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Tourist scams in the city: challenges for domestic travellers in urban China

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify dominant scams against domestic tourists in popular tourism cities in China. There are two questions of concern: what types of scams do domestic tourists experience and are the patterns of scams different between the capital and regional cities? The social situation framework was employed to interpret the outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis facilitated by Leximancer software was applied to 102 Chinese travel blogs reporting experiences of being scammed in Beijing, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Sanya and Guilin. Clear themes and concepts emerged from the analysis of these travel reviews and differences in scamming patterns between Beijing and regional cities were identified.

Findings – The most frequently reported scams in the capital Beijing were linked to the chaotic environment at tourist attractions and the misbehaviours of tour agents. By way of contrast scams involving manipulating the weight and quality of products purchased were more common in regional cities. The differences between Beijing and other locations may lie in the greater monitoring of fraudulent practices in the capital. Additionally, the role of shills (confederates of the scammer) was highlighted in many of the scams studied.

Originality/value – Scams include a slightly less serious but still troublesome set of problems accompanying major crimes and assaults. Rare research specifically focussed on tourist scams despite substantive work discussing crimes against tourists as general. Implications of the present study lie in enriching the literature on scams against tourists. The analysis of scams as a special type of social situation proved to be insightful in directing attention to facets of the interaction thus providing connections to previous work and directions for further study. It is also promising to be developed to inform strategic approaches to creating a safer tourism environment in cities.

Keywords China, Domestic tourism, City, Leximancer, Social situation, Tourist scam

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Safe environments in tourism cities are pivotal to the well-being of domestic and international tourists (Arlt, 2013; Fuchs and Reichel, 2011; Kozak *et al.*, 2007). Any practices or routine threats which cause anxiety to tourists can not only stress the newcomers but result in long-lasting reputational damage to the city's image. Many cities in China now attract domestic tourists as well as international tourists in large numbers (Paskaleva-Shapira, 2007). The complexity of these modern urban environments provides a stage for tourist-local interaction and sometimes a venue for problems. The focus of this paper lies with one set of these undesirable byproducts of tourism growth, the opportunistic exploitation of domestic Chinese tourists in the form of scams. It can be noted immediately that scams constitute a special class of intrusion and threat to tourists. Unlike crimes such as assault and robbery scams are less dramatic in their consequences. They typically involve the tourist losing small amounts of money, being deceived and left feeling socially inept (Pearce, 2011b).

In China domestic tourism constitutes a larger proportion of tourist arrivals, tourism revenues and tourism traffic than the international sector (Cai *et al.*, 2002; Goh *et al.*, 2015; Zhang and Liu, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2016). The number of domestic tourists in 2014 was 3.2 billion; while there were 98 million for the outbound and 129 million for the inbound markets (Weaver, 2015). In a survey involving 23,531 Chinese domestic tourists in 50 cities, unpleasant shopping experiences and problems with travel agents and guides have been reported as substantial threats to tourists' satisfaction (He, 2011). Specifically, the overpriced products frustrate domestic tourists the most in shopping situations. As to the package tours, forcing tourists to purchase products, abusing members who do not consume and even abandoning the group with limited shopping power are not uncommon among tour guides. Tour operators also harm tourists' interests by overpromising and fake advertising (Xu and McGehee, 2016). Most domestic tourists are disappointed by transportation, accommodation and catering service in destination cities. The gap between expectation and satisfaction deters domestic tourists from extending their visits, revisiting a city or repurchasing with a particular agent (He, 2011). The existence and practice of scamming tourists exacerbates these difficulties in developing satisfying tourist experiences for Chinese cities.

The present research seeks to identify dominant scams against domestic tourists in popular tourism cities in China. Specifically, there are two questions of concern: what types of scams do domestic tourists experience and are the patterns of scams different or not between the capital and regional cities? The social situation framework is employed to interpret the scams reported by tourists. The value of this kind of work is multi-faceted. At the conceptual level the study of scams offers potential insights into the way tourists adapt and behave in novel environments. Such studies build an understanding of tourist intelligence and travel skills (Pearce, 2015). At a more pragmatic and applied level, studying the type of scams and their location in China may offer insights into how both individuals and government bodies can reduce these fraudulent practices.

2. Crimes and scams against tourists

2.1 Crimes threatening tourists

Tourist targeted crimes refer to "an action which is contrary to written or case law in either the tourist-generating or tourist-receiving country" (Ryan, 1993). Two major strands of the research on tourism crimes include: first, the tourism context being a common crime scene; and second, the impacts criminal incidents exert on tourists' experience and the tourism development of destinations.

Tourism locations are regarded as a criminal "hot spots" under certain conditions. These conditions include settings where large numbers of tourists congregate and there is limited surveillance (Crotts, 1996; Pearce, 2011b). In particular, hot spot theory, which originated from human ecology and criminology, suggests that higher rates of crimes occur in relatively few places, and most especially in those lacking controls (Sherman *et al.*, 1989). Additionally, the concept of social distance has been identified as an explanation of victims' exposure to criminal attacks. For example, tourists who are isolated and distant from their home environments and therefore away from their regular support network (families, friends and colleagues) are particularly vulnerable. Criminals who offend in places away from their own towns or cities also benefit from not being easily recognised (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Sherman *et al.*, 1989).

