

**Beyond the Mass Tourism Stereotype Power and Empowerment in
Chinese Tour Packages**

Author

Wang, Ying, Weaver, David B, Kwek, Anna

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Beyond the mass tourism stereotype:

Power and empowerment in Chinese tour packages

ABSTRACT

Low-priced tour packages are mass tourism power projection sites where providers attempt to restrict tourist power. This study adopts a hybrid design that incorporates dual analytic auto-ethnography and blog analysis, sharing not only the authors' experiences and insights into the negotiation between supplier attempts to disempower tourists and reciprocal efforts of tourists to self-empower in all-inclusive tour packages, but also viewpoints of other tour participants collected during the tours and from the Internet. Tour experiences were negotiated through power exchanges. In this '*powerscape*', we were subjected to disempowerment strategies including domination, intimidation, reliance-creation and trust-building, while our self-empowerment ranged from active resistance to non-resistance. Different disempowerment strategies appear to solicit specific reactions. Our exploratory study provides insight into the power dynamics implicit in mass tourism and identifies several contextual factors that shape power relationships.

Key words: power, (dis)empowerment, overseas Chinese, shopping, China, package tours

1. INTRODUCTION

All-inclusive package tours, combining fixed-price transportation, accommodation, guides and sightseeing, are fundamental to contemporary mass tourism (Dwyer, King, and Prideaux 2007; Buckley, R. 2014) and reinforce stereotypes of rigidity, predictability and consumer manipulation (Poon 1993). A Chinese variant, “zero-dollar tours”, grossly misrepresents actual costs by pricing below operational costs (Chen, Mak, and Guo 2011). This is enabled by diverting tour groups to designated shops that pay sales commission to tour operators (Dwyer et al. 2007). While purchases are at the discretion of individual shoppers, guides attempt to manipulate tourists through various selling strategies (Huang, Hsu, and Chan 2009). Such practices are particularly prominent in Asian market and destination contexts such as South Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Indonesia where all-inclusive package tours are a ubiquitous component of evolving mass tourism industries (Chen et al. 2011; Dwyer et al. 2007; Wang, Hsien, and Huan 2000). Contrary to views that tourists exercise power over hosts (Cheong and Miller 2000), low-priced tour packages therefore are power projection sites where providers are especially incentivized to restrict tourist power. These tours are increasingly popular among overseas Chinese visiting China. The 41 million overseas Chinese (OCAC 2014) constitute a substantial share of international visitors to China, where target strategies have been developed (Huang 2012; Liang 2012). Through the experiential accounts, reflections and interpretations of the authors and significant ‘others’, we analyse the negotiation between supplier attempts to disempower tourists and reciprocal tourist efforts to self-empower.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism, in all its manifestations, is a dynamic and mediated process rife with underlying tension and manoeuvring. Power can be soft or hard, and expressed individually or

organizationally. Soft power is the ability to get others to do what you want them to do through co-option (Keohane and Nye 1998; Nye 2004), relying on shaping perceptions and behavior (Nye 2008). It is an “authority or power-to act which is used to invoke centuries-old thought lines and longstanding ways of seeking and knowing the world” (Hollinshead 2011, p. 1115). Kwek et al. (2014) demonstrate the application of soft power to influence package tourist shopping behavior through gift-baiting and storytelling that promote alleged cultural values and health benefits. In contrast, hard power is exercised coercively through threats and sanctions (Nye 2008), manifested in aggressive, persistent and unidirectional selling.

Foucault’s conception of power did not explore isolated phenomena or conscious application of power as power per se, but focused on the under-recognized normalization of power in everyday encounters (Hollinshead 1999). He argued from a structural perspective that power relationships evolve through interactions between involved parties/agents and are therefore socialized, internalized, and dynamic (Cheong and Miller 2000). Tourists are often subjected to education, instruction, persuasion, advice, scrutiny, and coercion. Lukes (2006) proposed three views on power, positing its value-dependency and ubiquity. “One-dimensional” views (Power Modification) regard power as a function of behavior applied to modify the behavior of others within decision-making processes where conflicts of interest are observable. The person with more power prevails. “Two-dimensional” approaches (Power Agenda) highlight the possibility of agenda-shaping to influence decision-making by those with power. Barriers are created and reinforced to prevent those without power from airing discontent and resisting. “Three-dimensional” approaches (Power Contradiction) recognize that people sometimes act willingly in ways that appear contrary to self-interest. The powerful can therefore elicit desired behavior in the powerless without coercion or forcible

constraint through pervasive ideology or false consciousness. This view implicates both observable and latent conflicts as well as subjective and overt actor interests (Lukes 2006).

