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Cultural Intermediaries and Cosmopolitans: A Netnographic Study of Chinese Travel Bloggers

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the symbolic power and locations of travel bloggers in the global cultural economy by linking the theories and approaches of cultural intermediaries, cosmopolitanism and tourist studies. Drawing on netnographic methodology and narrative analysis of Chinese social media accounts, this article further examines how travel bloggers convert world landscapes and self-presentations into mediascapes providing consumable content as well as life-styles for local audiences. A Chinese perspective is contributed by having the discussion connecting travel with other mobilities. We propose that the travel bloggers and their productions are the evidence of cultural traveling and transformation.

1. Introduction

More than 149.72 million Chinese tourists travelled to destinations overseas in 2018, an increase of 14.7% from the previous year (Hao, 2019). According to World Tourism Highlights, the total income of world tourism in 2017 was 1.34 trillion US dollars and the consumption of Chinese tourists was close to one-fifth of this total (WTO, 2018). At the same time, Chinese consumers at home and abroad spent 115 billion US dollars on luxury items in 2018 (China Luxury Report 2019). The increased influence of Chinese tourists and consumers in the global market is paralleled with a large amount of literature on their consuming behaviors. Mainly by using quantitative methods, the studies (see e.g. Li et al., 2011; Wu&Zhong, 2016; Xi-ang, 2013) contribute to overall tourist studies and are helpful to local tourism management decisions.

However, the large number of cross-cultural traveling populations and the huge expenditures contributing to the global economy are worth our further discussion. In the development of tourist studies, one inspiring advocate is to

put tourists in an important position in constructing a mobile sociology under globalization (Rojek & Urry, 1997; Franklin & Crang, 2001; Urry, 1990; 1995; Urry, 2000a, 2000b). Urry suggests a sociology concerning the diverse mobilities of peoples, objects, images, information, and wastes which “demonstrate(s) a complex combination of local, national and transnational components” (Urry 2000a:66).

Since the Open Door Policy in 1978, China has become one of the most important destinations to foreign investments, products, services and media flow. Commercial of global brands and diversified media products opened the door for Chinese audiences to perceive modern life and stimulated their desire to consume the world. In the process of globalization, informants and cultural intermediaries are required to bridge the producer and consumer in different countries and places. “Internationalization” has been regarded as a benchmark of modernization and advancement by Chinese government and people. Nonetheless, in a country where the participation rate in tertiary education is only 23% (Yu et al., 2012:vii) and less than

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10% of the population has passports (<http://www.chyxx.com/industry/201903/725115.html>), the majority of Chinese gain access to the distant places mainly through mass media and consumption.

Social media is currently the most active medium accelerating global information exchange and circulation, which reconstructed traditional industries. According to a report published by the China Internet Network Information Center, 854 million Chinese are now using the internet, 847 million users access to the internet on mobile devices, nearly 50% of online users are between the ages of 20-40 (<http://www.cac.gov.cn/pdf/20190829/44.pdf>). Chinese audiences are also profoundly changed and empowered by the social media revolution to express and influence (Xue & Yu, 2017). Travel bloggers are one of the subgroups in this audience and enjoy high popularity for their feeding audiences hungry for exotic images and stories about other cultures.

In this article, travel bloggers refer to a broad scale of influencers in social media, not limited to users of blogs, but also including the users who utilize other social media platforms such as micro-blogs, vlogs, video sharing services, etc. to produce and circulate content based on travel experiences. As a social media influencer or key opinion leader online, a travel blogger is usually working on multimedia platforms to achieve the widest spread of content.

The article seeks to broaden the understanding of cultural capital theory and elucidate emerging social phenomena in the digital era by addressing three key questions:

1. Explore the connection between cultural intermediaries and social media influencers;
2. Examine how travel bloggers leverage social media to cultivate their cultural capital and expand its reach across various consumption sectors, in contrast to traditional cultural intermediaries who typically consolidate symbolic power within a singular domain;
3. Within the context of the global-local interplay, analyze how Chinese travel bloggers utilize their travel experiences and narratives to create cosmopolitanism tastes and impact Chinese audiences.

