



A phenomenological explication of *guanxi* in rural tourism management: A case study of a village in China



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HIGHLIGHTS

- *Being-in-the-world* conceptualizes the tourism destination as an inhabited place, instead of a merely physical and functional space.
- *Dwelling* contextualizes the roles of *guanxi* in the development of Chinese rural tourism, through an *emic* understanding and interpretation.
- *Guanxi* is the most influential 'locality' indigenous villagers employ to participate in and manage the tourism industry in their home village.
- The *hermeneutic phenomenology* explores these backstage conditions as the *being-in-the-world* of tourism.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 March 2017

Received in revised form

22 May 2017

Accepted 3 July 2017

Keywords:

Rural tourism

Guanxi

Being-in-the-world

Hermeneutic phenomenology

China

Indigenous knowledge

ABSTRACT

Drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology in tourism studies as well as Heidegger's concept of *being-in-the-world*, this paper reveals how tourism can and should be *done* in a Chinese rural village. This research contributes a contextual interpretation of *guanxi* in Chinese rural tourism development through an empirical study of a traditional agricultural village in China that has been transformed through tourism development. The paper argues that for the Chinese indigenous residents who are the primary actors engaged in tourism, *guanxi* is, neither a Confucian political ideal nor an instrumental tool, but the specific manner in which they *dwell* in their place. It demonstrates how the tourist destination, landscape and managerial regulation have been modified and adapted in a *guanxi* way. The paper suggests that an *emic* understanding of *guanxi* and the roles it plays in tourism participants' daily life is warranted and can provide a more holistic picture of tourism development in rural China.

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1. Introduction

Many scholars have called for a foregrounding of "Non-Western" knowledge and theory to equip tourism studies to better understand and interpret the new era we are entering, one characterized by the rapidly growing Asian, and particularly Chinese, tourist market (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). Their aim is to confront the continuing dominance of "Anglo-Western centrism" because it has "provided the basis for misguided claims of universality" in tourism studies (Tucker, 2016, p. 250). One example of this "de-linking from Western epistemologies" (Tucker, 2016) in tourism studies is that researchers have sought to contextualize their discussions of

tourism in China by using the terms and conceptual frameworks from Chinese culture. *Guanxi*, in particular, a unique Chinese concept, has been employed to understand Chinese society and gained its status as a legitimate socio-cultural construct in Western mainstream literatures of cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, political science, and business and management research (e.g., Vogel, 1965; Weber, 1968; Yang, 1994). Yet it has been underexplored as a framework for comprehending the lived experience of tourism in China. Even those studies that address the concept of *guanxi* exhibit a notable blind spot. Generally, in these few studies, *guanxi* has been interpreted reductively as an instance of more familiar phenomena and universal forms of social relations. In particular, this Chinese-specific phenomenon has been described as a political ideal or a pragmatic tool exerting influence on tourism developing processes. However, the indigenous participants' localized "way of seeing" (Yeoh & Kong, 1997, p. 56) the roles of *guanxi* in their own tourism-related experiences is absent or at least

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muted in the extant literature.

This paper attempts to redress the imbalances in previous studies through a hermeneutic phenomenological study of one rural village in China that has experienced recent tourism infrastructure development. Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) analysis of *being-in-the-world* can provide a helpful philosophical framework from within which to understand the situated roles of *guanxi* in indigenous participants' tourism-involving experiences, one that differs substantially from those depicted in previous scholarly accounts. Since Heidegger's idea of *being-in-the-world* provides the theoretical grounds for this paper, it informs the interpretive methodology used here for understanding how local participants see and interpret their tourism experiences as meaningful. More importantly, these meaningful experiences constitute the very setting referred to as the "destination" where tourism actually occurs, and thus they determine how tourism can, should, and will be developed and managed in China's rural areas, like Huangling—the village studied in this paper.

This paper presents an original and reflexive study in how Western *being-in-the-world* and Eastern *guanxi* can productively combine to provide "an improved understanding of tourism research in China" (Bao, Chen, & Ma, 2014, p. 166). This reflection also initiates a hermeneutic exploration that conceptually frames tourism-and-locale (i.e., tourism-and-rural-China) as a holistic "field" in which the indigenous residents (re)shape and are (re)shaped by their cognitions, engagements and interactions with their lifeworld—of which tourism is a part. Moreover, the dynamic, ongoing and mutually constitutive engagement between *being-in-the-world* (that in rural China is *guanxi*) and tourism calls for further critical investigation as such a perspective has been under-researched or neglected in previous tourism research.

2. Literature review

The associations between *guanxi* and tourism have been insufficiently charted in academic research, despite the recent addition of new cases from China and touristic enterprises which are involved in the Chinese market. The use of the concept of *guanxi* in the English-language tourism literature began in the 2000s (e.g., Gilbert & Tsao, 2000; Pan, Laws, & Buhalis, 2001). This preexisting literature can be divided into two types: the first regards *guanxi* as picking out the way in which Confucian heritage functions as a political ideal in the tourism industry, and the second treats *guanxi* as an instrumental means for advancing specific interests during tourism development. Depending on which of these two perspectives they take, researchers differ not only in the roles, natures and purposes of *guanxi* in tourism but also in their value judgments about this Chinese-specific phenomenon.

2.1. Ideal *guanxi* in tourism

The first group of tourism scholars, those who take up the idea that *guanxi* is an ideal, have been influenced by the theoretical studies of Max Weber (1968) and Parsons (1939). Based on their arguments, *guanxi* is understood as "a particularistic structure of relationship" (Parsons, 1939, p. 466) that is deeply rooted in Confucianism. Confucius presented explicit moral principles that serve to guide the interactions of people and parties involved in these particularistic relationships. The maintenance of this particularistic relationship has been regarded as an important device for keeping political and social order (Shih, 1919). Many scholars (e.g., Chen, Chen, & Xin, 2004; Dunhua, 2009) believe that today's Chinese people, have, to a great extent, inherited these 'particularistic' values and preserved this normative tradition to build and maintain a special form of this relationship, i.e., *guanxi*. This paper refers

to this as "ideal *guanxi*."

The inherited cultural norms and programming among Chinese people (Chen et al., 2004) may help explain how *guanxi* influences tourism through governmental functions. In particular, having cultural and historical roots in Confucianism, *guanxi* has been appraised as the set of philosophical beliefs and ethical principles that inform the regulative ideal governing Chinese society. According to this ideal, tourism participants are expected to adopt non-market strategies to create a harmonious environment (Chen & Peng, 2016; Gu, Ryan, Bin, & Wei, 2013). For example, Gu et al. (2013) explore how the State utilizes the ethics of *guanxi* to advance desired reforms in the Chinese hotel industry. It is argued that the normative and regulative powers of *guanxi* serve as a social ideal which encourages tourism operators to take on certain social responsibilities. Additionally, given the state-led and top-down tourism development in China, *guanxi* has been a salient factor that forges many aspects of tourism. In particular, *guanxi* is an informal network of mutual trust that can promote the implementation of tourism policy (Wang & Ap, 2013), or a state-led tourism project (Zhao & Timothy, 2015), better than formal, hierarchical channels.

This literature is grounded collectively on the following assumption: China is currently in a transitional stage in which legislative and administrative gaps exist as the economy moves from a system of centralized control to a mixed public-private sector model (see, e.g., Ryan & Huang, 2013). In this context, the Chinese ideal of *guanxi* is viewed as the desired supplementary means to facilitate cooperation and provide informal guidance for the tourism participants, especially at the organizational level, because relationships and responsibilities remain, at least for this transitional moment, unclear. Notably, all of these studies have been located within the political system to investigate how *guanxi* as a political ideal can contribute to shaping government-involved tourism development.

