geopolitical and more overt economic motivations. High emotional attachment to ancestral homelands makes these markets viable and accessible (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2003; Scheyvens, 2007).

### *Issues in Chinese tourism operations*

Resources have been allocated to improve China's attractiveness as a destination, but investment and sophistication in marketing and monitoring are lacking (Gill & Huang, 2006). This can undermine soft power projections, as evidenced in media exposure of poor quality tourism experiences and unethical business practices. Authorities in China and elsewhere are alert to rogue operators who charge admission fees to free public spaces, change agreed itineraries, and accept kickbacks (Michael, 2012; Xinhua News., 2012). Notorious in Chinese outbound tourism are zero-dollar group tours,

where agents derive income by diverting tour groups to designated shopping outlets whose managers provide a commission on sales (Zhang, Heung, & Yan, 2009). As tourism is used increasingly to project soft power (Hollinshead, 2011), issues of possible ethical malfeasance in specialized retail package tours cannot be ignored given its potential to undermine China's national image building aspirations. Typically, these tours involve deeply discounted packages of five or more days, offered only to overseas Chinese, who are taken by bus only to preselected attractions and shopping outlets. Promoters typically claim government subsidy and support.

Such tours raise the tantalising question as to the degree to which motivations of projecting soft power and facilitating economic benefits through aggressive sales tactics are both implicated. Apparent government sanctioning indicates the fuzzy boundaries in China between the private and public realms, with communist state influences often being prominent in corporate power structures (Francis, 2001). One important implication is that tourist dissatisfaction potentially generated by those tactics may undermine the creation of goodwill as intended by soft power projections. Given the high interest in shopping, these package tours can first of all be understood from a retail tourism perspective as situations where tourists are captive consumers exposed to selected suppliers. Their only practical choice is to purchase fewer products from fewer suppliers at higher prices (King, Dwyer, & Prideaux, 2006). Such suppliers actively try to minimize interaction between tourists and non-sanctioned suppliers (Freitag, 1994). This captive approach, combined with aggressive selling tactics, is likely to produce widespread tourist displeasure.

A related operational issue is quality of the local tour guide, who assumes multiple responsibilities as guardian, informant, pathfinder, leader, mediator, mentor, confidante, entertainer, and parent (Wang, Hsieh, & Chen, 2002). Successful facilitation of intercultural interactions between tourists and host community, including between mainland Chinese and overseas Chinese, is largely determined by the guide's knowledge of local attractions and culture, attitudes toward both the origin and host culture, and interpersonal communication skills. Displays of emotional intelligence, involving empathy, respect, assurance and responsiveness, also influence tourist satisfaction (Min, 2011). Tour guides, accordingly, are critical 'coalface' agents of China's soft power projection to overseas Chinese and other foreigners. However, while China continues to exercise her soft power to create a positive tourism image, some practices adopted by Chinese tourism operators in both outbound and inbound situations appear to contradict or undermine these image-building aspirations.

## *Methods*

We adopted an analytic autoethnographic approach to understand the factors that concurrently inform and influence the touring experiences of overseas Chinese in China. This entails an interpretive, qualitative research paradigm informed by social constructivist ideologies. Grounded in the belief that knowledge is socially constructed and situated, it assumes that people differentially experience reality and their social worlds (Jennings, 2010). Given the interpersonal complexity of group tours and participants' cultural diversity, a social constructivist lens allowed the researchers to understand how meanings in these experiences are constructed and deconstructed. Tourism research mostly adopts a positivistic or post-positivistic paradigm, and it is therefore unsurprising that research into Chinese tourists has also emphasized Western positivistic traditions (Kwek & Lee, 2007, 2010; Wang & Davidson, 2010a, 2010b). This approach, however, fails to capture the dynamics and complexity of tourism experiences and their meanings as processes constantly under construction, deconstruction and reconstruction (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004). Autoethnography is gaining traction in tourism studies (Buckley, 2012; Coghlan & Filo, 2013; Schwartz, 1991) because it captures the lived experience of complex tourism settings.

Ethnic Chinese, in particular, often passively and reservedly express their expectations, needs and satisfaction as tourists. Insights are therefore more likely to emerge by observing as an insider (Chang, 2009). The multi-faceted, complex and highly subjective nature of tourism experiences can be more fully comprehended by those who have lived the experience (Coghlan, 2012; Getz, 2008), suggesting the appropriateness of autoethnography. Yet, we appreciated that conventional autoethnography is constrained by the use of self as the only source, commonly undeclared subjectivities of the researchers, and overdependence on one person's recollections (Holt, 2003). Reflecting on Getz (2008), who

calls for a holistic approach to understanding such experiences, we adopted an autoethnographic framework that utilizes the collection of primary data by two researchers and supplements this with analyses of other tour participants, promotional materials and blogs of past participants. This innovative hybrid approach departs from conventional autoethnography by including data beyond the ethnographer's own experiences (Deberry-Spence, 2010) to enhance the credibility and authenticity of our results.