For power to be observed or felt, power imbalances must exist between implicated parties (Dowding 2006). Power is exercised through such dominant-submissive relationships to advantage the dominant party. Power can be gained by manipulating people through actions but also acquired through inactions (Lukes 2006), as when one withholds a requested action or information to amplify the submissiveness of the other. Such “inactions”, difficult to measure and observe, merit analytical caution. Lukes (2006) argues that intentions to use power to one’s advantage are critical. Power is a universal concept, but its practice and interpretation is culturally mediated.

The modernization of tourism has created invisible but ubiquitous mediated power sites (Hollinshead 1999). Service providers one-dimensionally act as the powerful party with overt intentions to influence shopping behavior. Two-dimensionally, they attempt such influence by fostering reliance and preventing tourists from voicing discontent. Power is reflected three-dimensionally when tourists willingly purchase overpriced goods because they deem this as normative. It is the latter that most influences package tourists because it emphasizes the social nature of power through latent behavior and conflict. According to Lukes (1974), “...*the bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, more importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups, and practices of institutions.*” (p. 21-22).

Tourist reliance on frontline service providers for expert advice (Huang et al. 2009) enables the manifestation of “*expert power*” (Grønmo and Ölander 1991; Rezabakhsh et al. 2006). For example, providers can capitalize on tourists’ understandings of Chinese cultural values whereby gift-buying is a cultural expectation (Kwek and Lee 2013). Chinese tourists

are collectivist and hence more inclined to purchase goods for others over themselves (Nayeem 2012; Tynan et al. 2010). Their decision-making is also more influenced by family and friends (Nayeem 2012). Guides and operators, consequently, can exploit collectivist tendencies to manipulate purchasing behavior. Zero-dollar providers further mediate such dynamics through coercion, cheating, lying, aggression and misrepresentation (Chen et al. 2011). Such unethical service sabotage is widespread and cross-cultural. Those without sufficient destination knowledge are less likely to recognize, question, or challenge exploitation (Harris 2012). This has ethical implications and Macbeth (2005) recognizes the need to examine tourism stakeholders' moral positions. Morality has been raised in the broad context of Asian tourist markets (Dwyer et al. 2007), but not the associated power tactics.

Low-priced tours may include non-lawful actions such as threats and aggressive behavior, locking tour members inside designated shops to force sales, or abandoning the noncompliant. More usually, however, they occupy an ambiguous moral 'middle ground'. Zero-dollar tours are described as 'flagrant breaches of consumer rights and business ethics' (Zhang, Yan & Li, 2009, p. 749) and 'a parasitic phenomenon' (Zhang, Heung & Yan, 2009, p. 366), but it can also be argued that a 'buyer beware' attitude should prevail given media exposure and 'common sense' logic that absurdly low prices are not risk-free. What some perceive as victimization, accordingly, might be construed alternatively as due punishment for greed or gullibility. To address unethical practices, the Chinese central government implemented the *Tourism Law of the People's Republic of China* in October 2013, while some local tourism bureaus have imposed limits on shopping venue numbers in tour itineraries (<http://travel.sohu.com/s2012/lvyougouwu/>).

Tourist empowerment counteracts unethical service provision. Grønmo and Ölander (1991) and Rezabakhsh et al (2006) have conceptualized consumer power, but more relevant is Hjalagar's (2001) two-way relationship between businesses and tourists to improve

experience quality based on assumed consumer empowerment. Ironically, tourists can be empowered through tour operators, who “have the advantage of understanding the requirements of a single market, unlike the facility or destination that will usually get customers from many countries” (Hjalager 2001, p. 290). While independent organizations exist in some countries to empower tourists and protect consumers, their effectiveness is questionable. Regulatory bodies and standards are also relevant, while the Internet is increasingly influential in facilitating tourist empowerment (Umit Kucuk and Krishnamurthy 2007).

Oppressive power is often resisted through *self-empowerment*, even among the disadvantaged. Stigmatized consumers can enable self-empowerment through resignation, confrontation, enclave withdrawal, mainstream engagement, concealment, escapism, hedonism, spiritualism, and nostalgia (Henry and Caldwell 2006). These occur independently or simultaneously and associate with specific consumption patterns. Disempowerment in tourism settings, including mass tourism, may not be as relentless or difficult to rectify, but can induce similar reactions. Such behavior, whether normative or deviant, is influenced by unconscious and internal conflicts between satisfying personal instinctual drives and social demands. When subjected to power exercise, various adaptive (sublimation, altruism) or distorting (denial, rationalization) psychological defence mechanisms are spontaneously activated (Uriely, Ram, and Malach-Pines 2011). Self-empowerment can also be facilitated by sharing and learning, developing friendships, and incubating feelings of solidarity in safe spaces (de Wet and Parker 2014).