2. Travel bloggers as cultural intermediaries in the cultural economy

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) first introduced the concept of “cultural intermediaries” to refer to a new type of petite bourgeoisie occupations in France. The occupations involved “presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services” (1984:359). Bourdieu argued that self-presentation is often an essential condition for successful selling of symbolic goods and services (362). The cultural intermediaries always “sell themselves as models and as guarantors of the value of their products” (365). The sym-

bolic authority they impose on consumers comes from their belief, sincerity and/or self-deception in what they sell (365). Since the late 1980s, Bourdieu’s theory of cultural economy has been an essential framework of analyzing “symbolic violence” exercised from the mass (Lash, 1993:210).

Contemporary economic and symbolic processes are more than ever interlaced and inter-articulated (Lash & Urry, 1994:64). The new economy is embodied not only in the growth of cultural industries, but also in the process of aestheticization and culturalization happening in a wide range of manufacturing industries (1994:4). More and more products could be regarded as cultural objects resulting from reification of the media (Lash & Urry, 2007). In the process of economic transformation, new occupations for cultural intermediaries are growing quickly to negotiate between production and consumption. The debates on cultural intermediaries are continually taken under the context of a wide range of cultural industries, such as advertising (Cronin, 2004; Davila, 2001), lifestyle magazines (Gough-Yates, 2003), book retail trade (Wright, 2005), brands (Arvidsson, 2005) and fashion (Entwistle, 2006) etc.

Different from traditional occupations, these specialists in symbolic goods are both producers/disseminators and consumers/audiences for cultural goods (Featherstone, 1991:36). More precisely, they are firstly savvy and skilled consumers, and that makes them be able to teach other audiences. In studies of contemporary consumer culture, Mike Featherstone (1991) recognized the consumer’s creativity by appropriating symbolic products to construct a lifestyle and project self-identity. He pointed out that consumption “connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness” (Featherstone 1987). In media study, a consumer-centric view of value creation took the place of the traditional firm-centric and product-centric market views in the age of information and communication technologies (e.g. Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Therefore, the fan-consumer dichotomy is overplayed (Scott, 2013); “consumer-as-fan” is an “advertiser, entrepreneur, marketer, and producer” (Kozinets, 2014: 170; Linden & Linden, 2017:11). That is to say cultural consumers become new cultural intermediaries (Lee, 2012).

This is also true for the tourism industry. Sandvoss (2014:116) argued that a place is much more than its geographical location and its tangible elements; it is like texts which “are socially constructed through symbols, discourses and representations”. Travel bloggers, in particular the frequent and experienced fan-travelers, are the most productive contributors and circulators of millions of images and narratives of destinations based on their travel experiences. Additionally, the experienced independent traveler is unwilling to consume ready-made products, they continually discover new destinations and leave the old ones to mass tourists (Urry 1988:35). As a travel blogger continually accumulates transnational symbols and develops a

unique personality, he/she can attract manufacturing industries who are eager to approach potential consumers, but are short of cultural competitiveness. An influential travel blogger can turn out to be a mediator or a model of a new lifestyle to represent a system of cultural objects within and beyond the tourism industry.

3. Travel bloggers as informants and cosmopolitans in the context of globalization

Since the 1970s, globalization has been criticized of resulting in cultural homogeneity. However, more and more empirical and theoretical research at national and local sites suggest that we should look at the relationship between the global and the local in a complicated manner (Appadurai, 1990). Arjun Appadurai argues:

The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries). (1990:295)

James Clifford also problematizes a binary series of the global and the local, dwelling and traveling, the West and the Other in the tradition of anthropological study (1992). He invites attention and efforts to a more complex cross-cultural study, and “discovers non-Western travelers (“nomads”), with hybrid, syncretic, cultures, and in the process projects onto their different histories of culture contact, migration, and inequality homogeneous predicaments” (1992:113). “Squanto effect” (97) was discussed regarding insiders/native informants who helped early travelers and explorers to overcome inter-cultural difficulties. In these cultural encounters, the travelers were finally becoming inter-cultural informants (97).

In the tourism industry, according to William Gartner (1994), there are four categories of agents of information sources: 1) induced sources, such as traditional forms of advertising and promotional materials by tourism agencies; 2) covert, induced by endorsements of opinion leaders or celebrities or use of positive report in mass media; 3) autonomous, sources of independently produced news, movies and documentaries; 4) organic, information from friends, relatives and family members who visited a destination. Travelers had been a form of sharing information within a small circle by word of mouth. Empowered by social media, travel bloggers play the roles of multiple agents and blur the borders of the above four categories.

