

Chapter 5

Sustainability and the Tourist Wall: The Case of Hindered Interaction Between Chinese Visitors with Malaysian Society



Fei Long  and Can-Seng Ooi 

Abstract Many tourists want to travel in a more socially sustainable manner, which may mean that they have to engage more meaningfully with the host community. Tourists however inadvertently travel in bubbles. Tourist bubbles reduce tourist anxiety but they also build tourist walls between them and the host society. The wall seems to prevent tourists from a deeper comprehension of the host society. We use China's outbound tourists in Malaysia as our case. Including Malaysia, destinations and businesses are catering to Chinese tourists by providing more conveniences and comforts to them. Tourism promotion agencies are adopting China's social media platforms to disseminate relevant information. Consequently Chinese tourists may not have to use other platforms to communicate and interact with the world. Served with largely Chinese content and perspectives, host-guest appreciation may remain shallow, with few encounters that truly promote mutual respect and understanding to enhance a more socially sustainable tourism. This exploratory study looks at how Chinese tourists publicly review Malaysia on two top Chinese travel-sharing websites (i.e. [Mafengwo.com](https://www.mafengwo.com) and [Qyer.com](https://www.qyer.com)). It is found that there is a conspicuous silence on the discriminatory policy against Malaysian Chinese in those reviews even though the manifestations of that policy is omnipresent. Thus, we discuss how a Chinese tourist wall is constructed, how tourist businesses are inadvertently strengthening that wall, and how the wall limits the attainment of social sustainability goals. In addition, we are also suggesting the importance of acknowledging silence in data analysis. This paper makes contributions to the tourism literature on Chinese tourists and the complexity of the host-guest relations with regard to social sustainability of tourism.

F. Long (✉)

UKM-Graduate School of Business, National University of Malaysia (UKM),
Bandar Baru Bangi, Malaysia

C.-S. Ooi

School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania (UTAS), Hobart, Australia
e-mail: canseng.ooi@utas.edu.au

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5.1 Introduction

Malaysia seems to be the perfect destination for visitors from China. Because of its significant Chinese population, interaction between hosts and guests would be more seamless. A more meaningful understanding of the local community by visitors would also emerge. In the wider context, such a deeper engagement is promoted and encouraged by champions of sustainable tourism, as the visits are not merely commercial, superficial and economically exploitative. Hosts will not only be more welcoming, the visitors are also seen to be part of the community. However that deeper appreciation seems to remain elusive between hosts and guests in Malaysia and its Chinese visitors. This chapter highlights a set of social dynamics that prevent greater understanding of the host by Chinese visitors. We will: (1) highlight the inadvertent construction of the tourist wall that blocks communication and understanding; and (2) point to the importance of reading silence or omissions when understanding how tourists describe their experiences. By doing so, we will accentuate another factor that hinders host-guest interaction and understanding, and will also initiate a discussion on the research of silence in tourism studies.

As advocated, for tourism to be sustainable, the interlocking concerns of the economy, the society and the environment must be addressed (Budeanu et al., 2016). The overwhelming focus on economic sustainability has resulted in many scholars and activists to call for tourism to be more environmentally and socially responsible and sustainable (Jamal, 2019). There are also increasing demands for regenerative tourism, that is, for tourism to create social and environmental values (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). As much as tourists bring economic benefits to the community, tourists may also bring about social benefits, in terms of establishing dialogues of cooperation, of affirming common values and of generating mutual respect and understanding. Visitors will also mutually avow positive social and environmental values in the host society.

Also in a more sustainable tourism manner, visitors should not be ethnocentric but instead visitors can also be agents of change that can contribute to desired and positive changes in host societies (Ooi, 2021). Supporting the community to stand up against worker exploitation, environmental destruction and racial discrimination, for instance, provide not only social moral solidarity with but also economic support to local communities (Jamal, 2019). To accept the status quo in the host community may mean supporting and perpetuating the agendas of the established economic and political elites, ignoring the resistance and the activists in these places that demand justice, equality and fair opportunities. Visitors may reaffirm common values of the host society, and challenge injustices and corruption. For example, in gay tourism, LGBTQI+ visitors to China inevitably support and offer solidarity

with the marginalized group in society, albeit this group is not formally discriminated against but nonetheless widely ostracized (Ooi, 2021).