Analytic autoethnography has five key features that require the researchers to be fully integrated into the interrogated social world (complete member researcher status), possess the ability to connect to the research situation and reflect on relationships between researcher and researched (analytic reflexivity), be highly visible in the research context and written text (narrative visibility of researcher's self), demonstrate ability to inform the social knowledge by the interrelationships between self and others (dialogue with informants beyond self), and commit to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006). Accordingly, the first two authors (henceforth researchers 1 and 2) each participated in a separate tour purchased respectively from travel agencies in the US and Australia. Our primary initial implicit questions were why members took the tour, how satisfied they were, what influenced their satisfaction, and how did intermediaries interact with tour members to achieve satisfaction and sales. Our primary data collection method was the compilation of travel diaries based on participant observation and conversations as well as self-reflection. Reflectivity is necessary and is influenced by *a priori* assumptions (Tribe & Xiao, 2011; Tribe, Xiao, & Chambers, 2012). Participant observation, commonly used in qualitative research (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004), allows researchers to learn and collect detailed information about tour participants through immersion in their lived world (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004; Silverman, 2001).

Interactions arising from this immersion allowed us to study behavior patterns that reflect internalized cultural norms and values (Silverman, 2001). Located in the participant-as-observer realm, researchers 1 and 2 were highly engaged with the activities and subjects. As our roles and presence as researchers were integral to the way this research was conducted, it was necessary for us to develop friendships and empathy with our fellow tour members and with intermediaries such as tour guides, coach drivers and service staff at relevant venues. Dialogue with informants entailed unstructured and informal interviews and conversations held throughout the tours. A standard checklist guided observations and conversations about members' motivations, behavior, experiences of service encounters, and perceptions of China as a destination. The research design and conduct complied with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and [Griffith] University's research ethics manual. Tour members were fully aware of the researchers' identities as university academics, and service staff was regularly consulted to verify preliminary fieldwork interpretations (Jennings, 2010). All participants were de-identified and no information that could harm others was exposed.

In mid-December 2011, Researcher 1 participated in an overland nine-day trip from Beijing to Shanghai with a tour group of 26 overseas Chinese tourists born or residing mainly in Australia and Indonesia (Tour 1). In early January 2012, Researcher 2 toured Beijing and surrounding regions for eight days with 33 mainly China- or Taiwan-born Chinese residing in Australia, New Zealand or North America (Tour 2). Promotional travel agency materials and travel blogs by previous participants were also consulted for additional data triangulation. For travel blogs to be included in our analysis, the described tours had to be similar to those undertaken in this study. The criteria used to determine comparability included reference to government subsidies, low cost, similar tour itineraries and, time frame within six months prior to and after the researched tours. We monitored eight blogs on websites popular among overseas Chinese such as sina.com, superlife.ca, ipeng.com, and wenxuecity.com. These blogs were conducted in Chinese or English. Fig. 1 summarizes the research design.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret data. This was undertaken both manually and with NVivo to identify, categorize, and code patterns (Corbin & Strass, 2008; Neuman, 2003). Table 1 illustrates the coding process in which, first, concrete surface text were open-coded and then categorized into axial codes to convey structural meaning (Neuman, 2003). Emergent themes were then established through the rigorous and structured analysis of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To ensure authenticity and goodness-of-fit, analyst triangulation was adopted (Corbin & Strass, 2008). That is, both participant-researchers took turns to independently analyze the same evolving dataset and then compared their findings to reduce potential bias that may arise from analysis by just one researcher.

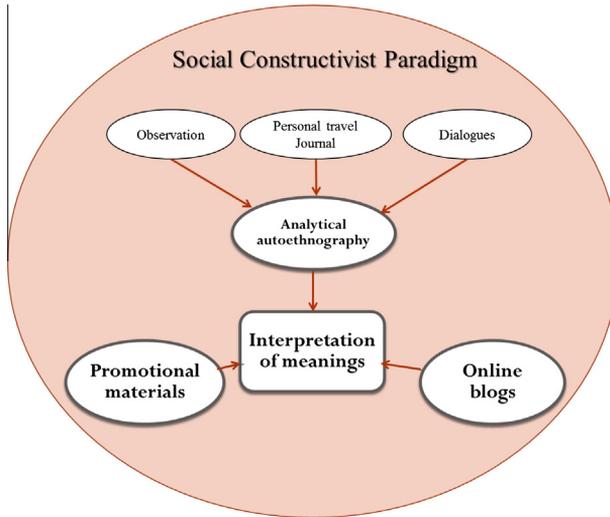


Fig. 1. Research Design

Table 1  
Coding Process

Text	Open code	Axial code	Reflective code
This tour was <i>coordinated by Office of XXXX, and sponsored by many tourism businesses</i> , because of these sponsors, we could offer the tour at this <i>extremely low price</i> and you could visit China on such a value added tour	<i>Sponsorship</i> <i>Low tour price</i>	<i>“Soft power”</i> <i>“Sales tactics”</i>	See Fig. 2
The culture of wearing jade is typically Chinese. <i>People who are proud to be Chinese should wear Jade</i> In Chinese culture, <i>jade symbolizes nobility and perfection</i> . In olden times, only the scholarly and the nobles wear jade as a <i>symbol of their moral integrity</i> . In Nanjing, every family has a precious jade that is passed down from generation to generation. <i>We, people from Nanjing do not buy cheap jade because the jade that we buy, symbolises our family name and pride</i>	<i>Soft propaganda</i> <i>Chinese values</i> <i>Promoting goods through symbolism</i>	<i>“Soft power”</i> <i>“Culture”</i> <i>“Hard sell”,</i> <i>“Tactics”</i>	

Major themes, representing the motivations of participating tourists as well as suppliers and intermediaries (Fig. 2), demonstrate how soft power and hard sell are manifested through these motivations to frame the tour experience.