Self-empowerment is important in consumer studies, but shopping research focuses on expectations and satisfaction (van Riel et al. 2012), retail setting influences (Urano, Saito, and Hoshino 2012) and online shopping (Kacen et al. 2013). Attempts have been made to conceptualize consumer power (Grønmo and Ölander 1991) and understand how the Internet

changes power dynamics (Rezabakhsh et al. 2006), but there is scant research on power relationships incorporating both vendor and shopper perspectives. Foucault's view that power is omnipresent implies its ubiquity in tourism (Cheong and Miller 2000), yet such research remains incipient (Marzano and Scott 2009), yielding themes such as stakeholder power struggles in policymaking, planning, and branding (Marzano and Scott 2009), and community empowerment (Reed 1997). Resistance to tourism is reflected in efforts by residents to collectively ameliorate tourism impacts (Joseph and Kavoori 2001) and to use open or veiled resistance against aggressive tourists (Maoz 2006). These studies provide insight into stakeholder power exercise, but do not take a holistic or reciprocal approach.

Research on power tactics used by travel agents and tour guides to influence purchasing is limited. Prideaux, King, Dwyer, and Hobson (2006) attribute unethical practices to the exercise or non-exercise of power by various package tourism industry/market players. Power imbalance between wholesale travel agents, retail travel agents, and inbound tourism organizations pertain, as does minimal government intervention. However, such research does not address micro-level power imbalances between service providers and tourists. This is likely to influence tourist experience, which adversely influences post-purchase outcomes such as complaining, word-of-mouth, and repeat visitation (Szymanski and Henard 2001). Our study investigates the power dynamic of overseas Chinese-only tour packages offered in China, identifying disempowerment and empowerment techniques adopted by service providers *and* tourists.

3. METHODS

Prevalent positivist or post-positivist viewpoints in research on Chinese tourists (Kwek and Lee 2010; Wang and Davidson 2010a & 2010b) may limit understanding of the meaning construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction needed to comprehend non-Western

experiences (Phillmore and Goodson 2004). Acknowledging the diversity and complexity of overseas Chinese group tours, an interpretive social constructivist viewpoint was adopted which assumes that everyone experiences a different reality in the socially constructed world (Jennings 2010). This enables deeper understanding of the factors that simultaneously inform and influence touring experiences, and how related meanings are constructed and deconstructed. A dual analytic auto-ethnography supplemented with an analysis of blog entries suits this qualitative investigation. The subjective and multifarious nature of tourism underpins auto-ethnography's momentum in tourism research (Buckley 2012; Coghlan and Filo 2013). Auto-ethnography allows researchers to live the experience, therefore better understanding context and social constructions (Coghlan 2012). An insider's perspective is more likely to yield insight given the passivity and reserve of many ethnic Chinese (Chang 2009). To gain this emic perspective, two of the authors participated in separate tours purchased respectively in the United States and Australia.

Tour A (Researcher 1, January 2012) was an eight-day excursion to Beijing with 33 predominantly China- or Taiwan-born Chinese residing in Australia, New Zealand or North America. Tour B (Researcher 3, December 2011), with 26 overseas Chinese from Australia or Indonesia, started in Beijing and ended nine days later in Shanghai. Both tours were priced below cost and included intensive shopping. The primary data collection method was participant observation. Covert observation is appropriate for sensitive topics, especially if it occurs in public and subjects cannot be identified (Holloway et al. 2010). We adopted a modified covert approach where tour members were made aware of our university connections but did not know the exact nature of the research. This was due to the sensitive topic, patently unethical practices of providers, and risks of verbal and physical abuse (Mok and Lee 2014). However, whenever tour participants inquired about our intentions, we disclosed that we were indeed conducting research on shopping intensive tours. Revealing

identity to the providers would also likely alter their behavior and hence attendant power dynamics. This approach allowed us to observe power interactions in realistic settings to obtain ‘uncontaminated’ data and protect ourselves from intimidation. Covert observation has been used to study nude beach bathing (Andriotis 2010) and volunteering at a children’s refuge (Tomazos and Butler 2010; 2012). To protect them from harm, no participants are identified. Research design and conduct complied with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and [name withheld] University’s research ethics manual. We acknowledge limitations such as accepting other participants’ explanations for events, focusing on frequently-occurring events, and losing subjectivity through emotional attachment to particular members (Drew, Hardman, and Hart 1996). We attempted to compensate by member-checking, cross-checking between participant researchers, and self-reflection.