In 2018, about 150 million Chinese tourists travelled outside of mainland China, which makes mainland China the largest source market for international outbound tourism (UNWTO, 2019). Given the noticeable economic benefits, overseas destinations and related businesses are catering to Chinese tourists' needs and expectations (Long & Aziz, 2021), such as providing Mandarin-speaking personnel and accepting UnionPay. In addition, tourism promotion agencies are using a range of Chinese social media platforms (e.g. WeChat and Qyer.com) to communicate with Chinese tourists (Ma et al., 2020). By doing so, authorities in destinations attempt to guide how Chinese tourists perceive places, alleviate tourist anxiety, and protect tourists from awkward encounters with local social issues that could shock or scare them. As a result, Chinese tourists do not need to seek travel information from other platforms and they don't even need to interact much with the locals during their trips. In serving the comfort needs of Chinese visitors, the economic benefits may be maximized.

The emphasis on providing a pleasing experience to Chinese visitors may also result in ignoring the environmental and social aspects of sustainability. We focus on social sustainability in this chapter. Tourists, including Chinese ones, may build their own "tourist bubbles" to avoid potential conflicts between their cultural assumptions and a foreign culture, and to view the host society through their own accustomed lenses and beliefs. For instance, Chinese tourists are very concerned about friendliness of locals, so they have created a supportive and friendly social environment for themselves by traveling with family, friends and other Chinese (Ye et al., 2012a, b; Moy & Phongpanichanan, 2014; Nielson, 2018). Therefore, Chinese tourists may inadvertently or otherwise travel in "tourist bubbles", and observe the host society through Chinese lenses. However, it does not mean that Chinese tourists are "close-minded" as studies have shown that they are keen to seek authentic travel experiences (Ma et al., 2018), and many of them are indeed adventurous (Cai, 2018). Due to the convenience of "tourist bubbles", Chinese guest-host interactions remain selective, which will be demonstrated by the case of Chinese tourists visiting Malaysia in this chapter.

Malaysia is one of the most popular destinations for mainland Chinese tourists. 3.11 million visited Malaysia in 2019, which makes China the 3rd largest source market for Malaysia, following Singapore and Indonesia (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). Meanwhile, Malaysia has been publicly implementing an official discriminatory policy against its own citizens with Chinese-heritage (Malaysian Chinese) and other ethnic minorities for decades (Harris & Han, 2020). In 2015, Dr. Huang Huikang, the then-Chinese ambassador to Malaysia, criticized this policy and showed support to the local Chinese community (Reuters, 2015). As will be shown, although ethno-nationalistic sentiments are growing along with China's economic rise, it seems that the vast majority of Chinese tourists either are ignorant of or have ignored the ethnic tension in their understanding of Malaysia. In contrast, many of them have portrayed Malaysia as an ethnically harmonious society in their online travel reviews.

Thus, there is an apparent tourist wall between the Chinese tourists and the host society. The woke Chinese tourists seem to keep silent with regard to this discrimination.

In this context, the tourist wall is defined as the selectively manifested barriers and obstacles that prevent tourists from interacting and connecting with the host society. The barriers may be social, cultural and even technological, and are not necessarily insurmountable. More significantly, a tourist wall may hinder the social sustainability of tourism with regard to promoting amicability, understanding and trust among people from every corner of the world. Our reading of Chinese tourist view of ethnic discrimination in Malaysia is based on their omission of or silence on this topic in their travel reviews on this topic. So with regard to silence, it refers to Chinese tourists' inaction or passive response towards the unfair treatment of Malaysian Chinese and even themselves when they are traveling in Malaysia (Paltemaa et al., 2020). In the present research, the characteristics of China's out-bound tourists and the ethnic issue of Malaysia are briefly discussed. Then, the focal analysis lies on the construction of the tourist wall in the case of Chinese tourists visiting Malaysia, and the tourist wall's impacts on bringing social benefits to the local community.

Tourism and Social Sustainability

The concept of sustainability has become a buzzword since the release of the Brundtland Report in 1987 (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). In tourism, it is defined as a development process, involving social, economic and environmental dimensions, that satisfies the present needs of tourists and hosts without compromising their future needs and prosperity (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). Specifically, social sustainability emphasizes positive social effects of tourism and tourists to the local community, such as initiating meaningful social contacts and improving host-guest relations (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). In fact, tourism's benefits to social sustainability, such as breaking down barriers among people, have been acknowledged by various governmental and international organizations (e.g. WTO and EU) (Farmaki, 2017). Unfortunately, today's tourism development is largely focused on economic benefits, and social values are often overlooked (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). For example, a lot of destinations are moving towards being "China-ready" by providing facilities/services that Chinese tourists are accustomed to and subsequently transforming these efforts to get Chinese tourists to feel comfortable and spend money (Arlt, 2013). There is little effort in deepening meaningful host-guest interaction; such loose host-guest relations do not support any social sustainability goals (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018; Van der Zee & Go, 2013). Locals are predominantly just service providers or props in the destination.