It is important to recognize the position of the researchers in the research (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). The first author (researcher 1) is a Singaporean Chinese who has resided in Australia for over 15 years. She is bilingual and has extensive industry experience and research interests in Chinese tourism. The second author (researcher 2) was born in mainland China and has resided in Australia for over 10 years. Having both Chinese and overseas education backgrounds, she is familiar with Chinese culture and customs, but has also been exposed to Western values and influences. The third author is an Australian tourism academic of European descent who helped to develop and refine the conceptual framework, interpret data, and identify patterns. ‘We’, in sections 2.4 and 2.5, represents only the participant-researchers. ‘We’, in the section 3, represents all three authors.

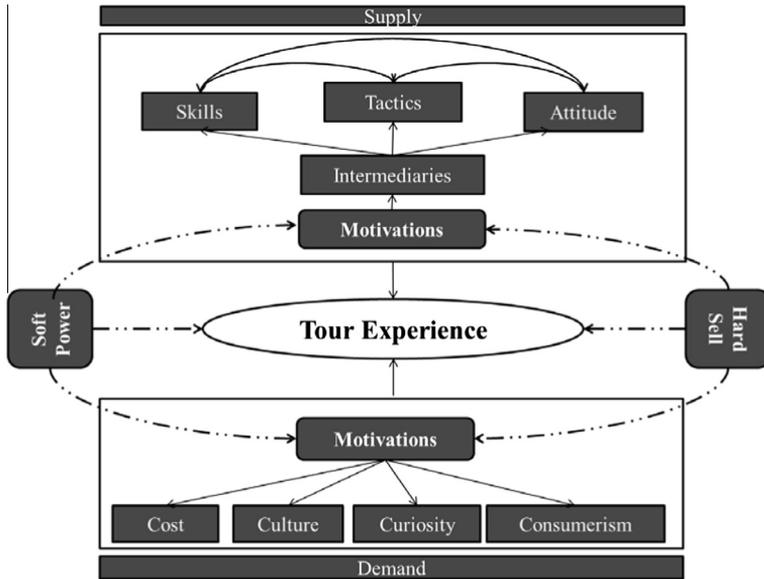


Fig. 2. Interplay of Soft Power and Hard Sell in Package Tour Experiences

### Results—demand-side motivations

Tour members were motivated to participate in these tours by cost, culture, curiosity and consumerism.

#### Cost

Soft power, through cost, plays an indirect but integral role in motivating group members to undertake the tour. Radically discounted tour costs superficially situate as a hard sell tactic, but participants, influenced by promotional content, perceived strongly that their tours were heavily subsidized by the Chinese government to showcase China:

*According to the policy of relevant departments, the subsidy is only available to overseas Chinese in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and a number of North and Central American countries. Participants must join the tour within five days of arriving in China, noting that subsidy quota is limited. . . although this is a business operation, various government departments have provided subsidies for you to experience and witness the changes and development in China (Tour operator's website, translated).*

Tour intermediaries reinforced this perception. One guide (Female, mid-thirties, Beijing) stated that it would be impossible to organize a tour package at this price without government funding. Other reactions include:

*The Chinese Office of XXXXX developed the idea of these super value tours. Instead of spending money on promoting the country through advertising, we want overseas Chinese to experience these changes in person (Tour guide, male, late thirties, Beijing, Tour 2, group briefing on tour bus, day 2).*

*We heard about this government subsidized trip from friends who have already come on the trip. We were told that this is a worthwhile trip as it is so cheap (Tour member, female, mid-fifties, Australia, Tour 1, casual conversation, day 1).*

*It's simply unbelievable...that a fully packed itinerary at that price is beyond its value (Wenxuecity.com).*

As participant-researchers, we differed in our interpretation of these sponsorship assumptions:

*Certainly, from my perspective as a Singaporean, there is no doubt in my mind that these tours were government sponsored. They have openly advertized it as such, and if there is no government involvement, wouldn't the government have stepped in and put a stop to it?* (Researcher 1, reflection, end of day 1)

*While I cannot fully rule out this possibility, I still hold doubts about the government's role in this tour as it is not common for the government to subsidize private tourism businesses* (Researcher 2, reflection, end of day 2).