The characteristics of tourism activities and the behaviours of tourists jointly make tourism settings a breeding ground for crimes (Chesney-Lind and Lind, 1986; Crotts, 1996; George, 2003, 2010). First, criminals have easy access to a large number of targets at densely crowded attractions and transport nodes. Second, some features of tourist behaviours make visitors vulnerable "prey" for intending offenders. For example, tourists carry large sums of cash and other valuable items that tempt thieves. Tourists also tend to be less aware of unsafe situations because they are unfamiliar with the environment and sometimes they are so engaged in viewing settings that they fail to take care of their belongings (Chesney-Lind and Lind, 1986). Additionally, tourists can engage in risk-taking activities, such as drinking and prostitution, because they are temporarily free from every-day constraints and responsibilities (Ryan, 1993). Such actions cross

legal boundaries and participants are often further exploited by criminals. Third, the high mobility and intricate interactions at travel settings reduce the risk of perpetrators being caught committing a crime (Crotts, 1996; Harper, 2001). In particular, the flow and dynamics of tourist crowds and relationships make it easy for criminals to conceal their misdeeds and escape (Crotts, 1996; Ryan, 1993). Tourists who experience minor crimes are also less likely to report or prosecute offences than residents because it costs tourists more to do so. Additionally, tourists do not want to damage their holidays by engaging with frustrating legal and administrative issues. Criminals therefore take fewer risks in preying on tourists (Chesney-Lind and Lind, 1986).

Criminal incidents against tourists exert adverse impacts on (prospective) tourists' sense of security (Floyd et al., 2004; Fuchs and Reichel, 2011; Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp and Gibson, 2003). Heightened perceptions of risk and safety concerns largely deter arrivals because security is a fundamental prerequisite when choosing a travel destination (Brunt et al., 2000; Floyd et al., 2004; George, 2003). In addition, on-site tourists who know about or suffer from crimes at the destination tend to limit their activities. Staying in hotels, avoiding activities at night time, and not visiting crowded places are common approaches which anxious tourists can use to protect themselves (George, 2003). Obviously, these protective behaviours affect tourists' experiences and reduce consumption which has an adverse impact on local tourism. Major crimes and assaults against tourists are also accompanied by a slightly less serious but still troublesome set of problems tourists may encounter; these annoyances include tourist scams.

2.2 Scams frustrating tourists

A full definition of the term "tourist scam" was offered by Pearce (2011a) as "essentially fraudulent practice intended to gain financial advantage from a tourist where that targeted individual is initially a willing participant". Importantly, what distinguishes tourist scams from crimes against tourists lies in the essence of a scam: some element of victim culpability, the purely financial-gain motivation and legal-illegal ambiguity. Normally, tourists get involved in a scam partially due to their spontaneous interaction with the scammer. They would not fall into a trap without attempting to take a petty advantage, ranging from a bargain to an easier trip. Attributions about scams in a broader consumption management context inform the understanding of tourists' culpability. In particular, "visceral greed, fear, and the desire to be liked" are identified in research by the University of Exeter as underlying triggers driving consumers to participate in actions leading to scams (Lea et al., 2008). These personal needs are also factors impairing consumers' judgement. Fundamentally, tourists partially or slightly contribute to the scams. Second, unlike many categories of crimes against tourists (such as assaults and terrorism attacks), scams do not often include threats to personal safety. What motivates scammers to cheat tourists is to directly or indirectly reap financial profits (accessing cash, acquiring sellable goods, or reducing their outlay as vendors). For the tourists the consequences are a sense of frustration through the loss of money, time, trust in others and self-esteem (Pearce, 2011a, b; Pearce and Kanlayanasukho, 2012). The absence of physical assault is one of the reasons why it is hard to definitively state that tourist scammers are violating the law or that they deserve serious legal punishment. In practice, scamming tricks are usually carried out by deceiving, overpromising, and providing false information – all of which gradually lead tourists to make inaccurate judgement and participate in an interaction (or a trade) with strangers.

An empirical study on scams against international tourists in Thailand identified dominant categories of scamming activities (Pearce, 2011b). A theme analysis was undertaken with the 35 scam episodes that were recorded in police documents or recalled by tourism practitioners. The seven principles, labelled as distraction, social compliance, herd, dishonesty, deception, need/greed and time, which frame consumer scams in the general public informed the coding scheme (Stajano and Wilson, 2011). Consequently, three themed categories, specifically "tourist service, retail environment, and social contact" emerged from the 35 episodes, indicating circumstances where scams happen frequently in Thailand. Sequentially, an extended study examining scam episodes was carried out by interviewing key tourism-sector informants who were familiar with Thailand's social and cultural environment. These key informants scored on each common scam activities identified previously according to the relative frequency of specific scamming tricks. As a result, two dominant scamming approaches in Thailand tourism context

are identified including up-selling and unreasonable surcharges in general retail contexts, and the exploitation of international romances in social contacts. Fake calls from supposed hotel staff seeking credit card information is an example of a fraudulent tourist service scam in Thailand.

Tourist scams are common in guided tours where guides seeking extra sources of income attempt to manipulate group members. The most common scams undertaken by tour guides are forcing or deceiving tourists into purchasing items from stores where guides receive high commissions (Wang *et al.*, 2000). Hawking, spending extended time at unrequested spots, overpromising and exaggerating the value of goods are also found repeatedly in guide-tourist interactions. Tourists who discern the scamming essence of these activities are likely to provide lower satisfaction appraisals about tourism services and destinations. Loss of money is the mildest consequence while sometime scams lead to break-down of the relationship between tourists and the guide. The collapse of such relationships can be recognised by tourists' anger, dislike of the guide, and even intentions to quit the tour (Pearce and Kanlayanasukho, 2012).

3. Understanding social situations at destinations

The social situation framework provides a systematic overview when analysing tourist encounters (Murphy, 2001; Pearce, 1984, 1990). Nine elements of a specific social situation include goals; rules; roles; concepts and cognitive beliefs; language and speech; skills and difficulties; environmental settings; sequence of behaviours; and comprehensive repertoire (Argyle *et al.*, 1981). These elements fuse together to help understand situations where strangers interact. Tourism settings are highly sociable and feature various interpersonal encounters; that is, they are a specific type of social situation. By considering the elements of social situations, the essential character of tourism encounters can be understood. The overview of social situations has been applied to investigate various interactions among tourism stakeholders, including host-tourist relationships in context of farm home stay (Pearce, 1990); interplays between tour guides and tourists (Pearce, 1984), and the interactions among tourists, e.g. backpackers (Murphy, 2001).