Cosmopolitanism is another important analytical framework for understanding the impacts of globalization. The definition of cosmopolitanism among different disciplines and authors remains debated. Ulf Hannerz (1996) gave an answer by stating that “a genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other”. Cosmopolitanism “entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a

search for contrasts rather than uniformity and a delight for difference” (Hannerz, 1990: 239).

One of the interesting and meaningful debates is regarding the relationship between cosmopolitanism and global consumer culture. Empirical studies have found that transnational elites and the young generation are more likely omnivorous and cosmopolitan in the neoliberal era because they have social, economic and cultural privilege allowing them to encounter with or have disposition to consume different cultures (Binnie et al., 2006:9; Kennedy, 2004; Peterson, 1996; Sklair, 2001). Cosmopolitanism is therefore conceived as a practice of having superiority and good taste related to social status and cultural capital (see Woodward & Emontspool, 2018, pp. 20). In contrast, everyday consumption, such as food, music or media products from other countries, or traveling to other countries is questioned and criticized as “banal cosmopolitanism” (Beck, 2002, 2006; Urry, 2000c) or the easy face of cosmopolitanism (Calhoun, 2002:105; Hannerz, 1996:104-105). Whether or not a tourist or a traveling individual can be called a cosmopolitan is still controversial. A classic argument in tourist studies is the difference between tourist and traveler, mass tourism and independent travel. Travelers are usually regarded as cosmopolitan and the tourists, even if they have a cosmopolitan orientation to be involved in other cultures, they are assumed to be incompetent (Hannerz, 1990:105). However, the niche market of independent travel has developed into the mainstream of cultural tourism. Research shows that the post-tourist of the new middle class looks for a more unconventional experience, immersing themselves in local culture over an extended period of time (Munt, 1994). Even if it is a form of “banal cosmopolitanism,” it is still meaningful, as Szerszynski and Urry (2002) suggest,

The selling of mundane forms of cosmopolitan style may go hand-in-hand with more fundamental and progressive social-structural changes. Rather than being mere surface features, and apparently trivial aspects of globalization, they do, in fact, have an important symbolic value and are harbingers of wider social changes. (cited in Emontspool & Woodward, 2018:14)

In the study of post-tourism, a destination is much more than its geographical location and material environment; but a space of imagination or a text “socially constructed through symbols, discourses and representations” (Sandvoss, 2014:116-117; Wearing et al., 2010). Travel bloggers are experienced cosmopolitan consumers as well as foreign symbolic specialists. They are active co-producers of tourist places and the creators of their travel experiences (Urry & Larsen, 2011: 206; Wearing et al., 2010: 15-16). In the following sections we will examine how Chinese travel bloggers are bridging foreign destinations to Chinese audiences/consumers, and how they utilize their image, experience, expertise and reputation to mediate a cultural economy around themselves.

4. Methodology

The quantitative approach of interpreting survey results to measure cultural consumption gradually raised questions and debates within the field of the sociology of culture (see Wright, 2015: 41-70). Ethnographic work in social sciences and cultural studies is suggested to give a more delicate and in-depth understanding to people's practice. As the on-line community is growing and prospering, netnography emerged as an efficient method for the cultural analysis of online community data.

Chinese social media, such as Sina Weibo, Wechat and Xiaohongshu are most popular blogging sites in China. Every day, users are telling stories about themselves, others and the places they visited in forms of confession, statement, and dialogue. The stories are developed through an orchestration of photo, video, music and text. A travel blog is usually composed of two parts, 1) a narrative of the travel experience and destination, and 2) the autobiography of the blogger; these two are sometimes independent but most of the time are mutually reinforcing each other, and eventually producing an identity which has the potential to be used to endorse for various products.

As an active user of social media and an independent traveler, the lead author has been following and observing travel bloggers for more than five years. To investigate how travel bloggers develop tastes, we conducted a comprehensive search across various travel channels on China's leading social media platforms, focusing on content themes and visuals to identify suitable research subjects. Subsequently, we refined our observations to focus on 20 bloggers that aligned with our specific research inquiries. For this selected bloggers, we conducted immersive observations, collected information, and engaged in interactions with their followers. The 20 bloggers were categorized into groups based on their travel experiences, blog content, and the personal backgrounds they shared online. During the data analysis phase, we integrated images, textual narratives, fonts, avatars, personal descriptions, engagement metrics such as likes and ratings, and interactive content, along with our reflections and interpretations. Ultimately, we partly employed the life history method to present our findings through form of personal narratives.