It is important in auto-ethnography to reveal researcher characteristics (Caelli, Ray, and Mill 2008). Researcher 1 (first author), born in mainland China, has resided in Australia since 2001. Educated in China and overseas, she understands Chinese and Western culture. Raised in a high power-distance society, she accepts hierarchical power structures, tends to respect authority, and admits regular submissions to power exercise even when self-interest is compromised. Researcher 3 (third author), a bilingual Singaporean of Chinese heritage, has resided in Australia since 1998. She has extensive industry experience and research interests in Chinese tourism. She received Western education and is assertive, but her Chinese heritage allows her to navigate between high and low power-distance situations. Neither researcher had prior experience with shopping-intensive tours. Both joined the tours assuming varying levels of cultural familiarity among group members. This was confirmed by observation and conversation. Those from Greater China were more familiar with Chinese business practices and culture/values, while others exhibited less understanding and appreciation. Researcher 2

(second author) is an Australian of European descent who helped to develop and refine the conceptual framework, interpret data, and identify patterns. We acknowledge that our gazes are influenced by Eurocentrism because of our exposures to Western socio-cultural values.

Auto-ethnographic research offers critical insider perspectives but is criticized for lacking analytical and theoretical rigor (Atkinson 2006; Delamont 2007). Accordingly, we adopted Anderson's (2006) analytic auto-ethnography which requires researchers to have: 1. integration into the investigated social world; 2. analytic reflexivity, developing connections to the situation and reflecting on relationships between researcher and researched; 3. narrative visibility in both situation and written text; 4. dialogue with other informants to inform social knowledge; and 5. commitment to theoretical analysis. Researchers 1 and 3 were decidedly engaged with tour members and intermediaries in the participant-as-observer realm. Travel diaries noted participant observation, conversations, and self-reflections on their own and other members' interactions with intermediaries. A standard checklist informed data collection by providing observation and interview guidelines, including topics for interviews, areas of observations, and note-taking protocols. Informal member-checking was conducted frequently with informants to authenticate preliminary fieldwork interpretations (Jennings 2010).

As participant researchers we developed friendship and empathy with informants while conducting unstructured and informal interviews and conversations. These conferred confirmability and credibility, advanced knowledge beyond our own understanding, and enabled us to identify and interrogate behavior patterns that reflect adopted cultural norms and values (Silverman 2001). Reflexivity, a critical component of analytical auto-ethnography influenced by *a priori* assumptions (Anderson 2006; Tribe, Xiao, and Chambers 2012; Tribe and Xiao 2011), is important in theory-building as incipient themes are constantly refined and constructed theory re-conceptualized. Difficulties in measuring power

dynamics (Lukes 2006) make immersive data collection techniques critical for delineating the emotions, tensions and conflicts experienced by researchers and tour members.

Our innovative hybrid framework enhances credibility and authenticity through data and analyst triangulation (Deberry-Spence 2010). Through the auto-ethnographic component, researchers 1 and 3 collected empirical data from themselves and other tour participants. The secondary analysis uses promotional materials and blogs from past tours, highlighting the voices of “significant others”. Exploratory, naturalist and unobtrusive, it aims to understand insider perspectives within online communities (Wu 2014). We conducted a Google search using the keywords “cheap tours”, “China”, “overseas Chinese”, “shopping tours”, and combinations. Only travel blogs directly comparable to the tours undertaken were included, determined by reference to low-cost intensive shopping, similar itineraries and timing within one year before or after the researched tours. Twelve blogs on Chinese- and English-language websites popular among overseas Chinese (e.g. sina.com, superlife.ca, ipeng.com, and wenxuecity.com) generated 115 pages of material.

Data were interpreted by both participant-researchers through thematic analysis, thus clarifying emergent themes and allowing for inter-analyst verification. Manual scrutiny and NVivo were used to identify, code, and group patterns (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Concrete surface texts were open-coded, then grouped into axial codes to express structural meaning (Neuman 2003) (Figure 1). Constant comparison then established emergent themes or reflective codes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The participant-researchers independently analysed the evolving dataset to reduce potential bias and ensure authenticity and goodness-of-fit (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Through data and analyst triangulation, we addressed concerns over objectivity, reliability, and authenticity in qualitative research (Miles and Huberman 1994). ‘We’ in section 4 represents the two participant-researchers and in section 5 represents all authors.

Figure 1

4. RESULTS

Figure 2 depicts revealed themes, including disempowerment strategies, self-empowerment strategies and negotiations between them.

Figure 2

4.1 Disempowerment Strategies

Service intermediaries variably attempted to disempower members through hard power impositions and soft power manipulations.