Social situation analysis has the potential to inform studies of tourist scams. For example, consider the scam from the work of Pearce (2011a): "tourists purchase what they believe to be good quality gems but in fact are sold inferior products". It was demonstrated that shopkeepers sometime give customers cheaper versions of the goods which they have bought in the retail space. In social situation terms, the shopkeeper achieved his goal to overly profit by breaking the rules governing fair trades. The scammer possess the skills to manipulate the environment, and the retail space, and there is a gap in knowledge about the goods by the consumer. The roles involved in this interaction are those of sellers and consumers but the scammers do not adhere to the roles of a genuine service provider or salesperson. The scam is enacted through a repertoire of links in a logical sequence which induces the consumer to make poor decisions.

Building on the key concepts in the literature on China's domestic tourism, as well as studies on crimes against tourists, scams and social situation analysis, this study seeks to explore the dominant scamming patterns against domestic tourists in urban China. Further the research seeks to explore any differences in the scams between the capital Beijing and regional cities. The context for this work is five prominent tourism cities in China because the existing literature reports that cities provide the hot spots for crimes and scams due to the issues of crowds, dynamics and social distance.

4. Methods

4.1 User-generated information in tourism research

The archival data accessed from the internet, especially tourists' reviews and commentaries, are regarded as informative for understanding tourists' experience and attitudes (Wu and Pearce, 2014). In the current digital-tourist era, social media and virtual communities are prevalent venues for communication and knowledge exchange. Online user-generated content (UGC), such as blogs, offer spontaneous and unbiased opinions from consumers (Schaad, 2008, p. 201). Accordingly, researchers can hear the real voice of the insiders from personal blogs and

determine what is really happening in practice (Wu *et al.*, 2014). (Potential) tourists even perceive travel reviews as more trustworthy than traditional marketing communication in revealing the real situation (Akehurst, 2009; Tseng *et al.*, 2015). In particular, user-generated data best facilitate the understanding about sensitive issues and newly emerging or considered topics (Mkono and Markwell, 2014; Pearce and Wu, 2016a, b).

The tourist scam has not been substantially studied though it is a long-standing problem frustrating tourists in unfamiliar settings. There is little empirical evidence informing researchers about the reality of scams. A systematic description of scams and stakeholders' opinions and behaviours has not yet been developed. Additionally, the low reporting rates of tourist scams make it difficult to access adequate data from police documents. Therefore, the authentic and rich information in the blogs of tourists who have experienced scams in person can be especially valuable for exploring scamming situations. Moreover, scams against tourists represent the negative side of tourism and potentially impair the images of both tourists and destinations. Tourists may regard their experiences of being scammed as shameful because others may blame them as foolish or greedy. Therefore, potential informants might be reluctant to discuss scams thoroughly. In the case of such a sensitive issue, the unsolicited description through the anonymous blogs can be a valuable approach to exploring the essence of a scamming interaction (Pan *et al.*, 2007).

Following the arguments concerning the appropriateness of exploring blogs on this topic, 102 travel blogs were systematically extracted from online reviews reporting experiences of being scammed as a tourist in the five Chinese cities. As mentioned in the previous section, online UGC is effective in exploring such a new and sensitive phenomenon as tourist scams. In particular, personal blogs were adopted as the primary materials because they provided substantial numbers of detailed and spontaneous descriptions about scams. Importantly, travel blogs have been regarded as an influential source of world-of-mouth information and a key influence on travel decision making in the digital tourist era (Zhang *et al.*, 2010). "Qyer.com", "mafengwo.cn" and "tianya.cn" were selected as main sources of data in the present study. These virtual communities are the most prevalent online platforms where Chinese frequently share their travel stories (Wu and Huang, 2014). Beijing, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Sanya and Guilin are the target cities because they are among the ten leading tourism cities in China and the geographical distribution covers the north, east, west, and south of the country. Additionally, because the selected cities include Beijing, the capital of China, and another four regional cities of medium size, contrasts between a core centre and regional players can be made.

A randomisation procedure was employed in April 2015 to sample a wide range of travel blogs for analysis. Additionally, the researchers attempted to check for repetition of the stories. It was initially decided to examine 50 stories for the capital Beijing and another 50 for the other regional cities. More blogs would be added into the sample if saturation could not be reached. First, each of the place names was grouped with Chinese words *pian*, *keng*, *meng*, *shua* and *zha*, all with the meaning of scam, cheat, fool, trick or fraud, as key words for searching tourist scam relevant stories. In total, 26,194 results for Beijing, 5,886 for Guilin, 6,638 for Sanya, 7,963 for Xi'an and 8,701for Hangzhou were retrieved and ranked according to relevance. However, many of these identified blogs, especially on the later web pages, were not really related to tourist scams. For instance, the complaints of being disappointed by the highly anticipated scenery were also shown because bloggers wrote they were "cheated" by promotion photographs or friends' recommendation. Subsequently, the research team filtered blogs on the first pages of the results for each city until obtaining 250 reviews for Beijing and 65 for each regional city. The filtering requirements that were kept in mind included: first, the blog or at least paragraphs in it were actually discussing scams (including personal interactions with tourism industry personnel at a destination) that bloggers experienced in person when travelling; and second, the reported time was after 1 January 2012. The third step was to count backwards from the most relevant blog and incorporate every fifth into the sample of each city until obtaining 50 for Beijing and 13 for each regional city. Consequently, 102 scamming episodes in which Chinese bloggers themselves were involved when travelling to Beijing, Guilin, Xi'an, Sanya and Hangzhou constituted the sample. These Chinese blogs were translated into English followed by back translation. Checks on the accuracy and fluency of the expressions were considered by the research team.