Most of these bloggers are initial Sina Weibo users since the inception of the platform in 2009. Of these accounts, nineteen registered their accounts between 2009 and 2011. All of them are frequent international travelers. Seventeen bloggers labeled themselves as a traveler, a global traveler, and/or a professional traveler, six also indicated themselves a travel writer, a columnist and/or a photographer, four identified as Vloggers, and four as creators and producers of documentary. There are three bloggers who did not classify themselves as a traveler, but as a photographer or a brand owner. However, when reading their blogs, we found that their posts and jobs are closely related to traveling to

foreignplaces. These identity labels have revealed the practices evolving around or connecting with travel and the areas to which the meanings and symbols could expand.

Among them,two individuals stand out for their extensive history of sharing and their rich personal narratives. Their unique experiences and storytelling styles have served as a source of inspiration for numerous bloggers seeking to emulate and reinvent. Their narratives can be viewed as a meta-narrative within the realm of Chinese global travel blogging. Another pair of bloggers adopted a comparable storytelling framework but evolved their cultural capital in an entrepreneurial manner, a goal that many travel bloggers aspire to reach. As such, they are encapsulating the essence of this digital landscape. To draw a whole picture of their personal history and establish a relationship with their travel narratives, we also collected information of these three bloggers' backgrounds from other sources, e.g. online news, interviews, or introductions about authors in their books. The study on the travelers' experiences and texts showed that they are much more generated from the culture and society they came from than the destination culture can offer (Johnson, 2006; Wearing et al., 2010: 79). Therefore, we developed the analysis by placing their stories in the context of contemporary China. At the same time the texts of the other bloggers were examined in a comparative approach. We kept them anonymous in this article.

Throughout the analysis of the subjects we attempt to discuss the following inter-related topics:

1. How the travel bloggers develop cultural competitiveness and expertise, introduce and frame goods, and their locations within the cultural economy (Maguire & Matthews, 2012).
2. How the travel bloggers display the world before Chinese audiences while mediating consumer culture.
3. In what way these travel bloggers and their narratives are connected with other mobilities in the context of global-local transformation in China.

5. Portraits and narratives

5.1. *The Urban Flâneuse and Transnational Professional*

The creator of the account @MTZ was born in Shanghai in the 1970s. She worked in a financial district in Shanghai and then went to the United States to study for a master's degree in business administration, and now is living there. Besides accounts on Sina Weibo, Sina Blog, Wechat and other Chinese webs platforms, she also has an Instagram account. She uses Chinese and English on different social platforms.

She is writing columns and articles for many newspapers and magazines in China. She is an author and a translator for many books. Her book *The Women in Office Cu-*

bicles in Shanghai: It's a Serious Thing to Stroll Around the Office tells about the daily work of Shanghai white-collar women through four spaces in the office. The title of this book reminds us of a figure of flâneur which was originally a literary figure from the poetry of Charles Baudelaire in the 19th century, and then developed into a metaphor representing the experience of a male artist or poet wandering on modern city streets with no other purpose than to be an acute observer and record the experiences and feelings by writing and photographing (Baudelaire, 1964; Benjamin, 2002; Wearing et al., 2010). It is discussed that being or behaving like a flâneur has been a general experience and leisure life of city residents and tourists in current days (Urry, 2000a; 2002:138). The online content created by @MTZ expresses a continuity of her interests and preferences in literature and travel, in particular, wandering and observing city life. Different from the detached gaze of a flâneur, as a female traveler or flâneuse (Elkin, 2016), she expressed desire of connecting and interacting with strangers. In one post, she said: "for every interesting person I met, ...I will dig out stories of three generations of his/her family" (26-11-2018 01:22).

Her stories reflect a profound influence of old-fashioned travel literature. The stories evolve around a travel destination chapter by chapter. The travel stories are complete without being fragmented by interruption of posts regarding other events. Different from the popular practices on social platforms centered on pictures and videos, she often writes as much as possible to add on more details of her experiences with and feelings about the places, objects and strangers. Her blog is similar to a writer's notebook or note stickers, which is a collection of materials for future writing.