Tourism is often imagined as a catalyst for promoting mutual understanding and global peace (Scheyvens & Biddulph, 2018). Jafari (1989) cited Mark Twain, "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow mindedness" (p. 439). Many researchers argue for tourism's contribution to bringing about global social values. For instance, Edgell et al. (2008) argue that peace is the foundation of tourism, tourism leads to cultural understanding, cultural understanding results in mutual respect and trust,

and a higher level of mutual respect and trust further promotes peace (Pedersen, 2020). Similarly Scheyvens and Biddulph (2018) state that tourism brings people together, then people gain a chance to empathize each other. With a better mutual understanding, inter-group hostility reduces. Based on these hopes and explanations, tourism is supposed to deliver laudable social benefits that are key factors for tourism's contribution to social sustainability in local communities and the world (Edgell et al., 2008; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018). However, Khalilzadeh (2018) suggests that social values arising out of guest-host interaction, such as fostering inter-group harmony, remain inconclusive, and tourism's position for cultivating social sustainability is merely an ideal (Farmaki, 2017). Some studies have questioned the hope of tourism capability of contributing to international peace and harmony (Farmaki, 2017; Pedersen, 2020). There are also insufficient studies examining the barriers of generating these social values (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Qiu Zhang et al., 2017). This chapter contributes to the latter.

Malaysia and Chinese Tourists

Compared to their western counterparts, Chinese tourists are generally less experienced in international travel (Fugmann & Aceves, 2013). As a result, they may easily overlook negative aspects of the destinations and accept the favorable images presented by the local tourism industry (Adiyia et al., 2015; Fan et al., 2017; MacCannell, 2001; Van der Zee & Go, 2013). Although more Chinese tourists are doing free and independent travel (UNWTO, 2019), their social contacts with the local community remain limited; despite their pursuits for the "authentic" experience, they are still dependent on information from various Chinese social media platforms (Lian, 2014; Wu & Pearce, 2016; Xiang, 2013). They may only visit spaces (e.g. attractions, hotels and restaurants) listed on well-prepared itineraries available on influential social media platforms, such as [Mafengwo.com](#). Therefore, Chinese tourists would probably view the host society through rose-tinted glasses created by marketing authorities from the destination and industry, and many of these tourists will internalize and perpetuate these images (Fugmann & Aceves, 2013).

Tourists bring their own cultural background with them (Ooi, 2002). So in terms of ethnic relations, many Chinese tourists habitually interpret another multicultural host society from their own experiences in China, and through information from their own China news channels and social media platforms (Jaakson, 2004). Moreover, information on some topics is filtered, if not censored, in China. This includes news on tense ethnic relations in China (Paltmaa et al., 2020). Such sources of information will colour the Chinese perception of the host society. Officially, Chinese authorities claim that they have implemented preferential policies for minority groups (Zang, 2016). Impacts of these preferential policies remain controversial but regardless many Han Chinese (officially, 91.5% of the total population) think that the minority groups in China are privileged (Wu & He, 2016; Zang, 2016). Therefore, many Chinese believe that being a minority has privileges, and they may wrongly perceive the same for Malaysia (Ye et al., 2012a, b).

Significantly, Chinese tourists are more or less political subjects of China-Malaysia relations. Tourism is closely related to a country's soft power, so it is an indispensable but insidious component of the geopolitics matrix (Ooi, 2016). Many countries intend to enhance their soft power through tourism for gaining preferred outcomes in global scenarios, and Malaysia is no exception (Hussin, 2018). According to Ooi (2016), tourism authorities are assigned the task to glorify the positive images and counter the negative ones of the destination. In addition, both Chinese and Malaysian governments are willing to promote their people's mutual understandings through tourism in a directed method for either economic or political reasons (Yeoh, 2019; Yeoh et al., 2018). For example, 2020 was initially scheduled as *Visit Malaysia Year* and *Malaysia-China Cultural Tourism Year*, and many related campaigns were already arranged in China and Malaysia before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Teoh, 2020). Under the current amicable bilateral relations, Malaysia has been highlighting racial harmony and multiculturalism concerning its own Chinese community to convey an explicit message that Chinese tourists are welcomed in Malaysia (Hussin, 2018). Meanwhile, China's state-owned media rarely report Malaysia's racial politics (Paltemaa et al., 2020). In short, how Chinese tourists, especially those with limited international exposure, perceive Malaysia is largely shaped, if not manipulated, by both Chinese and Malaysian governments out of their mutual and shared agendas.