Hotel accommodation and transport quality were rated highly by members with some firmly believing that government involvement made such cheap tours possible. Researcher 2 noted that:

*Being in contact with China through personal trips and family connections, I am not surprised by what I see, but I noticed that members were awed by the hotel. It looks brand new, with a magnificent lobby; it has all the facilities you would expect from a five star hotel. . . Internet (both wire and wireless) was available free of charge. . . Some said this would be a luxury in Australia, but made available to us because of Chinese government subsidy* (Field notes, Researcher 2, reflection, end of day 3).

### Culture

Chinese culture, another soft power locus, proved an attractive pull factor. Itineraries included numerous sites that embody China's ancient culture and heritage. As per promotional materials, tours offer "an in-depth understanding of the essence of Beijing's culture" and showcase "the depth and breadth of Chineseness" (Wenxuecity.com). Parents told us that they brought their children to learn and experience authentic Chinese culture and history, and reminisced about their own upbringing in China:

*I want to show my son China. Although we are originally from China and visited home several times, we were always busy with other things, and never had the chance to tour China in-depth. It would also be a good experiential learning of Chinese culture for him* (Tour member, female, mid-forties, Australia, Tour 2, group conversation on bus, day 5).

Most youth on the tours had little or no understanding of the Chinese language; they displayed little interest in the culture and were there because of their parents. We also witnessed negligible interest in genealogy. For adult members born overseas, curiosity about Chinese culture was a core motivation. Many felt that Chinese culture experienced overseas is inauthentic, and that authenticity can only be experienced by being physically present at historical sites. One member stated that "I watched so many Chinese dramas and always wondered how accurate the details are. This would be THE trip to find out" (Tour member, male, mid-forties, Australia, Tour 2, Day 3). At the Meridian Gate in the Forbidden City, he asked the tour guide whether this is where the emperor executed his officials, as heard on TV. The tour guide (Male, late thirties, Beijing, Tour 2, Day 3) responded that "these directors haven't done enough research, the Meridian Gate is where the emperor punished his officials, and execution took place outside the Palace as execution is deemed as inauspicious and ill-omened". Members also commented on the brief time spent at each tourist spot, while researcher 1 felt that the tour experience was limited to contrived settings. We both felt that this tightly controlled environment prevented us from venturing beyond the itinerary to interact and develop connections and empathy with locals.

### Curiosity

Like many tour members, we were motivated to witness China's rapid development for ourselves, inspired by ongoing media hype. Non-cultural sites in sightseeing itineraries centred primarily on China's economic development as represented by bullet train rides and Solana, an upmarket Beijing leisure and shopping precinct. Most members noted the transition of Beijing:

*Twenty years ago, China was poor and so were we. We were so poor that we did not even have money to stay in a hotel the night before we left China. Twenty years later, we really want to see what has changed* (Tour member, male, late-forties, Australia, Tour 2, conversation at lunch, day 5).

### Consumerism

We believe that shopping, like cost, appears as hard sell but can also manifest soft power since it enticed male and female members across age groups. Perceptions of cheap shopping combined with generally high quality goods and opportunities to buy counterfeit goods proved very compelling. Conversations with members made it apparent that most heard about these opportunities from friends and relatives who visited China previously:

*One member (Female, early twenties, Australia) approached me, asking if I could take her to buy fake goods as she could not speak Mandarin. . . . We went to an indoor bazaar where they sold handbags and were taken to a small hideaway behind the display shelves. We walked out of that hideaway with 6 fake handbags from different brand names. She reckoned that this shopping expedition was the highlight of the whole trip. Though I reminded her that they were counterfeit, she did not seem to care (Field notes, Researcher 1, upon arrival in Shanghai, day 7).*

*One member (female, mid-twenties, US) showed great interest in the imitation market that she heard from friends back home. Within a space of two hours, she bought nine imitation handbags and belts. She concluded that the fake products here are much better in quality and price than those in NY. (Field notes, Researcher 2, after visiting a Beijing market, day 7).*

We both discerned high purchase intent among members, and especially for souvenirs that reflect Chinese culture and serve as enduring reminders of members' pride in being Chinese:

*One member (male, early-fifties, Australia) spent 50,000 Yuan [US\$8,150] on a jade figurine to display in the foyer in his house. He indicated that he likes to buy things that reflect his Chinese identity and also believed that Chinese jade figurines can bring forth good luck and prosperity to the family (Field notes, Researcher 2, after a casual group conversation at the jade shop, day 6).*

### Results—supply-side behavior

Intermediary behavior was manifested in the hard sell element of consumerism which influenced the quality of tour experiences. This was conveyed to members through the coach driver, tour guides, group leaders, and sales personnel. Our field observations indicated that their effectiveness in satisfying tour members and achieving added sales of goods and experiences was dependant on successful projections of emotional labor skills, tactics and attitude, often manifested through aggressive shopping practices.