The blind spots in the extant research are obvious. Firstly, the theoretical starting point of this group of literature is that *guanxi*, as an ideal political power, can exert influences on tourism development in the transitional economy of China today, with its inherited organizational deficiencies. However, it would be a mistake to view Confucianism as a sort of unmoved mover in an ideal logic of political causality. This kind of research treats *guanxi* as the manifestation of a static ancient textual tradition rather than a dynamic construction and practice in daily life. Therefore, what we have seen in this research is that *guanxi* has been presented as a Confucian worldview, or a sort of abstract "political structure" that works outside of or upon human subjects. However, *guanxi* as a unique social phenomenon permeates every aspect of Chinese people's life (Tucker, 2010). Its existence is dependent upon the continuing work of Chinese people and constitutes their everyday behavior and interactions (Kipnis, 1997). If one separates Chinese people and the context of their daily life, the resulting picture hardly captures the real way in which *guanxi* interacts with tourism.

Secondly, as a lived experience, the meanings of tourism for its participants, managers and operators should not be merely confined within the political domain. Admittedly, the influences from the government upon the tourism industry in China may be more obvious than its counterparts in other places. But from the standpoint of participants, the influences of *guanxi* on their tourism experiences are located more in their daily lives than in the political system. In other words, the ideal political aspect of *guanxi* is not these tourism participants' practice of daily life but relatively far away from their everyday experiences. Practices of *guanxi* are not merely remnants of tradition but, rather, are activated or vitalized in present tourism participants' lived experiences.

2.2. Instrumental guanxi in tourism

Another group of tourism studies researchers are primarily concerned with the pragmatic or instrumental utility of guanxi in the various contexts of tourism. This position has been significantly shaped by the research of Vogel (1965), Gold (1985), and Yang (1994). These studies emphasize the instrumental nature of guanxi in the process of tourism development (called in this paper, “instrumental guanxi”), and thus the practices of guanxi have been interpreted as the strategies that are employed to pursue and exchange benefits associated with tourism development.

Guanxi has long been theorized and studied as the Chinese version of relationship marketing or business networking and something that can be utilized as a tool to enter and exploit the Chinese market (e.g., Tsang, 1998; Yeung & Tung, 1996). The impressive growth of the Chinese outbound tourist market has drawn the attention of western host countries, and the concept of guanxi marketing has been naturally transplanted into tourism studies. The instrumental conception of guanxi has been regarded as a marketing strategy for successfully establishing, developing and maintaining business networks with the Chinese outbound tourist market, at both the enterprise (Geddie, DeFranco, & Geddie, 2002) and governmental levels (Pan & Laws, 2002).

Another sub-group of instrumental guanxi in tourism research focuses on the pragmatic implications of guanxi in shaping collective actions and social practices in China, especially at the grassroots level (Wang & Tang, 2013). It is for this very reason perhaps that all of these studies have focused on guanxi in China's rural tourism (hereafter referred to as the RT). In particular, Li, Lai, and Feng (2007) illustrate how guanxi has become a major problem for rural residents participating in tourism development. Their examination reveals that, in the studied village, guanxi created a ‘circle of guanxi elites’ which allowed guanxi-rich villagers, who controlled the necessary ingredients for tourism development including polices, funds and community-owned resources (such as lands), to gain competitive advantages in the sphere of tourism development, e.g., individuals with family guanxi enjoy the privilege in RT development. In other words, guanxi proves to be an important capital for guanxi elites' partial involvement; at the same time, most community members have been excluded from tourism development because of “guanxi barriers”. Zhang, Ding, and Bao (2009) utilize the patron-client theory to interpret guanxi as the asymmetric-exchange tool of resources and opportunities between different rural tourism stakeholders. Besides these, other attempts also have been made to apply a universalistic ‘Western brand’ theory in order to understand the roles of guanxi in RT development, e.g., social capital (see, Zhao, Ritchie, & Echtner, 2011).

These tourism studies collectively suggest that, without guanxi as the bridge, developing tourism within China and with Chinese enterprises cannot achieve (commercial) success. They contribute to our understanding of the intricacies of guanxi in China's tourism development by describing some general features of guanxi. For example, the guanxi practices accompanied with resources flow, an obvious example of instrumental guanxi, is mainly concerned with an interest exchange in the dynamic of tourism development.

However, this theoretical assumption has not been without problems. First, in this group of studies, guanxi has been essentially understood not in its own right but as another outcome of utilitarian calculation by tourism participants. Accordingly, the benefits brought by tourism development have become the ultimate end for guanxi to contribute to as the means. In a pragmatic sense, guanxi can be adopted by an enterprise as a marketing strategy for its tourism business; or it can be manipulated by individuals for personal gain in tourism development. These analyses concentrate on instrumental exchanges of benefits and favor, but without

adequately considering that guanxi is derived from the most ordinary everyday actions and the forms in which they are “embedded, such as the family, kinship, neighborhood and community” (Yan, 1996). Moreover, as Gu et al. (2013) point out, a narrow instrumentalist definition of guanxi and overemphasis on its reciprocal interaction incurs the risk of exaggerating its pejorative outcomes, such as nepotism and corruption.

The present study maintains that these theories allow the researchers (as observers and outsiders) to describe the phenomenon of guanxi in tourism, but they do not interpret the essential meanings of guanxi practices (for tourism participants), offering a somewhat delocalized and incomplete view of guanxi in tourism. It should be emphasized that this paper is not against applying non-Chinese theoretical values in Chinese tourism studies. They are powerful and important – but the *etic* perspective might fall short in presenting a holistic picture of guanxi-in-tourism. For these reasons, this paper calls for an *emic* perspective, in order to capture the indigenous qualities of guanxi in Chinese tourism development. It shall be seen that the present study grounds its analysis in the *lived experience* of modern Chinese villagers who live in a tourist destination and explores how, in their daily life, guanxi practices are embedded in their tourism-experience.

3. An alternative understanding of guanxi

This paper suggests that *guanxi*, bound up with the physical and socio-economic characteristics of the particular locality of rural China, is a distinctive way of life led by rural Chinese people and developed over time. It means that both the rural Chinese world and people form a *guanxi* way of life, and thus both of them are the integral parts in the *guanxi way of life*. Therefore, either viewing it as a manifestation of Confucian ideal, or a scheming calculation for interest pursuing, risks reducing *guanxi* to less than it is.

3.1. A contextualized understanding of rural China through guanxi

RT as a social phenomenon is enmeshed in a complex of destination societies (with various structures and characteristics) and host residents (with different value systems, beliefs and attitudes). It implies that the substantive conceptual element to be understood within the phrase “Chinese RT” is the “Chinese rural society”—of which tourism is part. Rural China has its own distinctive nature, and people who live there lead their lives in a Chinese-specific manner. The present study attempts to communicate to the reader a sense of context— one which reveals the *idiosyncrasies* of the Chinese rural tourist destination, the very context in which tourism actually takes place. For this, we turn to *guanxi*.