5.2 Malaysia – The *bumiputera* context

Malaysia gained its independence in 1957. The way Malaysia is governed and organized reflects its diverse past. Parts of Malaysia had been occupied by different European powers since the sixteenth century. Like in other former colonies, residents and migrants in Malaysia were broadly identified according to their ethnic heritage (e.g. Malay, Chinese and Indian). Upon independence, the Malaysian government has been using the salad bowl rather than the melting pot model to manage its multicultural society (Gabriel, 2015). Although national pride is promoted, individuals are very cognizant of their ethnic identity in the social political system (Liu et al., 2002; Yashaiya & Noh, 2019). For a Malaysian, their ethnic identity sits comfortably and sometimes also uncomfortably with their national identity.

One of the prominent features of Malaysia's social political system is the *bumiputera* policy. In the country's attempt at wanting to level up the majority Malay population (67%) economically, this "son of the soil" policy explicitly discriminates against the Chinese (25%) and Indian (7%) populations. These minorities are not given equal access to school and university, government jobs and business support. While Malaysia is seen as a multicultural and harmonious society, there is dissatisfaction and disdain for that policy (Harris & Han, 2020). The unequal treatment is felt in everyday life for the minorities, for example, the occasional banning of the display of lanterns during Chinese New Year celebrations (NST, 2020). While local ethnic Chinese residents face discrimination, and their scorn for the situation is

communicated frequently in the media, during election campaigns and privately, we however observe that visitors from China do not seem perturbed by the situation. It is debatable if there is an ethnic bond or affinity between Chinese Malaysians and Chinese visitors but regardless, the local Chinese population in Malaysia is seen as a drawcard in the outbound market of China. The sizable Chinese population is deemed to help alleviate some anxiety of travels for visitors from China.

5.3 Methodology

This research adopted an interpretive paradigm by reviewing travelogues posted on [Mafengwo.com](#) and [Qyer.com](#), and the two websites are considered the equivalent of Lonely Planet in China (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). Unlike positivism, interpretive research assumes that reality is constructed intersubjectively in complexity, and attempts to gain empathetic understanding of conscious individuals (Goulding, 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Angen (2000) argues that the world is understood through meaningful interpretation, and our subjective experience is “an integral part of our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world around us” (p.385). One researcher in the study is a mainland Chinese citizen who has been living in Malaysia for over 4 years, and another one is a Chinese Singaporean citizen who has been doing research on Chinese tourists for a couple of decades, which allows both researchers to obtain deeper insights from travel stories shared by Chinese tourists visiting Malaysia (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Compared to structured questionnaires or in-depth interviews, online travelogues, as a form of user-generated content (UGC), are free of interference from researchers (Qi et al., 2018). In addition, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) state that scholars and marketers could receive first hand information on how tourists perceive destinations from travel stories written by tourists. These travelogues reveal a wide variety of information that may be neglected by pre-designed questionnaires, which facilitates researchers capturing psychological and cognitive activities of informants, and forming a more holistic and comprehensive insight on the topic (Wong & Qi, 2017).

As a case study, the scope of the research is mainland Chinese tourists visiting Malaysia. Therefore, a keyword “Malaysia” was used to search travelogues from the two travel community websites. The authors found tens of thousands of relevant travelogues, and sorted out these travelogues chronologically. Then, the authors saved the latest 150 travelogues with at least 10 paragraphs posted in 2019 as Microsoft Word documents with an assigned number. These collected documents contained texts and photos, and some of them were very detailed. To analyze these travelogues comprehensively and efficiently, the authors conducted data pre-processing, selecting and transferring relevant information to an Excel sheet after reading, including contributor’s nickname, website user rank, city of residency, post title and important extracts from the travelogues. Meanwhile, photos and short

videos were excluded for analysis despite they may contain some relevant information (Wong & Qi, 2017).

The authors read the documents line by line. Besides, some key words, such as discrimination, unfair treatment, multi-culturalism, cultural diversity and ethnic harmony, are utilized to locate the important extracts from the travelogues. During the pre-processing, the authors deleted a few travelogues because they were not written by tourists from mainland China or they were identified as advertisements posted by travel operators. Beside extracts with key words, the authors also revisited paragraphs adjacent to the identified extracts or even the whole travelogue for perceiving the contributors' stance on certain issues related to the study (Van Laer et al., 2018), which facilitated us comprehending Chinese tourists' attitudes and sentiments towards the matter of Malaysia. The logic behind the content revisiting is to search for possibly hidden information without clear markers (Scott, 2017). As per archeology of knowledge, untold and unseen contents of a narrative discourse are important to form a better understanding on described issues, so it is necessary to make hidden information visible through reasonable analysis (Rajchman, 1988).