### Skills

'Skills' encapsulate the ability of front line service personnel to perform in ways that ensure the smooth operation of the tour. One important component is inter-personal skill. The following extracts illustrate variable capacities to negotiate the gap between members' expectations and actual experiences, which can influence satisfaction and subsequent attainment of soft power objectives. One guide prepared members for prolonged stays in designated shopping venues by evoking group harmony and mutual understanding:

*One sponsor is souvenir shops. Sometimes we do spend a long time in the shop and I understand that you may not want to buy anything. . . . However courtesy requires us to make this visit for them to showcase their products. I ask for your understanding—you may not like this particular shop, but please be patient and wait for other people to finish shopping as there may be times that others have to wait for you. Your understanding is essential to the group's experience and it makes my job easier (Tour guide, male, late thirties, Beijing, Tour 2, Group briefing during bus journey to a Jade factory, day 4).*

A "not-so-skilful" tour guide on one occasion displayed a forceful, confrontational and unrefined approach:

*The tour guide speaks in a loud and domineering manner. His speeches are overbearing and condescending. From the time he joined the group, the topic of his conversation centred only on one area, selling Chinese jade. However, when some members indicated no interest in jade as the wearing of jade is*

associated with elderly folks and also perceived as cheap, compared to diamonds, the guide would unhesitatingly launch into a heated argument with members. He claimed that “The culture of wearing jade is typically Chinese. People who are proud to be Chinese should wear Jade. In Chinese culture, jade symbolizes nobility and perfection. In olden times, only the scholarly and the nobles wear jade as a symbol of their moral integrity. In Nanjing, every family has a precious jade that is passed down from generation to generation. We people from Nanjing do not buy cheap jade because the jade that we buy, symbolizes our family name and pride. . . . How can you call yourself Chinese when you do not wear jade?” (Tour guide, male, late thirties, Nanjing, Tour 1, commentary on tour bus, day 4).

As researcher 1 noted,

*His aggressive attitude was not well received. At the end of the Nanjing tour, most members were happy to see him leave and felt that he lacked the skills of a good and effective salesman (Field notes, day 5).*

### Tactics

Tactics allow intermediaries to achieve strategic outcomes such as selling optional tours and souvenirs. They combine soft and hard sell techniques. The former include storytelling that promotes cultural values and health benefits, and baiting customers with gifts. Hard sell techniques are aggressive, persistent and one-directional with clear intent to sell. We perceived these to be threatening, intimidating and persistent. Sales often began with an exorbitant price tag allowing massive price reduction as the haggling progresses. A typical experience begins with a preparatory presentation by the guide on the cultural merit of the product, be it jade, tea, silk, or optional tours. Arriving at the designated sales outlet, we would be welcomed and ushered into a private room for the host’s lecture or demonstration. Examples include performance of the art of tea-making by girls dressed in minority tribal costumes, live demonstration of the effectiveness of medical creams in treating burns, and lessons in assessing jade grade and quality by slicing glass. Once performances concluded, sales staff concentrated on selling the products to members with higher propensity to buy, using hard sell techniques. We noticed that some members were uncomfortable with such tactics:

*I do feel scared when they take us to these private rooms, I feel that they are trying to isolate us. I cannot help wondering what they will do to us if we don’t buy. I’ve heard many stories about this sort of hard selling and I feel afraid. And yes, I am not comfortable with this sort of selling technique (Tour member, female, mid-fifties, Australia, Tour 1, in a Chinese medicine shop in Beijing, day 2).*

This sentiment was also felt by researcher 1:

*Being in the industry for quite some time, I am aware of force shopping practices and how it operates. However, tour group packages sold in Singapore do not condone such practices. I guess the tourist market in Singapore is far too mature and the Singaporean tourist would not tolerate this sort of behaviour. Personally, I am not taking this well and found comfort in some of my group members who felt the same way (reflection on bus journey from Nanjing to Wuxi, day 5).*

Researcher 2 was not as intimidated and neither were other members of mainland origin in her group, who quickly adapted to the hard sell because of their familiarity with Chinese practices through media coverage and past experience. As observed in her field notes:

*By far, most of us have learnt how to handle the constant hassling by sale persons and felt much more relaxed. Tour members bantered with the sales person that their boss should have arranged us to visit the shop much earlier before we have spent all the money in other shops. Many figured that if we wait till the end of the visit, we would be able to get the silk quilt cover set at only a fraction of the asking price. Other than constantly putting pressure on us, there was not much else the shop can do to force sales (Field notes, Researcher 2, end of day 7).*

A common tactic to increase sales was to take the group to a tourist spot on the pretext that it is a crucial attraction. In reality, there would be nothing much to see or learn there. We would then find ourselves led to another designated shopping venue conveniently located nearby. While the visit to

the tourist spot took only 15 minutes, our shopping venue stay would last one hour. Researcher 1 observed the following hard sell tactic:

*He (Tour guide, male, early forties, Suzhou) referred to the “XXX” incident, a big health scare in China whereby people fell sick from wearing duck-downs. He claims that his brother-in-law who works in a duck-down factory has advised him not to use down because of the bacteria that lives inside the downs. These bacteria, according to him seeps into blood stream and eventually attack the immune system. This talk continued throughout the day, even scarily pinpointing out members who wore downs and telling them that they will die from it. We were told that a better alternative is silk. Not surprisingly, we were taken to a silk factory the next day and spent three hours there (Field notes, Researcher 1, Tour 1, tour guide commentary in Wuxi, day 6).*

A Google search yielded no evidence of the veracity of this claim. We assume it was fabricated to solicit silk product sales.