4.1.1 Imposition – Domination and Intimidation. Power exercise here is overt and conflicts with member interests; suppliers “own” power to force desired shopping behavior.

Domination. Domination was demonstrated in the following incident:

At this factory, our tour guide introduced and explained how silk blankets are made. He was also the principal salesman. When members were considering whether or not to buy, he became irrational and agitated, shouting to the members that if they are not going to buy, they should leave immediately and not waste time. It seemed like a good tactic as almost all bought a silk blanket except a small group. To those who did not purchase any, he scorned them (Group B, field notes, day 7)

Researcher 3 reflected,

I have a strong feeling that he works for the silk factory and not the tour company. I am aware that shopping venues such as these offer tour operators free tour guides, with the agreement that the tour operators agree to take members to their shops. It is a win-win situation for both parties, although when practiced like that, it can be quite

aggressive and intimidating. When I refused to buy, both the tour leader and guide constantly glared at me. I was quite uncomfortable with that sort of behavior.

Another example is from a blogger:

It was robbery! Several elderly were locked in the bus. The driver locked the door. They cannot even go to the toilet..... In xxx (shop name withheld) in Shanghai, because of our lack of interest in recommended Chinese medicine, the lunch time was deliberately postponed to 3pm!! Is this so-called “non-compulsory shopping”???
(bbs.ifeng.com)

Members simply succumbed on occasion to such force, as reflected in group conversation field notes:

The local guide stopped us for a group photo, which she suggested is a request of the tourism bureau for quality management purpose. It was so cold (-13°C). We did as requested, but all suspected that this is just another money-making opportunity. We were right. Later at lunch, she came back with a booklet containing the group photo and a DVD of local sceneries, selling it for RMB70 (approx. US\$11.5) (Group A, field notes, day 5).

These tourists were resigned and accepted whatever the guide recommended as normative or a consequence of cheap tour costs. Researcher 3 questioned the profitability of selling the group photos, but Researcher 1 felt that their actions reflected institutional pressure and low package price forcing them to resort to any moneymaking opportunity. In a sense, this rendered them more powerless than tour members.

Intimidation. In the following, the guide intimated that behavior non-conformant to Chinese norms would attract repercussion. Researcher 3 felt intimidated:

Upset that a member has discouraged another from buying a pearl necklace at a shopping stop, the tour guide openly hinted repercussion for those who undermine sales effort. He recited how he once managed an un-cooperative female member, who told others not to buy things at designated shops as it could be bought cheaper elsewhere. The member also allegedly distributed Falungongⁱ pamphlets to other tour members. Refusing to stop the pamphlet distribution, he reported her to the police and she was extradited from China. He told members, “do you understand what I am saying, don’t you agree that she deserved what she got. As tourists to China, I hope you can respect and follow our rules, and try and be cooperative.” (Group B, field notes, day 6).

Domination and intimidation were sometimes used simultaneously for greater effect:

On our way to Wuxi today, the tour leader tried to sell us an optional tour- a boat ride and an acrobatic show. Most members felt it was too expensive and were not interested as we have all just been to one acrobatic show.

The tour guide was visibly upset that members did not support him. He told the group, “it’s ok; it’s not a big deal. It’s fine if you guys don’t want to go or support me. We won’t talk about it anymore. I don’t want to force you. It’s fine, it’s fine. We won’t talk about it.” He then went back to his seat and refused to talk.

After much discussion, all members decided to buy the optional tour as no one wanted an angry tour leader. Though they were unhappy with his attitude, the group as a whole decided to let it go and not let this distasteful episode ruin the trip (Group B, field notes, day 5).

Researcher 1 regarded this as guilt-generating manipulation. However, researcher 3 perceived both intimidation and domination, given contextual factors like intimidating body language and attitude. Members who succumbed to this power imposition repeatedly recounted in group conversations their fear of and anxiety from experiencing such practices, clearly indicating – in confirmation of researcher 3 – their negative psychological impacts. Similarly, a blogger shared her feeling about a tea shop:

We were led into a room about 15 square meters in size.Bang, the door shut. I immediately felt nervous, I felt like a turtle caught in a jar.....It was similar to those timeshare sales sessions, the pressure was huge.....Don't know how long it went for, a tour member opened door and walked out, we all fled the room following him (vanpeople.com).

4.1.2 Manipulation – Creation of reliance and trust building. We observed orchestrations by providers to create perceptions of reliance that make tourists transfer their power to them. Power exercises are less visible and located in providers' capacity to create and reinforce barriers.