4.2 Structural content analysis by Leximancer

The research employed Leximancer, an effective approach to transforming "words to meaning to insight" which is becoming an alternative to hand coding (Cretchley et al., 2010). Leximancer has gained popularity as an investigative tool in various research domains ranging from public health to human language and psychology because of its advantages over many traditional textual analysis techniques (Tseng et al., 2015). Essentially, Leximancer extracts commonalities based on both frequency and co-presence of words, rather than examining only the frequencies as in the case for traditional content analysis (Cretchley et al., 2010; Indulska et al., 2012; Tseng et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2014). Leximancer analysis differs from traditional approaches since the researcher does not direct the concepts or themes to be used (Indulska et al., 2012). In particular, Leximancer automatically generates a structural word-concept-theme network without being constrained by a priori coding scheme (Cretchley et al., 2010). Additionally, the Leximancer approach better assists researchers to interpret the outcomes. For example, depicting an overview of the conceptual structure in a concise map is a relative advantage of Leximancer over other methods. It also allows for in-depth analysis by specifying links and the strength of the relationships among concepts and themes. Inter-group comparison map can also be developed to examine differences in patterns and levels of relevance to key concepts and themes between categorises.

5. Results and findings

5.1 Themes for tourist scams in China

As a first step in the analysis, a general map was generated from the 102 reviews presenting the dominant concepts and themes which best summarised domestic tourists' scam experiences in Chinese cities. A total of 33 concepts emerged from the refined textual material. In order to obtain interpretable outcomes, original travel blogs were processed by removing meaningless words (such as prepositions and articles), merging synonyms and variants of the one term (e.g. yuan and RMB, buy and purchase, visit and visited). These concepts were then clustered into major themes according to their relevance with others. As shown in Figure 1, the hottest or most important themes appear in the red colour with the next influential in yellow, and so forth according to the colour wheel. In order of their relative importance, "yuan", "tour", "driver", "shopping", "restaurant" and "tea" are identified as six major themes.

Yuan. The most influential theme is "yuan", the basic unit of money in China. Money as the hottest topic indicates that most tourist scams are money-oriented. Concepts comprising this theme include: yuan, cheated, ticket, admission, buy, price, spot, cost, shopping, hawk, pay and sell. The concept "cheated" is most closely connected to money, which reveals tourists' strong perception of being cheated of money as the consequence of a scam. From another perspective, it is the pecuniary loss that makes a tourist recognise the "cheating" or scamming nature of an interaction. It can also be argued that scammers are mainly driven by financial gains from tourists. A typical comment from a tourist aware of losing money in a scam was:

> A person decorated and painted in bronze colour walked up to us and invited me to take photos with him at Qianmen Street. Surprisingly, he requested for 20 yuan after we took a picture. I got cheated and gave money reluctantly. It's an obvious scam.

The relevant concepts "ticket", "admission" and "spot" indicate that scammers tend to exploit the situation of buying admission tickets for attractions to set traps. Also, it is not uncommon that tourists get trapped into a scam when buying tickets. Tourists' reluctance to queue and attempts to pay less explain the reason why they are easy to scam when buying tickets. One examples depicting how tourists were cheated when entering a tourist spot is:

> We were too tired to walk to the Prince Gong Mansion after getting out at the underground train so took a pedicab. The tricycle driver charged us 10 yuan per person. It turns out that when you go after small gains you may suffer a big loss. Actually, we were taken to a false ticket centre. Although there were a huge crowds of people in front of it, that ticket centre was quite rough and shabby. We bought student tickets at 45 yuan per person there. A man gave us a badge and told us to wait for a tour guide. I became aware that we were cheated when holding that badge without receiving a normal

Figure 1 Dominant concepts and themes representative of tourist scams in Chinese cities
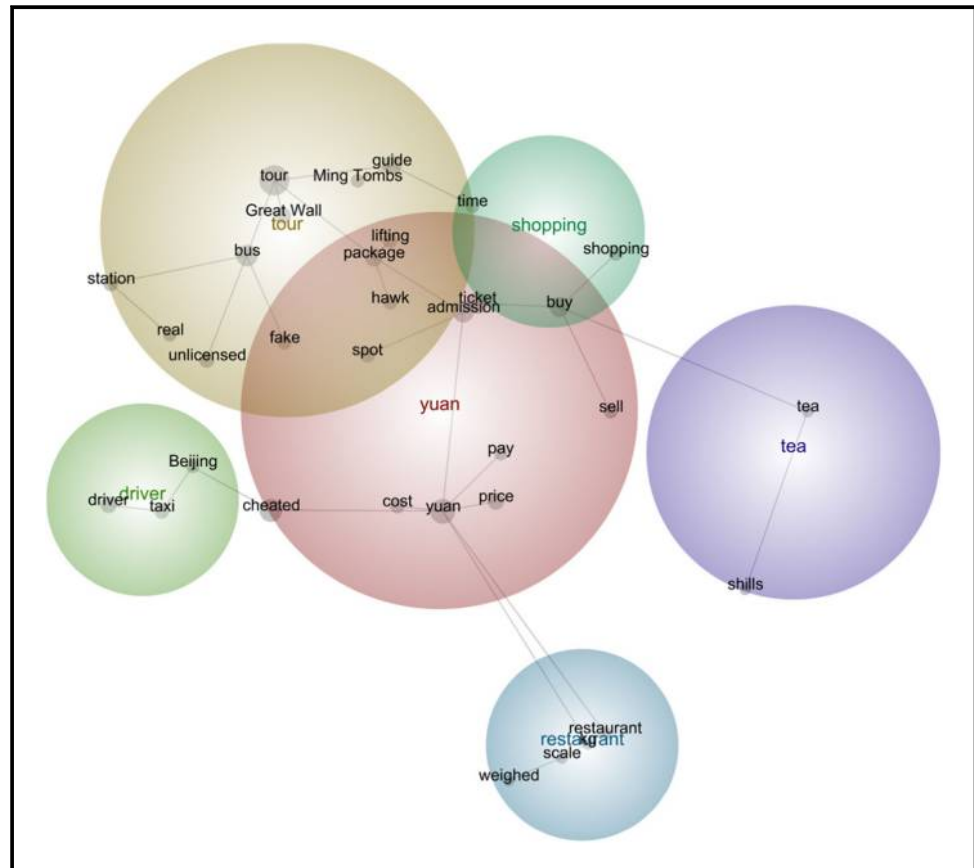
admission ticket. Afterwards, I found the authentic ticket centre near to where we got on the pedicab. We knew that the ticket should be only 40 yuan by asking a tourist who bought a ticket at the authentic center (I was going crazy).