### Attitude

‘Attitude’ is the intermediaries’ context-dependent display of disposition, manner, and behavior. When there were confirmed sales transactions at shops, we noticed that attitudes were more positive, whereas negative attitudes prevailed when members showed disinterest or demurred. Behavioral evidence of positive attitudes includes being chatty and accommodating. Attitudes also reflect intermediaries’ integrity and work ethic. Negative attitude is demonstrated through condescending behavior of ignoring or giving members a cold shoulder, and making nasty comments about recalcitrant members’ values and integrity to make them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. We noted that skills and attitude dance together, as skills were observed to influence displayed attitude. An example was their frequent attempts to truncate tour itineraries to allow more time in designated shopping venues. Guides possessing good interpersonal skills displayed more positive attitudes and were better able to justify excessive time in shops and itinerary deviation. A blogger noted that “*though the itinerary included many must-visit shopping stops, the tour guide did not put any pressure on us to buy, it was completely voluntary. As such, it was quite enjoyment to just wander around in the shop*” (WordPress.com).

In contrast, a member was rudely pushed out of a shop at the counterfeit market after failing to reach an agreed price with the vender. Bad attitude is also reflected in the following field note:

*On our way to Wuxi, the tour guide tries to sell us an optional that includes a boat ride along the Suzhou River and a live show for RMB350 per person [US\$57]. . . . He claimed that the selling of this optional tour is a directive from the tour company and members would show their support for him by buying it. When most members showed no interest, he became visibly upset and red in the face that we are not sympathetic to his cause, and did not try to support him, grumbling: “It’s ok; no big deal. It’s fine if you guys don’t want to go or support me. We won’t talk about it anymore. I don’t want to force you. It’s fine, it’s fine. We won’t talk about it” (Tour guide, male, early forties, Shanghai, Tour 1). After much discussion among members, the group decided to buy the optional, as no one wanted an angry tour guide for the remaining trip. Though not at all happy with his attitude, the group decided to let it go. We agreed that we are not going to let this distasteful episode ruin our trip (Field notes, Tour 1, day 5).*

As a direct hard sell consequence, most Tour 1 members and some in Tour 2 expressed dissatisfaction with the shopping and the behavior of some tour guides, but also exhibited resignation. According to a late entry in researcher 1’s diary:

*It is interesting to note the changes in tour members’ reactions to this forced shopping from the start of the tour to the end. In the early days of the tours, tour members (myself included) felt indignant that they (tour suppliers) were doing this (forced shopping) to us. In the beginning, we were shocked and afraid to some extent, particularly when they tried to isolate us from other members. As the tour progresses, we became angry and reacted strongly, refusing to cooperate at times. However, this attitude began to change and mellow as the days went by. I think we started to accept that regardless of how we feel, they are still going to take us to these shopping places and make us stay there till some purchases are made. And since we are already there and have paid for the tour, we might as well enjoy it. In a way,*

*this shift in mindset relieved much of the tension and members seemed more happy and relaxed (after another entire day of shopping, day 8).*

## Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that geopolitical imperatives of soft power and economic imperatives of hard sell in China concurrently mediate and motivate the consumption and supply of group tour experiences targeted at overseas Chinese. Such populations have not been recognized previously in the literature on the geopolitical sustainability of international tourism. The marketing and delivery of these tour experiences is closely aligned with how the Chinese government promotes soft power through tourism, and vice versa. Soft power draws on the nation's culture and projects it in destination marketing (Gill & Huang, 2006). Accordingly, to strengthen the product, tour operators incorporate culture as the main attraction and emphasize government sponsorship. This focus on Chinese culture, heritage and economic development is continually reinforced in tour promotions and delivery. We suspect that the emphasis on government sponsorship reflects marketers' understanding of the need to evoke soft power in tourism promotion. Its success is evident in word-of-mouth advertising—many believed that without government funding, the experienced quality is not possible at such a low price. Perceptions of government sponsorship, correctly or incorrectly, also assure safety and security.

Group members were very impressed with the exceptionally low tour cost and accompanying high quality of accommodation, transport and attractions, all of which conveyed (courtesy of alleged government sponsorship) a modern and sophisticated China retaining a compelling cultural heritage. Accordingly, we situate these tours in the *virtuous* upper right quadrant of product matrix 'A' where 'high quality' and 'low cost' intersect in the delivery of these elements (Fig. 3). Resultant very high satisfaction tentatively indicates, at least on this dimension, the successful exercise of soft power. A parallel product matrix 'B', however, is required to characterize the very different experience of the shopping venues, which embody the hard sell. This combines the aggressive selling of the soft power embedded in Chinese culture (e.g. jade and silk) with strategies that utilize captive settings and audiences. Accordingly, and in contrast to matrix 'A', we situate the shopping experiences in the *villainous* lower left quadrant of 'B' at the intersection of aggression and captivity.