In her album, most photos are in a style of humanist photography, presenting a scene about local people in their daily life. Her photos display material details of objects in natural light or a part of an architecture to pursue an effect of abstract art of colors and lines. Sometimes she adds a filter to the photograph to enhance its aesthetic quality. In her few selfies, she is always in yoga leggings, giving her a sporty and leisure look.

Let's take a look at her travel story in Iceland. In Nordic tourism, Iceland traditionally boasts its nature and wilderness. Recently, Iceland is promoted in China as a shooting location for many famous movies. The *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013) is one of them. It is about a day-dreamer who escapes his boring life in an office and engages in a global adventure. The film echoed with young middle-class professionals in Chinese cities. Tourism consumption frees them from the constraint of work and everyday routine which was discussed as an important motivation of middle-class tourists in advanced industrial societies (Urry, 2000a; 2002). @MTZ and many other Chinese travel bloggers were the forerunners of making travel as consumption and even a profession in China. @MTZ did not follow the

commercial strategy of positioning Iceland as neither a natural spectacle nor a film shooting location, but tried to tailor the popular destination to serve her personal interests. The tour started with two friends driving along Route 1 seeing the magnificent glacier. After that, she spent days by herself wandering around in the city of Reykjavik. The urban landscape she created was composed of bookstores, cafes, galleries, restaurants, architectures and windows that are physical settings and material textures of urban modernity. Since the 1980s, the widely application of urban regeneration strategy of producing artful and entertaining spaces to attract middle class consumers (Law, 1993; Zukin, 1995; Stevensen, 2003; Johnson, 2009) made cities less identifiable. Thus, a display of culture of everyday life is emerging for tourist gaze (Stanley, 1998; Dicks, 2004); tasting local food becomes authentic experiences of a place (Zukin, 2010). @MTZ vividly showed her experience and knowledge of local foods (20-03-2019 01:19):

The squid head that I was looking forward to before my departure was finally squirting in front of me like a volcano. It had been stewed in chicken broth for a long time, then boiled in a sauce containing sugar kelp and birch syrup. Now it looks like a toad. Icelanders are also obsessed with the fish head by precise naming (in 150 nouns) the every parts of fish head. However, Icelandic people themselves, in fact, have no surname.

Based on her travel experiences she gradually developed a cultural economy. Royalties and payments for writing are usually a source of income for a professional travel writer. More importantly, literature publication and the identity of an author also gives the travelers symbolic capital and justifies their authority. Among the twenty travel bloggers, @MTZ is the most dedicated one to writing. Besides publications, @MTZ utilizes her expertise in international marketing to help with the geographic extension of global brands. Her writing skills enable her to create long but high quality soft advertisements. In her travel blogs on Sina Blog, she recorded a partnership with Airbnb. She segmented the potential consumers by describing a lifestyle of a willingness to embrace adventure without budget control,

Airbnb is really not for everyone, it is depending on your travel companion, your mood, your budget, your travel purpose, and your "travel blood type". Of course, the most important thing is that you must be an "embracing the adventure" person. This might be the most basic personality to match Airbnb. (18-11-2013 15:16:56)

Besides continuously posting stories of Airbnb owners, in 2016 she published a book, *Well, I Slept the World in Such Way*, presenting a variety of interesting accommodations and stories of the owners and tenants of the rooms and houses.

The products she promotes are mainly within the tourism industry, such as accommodations, luggage and those which can be associated with her travel theme. In a

few exceptions, for example, working with Chloé perfume Nomad, she placed the product in a series of profile features and life adventure stories. In one of her articles, she wrote a legend about an 80-year old, female American-Russian painter and used photos of her wrinkled face to represent life's voyage giving meaning to the brand. However, her intention of putting form of literature above function of advertising might only reach a niche market in China, because the association of the old, wealth and luxury brand is not prevailing in a developing market dominated by young middle-class consumers. The long text also challenges the patience of internet audiences.

In the following story of travel blogger @ML, we saw that the symbolic value of a cultural intermediary is stretched far beyond the confine of the tourism industry into a much more dynamic world of brands.