Hawkers, who can be defined as individuals who walk the streets to sell and ask people to purchase goods in a forceful way, are encountered frequently in tourism settings in China. These unlicensed salespersons often promote tourist products and package tours. One blogger wrote about his experience:

I'm telling my experience of being scammed. I was stopped by a group of people asking me if I was interested in visiting Hutong by rickshaw (a traditional seat on wheels pulled by a man) when exiting the Shenwu Gage of the Forbidden City. They told me that Hutong is a must for very tourist to Beijing. I had sympathy for the driver for working hard on such a cold winter day, so made a deal at a price of 100 yuan for a one-hour tour. However, he took me on a tour which lasted less than 40 minutes as opposed to our agreement. All we did was visiting a Quadrangle courtyard outside the gate.

A particularly prominent example of extracting money is provided in the following:

An ascetic monk kowtowed once every three steps on barefoot, approaching the huge Avalokitesvara sculpture at South Sea Avalokitesvara Spot. Many tourists gave him money when passing by. My wife told me he was a cheater but I didn't believe it. I searched online later, finding tourists post photos of him as early as 2011. I remind all not to get cheated by him. This guy pretends to be a monk and worship Avalokitesvara for two hours every day. He can earn as much as 10 thousand every month! Buddhist wouldn't protect such person cheating in the name of Avalokitesvara.

Additionally, a large number of scams happen in shopping situations through the interactions involving "buy" and "sell". How much certain products and services cost and tourists "pay" for them seems the link most frequently exploited by scammers. Tourists mostly lose money by paying extraordinarily high prices for fake products. The dishonest salespersons manipulate the

price in various ways to make tourists buy and then overcharge them. An example of promoting sales by a deceptive raffle was described in Xi'an:

> I visited the Chang'an Jewellery Art craft Shop expecting to buy some souvenirs and found a favourite art object. The salesperson told me that I had a chance to win a lottery and free gift. I drew one thinking it would be foolish not to receive a free gift. I seized the first prize which is a chance to buy any of the pearl necklace with 90% discount. All of those necklace were over 40,000 yuan for each […] I am sure that it was a scam hawking such products no matter whether the pearl was real or fake.

Tour. "Tour" is another dominant theme of tourist scam stories. "Bus", "station", "guide", "package", "unlicensed", "fake" are closely linked concepts with "tour". The amount of tourism traffic in Chinese cities is at the heart of the problem. There are a great number of scammers lurking at traffic nodes and entrances to main tourist attractions. Common scammers include unlicensed taxi drivers and tour guides, operators of fake buses, salespersons touting for package tour business, and other malicious persons.

A trap many tourists encountered on their way to the Badaling Great Wall is notorious. Specifically, uniformed persons pretended to be traffic regulators or staff of an official bus company. These scammers stop tourists who are heading to the bus station where the bus to the Great Wall stops; and redirect tourists to different bus stops by lying. Their partners in crime approach tourists asking them to take their cars when tourists waited too long for the bus (because they were at a wrong stop where the real bus would never show up). Another trick is to park a fake bus (which looks like the official bus) in the place to which tourists have been directed. Confused tourists will get on the fake bus because they think it is the official one. Scammers running fake buses charge higher for the drive as well as hawk admission tickets and products on the way. What is worse, the fake bus traps and transports tourists to a different spot where the driver can take commission from the private tourism business. Some scammed tourists realised they were cheated upon arrival while others did not realise and felt disappointed with their visits to the Great Wall. Similar scams about fake buses are also frequently reported with regional cities. A blogger was involved in such a scam in Xi' an:

> I would like to emphasize tips to avoid scams when taking No.5 Tour Bus at the railway station in Xi'an […][…] A table was set outside the office of standardized public transport company and there were several men in uniform sitting behind it, shouting: "this way. Tourists to Huaqing Hot Spring and Terra Cotta Warriors by No. 5 Tour bus buy tickets here". I was about to buy tickets before asking whether it was the standardized bus. The guy answered: 'look at our uniforms. This is our office. How could we be the fake?' I began to suspect them when they denied my request that we only go to Terra Cotta Warriors and didn't visit Huaqing Hot Spring.

The following is another example of tours offering false information for profits:

> The creepiest scam was that a tour guide told us that Mr. Yangjide, who discovered the underground Terra Cotta Warriors was signing his books and one autographed book sold at 180 yuan on a discount. Actually, the man who signed on the book was not that person. The peasant who discovered the Terra Cotta Warriors is not Yangjide either.

It is not uncommon for group-tour guides to profit from taking tourists to shops, where they obtain commission or kickbacks and can hawk specific goods. Many of them are unlicensed and may be partners in other scams. In particular, package tours from unauthorised providers, especially the low quality day-tours greatly frustrate tourists in urban China. The following are examples of the control exerted by some tour guides on tourists:

> We were guided to Visit Rainforest Valley in the afternoon but misdirected to go shopping in fact. We didn't visit any spot except for an alleged "most toxic tree". The guide took us to three shopping centers selling hand-made soaps, kosso art craft goods and tea leaves, which consumed all our time.

> The guide took us to have lunch at a restaurant on the second floor of a jade shop. She said we would visit the Ming Tombs after lunch. It was said those who didn't visit the shop would not be allowed to have a meal. I don't think it's necessary to mention the low quality of the food we ate!