Thematic analysis was conducted manually to search for shared meanings from Chinese tourists' thoughts, experiences and behaviors reflected by their travelogues with regard to social sustainability and the tourist wall (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). Chinese tourists' way of thinking and how they view overseas destinations are shaped by their own cultures and life experiences (Goulding, 1999). Thus, the lead researcher, as a Chinese national, introspects his own experiences traveling and living in Malaysia to search common themes and interpret the collected travelogues. The process may generate a certain degree of bias, but it facilitates the study to gain a deep understanding of Chinese tourists that is less likely to be achieved by a non-native Chinese researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). To increase the accuracy and credibility of data analysis, some important extracts were translated into English and integrated with the findings part (Mukminin, 2019). With regard to the quality of the translation, the lead researcher used to work as a professional translator, and the translated extracts were also checked by another researcher. The identified three themes are presented and discussed in the following sections.

5.4 Chinese Visitor Perceptions: Ethnic Diversity and Multiculturalism

During the fourteenth and eighteenth century, many businessmen from China, India and the Middle East arrived and settled in the Malay peninsula (Harris & Han, 2020). Then, the British colonists came with Western influences, making Malaysia a unique place where 'East meets West'. To promote its tourism to the global audience, Malaysia implements a branding strategy emphasizing ethnic and cultural diversity, which could be reflected by its national tourism slogan 'Malaysia, Truly Asia'. The slogan sends a clear message to the international audience that Malaysia is a melting pot of Asian cultures (e.g. Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures).

From the travelogues, Chinese tourists generally accept Malaysia's branding message. Many of them are impressed with the cultural diversity and ethnic harmony being manifested by some external symbols, such as food and architecture in Malaysia (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2015). Meanwhile, these symbols reinforce the perception of multiculturalism among Chinese tourists. Sample No. 55 is one typical example, and she saw a culturally diverse country with ethnic harmony through coexistence of different food and architecture. In her own words,

Malaysia is a multicultural country where Malay, Chinese and Indian keep their own ways of life and customs. In Penang, Malaysia, we can experience visiting the architecture of 5 different countries/regions, and tasting authentic food from different countries/regions.

Such a perception is not only limited to Penang, some travelogues contain similar information describing Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and East Malaysia. In sample No. 13, the contributor wrote about his feeling when he and his spouse were traveling in Kuala Lumpur, that 'we have never before walked from Chinatown to Little India, and they [of different cultures] were only one road apart [in Kuala Lumpur]. We gained a deep understanding of multicultural tolerance in Malaysia.....Chinese, Malays and Indians don't disturb each other, and live in harmony.' Meanwhile, similar comments were found in travelogue No. 11 to describe her experience in Melaka, in her own words,

Melaka is the oldest ancient town of Malaysia. In the past hundreds of years, Chinese, Indian and Javanese came here one after another, and [their] cultures, languages, stories blended and grew together. There are Chinese-styled houses, Dutch-styled buildings with red roofs, and Portuguese style villages. Although (they are in) diverse styles, they exist in perfect harmony. It seems that this is the natural way how Melaka is supposed to look.

Some Chinese tourists also noticed some negative aspects of Malaysia, including its unreliable public transport, visibility of motorbike gangs, prevalence of tourist scams and pollution. However, these issues are visible. In samples No. 16 and 44, both contributors shared their travel experiences in Semporna which is well-known for its crystal clear water and marine diversity in East Malaysia. In the travelogues, they mentioned their encounters with tourist scams and marine ecological degradation. Nevertheless, many Chinese visitors highlighted the multiculturalism of Malaysia through physically displayed cultural symbols, which inevitably affirms the official narrative of ethnic harmony. Chinese tourists seemed largely to have ignored the issue of ethnic discrimination.

5.5 Cognizance of Discrimination Against Chinese Malaysians

The majority of the reviewed travelogues did not mention anything related to ethnic discrimination. On the contrary, many contributors gave their praises to the cultural diversity and ethnic harmony of Malaysia. In our study, most travelogue contributors visited Malaysia for relaxation with friends or family members. Fan et al. (2017) argue that this type of tourist does not desire to have deep interactions with

locals (Qi et al., 2018). In addition, less inexperienced tourists are likely to face difficulties in cross-cultural communication and encounter unwanted tensions with local residents (Fan et al., 2020). To avoid that, they would embrace or even create tourist bubbles that separate them from the host community (Unger et al., 2019). Travelogue No. 50 is a clear example. The contributor wrote extensively on her interactions with her family members, and none on her contact with the locals. She explained why she revisited Malaysia:

This was my second time visiting Malaysia. I truly love it. Last time, I went to Sipadan with my husband for honeymoon.....I can't stop thinking of the bluish green sea of Semporna from my last trip. Xiaomenger [her son] was 3 years old, I think that I would take him to see the world. My grandma looked forward to the sea, and grandpa's legs recovered well from surgery. My thought [of revisiting Malaysia] coincided with theirs, so we booked flight tickets during Air Asia's annual promotion.