An unrelenting increase in population within a fixed landmass, together with the vagaries of weather, has made life hard and uncertain for the great majority of Chinese peasants (e.g., famine, starvation, etc.). It is this physical environment that has been the cradle of *guanxi* – where reliance on one's family is often insufficient and mutual aid has been sought through membership in a village, or clan group (Bell, 2000). Additionally, for more than 2000 years, Chinese people have been dependent on “a small-scale peasant economy” as their fundamental livelihood (Huang, 1985, p. 65), which is characterized by a family-oriented, socio-economic foundation. In this world, it is imperative to expand reliance and assistance beyond one's family to the entire village, or even inter-village relations. For example, the construction of some public necessities (e.g., ancestral halls, irrigation work, etc.) is impossible to achieve unless the whole village or several villages cooperate. Consequently, *guanxi* has been understood collectively by rural Chinese people in terms of how to organize their society, direct social action, and shape social ideology, etc. That is, in both

ideological and practical senses, guanxi governs their life. Guanxi, therefore, is simply the Chinese way of life for rural people embedded in their world, one which has been maintained relatively stably over time (Ying & Zhou, 2007).

In this sense, guanxi is a holistic phenomenon and impossible to reduce to a political ideal or an instrumental tool. Rather, the essence of guanxi is the specifically Chinese way of enhancing welfare and raising awareness of the meaning of life, by establishing and maintaining a broad and long-term mutual assistance. For the people who lead a life of this form, the significance of guanxi for them includes the facets of idealism and utility, but it is also much broader than both. In particular, for rural Chinese people, a wide range of harmonious guanxi in their lifeworld is seen as a desired end in and of itself (Bell, 2000; Yan, 1996). The opposite, a solitary state, is seen as a disaster. To avoid this disastrous isolation, villagers need to actively participate in various guanxi-cultivating activities (which can include anything from having a meal together, to gift giving, or paying visits). The involvement in guanxi-cultivation is, indeed, the result of purposeful human efforts for pursuing the desirable state of life in Chinese rural society. To this end, any attempt to use Confucian idealism or utilitarian calculation as an interpretation of guanxi would be to significantly narrow and simplify this phenomenon's richness.

In presenting guanxi as simultaneously more than Confucian idealism or an instrumental tool, this present paper suggests that guanxi-cultivation is about another important aspect of human nature in rural China: the composition of the self. For someone who lives in “a guanxi-centered world” (Wen, 2008), there is no “self” outside of other; the self is embedded in many forms of guanxi (Fei, Hamilton, & Wang, 1992). It means that an individual is only defined and identifiable within certain forms of guanxi. Ames and Rosemont (2010) state that a guanxi self, with its emphasis on a sense of connectedness and interdependence, implies that to *be* a human, is tantamount to be linked to others—to one's parents, siblings, children, and friends—and to fulfill the obligations of different forms of guanxi. In other words, a human being in rural China is fundamentally a *guanxi being* (Chen & Partington, 2004). In such a society with an innate base of guanxi, human nature and truly human conduct always entail living up to one's roles as defined by certain forms of guanxi the individual is involved in. To do otherwise is to be less than human; that is, when roles prescribed by guanxi are not met, violators are naturally judged as ‘non-human’.

In effect, guanxi distinguishes rural Chinese people from others, and their village organized through guanxi is hardly captured from within the theoretical framework of a network. Based on the group-oriented approach, especially in structural-functionalism, a network analysis approach stresses the importance of personal strategies of network building, individual manipulation of human resources, and the influence of personal affection on interpersonal relations (see Mitchell, 1974, p. 280). These are similar to the instrumental guanxi discussed above. As such, using network theory to interpret village life will result in an overgeneralization of the utilitarian aspect of guanxi, with no room for other aspects of the *guanxi way of life*, such as intimacy, communicatively, sentimentally, and so on. Additionally, a given ego, in network analysis, is connected to a person's network of people either by a single-stranded relationship, such as kinship, or by multi-stranded relationships, such as a combination of kinship, collegueship, and friendship (see Mitchell, 1969). That is, people within the same network usually have independent relationships with the given ego but rarely interact among themselves. By contrast, the individual Chinese villager, as a *guanxi being*, is involved in overlapping forms of guanxi, and thus everyone has multiplex relational configurations and dense interpersonal transactions. Villagers cooperate in agricultural production, support each other in village affairs, spend

recreational time together, exchanging gifts in various situations, and now work collectively for tourism. In this sense, guanxi distinguishes itself from the common form of personal networks that are the subject of network analyses.

3.2. *Guanxi and being-in-the-world*

Heidegger introduced *hermeneutic phenomenology* into modern philosophy through his explication of the necessary role of interpretation in the study of *what it is to be human*. As a philosopher, Heidegger is clear that the necessary and sufficient conditions for *being human* are not just, or primarily, biological or physical. For example, in Heidegger's view, *being Chinese* is not merely being spatially located in China, or physically possessing Chinese biometric characteristics. Instead, he focuses on human nature, that is, *what it means to be human beings*, or, what makes us the human beings that we are.

Heidegger claims that the fundamental way to be the specific kind of *being* (including both human and nonhuman agencies) is determined by our relations to our surrounding world. This is what he refers to as *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1996). From the Heideggerian perspective, the meaning of being a person (e.g., a host, a tourism worker, a tourist) as he/she is, is always embedded in the world he/she lives in. That is, the essence of a human being's nature exists in relations of concern to his/her immediate surroundings; for example, *being Chinese* means the specific way in which a Chinese person realizes his/her identity as a person in his/her local world. In this context, I am arguing that this specific nature is guanxi.

Heidegger calls the process of *becoming* a person (e.g., a Chinese villager, a U.S urbanite) *dwelling* (Heidegger, 1971), and asserts that dwelling constitutes human beings' basic way of *being-in-the-world*. Heidegger emphasizes that dwelling is always rooted emphatically in a particular place. For example, guanxi, as a form of *being-in-the-world*, should be understood as the way in which Chinese rural people *dwelling* in their village world. Because this is something that is only experienced by rural Chinese people themselves, the guanxi way of life can only work in Chinese rural society and be meaningful for rural Chinese people. Thus, the rich and intimate ongoing fellowship of human beings and the places they inhabit are an integral part of their being as they are in their world. In other words, the world is no longer merely an objective entity existing externally for human beings, but becomes an integral part of themselves and pervades their subjective relation to the world (Dreyfus, 1991).

Human beings also, in Heidegger's sense, *dwelling* in the language that they use to interpret themselves. His emphasis is not the linguistic aspect of the language (e.g., lexicon), rather “it is what human beings agree in the language they use” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 208). This agreement is the grounding for their interpretation of their lifeworld, or what Heidegger (1971) calls a *shared understanding*. This shared understanding is taken for granted within certain societies and occurs through our culturally and historically mediated interpretations and relationships with the world. As explained by Pattison (2000), interpretation contains the understanding of what it is to be a thing, an object, and a society, etc., and finally how all these fit together and reflect a shared understanding of what it is to be a human being. In this sense, interpretation should not be understood as a tool for knowledge, but as the way human beings *are*. That is, the understanding of the meaningful life is contained in the language chosen by human beings to interpret themselves. For instance, guanxi is frequently referred to by Chinese people as “social relations” (*shehui guanxi*) and people who are actively involved in related social interactions, such as weddings, funerals, mutual visiting, are called “people in the society” (*shehui*

shang de ren) (Yan, 1996). A given individual's "society" is interpreted as one's *guanxi*. This interpretation itself reveals that Chinese people understand themselves and their lifeworld in the way of *guanxi*; *guanxi* gives meaning to the experiences of the lifeworld they are involved in, e.g., attending someone's wedding is a *guanxi*-creating practice.

The roles of *guanxi* in the RT development process in China cannot be based solely on the Confucian moral principles underlying it, or solely on the utilitarian results presented. Rather, the intricacies of *guanxi* in the experiences of "doing tourism" (*gao lvyou*), as the indigenous villagers themselves put it, are situated by cultural interpretations. The following research is designed within the framework of the hermeneutic epistemology and interpretative methodology and informed by the Heideggerian ontological assumption of *being-in-the-world*.