Driver. "Driver" also emerges as an important theme and its connectivity with the concept "unlicensed" is informative. This theme again identifies the untrustworthiness of tourism transport as a serious issue in China, as noted before in the "fake tour bus scams". Other scams generated

by drivers around tourist attractions include overpromising, overcharging and forcing tourists into shopping locations, such as in the following scam by a tricycle driver in Guilin:

> We came to an agreement that he would take us to tour two rivers and four lakes at 40 yuan for each tricycle (we need two tricycles). However, he began to guide us to buy special local products and purchase admission tickets for spots after visiting less than a half of the agreed route. Moreover, he dismissed us from his tricycle as soon as obtained the kickback from our consumption. I was angry because of the shame of being cheated rather than the loss of the money.

Taxi drivers also play tricks at public places other than near tourist spots. The reported scams include going a longer way, charging more than the metered price and driving passengers to tourist attractions, restaurants and hotels where they can take commission. Interestingly, licensed or standard taxi drivers scamming tourists were only reported in regional cities whereas taxi drivers in Beijing were positively considered to be relatively warm hearted and knowledgeable:

> Tourism transport in Guilin is awful. Taxi drivers not only overcharge but also get kickbacks by taking passengers to tourist spots […][…] Taxis in Beihai never run the meter so remember to discuss and agree on a price in advance. Don't believe any cab driver who recommends restaurants. They all cheat non-locals into having meals in expensive and low-quality stalls.

The unpleasant experience of taking a taxi in Beijing usually involved unlicensed taxi drivers. They overcharged tourists and took them to run-down attractions, shopping centres or restaurants where the private business would give the drivers kickbacks:

> We took a cab which didn't run the meter and charged 30 yuan from the Beijing North Railway Station to our hotel. It's only 10 minutes' away so 30 yuan is apparently expensive.

Unlicensed taxis are more common in regional cities than Beijing. For example, the following blogs reported the experience in Hangzhou:

> A guy told us we cannot catch the plane if we take a shuttle bus. I asked him why since there was two and a half hours left. He answered it would be traffic congestion on a rainy day, the shuttle would not leave until being fully seated and it would stop at several stops on the way. He asked me to take a taxi and took my luggage, immediately heading to a car. I found it was an unlicensed car stopping beside the shuttle station so asked about the price. He told me to spend 240 yuan. My mother and I didn't want to take his car and the man said he would charge 100 yuan less if we could find another person to share the drive.

Shopping. Shopping is also a frequently reported context where tourists get scammed. In addition to the overpricing reported in the theme "yuan" and the forced consumption during group tours, the low quality and even false products also disappoint tourists. Importantly, such shopping tricks are not played out only at tourism settings but also in public retail departments. The following is an example of a shopping scam which happened in a common retail space:

> We went to the Wangfujin Street […][…] We got cheated at a shop near KFC selling Beijing Specialties. I found a counter selling Daoxiangcun (an old and famous brand of desserts in Beijing) and I was pleased after making sure it was exactly "Daoxiangcun". Before that, I came across a fake shop with a similar name "Dongxiangchun" at the Qianmen Food Court where "Cun" was changed into "Chun" […][…] We bought a large box at 55 yuan and a small one at 45 yuan […][…] foolishly we then left. We also bought several Tuckahoe Pies at other counters. When having a rest in a building at Wangfujin Street, I found by chance that the brand names printed on our gift boxes were not "Daoxiangcun". What that shop sells is different from what is promoted on their sign board. Actually, the authentic shop is on the first floor of that building. How creepy it was! Moreover, we bought 6 Tuckahoe Pies at 10 yuan while it's 6 yuan for a large bag at a supermarket. Therefore, tourists mustn't purchase at specialty shops on the Wangfujin Street […][…] We found worse things when opening the box at home. It's not as full as the sample showed to us. There was only half a box of desserts in our container.

Deceptive measurement scales and fake currencies used by some stores were mentioned several times in regional cities. For example:

> However, an awful thing happened before I left Guilin. Two mangos weighed 4kg and were worth 32 yuan. I knew the scale was unequal and the mango was short-weighed so bargained to an acceptable price at 30 yuan. I gave a 50 yuan paper money to that salesgirl and waited for change.

She requested me to change another paper money saying it lacked a corner […][…] I gave her a 100 yuan paper money. The girl said she wanted to receive that 50 yuan instead of this 100 yuan. When asked about the reason, the girl answered: "this 100 yuan paper money is fake." (How could I imagine that she had replaced the money I gave her by a fake paper money?) I complained: "how could it be fake? I withdrew it from bank right now." However I felt weird because I found the colour of that paper money was abnormal […][…] After listening to my experience, my husband told me I must have been cheated by that girl and it was her who changed my real money with a fake note […][…].

There are several dirty tricks with which owners of seafood venders in Sanya cheat tourists. Firstly, they fill water into plastic bags containing seafood […][…] Secondly, they use short-weights. Take a spring scale with you and request to weigh goods by yourself. Don't allow the vender to touch your scale because they may seize the chance to adjust it, making it unequal as well. Thirdly, be watchful about whether they replace your seafood bags with another containing low-quality ones.

Restaurant. Some dishonest restaurant owners also gain benefits from tourists when providing food and meals. Such scams at restaurants were mainly reported in regional cities. Common tricks include soliciting customers through taxi drivers and then overcharging for items. In particular, cheating on measuring scales, in terms of weight of the ingredients is common. It is an issue in markets, food courts and restaurants where fresh ingredients, especially seafood are provided. Providing different food from what the customers have ordered is another approach to scamming tourists at restaurants:

We selected a large and popular restaurant, Dashifu, to have dinner. We ordered three dishes: beer boiled Jiangu fish (1.1kg and 288 for 1kg) […][…] The next day, a raft driver told us that Jiangu fish looks and tastes like Maogu fish which is much cheaper. The only difference between them is that Jiangu fish weighs less than 1kg while Maogu fish is larger. I began to suspect that restaurant sold Maogu fish at the price of Jiangu fish because it weighed more than 2kg. We ordered a Maogu fish at another restaurant that day, finding it tasted the same as Jiangu fish we ate the former day. Therefore, we have more evidence to believe that we got cheated at Dashifu restaurant.