But why incorporate into the tours a villainous shopping experience that can sabotage the soft power successes of the other tour components? Several factors suggest that hard sell may actually facilitate these successes and help to achieve implicit geopolitical objectives. First, ample provision of shopping opportunities is rational given the strong interest in shopping exhibited by tourists. Second, hard sell, ultimately, usually succeeds in achieving sales of desirable and culturally relevant souvenirs that may help to foster buyers' longer-term attachment to China. Attendant expenditures, thirdly, contribute to company profits and China's economy. Fourth, we have shown how intermediaries can mobilize positive emotional labor to minimize or pre-empt dissatisfaction that otherwise results from hard sell. Finally, though some dissatisfaction inevitably arose, most members adapted accordingly. Those with strong mainland Chinese associations already expected them; others became increasingly habituated and resigned through repeated exposure. Many vowed that they would not allow this to detract from the otherwise positive tour experience. Some even began to enjoy the experience and regard it as a game.

We concluded therefore that negative hard sell outcomes, for most participants, is ephemeral and constitutes 'negotiated' dissatisfaction that does not outweigh overall satisfaction derived from other tour elements—these tours can therefore be tentatively deemed successful as vehicles for furthering China's geopolitical aspirations. Less clear is whether this subtle interplay of soft power and hard sell reflects deliberate strategy or happenstance. Ham-fisted displays of aggression and attitude by intermediaries were common, and these can easily contaminate positive image-building through their rapid and widespread dissemination via social media (Shakeela & Weaver, 2012). Negative experiences, indeed, are disproportionately memorable and more likely to be shared with contacts (Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999). Telephone follow-ups with two tour members, to capture post-experience perceptions, revealed conditional satisfaction. Both agreed that the tours far exceeded their expectations, but that the forced shopping dampened their perception of a hospitable China. The investigation

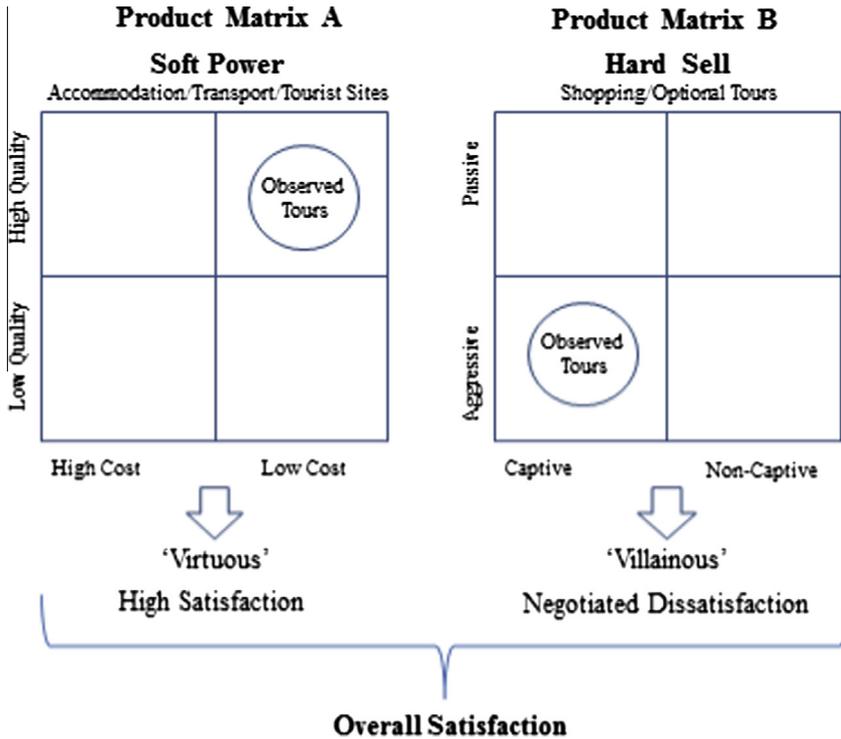


Fig. 3. Overall Satisfaction Matrix

of perceptual change regarding China emerges as a worthy topic for future research. Another expressed criticism was that the bubble effect of strict itineraries and captive settings constrains opportunities to interact with residents. This limits the potential for China’s human capital to project a more collective and visceral soft power in support of geopolitical sustainability.

Overly aggressive hard sell in particular may reflect design deficiencies in the soft power strategy and a mismatch of government and business objectives—that is, the desire of the operators to profit maximally from the participants may supersede their desire to project soft power on their country’s behalf, an abstract concept for businesses. This supports the criticism of China’s soft power approach with regard to the lack of sophistication and imbalanced resource allocations resulting in low investment in the marketing behind this strategy (Gill & Huang, 2006). Consequently, this product is not a true reflection of a government-sponsored tour that aims to fully and *skillfully* project China’s soft power to overseas Chinese tourists. By extension, it reflects a lack of understanding of the concept of geopolitically sustainable tourism and its successful execution. Tour guides, who ‘bond’ with participants over time, were confirmed as critical players in intercultural settings (Wang et al., 2002), while personnel at shopping venues are also implicated strongly in the hard sell. Both therefore especially require government-sponsored certification schemes and stringent codes of practice to promote ethical and professional behavior (Font & Buckley, 2001). China does have a licencing system for tour operators and guides, but its effectiveness is unclear, and there is no indication that this is informed by broader geopolitical motivations.