The focus of the trip for the writer of No. 50 was to spend time with her family. The destination was just a prop. Even if she knew of the discrimination in Malaysia, knowing the country better was not the main motivation of her trip.

However, a few contributors did write that Malaysian Chinese are not equally treated. By comparison, these contributors seem to share some common features: (1) they usually traveled alone in Malaysia; (2) they had a higher website rank; (3) they had traveled to other countries/regions before Malaysia; (4) they had more social interactions with the locals, such as taxi drivers, business owners and service staff. Arguably, all these characteristics indicate that these contributors are likely to be experienced international travelers. According to Pearce and Caltabiano (1983), experienced tourists emphasize more on higher order needs of Maslow's hierarchy, which may explain why they sought higher involvement with the locals, and subsequently noticed the institutionalized discrimination towards the local Chinese community (Fan et al., 2017).

The contributor of travelogue No. 11 is one of the clearest examples. Her homepage at Mafengwo.com contained 25 travelogues covering destinations in 10 different countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Oceania since 2010. With regard to discrimination, she wrote that 'I am impressed how this magical country maintains the balance: the Malay [community] is clearly dominant, but the local Chinese preserve their culture and gain a firm foothold despite the fact that the government suppresses and restrains them.'

Similarly, the contributor of sample No. 101 visited 32 countries/regions, and she traveled to Malaysia alone. As an experienced traveler, she even compared Malaysia with Singapore to explain why Malaysian government imposes affirmative action policy (Liu et al., 2002). She immersed herself to the host society by communicating with Malaysian Chinese, so she gained a deeper understanding of the discrimination issue. Consequently, the official ethnic harmony bubble burst, and her anxiety level increased. In her own words,

Kuala Lumpur (KL) deserves to be the capital: high buildings, government agencies, big mosques. However, what impressed me more is the endurance of Malaysian Chinese. On my first day in KL, I met my taxi driver, a middle-aged [Malaysian] Chinese at a busy metro entrance. He poured out all his [negative] experiences as a [Malaysian] Chinese living in KL after he knew that I am from China. His stories shaped my impressions of KL.

The contributor above perceived the existence of discrimination against local Chinese mainly by chatting with local Chinese taxi drivers, small business owners and service staff. Beside this travelogue, samples No. 6, 13, 28, 36, 47 and 103 all mentioned that the contributors heard stories of unequal treatment from Malaysian Chinese who were in the service sectors. Meanwhile, most Malaysian Chinese expressed that their situation was improving in recent years because China became stronger, which may work as a buffer to alleviate the tourists' anxiety triggered by the cognizance of discrimination against Malaysian Chinese.

In travelogue No. 101, the taxi driver said that 'China is strong now, and Malaysia relies on China for trade.....'. When the contributor asked whether she herself would be discriminated against in Malaysia, the driver replied that 'no, young lady. It's different because you are an international tourist. Malays may have biases against minorities [Malaysian Chinese and Indians], but it doesn't mean that they are bad. The vast majority of Malays are friendly to international tourists. No worries.' There is context. The driver's answer suggests a more layered understanding of the issues, and Chinese tourists are seen primarily as an economic opportunity (Homans, 1958; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Yow, 2016).

5.6 Reflections on the Wall and the Silence

As expected, there is a wide range of contrasting and contradicting travelogues. The positive comments mentioned above reflect the huge majority of the posts. They indicate that many Chinese tourists accept the official views and perceive Malaysia as a multicultural society with ethnic harmony. The Malaysia tourism authority seems to be successful in its destination branding via its 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' campaign, and the tourism industry provides much comfort to Chinese tourists for reducing their anxiety regarding possible discrimination (Ooi, 2002). In addition, many Chinese tourists rely heavily on social media platforms of China for travel-related information, and they are unlikely to find much information about Malaysia's affirmative action policy from these platforms (Paltemaa et al., 2020). Furthermore, they may not gain relevant local knowledge from very limited social contacts with the host community (Fan et al., 2017; Fan et al., 2020; Lajevardi et al., 2020).