5.2. *The Queen of Individualism and Consumerism*

The account creator @ML was born in 1988. She graduated from university with a bachelor degree in radio and television programming. Inspired by the Grand Tour of young British noble men in the 18th century, she started her first global tour with her ex-boyfriend in 2012. She was deemed the Queen of Qiong You (travel on a low budget) and a role model of independent travel among online community with over 6.7 million followers of her Weibo account.

Her travel stories are developed by extensive using of photos and videos. Obviously, her knowledges and practices accumulated in university provided her with sensitivity and techniques to spread her influence in the era of image sharing and reading on mobile devices. In her travel blog, whether in photos or short videos, she always puts herself at center stage. The destinations are exotic, romantic and fantastical backgrounds to her personal stories. @ML is a skilled model, good at posing coordinating to environments and objects. She developed a variety of facial expressions and body languages, performing different characters ranging from a naive girl, an alternative hippie, to a sentimental young lady. By utilizing hip-hop montage and an edgy style, all the images and shoots are organized in a rapid series of simple actions. The images of the destinations further lose meaning and are simplified to signs in fragmentation.

Huge popularity encourages travel bloggers to cash in on their internet traffic. During the global tour, @ML established her own clothing brand and operated an online store. The Queen often dressed in her brand at new destinations and showed them in different postures, moods and environments. A woman keeping changing clothes without repeating outfits on a tour evolved into a ritual and occupied tourists' albums in China. @ML published travel books, acted in films and advertisements, and spoke for brands within and beyond the tourism industry. In the last

two years, @ML is more focused on commercial partnerships with domestic and foreign brands in beauty industry. In the past year, she was a spokesperson for over ten different global makeup brands online. Every month she posts a list of recommendations for travel, sharing her experiences with more cosmetics products. She started producing and posting short videos documenting her business trips. For example, in cooperation with the brand Clarins, she attended a fan gathering in Shanghai, teaching fans how to take snapshots, pose for photographs, match outfits and apply cosmetics.

Although she continues to travel and introduce destinations on Weibo, the content regarding travel is further fragmented because of increasing numbers of posts for different commercial purposes. However, @ML inspires scholars in tourist studies because she has different narratives for different realms of her life—travel, career, romance, “fateful moments” (Giddens, 1991; Desforges, 2000)—firmly interconnected. Months ago, she announced to have egg freezing and posted vlogs regarding the process. One of the posts said:

[VLOG 014] I resisted being forced by my family to get married. After 30 years old, I planned to freeze my eggs. In February 2019, after having my parents' understanding, I flew to the United States waiting for the egg retrieval operation. Here is my documentary of the process (with a link to video). Are the rules of the others correct? Is the life of the others really what you want? (20-03-2019 13:03)

Coincidentally, another 34-year-old female travel blogger also chose to freeze her fertilized eggs and made her announcement on social media. The pressure to marry and have children has always been imposed by Chinese society on women. Contemporary economic and social transformation produces more complex conflicts. Economic globalization, cultural economy and social media create more career paths for young women who have knowledge and aesthetics to create and communicate new life styles. Successful urban young women are labelled as Queens by mass media and commercial enterprises. At the same time their depression is also presented in many commercials. For example, Japanese cosmetic brand SK-II delivered a series of advertisements featuring career women in Tokyo and Shanghai who were unmarried or suffered professional crisis after giving birth. The interesting thing is that @ML is one of the online spokespersons for SK-II Travel Set. The images of a young rebellious woman and of a global traveler are merged with a global brand story. Unfortunately, as Wearing et al., argue “the pursuit of a desired identity in modern times, however, has been channeled into consumption”; “the individual is left with a search for identity and a seemingly endless desire to consume” (2010:41).

The final story is about a married, billionaire couple who want to reflect on their life through adventurers as well as produce blockbuster media.

5.3. *The Newly Rich Chinese and Their Exploring Projects*

Zhang and Liang are of a few travel bloggers on social media who use their real names. They were both born in Beijing in the late 1970s. Zhang did not go to university, but joined the army. After his military service, he refused the assigned job and started a variety of small businesses in the 1990s. Liang is a university graduate; she joined Zhang's small business shortly after graduation. They made their first pot of gold by imitating, producing and selling tofu machines. After that, they came into the business of jewelry production and retailing, and finally the international trade of construction machinery.