Although its alleged sponsorship is prominent in promotion, the role of government remains ambiguous. Researcher 1 (from Singapore) believes that there must be considerable government involvement given the sophistication of soft power projections and the apparent necessity of subsidies to cover low package costs, while researcher 2 (from mainland China) is inclined to see these as strictly commercial operations. Undoubtedly, government is implicated to some degree since such

companies cannot operate without official sanction, but we do not know if or to what extent this extends to the articulation of tour strategies and tactics to achieve geopolitical objectives. Repeated efforts to clarify this issue with appropriate authorities in China produced only evasive replies. Researcher 3 speculates that the relationship is deliberately disguised, perhaps so that government can project the soft power of the state through tourism without being implicated in the negativity of hard sell tactics. This seems plausible given the ubiquity of state involvement in the Chinese economy and established conventions of highly centralized planning.

Tour member roles also exhibit ambiguity. The lack of any evident interest in searching for personal familial information contradicts earlier speculation that these tours situate as a form of genealogical tourism. More relevant may be notions of 'diaspora', which implicates the movement of people away from a homeland and the descendants of such people. In diaspora studies, a sense of *displacement* is pervasive, which in some interpretations translates into narratives of removal, persisting consciousness of homeland, and desire for re-placement (e.g. the Jewish people and Israel) (Vertovec, 1997; Vertovec, 1999). Fundamentally, such narratives are geopolitical. While overseas Chinese participants also did not convey any explicit sense of missing or returning 'home', consciousness of being Chinese and desire to experience 'authentic' Chinese culture did motivate many participants; subconscious but powerful motives of ethnic reconnection and reconstruction therefore cannot be discounted. Alternatively, more pedestrian motivations such as curiosity and bargain-seeking may give way to such deeper reflections during the actual tour. From a geopolitical soft power perspective, such subconscious impulses present potential opportunities to convert curious overseas Chinese into sympathetic countrymen who cultivate multiple identities and make *temporary* returns (or re-placements) to the homeland for that purpose.

#### *Contributions and future directives*

This study fills a void in the literature as the first examination of the overseas Chinese package tour *sellscape*, a term we propose here to describe the multifaceted geographical, sociological, economical, psychological, anthropological—and geopolitical—context within which goods and services are developed, accessed, promoted and exchanged. Our novel research design, which augmented analytical and dual autoethnography with promotional material and social media content, gave transparency to the research process and added credibility to findings anchored in multiple subjective realities. Using this approach, we demonstrated for the first time how geopolitical considerations, through the projection of soft power, can play a central role in the retail tourism *sellscape*, influencing and being influenced by associated psychological, sociological and economic elements. We also showed how hard sell plays an integral, concurrent, and interrelated role in such experiences, evoking its own geographical, sociological, economical, psychological, anthropological and geopolitical implications. Fig. 4 provides an organizational framework for this and subsequent research.

Retail tours for overseas Chinese, we argue, are provided and encouraged to help achieve the geopolitical goals of the Chinese state through soft power projections of high quality and low cost services, facilities and attractions. The overlapping hard sell, displayed especially in target shopping venues, is a potentially positive or negative filter, depending on how it is managed. The interrogated *sellscapes* of this particular study revealed how the hard sell, even when manifested in participant dissatisfaction, does not appear to outweigh the positive soft power outcomes. However, this should not lead to complacency, since the exercise of 'positive' hard sell dimensions in the examined tours was hardly optimal. More concerted and explicit involvement by government, currently a matter of ambiguity, is one way in which positive dimensions of hard sell can be more effectively mobilized and negative or 'villainous' dimensions more effectively avoided. This could involve certification that encourages positive and discourages negative skills, tactics and attitudes. More sophistication is also required to identify tour members more resistant to hard sell so that such proclivities are respected in those who display them, and alternative strategies pursued. Younger members, who were generally disengaged from the tours, could also be more strategically exposed to compelling experiences so as to better cultivate future associations with China.

More theoretically, interactions of soft power and hard sell can be contextualized as a dialectic wherein the two opposites (as positioned in the two product matrices) can be manoeuvred toward



Fig. 4. Organizational Framework for Analysing Retail Tours in China Offered to Overseas Chinese

a geopolitically optimal synthesis that retains but transcends both (Weaver, in press). Eastern philosophical constructs of *yin* and *yang*, evoking complementarity in contradiction, may form a relevant cultural framework for such an analysis, which needs to clarify the ambiguous role of government as enabler or passive observer. Future research should also try to determine if the soft power/hard sell nexus in package tours is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, even regarded perhaps as *appropriate* in such contexts. Regarding limitations, we have concerns about the representativeness of online material. This study applied specific criteria in identifying and selecting appropriate blogs, but we are uncertain about blogger identities and other factors that may influence their opinions. Our field observations suggest that the tolerance and intensity of emotion displayed toward hard sell varied among group members with varying degrees of cultural consciousness, indicating a need for in-depth research on the psychology of these tourists, including the period following the tour experience.

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