4. Research design

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the process of "doing tourism" as experienced by a Chinese village residents who had little or no experience with tourism, through their lifeworld stories. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as suggested, has the potential to reveal the *nature* of "people's lived experience" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4), and explicate what grounds the experience (Van Manen, 2016). This serves the aim of this paper by enabling the researcher to penetrate deep into those local villagers' tourism-conduct experiences and trace their essential features.

4.1. Fieldwork site

Huangling is a small rural village with 139 households and 612 inhabitants in Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province. It is a single-surnamed and close-knit village, in which over 70 percent of residents are related to one another. The geographic position in which it is situated (steep hillsides comprising small plots of terraced fields at about 280 m above sea level) makes productive activities, including agriculture and living conditions very difficult. Since the mid-1990s, Huangling has been a "hollowed village" (Long, Li, Liu, Woods, & Zou, 2012, p. 12), characterized by low land-use efficiency, many vacant houses, patches of abandoned land, and a severe flight of its young and educated population to cities. For example, in 2009, there were only 89 households who remained living in the mountain village. It is also a typical representation of the Hui Culture – one of the most influential and traditional Han-Chinese cultures. As early as the mid-1980s, artists and photographers discovered this vernacular place, but these sporadic backpackers could merely bring meager and unstable income for villagers. They, thus, had never considered the possibility of developing tourism as a livelihood.

The year 2008 was a watershed for Huangling. After multiple studies and comparisons in this area, the Wuyuan County Rural Culture Development Co. Ltd. (hereafter referred to as the CRCD) negotiated with the Jiangwan Town government and Wuyuan Prefecture government and, through the form of an auction, acquired the land-use rights to a 33,000-square-meter, non-arable "construction" site in the mountain village for developing the *Huangling Tourist Resort*. An agreement was reached between the CRCD and the Huangling village in 2009 on the allocation of tourism revenues from the *Huangling Tourist Resort*: the CRCD would pay an annual 'resource fee' of 350,000 yuan (US\$51,210) to the Huangling community which would increase by one hundred thousand yuan (US\$14,630) every five years. Additionally, in order to relocate the all Huangling villagers, the CRCD established a *Huangling New Village* (which consists of the four rows of the three-story modern buildings) at the foot of the mountain.

In February 2012, the majority of villagers, 87 out of 89 households, moved into the new established residences in *Huangling New Village*. The traditional architecture and decor in the mountain village, as well as parts of the agricultural terraced fields, are managed professionally by the CRCD for sightseeing. The CRCD built a cable car to carry tourists to the old village tourist zone, charging 145 yuan (21 USD) for the cable car ride and the entrance ticket. *Huangling Tourist Resort* began a trial operation for the public at the end of 2012. Though it is a relative newcomer to the rural village tourism destination trend in China's domestic tourist market, its popularity is evidenced in provincial and national media coverage, in guidebooks, and in the 500,000 tourists that the destination received in 2016.

Huangling village independently elected six villagers in 2008 to assist the project, and they worked as a bridge in charge of communicating between the company and villagers, helping with such tasks as relocating villagers, negotiating how to rent and exchange "ingredients" (e.g., the traditional architecture, terraced fields, etc.) for tourism, etc. The CRCD formally established the '*Difang Guanxi Department*' (hereafter referred to as DGD) in 2010 and absorbed all of these six villagers as the first group of employees for this department.

The term "*difang guanxi*" literally means *guanxi* in local place. For Huangling villagers, the concept of "*difang*" (local place) has flexible boundaries that allow it to point both within and outside Huangling. In a broader sense, "*difang*" may refer to the whole county in a discussion about something happening in Wuyuan county seat or somewhere else outside their village (but within Wuyuan County), and people who have active social *guanxi* (such as relatives, friends, colleagues), are called "*difang shang de ren*" (literally "people in the local place"). Or the term may be used to refer to their village when they are discussing community matters. For the majority of villagers, the space of *guanxi* is functionally their perceptual world, and hence they refer to it as *difang* (only few villagers are capable of extending their *guanxi* "nets" to the county seat). Locally, in most cases, *difang* refers to *guanxi* that encircles a given individual. It is this common language that is understood by villagers that indicates that, for Huangling villagers, *guanxi* is a 'small' social universe.

4.2. Method

Epistemologically, "truth" in hermeneutic phenomenology is an interpretive construct, and the researcher, as an intrinsic part in the process of constructing the interpretation, arrives at an understanding of the "truth" through dialogue (with participant) and interpretation. That is, the researcher and participant co-construct the interpretation and work together to elucidate conditionally the meanings (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010).

Underpinned by this epistemological standpoint, and in order to understand contextually the tourism-conduct experiences in rural China, this fieldwork investigation was undertaken over a nine-month period (September to December 2015 and March to July 2016), and consisted in semi-structured interviews and participant observation by the researcher in Chinese. Throughout this period, the researcher was immersed in the fieldwork site and lived side by side the villagers, which enabled her to enter into the *lifeworld* of the participants who were interviewed. It ensures that the interpretations and understandings are not detached from the context within which the dialogue/interview was being produced and, hence, able to bring forth valid interpretations of the essential meanings.

4.2.1. Sampling strategy

The development and management of RT in Huangling village (as well as major rural areas in China) have been heavily localized.

That is, they primarily rely on local villagers to manage local staff and development issues. In this sense, the analytical and practical significance of privileging the host village, i.e., Huangling indigenous villagers, is emphasized throughout the present study. The hermeneutic phenomenological strategy suggests that the participants should have rich and unique experiences of the particular phenomena (Van Manen, 2016). Regarding the present study, the target phenomenon is the *doing* of tourism—i.e., doing the work of tourism in Huangling. Thus, the indigenous villagers who themselves have intimate experience of conducting and debating tourism-work should supply “a rich supply of data” (Van Manen, 2016: 216). In this sense, the DGD staff, whose works (such as, relocating villagers, exchanging buildings, purchasing and renting ingredients for tourism) involve “doing tourism”, are identified as an ideal group of sampling participants. Indeed, the works conducted by DGD are just as, if not more, important to creating the conditions for the possibility of tourism.

Since the DGD was established in 2010, there have been as many as thirteen employees who have worked in this department, all of whom are native villagers, and in 2016, there were three people in this department. In terms of tourism development, the DGD has worked with a different emphasis. For example, at the preparatory stage (i.e., 2008–2011), the DGD was mainly in charge of negotiating with villagers about the exchange and rent of “ingredients”; at the initial development stage (i.e., 2012–2015), the focus was on harmonizing relationships between indigenous villagers and the CRCO (see section 4.2). In this manner, the core purpose of the DGD is consistent: facilitate the process of RT development. But the specific work and emphasis vary distinctively with period and the specific villagers they encounter. As will be presented, the varied tourism-related issues have been understood and addressed in an unvaried way, which has highlighted the workable approach of *guanxi* in doing tourism in this village.

Generally, a sample of ten informants is adequate for a phenomenological interview (Creswell, 2007, p. 166). To ensure the data were as information-rich as possible, twelve participants who had worked in the DGD were identified in total (Table 1).

4.2.2. Data collection and interpreting

The hermeneutic phenomenological researcher aims to provide a rich textured description of lived experience (Van Manen, 2016). In order to reveal what tourism-experience means for local participants, the interview questions were intentionally general, as they were designed to maximally elicit participants’ understandings and interpretations of their experiences of “doing tourism”. The interview protocol for this study included the following questions:

- Can you help me understand the meaning of the department’s name, ‘*difang guanxi*’?