The couple won their fame for spending 100 million RMB on world adventures in many extremely dangerous places and have produced a series of programs documenting their experiences since 2012. While talking about why they traveled around the world and produced programs, Zhang explained in a post that in 2008 after participating in the rescue effort after the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan province, he began to reflect on the meaning of life and decided to travel. However, self-reflection and global travel seemed not to be in conflict with their business expansion. At the beginning of their exploring project, they established a cultural and media company to produce their own program.

Besides the accounts and channels on Weibo, video streaming websites, and newly emerging applications on mobile, their programs are also uploaded on YouTube. Their Weibo account is the key node of information dissemination for posts of their daily life, program notices, commercial partnerships, real-time updates of travel experiences, and links to other platforms.

There have been four seasons of the program, each one was based on an independent exploration project of a series of destinations. In 2013, the first season of the program *Li Xing*, literally translated into "a couple in travel" or "couple travelers" was broadcasted online. The official English name of the program is *On the Road*, which reminds us of a novel by American writer Jack Kerouac based on the Beat Generation and their travels across the United States. However, the title only provides a sense of youthful mindset, but hardly draws a relationship to a billionaire couple.

Zhang and their first partnering video website have different opinions on the classification of the program. Zhang prefers documentary to outdoor reality show, the latter is the most popular genre in China's media and entertainment market. Finally, the program is promoted as a documentary reality show without script. In the program, the two travelers look natural without makeup, and often have dirty appearances and exhausted expressions. The promotional posters, however, are carefully designed and beautified. In the poster, the travelers wear stenciled outdoor safari suits, their faces are modified smoothly and brightly, and their

standing postures look more like they are coming out of a Hollywood adventure film.

In the first season, the couple went to Mogadishu in Somalia, Oymyakon in Russia (one of the coldest permanently-inhabited settlements on Earth), the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, and the Lunu volcano in the Republic of Vanuatu. Zhang admitted that his interest in Somalia is because of the American film *Black Hawk Down* (2001). The episode in Somalia was a mix of documentary, feature film and reality show. Through editing materials of their video shoots, movie clips, and news reports, they created a war scape composed of broken streetscapes, gunmen, a hotel under armed security, a hospital with many wounded, a refugee camp, children crowding for candies, etc. They expressed sympathy for the local people and questioned the cruelty of the war, but did not make further exploration into the history and reasons, which makes it a documentary that lacks attitude and depth. After all kinds of thrilling stories, the first season ended like a romantic comedy—the hero proposed to the heroine in the Arctic Circle.

In the following years, they were by themselves sailing 34,000 nautical miles to the Antarctic, driving automobiles across 16 countries, and flying a China-made transport plane with a total voyage over 60,000 kilometers. In 2018 when they started a new program with a new production partnership, Zhang said it would be "an earth encyclopedia dedicated to young people" (http://www.sohu.com/a/318338156_120111732). In addition to the increasing numbers of destinations, programming techniques were also enhanced for new viewing habits. Zhang expressed that they want to create God's perspective and computer game-like viewing experiences for audiences by implementing drones, helicopter, satellite antenna and underwater shooting (<http://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/DVIBIL-CB05149K06.html>).

In order to raise money for travel and production, they resorted to more and new brand partners, social media platforms and sponsors ranging from soft drinks, foods, outdoor clothing and automobiles. They published books and produced travel objects for mass markets, including t-shirts and dried beef, which is a popular snack in China. In addition to endorsing global brands, they also became spokespeople for Chinese Dream. They often showed the Chinese national flag and expressed national pride in China's prosperity and peace in comparison with the war-torn and underdeveloped places they visited. A lot of audiences expressed their agreement with Zhang and the other bloggers who have particular interests in adventure and exploration.

It is criticized that travel practices of explorers and scientists during the 18th and the 19th centuries objectively served the ideology of imperial governance in Western Europe (Pratt, 1992). The diaries, etchings, photographs, and scientific research of these early travelers had been utilized to shape the Westerner's way of viewing the world and constructing national identity. The printing press, film and