Creation of reliance. By accommodating tourists away from downtowns, operators hindered tourists from accessing competitors and comparing prices. We were constantly reminded that hotel locations were determined by low tour prices, and travel to downtown would be at our own cost. Operators thus shifted the constraint to us and set the agenda for shopping at designated venues. Barrier reinforcement occurred where our guide skilfully crafted an agenda around the package and employed subtle precautionary anecdotes:

You will see many small shops and street hawkers. Be careful! They may give you Taiwanese dollars, Vietnamese Dong, or even counterfeit notes as change. I will not be able to help if that happens because it is hard to prove that they did it.

Please don't bring up those sensitive topics, especially in the Tiananmen Square...

Don't get yourselves in trouble.

This is China, a country with the second highest road accident rate in the world.

More than 100,000 people died in road accident every year. Thirteen people died here yesterday. Rules are just rules; cars do not necessarily stop at Zebra crossing...the situation is different here (Group A, field notes, day 2).

Researcher 1 reflected:

I feel the whole point is to shape a perception that we will only be safe if we stick together and stay with him. This renders us helpless to prevent us from venturing out on our own. If this was my first visit to China, I would be pretty scared. The DMOs probably won't be too thrilled about this scare campaign. Just think of the images these members are going away with! ...We are basically in an enclave with all these barriers set up around us. Those designated shops are enjoying monopolistic power over us.

Trust building. Orchestrations were observed within each shopping episode to build trust, as illustrated in a jade factory visit:

Upon arrival at the factory, we were welcomed by the boss himself. As visitors to his shop, we are like his friends. As friends, he would not sell us anything, but take us for a walk around his shop. We were puzzled by this behavior. We were also taken aback when he gifted all of us with a jade pendant and declared that he was going to sell us quality jade necklaces a tenth of the retail price; his salesgirls expressed shock and horror. All members rushed up to buy these jade necklaces.

After buying jade necklaces, some members started to look at the jewellery on display. At this, the boss and his sale staff began their hard selling on those people who showed interest. One member later mentioned that during price negotiation, the boss' demeanour changed from a softly spoken man to a very persistent and aggressive salesman. They were shocked and bewildered at the change (Group B, field notes, day 8).

Researcher 3 saw attempts to modify attitudes and behavior. Reversing stance allows the shops to sell their products more effectively. Friendship claims lower resistance, pressuring members to purchase. Gifting solidified the buyer-seller relationship, but also relaxed buyers. Off-guard, members become more vulnerable to selling tactics.

Trust-building occurs when tour members are manipulated to exhibit trust in a provider, eliciting enthusiasm and agreeability even when in conflict with self-interest. In euphoric states, members willingly purchased overpriced goods, truly believing in their quality and value:

Overall, our tour guide skilfully projected himself as a facilitator, not a dominator. His style seemed to have been well-received by members, given the thank-you-letter that everyone signed. One good thing about [operator name withheld] is he never pushed us to buy, either waiting outside the shop or entertaining those who were not interested in shopping. Like other members, I have no doubt that he is part of the selling strategy. It is interesting to see that even those who were consciously aware of his involvement were still happy with his service (Group A, reflection, day 8).

Group A also experienced a jade shop episode similar to what was described earlier. The set agenda was almost identical, but some members' responses differed:

“I know, the jade (gifting of jade pedant) is a seed the owner planted, but the shop sells quality stuff. They are all real. It cannot go wrong at this price!” He tried to convince us there were good buys, almost acting like an agent for the shop. When we suggested that this could be a scam, he became agitated and started defending the shop. In another incident, a female member was so taken in by the shop’s strategy that despite her husband’s advice insisted on buying expensive jade bangles. The husband, fearing big and irrational purchases, had to seek help from other members to discourage his wife (Group A, field note, day 5).

‘Recruitment’ strategies facilitated by the ability to gain irrational trust from weaker members were observed:

It was a bizarre scene. Some members seemed brainwashed, spending irrationally in the shop. The success of this strategy is dependent on shop’s ability to identify and win the trust of those who are easily persuaded. Those most responsive to this selling strategy seemed to be those with least experience with China. It was also interesting to note that these members have taken upon themselves to defend the shop’s agenda, noticeably offended when others commented negatively on the products. Our warning of inflated prices was dismissed as being baseless.... Yet, when one member showed trust in sales person, other members became suspicious of his motive and opposed him (Researcher 1, reflection, day 5).