Table 1
Profile of participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Work experiences in DGD (month)
Q. Cao	38	Male	46
X. Wu	36	Male	16
J. Cao	31	Male	40
W. Cao	33	Male	20
H. Cao	34	Female	11
F. Cao	36	Female	26
C. Cao	51	Male	23
X. Cao	43	Male	30
G. Cao	49	Female	33
L. Cao	53	Male	16
B. Cao	45	Male	20
D. Cao	44	Male	19

- What is it like to work in this department?
- Can you tell me some of your working experiences when you were in DGD?
- How do you perceive tourism developing here?

The interview protocol served as the essential guide to facilitate participants’ articulation of their lived experience of tourism in their everyday practices. Twelve interviews were conducted face-to-face at the subjects’ offices, and each kept to a moderate length of time ($M = 68.5$ min; $SD = 7.2$ min). The twelve interview audio files in Chinese were transcribed and translated into English verbatim, which generated 163 pages and 90,158 words of interview text.

The process of data interpretation is framed through the “hermeneutic circle” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 36) which refers to a constant part-to-whole interpretation at both the individual and communal levels. Specifically, operating from the first-level holistic perspective, each part has been interpreted and its meaning and relationship to the interview conversation as a whole consolidated into an emergent understanding of the phenomenon. Upon completion of this first-level phase of part-to-whole interpretation of all interviews, the second-level phase, in which each interview conversation is related to each other, and the total twelve interviews as a “whole,” was conducted.

When interpreting data in hermeneutic phenomenological research, it is most important to pay attention to how *language* is employed (Van Manen, 2016). Heidegger (1996) suggests that the participant’s everyday language is at work in particular ways of speaking or acting, which provides a new semantic context to help facilitate an ever-deepening appreciation of the lived experience. The hermeneutic interpretation also involves a process of reflecting upon the researcher’s interpretation of the participant’s experience (as described by the participant). In cycling through the “hermeneutic circle of understanding”, the “global theme” is identified, one that sheds light on figural aspects that emerged within the foreground of the participants’ lived experiences.

5. Findings & discussion

The analysis presented in the following parts shows an *emic* view of *guanxi*-in-tourism. That is, through *guanxi*, Huangling participants make meanings of their tourism-involving experiences. It is this observation that inspires the argument that *guanxi* is best understood as a form of, what Heidegger would call, *being-in-the-world*; this phenomenon appears to be the most influential and dominant factor in shaping residents’ perceptual and practical senses of *how* best to do tourism in their inhabited village. Specifically, the roles of *guanxi* in destination production, landscape shaping and management in the *Huangling Tourist Resort* have been examined.

5.1. *Guanxi* produces the RT destination

As pointed out by Edensor (2009), very little attention has been paid by tourism researchers to the compound, discursive intersections of the host participants in the ongoing construction of their place, and the constitutive manner through which tourist destinations are produced. By saying that the destination is produced, the present study emphasizes that *guanxi* has been heavily relied upon by the DGD to conduct the specific works (including removing the villagers, repairing the traditional architectures, renting and exchanging the resources, etc.) of transforming Huangling from an agricultural village into an RT destination. In other words, *guanxi* “produces the RT destination.”

Interviewer: Can you help me understand what you mean by 'Difang Guanxi Department (i.e., DGD)'? I mean, what did you do in this department?

Q. Cao: Well, 'doing' tourism requires the old buildings, terraced fields and many other things in the village; people in this department deal with villagers about these issues.

Interviewer: Sounds like what you are dealing with were materials instead of guanxi.

Q. Cao: Materials are guanxi. You need to talk with the owners, and the process of talking and persuading significantly depends on guanxi. We six people were elected by all villagers to do this because all of us have good and broad guanxi "nets". We could mobilize all of our guanxi to do tourism. Without guanxi here, the owners would never have given you their fields, and then how could you do tourism?

Throughout the field research, the interviewer was intrigued by the way Huangling participants perceived the connections between guanxi and RT in their inhabited place. Whenever discussing the process of RT development in Huangling, the term "difang guanxi" (literally "guanxi in local place," and the local meaning can be seen in section 4.2.1) was always referred to in one way or another. The title of "Difang Guanxi Department" exactly exemplifies how Huangling villagers understand RT – "an emerging and, at present, very integral part of life in their inhabited place" (Chio, 2014, p. 6). As mentioned earlier, the DGD was established to execute RT works for producing the Huangling RT destination, which is referred to by village residents as "doing tourism." A department which focuses on implementing the tourism industry has been named by indigenous people to reflect the importance of guanxi, and the choice of this term *per se* indicates that villagers see "doing tourism," or what we might more precisely describe as doing RT work successfully in Huangling as essentially involving guanxi.

In particular, the necessary elements for RT development, including "the old buildings, terraced fields and other things in village," are likely to be classified and defined by the observer and outsider as the 'tourism resource.' However, what has been washed out of the definition of "tourism resource" is the rich engagement of the residents with their own place, as well as the meaning of the immediate surroundings for their people (Jamal & Stronza, 2008). As the participant Q. Cao explains his work in the DGD: "[dealing with] materials [for doing tourism] were [dealing with] guanxi." Specifically, these "materials" are not merely physical objects separated from Huangling villagers, rather they physically constitute the world in which Huangling villagers inscribe their social guanxi. It means that Huangling villagers *dwell* in these material things and that they have become parts of villagers themselves. Therefore, for Huangling villagers, the meanings of a piece of land, an old building, or other physical things, do not merely exist in their material sense; rather the very guanxi embedded in these things and places is the meaningful point for them.

Additionally, guanxi exerts a strong influence on the concrete ways in which Huangling villagers "do tourism". Q. Cao states that he and his five fellows "were elected by villagers" for developing tourism because they "have good and broad guanxi 'nets'". It should be remembered that the election in itself was a key step in producing the Huangling destination, and that guanxi played a significant role in this. In particular, the whole village used "good and broad guanxi" as the 'standards' to elect their representatives for "doing tourism," and this collective choice is governed by the shared understanding of *being-in* Huangling, i.e., guanxi. An "authentic" *Huanglinger*, in the emic viewpoint, is a person who is

capable of guanxi-cultivation, and accordingly believed to be capable of "doing tourism," or something else new in the Huangling village. It should be noted that this guanxi logic is designated by *being-in* Huangling, instead of by "doing tourism." The majority of villagers (including the DGD staff) had no or very little prior familiarity with tourism, and "doing tourism" is particularly a new experience for them. When villagers encounter an emerging phenomenon and experience, they tend to use what they know best, that is guanxi, to frame the new encounter. Thus, the fact that guanxi is relied upon as the fundamental way of making tourism meaningful is not determined by the identity of being a DGD staff but, rather, by the identity of being a Huangling villager.

Interviewer: Could you tell me some of your working experiences, for example, about some challenges you've faced?

B. Cao: Well, there was one piece of land that the company needed, and no matter how hard I worked, the owner was reluctant to sell it. Finally, I asked for help from my sister's husband to talk with the owner because I knew he and the male head were *xiangqin* (literally, relatives of co-residence). Sure enough, the man agreed.

Interviewer: Really? At the original cost, without extra conditions?

B. Cao: Not at all. You don't understand because you are *waidi ren* (literally, strangers from outside Huangling, i.e., outsider). The matter is not money. They are *xiangqin*, how could it involve money? Besides, there were over 60 households who had different requirements. How could you use money to figure out all these problems?