television are critiqued for having the same function (Anderson, 1991; Eisenstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1987). Modern tourism is viewed as an extension of imperialism of Western nations (Chambers, 1997; Nash, 1989; Palmer, 1994). These arguments disclose the complex interrelationship between the imperialistic gaze, media and modern tourism. In contemporary society, this historically constructed culture and gaze are constantly evolving in personal travel stories on social media and interplaying with local political climates. Nationalism could be stimulated by a display of global scape.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Cultural intermediaries studies in other contexts never argue that the cultural workers can expand meaning and symbolic values beyond the confinement of their occupations and industries. These Chinese travel bloggers accomplish this by converting global landscapes they viewed and experienced into global mediascapes, providing repertoires of images and narratives to audiences for entertainment and imagination of the world (Appadurai, 1990:296-297; 1996:33-35). These narratives are further utilized as symbolic resources of an array of global and local brands. These culturally structured brandscapes will help to shape consumers' lifestyles and potentially facilitate further movements (Emontspool & Woodward, 2018; Sherry, 1998:112; Thompson & Arsel, 2004:632).

The travel bloggers develop different narrative styles, self-presentations and business strategies with their accumulation of cultural capital in forms of knowledge in literature, art, photography, film, pop culture, travel, fashion, and skills and techniques in video shooting and editing, social media, marketing, driving, and makeup. Comparatively, @MTZ represents a global elite image of cosmopolitanism as urbanity and sophistication (Fuente, 2018:174). With more high-culture capital, she has the intention to approach objects in terms of form and style rather than function. Although she has benefited from the popularity of digital technologies, her way of production remains traditional. As a digital native, @ML is savvy in media aesthetics and technology, and has strong competence in pop culture and fashion, so that she is able to engage the post-1990 generation who just started buying luxury. @Zhang&Liang invested huge amounts of economic capital in travel and content production. They express interests in acquiring knowledge in natural science and skills in transportation and digital media. However, the program, without a clear genre and form, discloses their deficiency in cultural competence both in arts and pop culture.

These differences come from their educational backgrounds, age, gender and many other demographic and social variables. The rapid socio-cultural changes in China further complicate relationships among these variables.

The travel bloggers born in the 1970s experienced China's transition from a socialist-planned economy to a market-oriented economy. People like @MTZ and @Zhang&Liang were the darlings of a market with neoliberalism tendency in the 1990s. Faced with a greater autonomy in career choices, they developed their career paths differently. One is the educated informant required by global companies, the other is an adventurer and a doer with sensitivity to local markets and mass consumers. They also saw the exponential growth of cultural and media goods from foreign countries and regions since the 1980s. In this process, they started the accumulation of cultural capital for being a cosmopolitan. These differences are all reflected in the way they display the world.

The booming internet economy and social media over the last decade created a place where youth develop their culture and power. All the Chinese travel bloggers took advantage of both internet culture and consumer culture. However, the post-1990s generation expresses much stronger attempts to formulate self-identity through consumption and self-presentation online. @ML, through diversified and colorful destinations, clothes, postures and selfies, constructs her individual identity, as well as produces "a Supermarket of Style" (Polhemus, 1997) for her audiences to appreciate and imitate.

In the first 15 years of the 21st century, the Chinese government introduced media industry reforms to include the sector as a pillar of economic transformation. The media industry was also encouraged to produce content to strengthen national identity and serve the "Going out" strategy. As we discussed, in this economic and cultural transition, the influencers on line became new heroes and heroines not only in the production of media content, but also by having a finger in the pie of lifestyle endorsement which was once dominated by foreign and local stars. The case of @Zhang&Liang represents the emergence of consumer nationalism or political consumerism in this context. However, the culture now, as James Boon argued on Balinese culture, is "a multiple authored invention, a historical formation, and enactment, a political construct, a shifting paradox, an ongoing translation, an emblem, a trademark, a nonconsensual negotiation of contrastive identity, and more" (Boon, 1990:ix; cited in Clifford, 1992:100). The global cultural economy, especially the media industry, capitalizes diversified cultures from different places, social groups and ideological orientations. There is "an increasing interconnectedness of varied local cultures, as well as a development of cultures without a clear anchorage in anyone territory" (Hannerz, 1996:102). China is a destination receiving intensive and diverse mobilities of people, objects, images and information in the past four decades. The Chinese travel bloggers and their stories provide us with a subject of examination, so that we can understand the complexity of cultural traveling and transformation. The narratives, styles, and aesthetics of these texts reveal pro-

found influences by the cultural goods from Japan, Europe, the United States, Hong Kong and other places. In other words, Chinese travel bloggers, as cultural intermediaries, are themselves the production of cultural diaspora and the presentation of different forms of cosmopolitanism.

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