As expected the posts did not constitute a body of coherent views, perspectives and opinions. Instead there was a cacophony of voices, pointing to the range of ways Chinese visitors appreciate Malaysia. There was however a silence on how Chinese Malaysians are discriminated against in Malaysia. Silence is a complex phenomenon to capture. It is an absence. It is an indirect discourse (Bindeman, 2017). Linguists and philosophers, for instance point to the limits of linguistic structures (Wittgenstein, 1980). Language may prevent or restrict us from articulating certain phenomena because there is no word or that the grammatical structure frames reality in particular ways. Silence can only be described by its effects and how it affects our lives (Bindeman, 2017). Silence also carries tacit knowledge or taken for granted notions (Polanyi, 1958). But silence and omission reveals the

politics of how knowledge is articulated, and what is considered irrelevant, assumed away or intentionally marginalized (Foucault, 1972). According to Foucault (1972), silence limits discourse and oppresses. In tourism, marketing a place highlights what is considered attractive and distinctive about the place while marginalizing the ugly and tenuous. For instance, George Town and Melaka are UNESCO inscribed world heritage sites in Malaysia. Their heritage status is widely promoted but the social tensions entrenched in the politics of selecting what heritage to celebrate and what to sideline is ignored in their destination promotion (Lai & Ooi, 2015).

The tourist also omits things. Urry's (1990) tourist gaze, for instance, suggests that visitors pick up sights that are different from their everyday life. We do not give attention to what we consider mundane; and are thus omitted or ignored by us. Mediators are at hand to select, accentuate and dramatize the taken for granted into attractions, such as in Malaysia. In our case of Chinese visitors in Malaysia, the general omission of ethnic discrimination in Malaysia in Chinese visitor description of their experiences seems odd because it is relatively conspicuous.

Some complained about ethnic bias only when they suffered from ethnic discrimination themselves. The contributor of travelogue No. 32 wrote that one (Malay) immigration officer denied his and his spouse's request for a transit visa rudely, and without a proper explanation. Eventually, they got their transit visa with the assistance of another immigration officer. Nevertheless, their first impression of Malaysia was negative. In sample 102, it is even written that '*(airline) check-in staff was not friendly, most probably he deliberately made things difficult.....Malaysia, I am very disappointed. I don't think I will come back again.*'

Chinese tourists, like many other tourists, have a certain degree of tolerance towards encounters with social injustice. Even confronting alleged ethnic discrimination, they may respond mildly and modestly. They may prefer to complain through their personal travelogue, rather than to report to the media or to the authorities. For many tourists, it is not worth the effort, they do not want to be further inconvenienced and/or they do not know how to go about complaining. Chinese tourists who travel with family and friends have to consider how their actions will affect those around them as well, especially all of them have committed time and money to enjoy themselves during the trip (Weber et al., 2017). Therefore, many Chinese tourists may choose to keep silent after they perceive or even encounter discrimination. They may also choose not to focus on negative encounters to have a more pleasant trip. Similarly, many may also choose to ignore the unpleasant to portray a more positive image of their travels. Regardless, research on what is not spoken deserves more attention.

5.7 Conclusion

Most tourists travel in bubbles, as their needs are specially catered to by tourism businesses. These bubbles also inevitably build tourist walls that prevent guests and hosts from having more meaningful and deeper interaction. The walls are social,

cultural and even technological obstacles. Without deeper engagement, their tourism activities are shallow, and locals are treated merely as service providers and props for their enjoyment. This does not bode well for enhancing social sustainability in the industry. By analyzing various reactions of Chinese tourists towards the official narrative of ethnic harmony of Malaysia, we attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of host-guest relations and the role of tourism that can play in social sustainability.

It seems that the Chinese tourists either consider the issue of ethnic discrimination irrelevant or are not aware of the overt discrimination that they may have already encountered while in Malaysia, which alludes to a tourist wall disconnecting the tourists and the host society. Only a small portion of Chinese tourists in our data mentioned ethnic discrimination against Malaysian Chinese from a bystander's view. Nevertheless, the fraught silence and absence are possibly the passive responses of the Chinese tourists towards this issue, and such responses reflect the complexity of how guests view, behave and treat the host society.

There are at least four interrelated reasons why the vast majority of Chinese tourists keep silent towards the tacit ethnic discrimination in Malaysia. First, many Chinese tourists are inexperienced in outbound travel, and they are satisfied with the convenience, comfort and enjoyment within tourist bubbles (Ye et al., 2012a, b). Second, many of them are walled out from the host society because they only search for information from social media platforms and other news channels of China that do not say much about the discrimination issue of Malaysia probably because of China's censorship towards certain sensitive topics, such as ethnic minorities (Lajevardi et al., 2020; Paltemaa et al., 2020). Third, some Chinese tourists are not interested in politics and find the issue irrelevant to their travels in Malaysia. Fourth, many of them may not feel right to voice their opinions as outsiders (Fox & Holt, 2018).