Interviewer: I see; but still, I thought it was an impossible mission to persuade these families to relocate.

B. Cao: Well, if *waidi ren* implemented this plan, it would have highly likely failed. Only we *bendi ren* (literally, indigenous villager, i.e., insider) as the implementers could realize this plan.

A notable aspect revealed by these transcripts is the perception among Huangling villagers that who they *are* determines directly how they "do tourism," specifically here, producing the RT destination. In the transcript above, participant B. Cao interprets himself and his fellow villagers as "*bendi ren*" (insiders), as compared to the "*waidi ren*" (outsiders). According to B. Cao, "*bendi ren*" understand the subjective connectedness of the local villagers to each other in terms of guanxi, while "*waidi ren*" interpret matters in monetary terms. It is through these interpretations based on certain shared understandings that Huangling villagers distinguish themselves from others and discover what they *are*. This can be clearly exemplified by another participant, J. Cao, and his claims that, in the village, money alone could not do everything, and that "this distinguishes us from urban people who count on nothing but money."

Furthermore, the shared understandings do not only determine the meanings brought into the interpretation of experiences. Producing the Huangling destination involves relocating over 60 households, exchanging fields and buildings with over 120 families, and many other related works. The plan might be understood from an 'outside' perspective as "an impossible mission, which can be supported by participant B. Cao's descriptions, "if *waidi ren* implemented this plan, and it would have highly likely failed." Guanxi, here, the shared understandings, further constrain the possible way of dealing with the world. In Huangling, guanxi functions in every aspect of villagers' lives: encountering objects and fellow villagers, using language, doing tourism, etc. As explicitly pointed out by participant B. Cao, the plan of producing the destination can only be realized by *bendi ren*. For example, when mentioning the challenge of purchasing land, B. Cao rejects my

suggestion that money might be used to resolve the problem. Instead, he insists it is *xiangqin*—a form of *guanxi*—that is responsible for resolving the matter. Both *guanxi* perception and the specific forms of *guanxi* among local villagers are not possessed by the outsiders, which is the reason for *waidi ren* having “highly likely failed” in producing the destination in Huangling.

In this sense, producing the RT destination successfully in Huangling is not only related to the physical characteristics of the particular locality (e.g., terraced fields, hillside village, Hui-style architecture, etc.), but more fundamentally to the *guanxi* manner of life of villagers who intersect and live in the destination (Ringer, 2013), that is, *dwelling* in Huangling. Predictably, the periodic need to solve challenges arising from RT will reinforce the cultivation and dependence of *guanxi*. Tourism, in Huangling, has been *done* in a way that is impossible to divorce from the particular *guanxi* way of living, and the indigenous residents' *being-in-the-world* has been and will be consolidated with RT.

5.2. *Guanxi* shapes RT landscapes

It shall be seen that the phrase ‘*guanxi* shapes the landscape’ is indeed not metaphorical when applied to tourism in Huangling village. In particular, the RT landscape is not just shaped by *guanxi* or a model for this special *being-in-the-world*; the reshaped RT landscapes are simultaneously the shaper of the temporal dimension of dwelling. That is, it generates new meanings and decodes existing ones for local residents who intersect with the destination.

Interviewer: *As far as I know, there are still two households living in the hill village; what happened?*

J. Cao: *These two households have long been known for buhui zuoren (do not know how to be human beings), and their guanxi with fellow villagers was not good. I cannot remember how many times I visited their homes to persuade them to move, but no matter what you said, they just ignored you, and they never even treated me with a cup of tea.*

Interviewer: *Really? Then the company let them be?*

J. Cao: *For such simenzi (literally, dead door), you have no idea. We couldn't force them. You know what? The original design of the trail wasn't like the current proposal, and because of them we changed the plan.*

Interviewer: *You mean the small turn on the trail, right?*

J. Cao: *Yes, we constructed the corner and paid extra costs. Now, all of us live at the foot of the mountain, and they are the real simenzi.*

The preceding passages illustrate how *guanxi* shapes the RT landscapes in Huangling by presenting the *emic* understandings of the “social processes that lie behind these spatial configurations” (Mowl & Towner, 1995, p. 103). According to participant J. Cao's descriptions, the “turn on the trail” is shaped by the villagers who “do not know how to be a human being (*buhui zuoren*).” The indigenous expression “*buhui zuoren*” that criticizes someone's skills at cultivating and maintaining *guanxi* is far from rare in both Huangling villagers' and their Chinese peers' daily life, but the connotations embedded in this expression have been often overlooked.

According to his interpretation, the understanding of how to be a human being in Huangling should be shown in a variety of practices including “offering a cup of tea,” or greeting instead of ignoring. At the same time, through engaging in these most ordinary daily practices, a Huangling villager creates and maintains his or her *guanxi*. In other words, *being-in* Huangling, or being a

Huanglinger must be realized through a person's ongoing *guanxi*-creating practices, including daily communication, mutual visiting, greeting, hosting, gift exchanging, etc. Therefore, by not providing tea or greeting, these two households were refusing to establish *guanxi* with fellow villagers who are conducting tourism, which violates the basis of *being-in* Huangling. A refusal to create *guanxi* simultaneously means the loss of the basis of self-construction (i.e., the failure to be a *Huanglinger*), and which naturally has been interpreted as “not knowing how to be a human being.” In the new context of RT, *being-in* Huangling, i.e., a *guanxi*-structured life, has been exhibited in tourism's progress and materialized in the tourist landscape. In particular, the failure to realize Huangling residents' sense of being a human has been represented as the “turn on the touristic trail”. In this manner, the RT landscape of the Huangling destination is shaped by *guanxi* and interpreted by local villagers from the standpoint of their own *being-in-the-world*.

Additionally, in preceding passages, another localized saying, *si menzi*, can deepen our understanding of the reciprocity between *guanxi* and RT landscape shaping in the Huangling destination. The local term of *si menzi*, which means literally “dead (closed) doors,” with door a metaphor for the access to *guanxi*, is used in Huangling to refer to those people who do not cultivate *guanxi*, or who do “not have any *guanxi*” (participant D. Cao). It should be noted that the word *si* is used as a modifier, meaning either inflexible or dead. Given the widespread belief in death pollution and the related fear of the dead among the Chinese (see, e.g., Watson, 1986), the negative connotations of this localized saying of *si menzi* is obvious. This saying, therefore, symbolizes both the incapability and inflexibility of these persons, and, at a deeper level, stems from the *shared understandings* that such people are dead in the domain of social exchange and network construction.

In sharp contrast, it is found that those who are active in and capable of *guanxi* building are described by local villagers as *huo*, which means literally “flexible, alive, and vigorous.” For instance, participant D. Cao told the interviewer that many villagers established their own household-run tourism-based businesses including hostels, restaurants and souvenir shops, at the foot of mountain after Huangling had become a popular tourism destination, but not all of them are profitable. The local interpretation of those successful businesses is that the operators are “*lu zi huo*” (literally, “have vigorous and broad roads/channels”), which means that they have broad and good *guanxi* and thus are very capable, flexible, and vital.