Tea. Purchasing tea leaves was identified as a separate theme in the general model. The theme "tea" in the Leximancer output includes the concepts "shill" and "tea". The influential concept "shill" represents a deceptive salesperson who pretends to be a genuine local resident or an enthusiastic customer in order to stimulate the consumptions of tourists. Many tourists encountered "shills" who pretended to be local residents who recommended shops for local specialties. Shills who collaborate with tea shops and silk shops are common in Hangzhou. These tea shills and silk shills were reported by most bloggers who were scammed in Hangzhou. Shills creating scams were not easy to recognise so most tourists approached by these scammers were trapped:

We encountered a woman at a bus stop before leaving for West Lake who asked us whether we were travelling and recommended that we visit Jiuxi. She told us to take a minivan to visit the falls after getting off bus. Ridiculously, we believed her, taking a bus to Jiuxi and then a minivan at 5 yuan after getting off the bus. (Actually, I started to suspect that this was a scam and they were shills.) The driver of the minivan was an old man. He told us that if we wanted to buy the best Longjin tea leaves, we could ask the tea famers we encountered on the way whether there was tea at their home. He also recommended us to taste tea at homes of famers and asked whether they would sell tea leaves. He also reminded us that average price of tea leaves was 80 yuan for very 50g (how pricy it was!). As expected, we encountered several people who started up conversations with us so we asked an old man whether there was tea at his home. He answered: "yes, of course. I myself am a tea famer." Then we followed him to his home to taste tea. We found photos of him showing that he won prizes in competition for making tea. We asked whether he could sell tea leaves to us. He answered yes and it cost 70-80 for every 50g. We were all students travelling frugally and couldn't distinguish unqualified tea from the qualified […][…].

Sometime, shills pretend to be someone else who are supposed to be famous or reliable. The following is an example:

Afterwards, they drove us to a small courtyard where there were many alleged professors of Tsinghua and Peking University. It's asserted that they all had been involved in the design for the "Bird's Nest" Olympic Stadium. A beautiful female teacher imparted general knowledge about Fengshui and led us to a small room where she let us forward further questions to "professors" (They are actually hawking PiXiu).

Shills were also common at Houhai Bar Street in Beijing. There, some young and beautiful women approach foreigners and Chinese tourists who look rich. These women ask the targeted tourists to have a drink and lead them to a certain bar after chatting and "making friends" with them. Several bloggers reported that they witnessed such "bar-lady" scams at Houhai.

### 5.2 Comparing tourist scams between capital and regional cities

A comparison map was also developed to examine differences in scamming patterns between the capital city Beijing and the other regional cities. The capital and regional contrast in prevalent tourist scams was drawn from the inter-group comparison map (Figure 2). In this model, the separate themes "restaurant" and "tea" in the general map were merged into a bigger topic represented by manipulating the weight measures and the behaviours of shills. The patterns of scams that tourists encountered most frequently were different between regional cities and Beijing.

First, in regional cities, the most frequent scamming contexts are restaurants and food courts where service staff cheat on measuring scales, particularly in terms of weight. Such deceptive sales were not reported in Beijing. The improved regulatory and monitoring systems over retail businesses in the capital city can be the explanation for the better behaviours of salespersons in the retail sector. Similarly, authorised taxi drivers in Beijing were never reported as scamming tourists; while taxi drivers in Guilin and Sanya were found to collaborate with hotels, shopping centres and dishonest restaurant owners.

Second, for the capital the most frequently reported scams are about the chaotic environment at tourist attractions and tour agents. Most reported scams happened when tourists were on tours, rather than during their stay in non-tourist areas. By comparison, in the regional cities scams happen frequently in other public service sectors, such as in catering situations and bus stops and not on the way to attractions. There are a great number of attractions in Beijing and the environments at these tourist spots are complicated because they tend to be large-scale and crowded with various people. Therefore, tourists are more confused with the environment and so it is easier to fall into traps. In the regional cities situations seem simpler, smaller scale and less crowded.

The links between the results and the existing literature on tourist scams and crimes against tourists are reviewed in the following section. The discussion will be guided by the social situation framework.

Figure 2 Tourist scam patterns in capital and regional cities
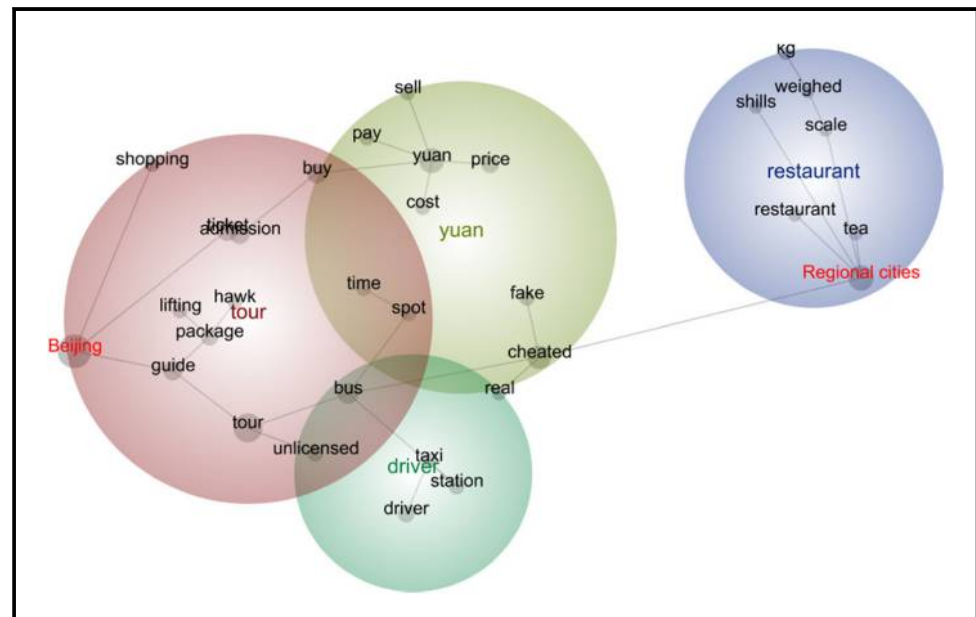
6. Discussion