No matter what the reason is, many Chinese tourists are traveling in cognitive bubbles that filter out unfavorable bits of a host society towards them. They are walled out from the host society, and the wall contributes to the indecisive relationship between tourism and social values. In other words, Chinese tourists are not likely to gain a holistic understanding of some local social issues, especially negative ones, which may lead to a hindered social interaction. As a result, Chinese tourists are not likely to bring social benefits, such as promoting inter-ethnic understanding, to the local community. In the case of Malaysia, Chinese tourists may not become a progressive force to mitigate the ethnic tension between the minorities (e.g. Chinese and Indian Malaysians) and the majority (i.e. the Malays). Furthermore, shallow host-guest encounters could even result in potential conflicts due to different social norms (Pedersen, 2020). Without dedication to social sustainability, tourism may not generate much social benefits to the local community as a benign social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2018).

Besides, silence is highlighted in the research so as to truly understand China's outbound tourists and their relations with overseas destinations. Tourists' ostensible silence may carry much hidden information that is neglected by previous tourism studies. What is not spoken probably reveals the loose host-guest relations between

Chinese tourists and a host society, and indicates that Chinese tourists carry a range of social, cultural, psychological and even technological spaces along with them during their trips abroad. Apparently, there is a tourist wall that limits tourists' interactions with the host society. Destinations and businesses' desire to cater to Chinese tourists, such as using social media platforms of China, inadvertently contributes to the construction of that wall. Moreover, the tourist wall is a major constraint for tourism to deliver considerable social benefits to the local community and eventually achieve social sustainability of tourism development.

With regard to practical implications, resorts and tourist places are encouraged to provide physical and psychological comforts to Chinese tourists. Although such a practice may build up a tourist wall, it reduces tourists' anxiety (Ooi, 2019). As a matter of fact, many Chinese tourists do not have sufficient local knowledge about destinations where they visit due to lack of international exposure (Fugmann & Aceves, 2013). Therefore, they may experience too much strangeness or even conflicts between their native culture and a host culture. A certain level of comfort is necessary to minimize cultural shocks and other uncertainties (MacCannell, 2001). However, resorts and tourist places must keep a balance between familiarity and authenticity. In addition, tourism stakeholders are suggested to interpret and understand Chinese tourists' behaviors from their values and beliefs. More importantly, tourism authorities and marketers need to analyze unmarked information and passive inactivities of Chinese tourists for comprehending a layered host-guest relations for managing the relations accordingly. Meanwhile, destinations should be prepared to explain unpleasant social issues of local society to Chinese tourists. Chinese tourists gradually mature, and will probably search closer social interactions with the host society and local residents (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Then, they may ask questions related to awkward social issues of host places. Without proper answers from overseas destinations, inter-group hostility may increase rather than decrease, and consequently tourism fails to achieve social sustainability as a benign social force. The authors speculate that the institutionalized discrimination against Malaysian Chinese are not likely to be terminated in the coming years, and Malaysia is not ready to explain the issue to tourists from China. Inevitably, Chinese and other international tourists remain political subjects of Malaysia's ethnic policy.

5.8 Limitation

Possible limitations of the study mainly come from the research methodology. At first, the research collected and analyzed data from user generated travelogues on two major online travel communities, and these travelogues were written by individuals who care about sharing travel stories. Besides, we don't know how Malaysia is perceived among Chinese citizens who have never visited the country. It is also possible that some Chinese tourists may refuse to visit Malaysia because they know

Malaysia's ethnic discriminatory policies against its own Chinese community. Thus, samples of the study may not represent the entire population of Chinese tourists. Secondly, the travelogues are interpreted based on the authors' knowledge and personal experiences. Researchers think in different ways, and they probably have different interpretations on the same "truth". Therefore, the results of the study may not be generalized. Therefore, the issue of the tourist wall with regard to host-guest relations and social sustainability needs further discussion in future research.

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Fei Long is currently pursuing his PhD at the National University of Malaysia (UKM) after 6 years of corporate experiences in marketing and communications. His industrial career spans over different regions, including East, South, Southeast Asia and South America, which has been shaping and reshaping his research interests. His research focuses on China’s outbound tourism, cross-cultural communications, social justice and ASEAN studies. In the past few years, he joined some research projects involving consumer behaviors, digital marketing and organizational adoption of big data analytics. He is an invited author of Business Times (China). Besides, he was a visiting researcher at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) in November 2019.

Can-Seng Ooi is an anthropologist/sociologist. He is also Professor of Cultural and Heritage Tourism at the School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania. His research career, in and outside the university system, spans over three decades. Singapore, Denmark, Australia and China are some of the countries he has conducted investigations. Besides tourism studies, he has contributed significantly to theories and understanding of art worlds, cross-cultural management, the experience economy, and place branding. His personal website is www.cansengooi.com.