In this connection, the Chinese words *si* and *huo* constitute an impressive binary opposition between inflexibility and flexibility, incapability and capability, and finally between social death and life. In the new context of the RT destination, on the one hand, the social significance of *guanxi* is fully embodied in the shaping of the tourism landscape: the changed trail in the hillside tourism zone, and the unequal distribution of prosperity within the business landscape at the foot of mountain. On the other hand, the shaped RT landscape has reinforced the *guanxi* way of life as the identity that local villagers understand themselves through. In particular, the localized expression of *si menzi* for those two households who remained living in the hillside was a metaphor to describe their social isolation in pre-tourism Huangling. In the new context, it is RT that embodies their social isolation physically: they have been separated from the majority of the households who have been relocated to the foot of mountain. Additionally, broad and vigorous *guanxi* is understood as the critical key for those tourism operators' prosperous businesses. Once tourism becomes a steady and predictable source of income, local people who participate in the RT industry and attempt to establish themselves in the Huangling destination society will be more active in establishing, maintaining

and broadening their guanxi. In this manner, these fostered RT landscapes are incorporated into the ongoing guanxi creation, which implies *dwelling* in Huangling destination has been (re) constructed by the present-day RT.

X. Wu: *Highly recommended by tourists, we named the bridge of “Huangling” as a landmark for tourists to take photos; unexpectedly, the representatives from Xiaoyong village protested this name. They argued that the bridge crosses the borders of two villages, but the name didn't show this point.*

Interviewer: *Is this important? It is just a name.*

X. Wu: *It is important for them. Huangling (village) was separated from Xiaoyong (village). They share the one surname, and historically, they shared the one ancestral hall. They are like the brothers in one family: Xiaoyong is the older brother since it has a bigger population, while Huangling was the younger brother. Before tourism, the older brother sometimes bullied the younger for fields, water, and borders. However, tourism made younger brother more affluent than the older. The (psychic) imbalance will inevitably occur. We renamed the bridge as “Lei Xin Bridge” immediately, and that's what you have seen today ... The guanxi between the two villages was very subtle, and as a tourism operator, I need to balance this difang guanxi (this literally means, guanxi in local place).*

In fact, RT development and management in China pivot around more than just the relationship between “hosts and guests” (Smith, 1989), or “tourist-tourate” (Cole, 2008, p. 198). Rather, it is vital to map how tourist villages are embedded in inter-village networks shaped by myriad connections of kinship, shared histories, and economies (Chio, 2014). Changes associated with tourism vary considerably from village to village, giving rise to different meanings for different people (Chen & Lew, 2017). This is a blind spot in previous tourism studies. The framework of guanxi allows for the exploration of the complexity of inter-village and of particular issues of relatedness that occur within that contextual whole. In the Huangling destination, inter-village conflicts and contests over the consequences of RT growth have been concretely reflected in twice naming the bridge, which has been interpreted by participant X. Wu as a result of the RT growth in Huangling transforming the guanxi.

In particular, the wealth and flourishing brought by tourism led to changes in the guanxi between Huangling and its neighboring village, Xiaoyong. The statement that “tourism made younger brother more affluent than the older” is materialized as the original “Huangling Bridge” which can be regarded as Huangling villagers' redefining their own village in this area. That is, Huangling village employed the tourist landscape to differentiate itself from its neighbor Xiaoyong. This fostered tourism landscape is simultaneously the shaper of the structure of inter-village guanxi. For Xiaoyong village, this tourism landmark creates new meanings which challenge their shared understanding of the established inter-village guanxi. The renamed bridge serves as a poignant marker of the reshaped guanxi, which, for Xiaoyong villagers, is unpleasant and not acceptable, naturally causing protests. The scale of the impact of this event on everyday life in this rural village was arguably more prominent than perhaps it would have been in an urban context (Cornet, 2015). As participant X. Wu states, “the (psychic) imbalance will inevitably occur.” Expressions of jealousy, envy, and anger, have accompanied the protests of the bridge's name. It reveals the depth to which the RT development program in Huangling was opening old wounds (i.e., the previous imbalanced guanxi between two villages as described by participant X. Wu as “older brother sometimes bullied the younger” for resources) and

creating new inequalities (i.e., a new imbalance in the intra-village guanxi structure). With the RT process, lives and livelihoods in Huangling and its neighboring villages are increasingly interconnected, interdependent, and lived in response to each other, which means that the inter-village guanxi is an ongoing construction.

5.3. Guanxi manages RT regulation

Destination provides the critical context which indigenous people inhabit over time, as well as the site where tourism actually occurs (Ryan, Chaozhi, & Zeng, 2011). *Being-in-the-world* conceptualizes “destination” as a theoretical component of both history and location and can equip RT operators with the skills to understand the destination with a local sensitivity. In particular, guanxi is a way of living rooted in time and the particular place of Huangling that constrains present-day processes, including the management of RT.

Interviewer: *As far as I know, every year, the company would distribute a part of ticket revenue to Huangling villagers, right?*

X. Cao: *What you're talking about is the “resource fee”. According to the agreement, the company has paid the annual amount of 350 thousand yuan as the resource fee to Huangling village since 2012, and the amount is increased by one hundred thousand yuan every five years.*

Interviewer: *Is this amount averaged and divided out?*

X. Cao: *Sort of, I mean, tourism made money, and shouldn't they let all villagers zhanguang (literally, share the light)? However, yes, there are some regulations regarding distribution. For example, if there are two daughters in one family, after they get married only one daughter (and her spouse and children) are allowed to enjoy this benefit, but the second is not.*

Interviewer: *What about sons, I mean, what if there were two sons in one family?*

X. Cao: *This situation is rare.¹ If there is such a case, both of the sons (and their spouses and children) can enjoy the resource fee distribution.*

Interviewer: *Who made this regulation? It sounds a little unfair to women, doesn't it?*

X. Cao: *Don't blame me (Smile). The whole village made and approved this regulation.*

Since 2012, income distribution from tourism has benefited Huangling villagers, and this mode of managing tourist revenue is far from rare for RT in China (see, e.g., Zhang et al., 2009; Wang, Yang, Chen, Yang, & Li, 2010). The *etic* interpretations of this management mode are “capitatum cash distribution” (Ying & Zhou, 2007) or “economic benefits distribution” (Zou, Huang, & Ding, 2014), which is believed by scholars to contribute to community participation in RT development. However, the indigenous saying in the preceding passages highlights the distinctions between the native and scholarly accounts.

The literal meaning of the Chinese term *zhanguang* is “to share the light.” In Huangling villagers' (and Chinese people's) daily life it is commonly used to indicate one's intention to benefit from certain

¹ The national birth control policy in China, first introduced in 1979, and thus in Huangling, a peasant couple whose first child is a girl can have their second child. This ends the possibility of multi-son families here, and thus at present, there are many families with two daughters, but two-son families are very rare.

forms of *guanxi*. “Sharing” might be the closest English translation of *zhanguang*, even though in many cases this Chinese sharing is characterized by involuntary and obligatory acts among parties involved in *guanxi*, and *zhanguang*, thus, plays an important role in creating and maintaining *guanxi*.

Dwelling in the Huangling destination essentially involves understanding this *guanxi* way of living, which sensitizes us to the most ordinary, yet perhaps least recognized interpretation of this prevalent RT management mode. It should be noted that, in many RT cases in China studied previously, the indigenous residents remain living in the tourist destination, which means that these villagers are an integral component of the RT product (see, e.g., Cui & Ryan, 2011; Ryan et al., 2011). These rural villages, including the inhabited residents, constitute the basic unit of the destination and are ‘enclosed’ and ‘sold’ to tourists who are charged an entrance fee (Ying & Zhou, 2007). They are an indispensable part of the front-stage and thus they deserve the tourist income distribution. However, Huangling villagers have already withdrawn from the front-stage (i.e., the hillside destination) and resettled to the back-stage (i.e., the foot of mountain). The main attractiveness of the Huangling destination as a single RT product is not based on the indigenous villagers, which means that they do not contribute directly the ticket revenue. Nevertheless, from the *emic* point of view, the CRCD is obligated to let all villagers share the benefits created from RT, and the logic behind this ‘obligation’ is that, through developing RT, the CRCD and Huangling villagers have engaged in and maintained certain *guanxi*, physically and socially. The logic of *zhanguang* emphasizes the role of actors involved in certain *guanxi*, instead of merely those who contribute to the tourism front-stage.