Embedding Chinese culture into products also influenced evaluation, especially for the superstitious. One member (male) said that *“I really like jade. Did you notice the sculpture at the entry yesterday? Most people would think that it is just another big sculpture, but it conveys the meaning of “good luck on a roll”. It is an excellent sculpture!” (Group A, field notes, day 6).*

Shopping venues also attempted to project socially responsible images to create trust. In Beijing, service staff at a heritage tea house solicited sales successfully with a slowly unfolding sales strategy:

We were introduced to the history of tea, the Way of tea making, health benefits of tea drinking, and charity programs the company has been financially supporting. We tasted six tea types. After 45 minutes of tasting and demonstration, five pretty young girls entered the room in traditional tribal costumes to sell us tea They were a little pushy, but nothing too uncomfortable, we could certainly say no. But in the end we all bought something... (Group A, field notes, day 2)

Researcher 1 reflected that *“The shops’ strategies were successful because instead of an aggressive hard sell approach, they also capitalized on the members’ cultural connectedness, focused not only on the health benefits of tea drinking but also on building a socially responsible brand image to gain members’ trust” (Group A, reflection, day 2).*

Bloggers noted similar trust-building strategies:

He (the salesman) said that after Wenchuan earthquake, overseas Chinese donated a huge amount of money to Wenchuan. His boss also donated 25 million Chinese Yuan (www.vanpeople.com).

The jewellery shop owner and his entire team welcomed the group at the entrance. Because the shop arranged an appraiser with national-level certificate to answer our questions, Mr [name withheld] bought an ancient piece of jade for over CA\$2000 without suspicion (www.vanpeople.com).

This piece was valued below CA\$100 by appraisers in Vancouver post-trip. The tour member was eventually refunded after rounds of negotiation with the shop.

4.2 Self-empowerment Strategies

Members exhibited diverse responses to forced shopping in attempting to self-empower, consciously or subconsciously. Three levels of resistance were observed.

4.2.1 Active Resistance – Confrontation and subversion. Confrontation occurred often as assertive direct refusal to purchase, especially in early tour stages as responses to hard power projections. Here, members exhibit strong will to exercise power directly, as by blatantly refusing to buy:

The sales person said that this (the silk quilt cover) is the best one can find in China, but I told her that I saw much better quilt covers made from a special type of cotton in Shanghai (Group A, field notes, day 6)

In a group conversation immediately afterwards, this member gloatingly told others how she resisted and did not succumb to pressure. Commonly, sales personnel would shadow members to induce buying, but several assertively told them to desist.

Group B members' initial reactions to domination or intimidation were resistance and non-cooperation. When the guide tried to force-sell an optional tour, members resisted. However, this was not prolonged, as they became fearful of consequences. Similarly, though disliking how the guide promoted silk blankets, many succumbed to these domineering tactics. Members sometimes surrendered to pressure, as described earlier.

Another form of active resistance is subversion, with similar strong will to exercise power, but indirectly by undermining and overriding intermediary efforts. A common example was mutual encouragement not to buy:

To induce sympathy, the shop owner told us how his parents died in an earthquake, how he was born premature, and his six years of study in a Buddhist Monastery. We

found the owner's life story too dramatic. It made us even more suspicious of the owner's background. Then we warned others not to fall in the trap the shop set up (Group A, field notes, day 5).

4.2.2 *Passive Resistance – Indifference, Avoidance, Submission/resignation, bargaining tactics and appeasement.* Indifference entails non-participation, low enthusiasm, disinterest, and responsibility-shifting. Males commonly deflected buying pressure to spouses:

We sat down for tea but quickly became the target of a sales girl. A male member quickly rejected the girl by saying that “you are not talking to the right person, go after the wives please, this is women's territory” (Group A, field notes, day 2).

Avoidance is highly effective. Excuses to avoid interaction with intermediaries included faked sickness, pretending not to understand Chinese, and other blogger suggestions:

Making up an excuse works sometimes as well, such as visiting the restroom or simply staying outside of the store til the entire group has exited the store (www.virtualtourist.com).

Because I can never resist salesman's persuasion, I would bring no more than two or three thousands RMB and leave all bank cards at the hotel (www.wenxuecity.com).

Bargaining strategies include befriending guides, attaching oneself to an avid shopper, bantering with sales people or faking interest to defuse pressure. Some tried to “*befriend the tour guide, not only in the hope of getting preferential treatment, gathering more information, and also easing themselves out of the pressure to buy*” (Group B, field notes, day 3).

Appeasement, reflecting weak will to exercise power, is demonstrated by buying to minimal expectations, or selectively purchasing cheap and easily consumable products such

as keychain holders and confectionary. At a jade shop, “*feeling obliged to buy something because of the owner’s gifting of jade pedant, many bought the crystal bracelet that was on sale for RMB100 (approx. US\$16)*” (Group A, field notes, day 5).