The findings of this study about the individual scams experienced by domestic tourists in urban China can be understood through the lens of the social situations framework. The key elements to be considered are the goals of the scammers and victims, the roles the participants play, the rules governing their interaction, the environmental settings, the tourists' cognition and knowledge, the role of language and the sequence of the actions involved. By reviewing these key components of social situations, the main findings of the study are highlighted and linked to the previous literature on scams and crimes against tourists.

6.1 Goals

Money, as the most influential theme of tourist scams in China, obviously reflects the goal of scammers to gain financial advantages from tourists. Seeking financial gain is the essence of scams in the general consumer context (Pearce, 2011a). Tourists' motivation to participate in the interaction includes but is not limited to financial gain. In particular, the intended benefits driving tourists to interact with strangers include not only a lower price of products and service, but also an easier trip, saving time, obtaining knowledge about the attractions and a desire to know about the local people. These goals reinforce the ideas about people's susceptibility to scams through their own ignorance, gullibility and, at times, greed (Lea *et al.*, 2008). Recognising the tourists' personal responsibility and the need to control certain motives and desires is one way to modify the spread of tourist scams.

6.2 Roles and rules

Normally, the roles local citizens should play in tourism interactions are as hosts, sellers and helpful supporters. However, scammers make themselves convincing and believable through breaking the "rules of roles" in tourism situations. In particular, sellers who pretend to be ordinary citizens flaunt the expectation of the citizen's role as a passive or possibly helpful bystander. Apart from the shills who pretend to be kind locals, some others pretended to be a professional or offer links to famous and reliable people to cheat tourists into purchasing. Stajano and Wilson (2011) have identified exactly these kinds of deceptive roles in their study of western settings. Distraction and dishonesty are two maneuvers used by scammers. Tourists' attentiveness and vigilance about the roles of those they encounter may assist in the recognition of tourist scams.

6.3 Environmental setting

Tourism settings are often dynamic, complicated and unfamiliar, so they provide an ideal environment for scammers who intend to cheat tourists by dishonest actions. The different environmental features of capital and regional cities also result in distinguishable scamming patterns. In the present study the scams in the regional cities were different from those in the capital city. The findings revealed that scams in Beijing occurred principally in the transport and attraction locations whereas in the regional cities they were proportionately more common in shops and retail settings compared to the capital city. These findings parallel the work of Crotts (1996) in terms of the concept of "hot spots" at attractions and tourist nodes. The results also reinforce the widespread occurrence of service and retail scams noted by Pearce and Kanlayanasukho (2012) in Thailand.

6.4 Cognition

Scammers succeed in enticing and cheating tourists because they exploit the information gaps between themselves and tourists. Tourists often do not possess adequate knowledge about the tourism environments and the items or tours that are promoted by scammers. The work of Chesney-Lind and Lind (1986) and Ryan (1993) addressed tourists' understanding of settings and their propensity to take risks. It is risky behaviour and thinking coupled with a lack of knowledge and failure to inform themselves of the local tactics which afford scammers the opportunity to exploit tourists.

6.5 Language, skills, behavioural repertoire and sequences

A common characteristic of scammers is the capacity to manipulate language. Scammers are typically confident and fluent, encouraging tourists to believe in them and therefore be cheated. As Stajano and Wilson (2011) observed, distracting talk and social pressure are tools scammers use. These tactics were present in the reported scams in the study. The topics of skills, behavioural routines and sequences of behaviour were revealed in the step by step approach apparent in some scams. At times one action by the scammer led the tourist to a situation where the next logical step was to follow the first inviting offer. By the time the tourist realized that they might have made a mistake or been duped, it was often too late to withdraw from the setting. To try and enjoy their holiday or tour at times tourists had to make the best of the situation. For example, sometimes when confined to shops they never intended to visit, tourists spent money on products they did not really want.

7. Conclusion

The present work suggests that scams exist in contemporary China and tourists may be exposed to them with some regularity in both Beijing and in prominent tourism cities. There were several limitations to the present work which further studies can seek to correct. Only online commentary by domestic tourists was used to study the topic of interest. It is implicit in this approach that further work can not only explore the reactions and experiences of international tourists but also both domestic and foreign visitors could be surveyed directly. It is possible that a small subset of types of scams are not reported online. Pearce (2011a) noted that some of the interpersonal scams involved activities which were embarrassing to the tourists. Examples included participating in marginally illegal or suspicious behaviours (massage and escort services) or in terms of making them look very foolish (naively falling for a fairly obvious fake representation of the value of jewellery). For these scams a wider net of asking other personnel, such as embassy staff, the police or tourism industry professionals might be valuable.

The dual implications of the present study lie in enriching the literature on scams against tourists, including noting regional differences in the forms of the scams in China. The analysis of scams as a special type of social situation proved to be insightful in directing attention to facets of the interaction thus providing connections to previous work and directions for further study. It would be premature to offer immediate solutions to this tourism problem as more needs to be understood about such topics as surveillance, the role of (tourist) police and the issues of national, regional, place and setting differences. In time, these perspectives can be studied and developed to inform strategic approaches to creating a safer tourism environment in cities.

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