After examining the specific regulation of tourism income distribution, it is especially remarkable that a special *Huanglinger* form of *guanxi* directly influences the local villagers’ ideologies and values concerning RT management. When the interviewer confirmed the distributional regulation regarding son preference with other participants, none of them could really explain it, but they all took it for granted. For instance, participant L. Cao said: “distributing money to a daughter is like pouring water onto another’s field”; participant C. Cao explained, “daughters marry into their husbands’ households to continue the family line.”

One of the key points hiding in these ambiguous interpretations is the different positions of male and female in *guanxi*-cultivation in rural China. Specifically, in Huangling, male hold influential and advantageous positions in *guanxi*-enhancing activities. By contrast, rural women have been historically underemphasized in *guanxi* relations, and therefore have limited effective *guanxi* of their own (Yan, 1996). More importantly, this gendered and patriarchal *guanxi* is not merely a ‘traditional’ or ‘feudal’ belief of the distant past but has persisted and even been strengthened with the institutionalization of socialism (Whyte & Gu, 1987). In rural China, it is still common for the bride to be recruited into the groom’s household register system upon marriage. This symbolizes how the *guanxi* cultivated by women after marriage is categorized as belonging to their husbands’ households.

As the previous analysis reveals, the *emic* logic behind the tourist income distribution is *zhanguang*; that is, let people within certain *guanxi* networks share the benefits or social resources. According to the interview transcript, in certain periods (i.e., five years) the total amount of the distributed ticket revenue is fixed, implying that the more outsiders join in the distribution, the less benefits can be shared by the insiders. In the *guanxi* way of thinking, both a non-Huangling bride and a Huangling woman who marries a non-Huangling man are outsiders who are not eligible for *zhanguang*. Huangling villagers not only use *guanxi* as a perceptual boundary to differentiate themselves and others, but also to govern

their values and behaviors and to reinforce who they *are* through tourism management and benefits distribution. In this sense, *guanxi*, as a form of *dwelling* in Huangling is legitimated and authorized in tourism regulation and management strategy (e.g., males enjoy a privileged revenue distribution from tourism), and this material practice and socioeconomic regulation (e.g., transfer of household) reinforces this *being-in-the-world* reciprocally.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical values

RT development in China has been affected by intricate factors. An ethnography of tourist villages like Huangling contributes to a more contextually rich and theoretically sophisticated understanding of these places where the local way of living and experiencing the world is both the shaper of and, in turn, shaped by tourism development.

In particular, this study, drawing on “indigenous knowledge,” has advanced the current research of “Non-Western forms of tourism” (Tribe & Liburd, 2016, p. 52). Although *Guanxi* is a centrally important indigenous concept and one whose study has already been “legitimized by the more established forms of knowledge production” (Tribe & Liburd, 2016), e.g., *guanxi* in sociology, political science, business research, etc, it is also a concept that is undervalued and underexplored in the current tourism literature. As this study has shown, the concept of *guanxi* embraces the context-related form of knowledge that comes from people’s living with each other and within their environment. In light of this, the current paper’s contextualized study of tourism in China, if more specifically in rural China, is crucial to the effort to construct a true and holistic representation of the phenomenon. Moreover, this study is the first to attempt to provide an overview of the two main competing understandings of *guanxi* in extant tourism research: both ideal and instrumental *guanxi*.

The gap between the *etic* perception and *emic* interpretation of *guanxi* in Chinese RT has also been presented. The *emic* description demonstrates that *guanxi* is a unique form of *being-in-the-world* for rural Chinese people embedded in their world, one that is entangled with the new experience of RT process. In the case of Huangling, indigenous villagers have primarily relied on *guanxi* in order to make possible the *Huangling Tourist Resort*. In this sense, *guanxi* acts as a constraint upon tourism processes in present-day Huangling. This indigenous tourism knowledge of Chinese RT echoes “a new agenda for tourism’s epistemological decolonization” (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015, p.8).

Additionally, as pointed out by Tribe and Liburd (2016, p.48), “progress in the humanities in tourism is limited.” This study has adopted the hermeneutic phenomenology to underpin its theoretical and methodological groundings. The philosophical premise of *being-in-the-world* enables us to reflect deeply on *What does it mean to “do tourism” (for the Chinese rural participant)?* It also offers rich possibilities for exploring the complexity and strangeness of the tourism destination society; tourism as a lived experience, complex phenomenon and practice entangling with the locality has been revealed through hermeneutic interpretation. Moreover, the application of the “valuable and under-utilized” hermeneutic phenomenology in this paper further contributes to the literature concerned with the “experiential turn” in the field of tourism studies (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1057). Unlike other phenomenological analyses, which are often criticized for failing to make clear their philosophical and theoretical commitments, this paper has argued that Heidegger’s *being-in-the-world* provides the needed framework from within which to evaluate the credibility of this hermeneutic phenomenological research. This scholarly

attention serves to improve upon the “confusing situation that lack of the clarity in philosophical consideration” has caused in previous phenomenological research in tourism (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1061).

6.2. Practical implications

There is a genuine value to understanding the approach to conducting and developing tourism suggested here at the local level. RT development in Huangling is never merely leisure, i.e., an activity engaged in by *tourists*, but rather something enacted and made possible by those who have to do the work of tourism. Meaning-making in tourism is not the exclusive purview of those who travel from destination to destination. Rather, as this study shows, the village residents who do the work of tourism are invested in making tourism meaningful. An appealing or attractive “front-stage” of tourism (MacCannell, 1976, p.98) cannot be interpreted without careful development and management of the “backstage,” or what creates the conditions of the possibility for tourism. As this research shows, *guanxi* is the lived reality of the backstage in Huangling that determines how tourism can, should and will be *done* in rural China. In a broad sense, what is at stake is our knowledge of the work involved in developing tourism and how its management intersects with, or interrupts, the ongoing formation of rural, subjectivities and livelihoods in China today. These contextualized insights based on the host's *emic* viewpoint can caution the future tourism planning and management in rural China.

In a narrow sense, as a lived experience, tourism can be a messy business in which individual, or even collective aspirations may collide with the plans of larger commercial businesses (see, e.g., Malek et al., 2017). Undulating tensions exist in the tourism development process, e.g., neighboring villages' conflict, gender bias in the distribution of tourism revenue (yet locally believed to be “reasonable”). These potential risks should be carefully monitored and managed by tourism managers to prevent them from becoming a threat to the whole tourism industry in this area. The various intersections in both physical and social senses have obvious consequences for sustainable tourism management and development, as well as the sustainability of the destination itself as attraction and abode.

Heidegger (1996, p. 16) suggests that the “proper plight of *dwelling* lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of *dwelling*, that they must ever learn to *dwell*.” To do so requires that the destination be understood, not only in terms of physical and functional space, but more importantly as an inhabited, local place. Regarding RT in China, tourism scholars and operators should therefore be sensitive to the localized realities of rural Chinese people who reside in destination societies and develop under different physiographic regimes and historic conditions. As I have argued, these people experience, interpret and articulate the values and meanings of their destination in a *guanxi* way. We can hardly claim to understand China's RT unless we have a sound knowledge of *guanxi* in rural China.

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