4.2.3 Non-resistance – Accommodation and co-option. This reflects weak will to exercise power with members willingly purchasing over-priced products. At a Hangzhou tea planation, Group B members did not resist the sale of tea products delivered by a soft-spoken and professionally dressed man who presented tea-specialist credentials. He presented as highly trained, educated and very convincing. Despite expensive prices, most members made purchases. Similar dynamics were described by a blogger:

The audience responded positively to the salesman’s highly enthusiastic sales pitch.

The oldest tour member (83 years old) in our group from Australia was very cooperative, going on stage to be treated for his aches.....in the end he obligingly bought a large number of medicinal pads. The tour guide was extremely happy.... (www.vanpeople.com).

Differences between accommodation and co-option implicate the nature of trust in intermediaries. Co-opted members exhibit irrational trust and influence others to purchase. Co-option is exemplified in an episode described earlier where a member actively defended the shop and persuaded others to buy. Reflecting the tours’ ethical ambiguity, member reactions and negotiations ranged from acquiescence and support to overt resistance and sabotage.

4.3 Negotiated experiences

Member experiences are negotiated between supplier attempts to disempower members and reciprocal efforts, individually and/or collectively, to self-empower. Different disempowerment strategies solicited specific reactions. Domination resulted in active and

passive resistance including confrontation, subversion, indifference, avoidance, submission/resignation and bargaining, to appeasement. “Hard-to-hard” confrontation episodes usually created dissatisfaction, as evidenced in forced “optional” tours.

Alternatively, intimidation and reliance-creation attracted passive resistance that avoided direct conflict with intermediaries through indifference, avoidance, submission/resignation, bargaining and appeasement. While not satisfying, these are less confrontational than domination-active resistance relationships. Furthermore, members tended to appease, accommodate, or co-opt when intermediaries successfully adopted a trust-building strategy. If adopted unsuccessfully, members remained sceptical and acted indifferently, but still recognized intermediaries’ soft power efforts. Trust-building more effectively creates satisfying experiences for members than other strategies. In the tea plantation, jade factory, and medicinal shop, members were highly satisfied with their purchases because they genuinely accepted the products and their associated benefits. We observed all identified strategies and interactions in both groups but noticed differences in adoption strategies, as elaborated below.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The multiple-lens approach to identifying power-related patterns in shopping-intensive Chinese tour packages recognizes the latter as social constructs requiring methodologies conducive to multiple and subjective constructions of meanings, including those adduced in the post-experience phase (Pearce 2014). Both participant-researchers acknowledged altered pre-trip perceptions, Researcher 1 asking, “would I behave differently after this experience?” She speculated that she probably would because of insights gained, believing that she became more tactical in sales situations. The observed complexity of power exchanges within the tour, together with her own position regarding power, has allowed her to develop empathy

toward sales personnel who she suspected were coerced by supervisors. Additionally, it is not always a unidirectional power projection from providers to customers as often portrayed in the literature; customers do “push back”, possessing and exercising power, sometimes excessively as in overly aggressive price negotiations. Yet this is not clear-cut; she empathizes with some personnel but is careful not to be disadvantaged.

Researcher 3 joined the tour negatively biased by word-of-mouth information. She opposes hard-sell practices and already felt intimidated pre-trip due to personal inexperience. Intimidation from some providers reinforced her view of compromised ethics in such practices, amplified by the authoritarian setting. Post-trip, this negativity was slightly revised upon realization that most threats were impossible to execute. She felt it very irresponsible of providers to exploit members’ ignorance of Chinese political reality, which negatively affected her overall perception of China.

We conclude from diverse situational and retrospective evidence that tour experiences are negotiated between suppliers’ ongoing attempts to disempower members, and reciprocal efforts to self-empower. Online blogs confirm the strategies identified during the tours. Such explicit power interplays, not previously recognized in the tourism literature, reveal the diversity, agency, proactive tendencies and flexibility of mass tourists (Swarbrooke and Horner 2007, Vainikka 2013), further dispelling long-held stereotypes of homogeneity, docility and reactivity (Poon 1993, Turner and Ash 1975). Disempowerment strategies (which perhaps assume the stereotype) include domination, intimidation, reliance-creation and trust-building, while self-empowerment ranges from active resistance to non-resistance. Self-empowerment, conscious and subconscious, is often spontaneous (de Wet and Parker 2014; Harris 2012; Henry and Caldwell 2006; Uriely et al. 2011), as observed when members avoided certain merchants, encouraged other members not to buy, or feigned interest to disorient vendors. Differing from host resistance classifications of Joseph and Kavoori (2001)

and Maoz (2006), our study explores resistance from mass tourist perspectives. Identified strategies reflect Lukes' (1974) three power relations. First, both intermediaries and members tried to modify each other's behavior (Power Modification). Second, visible agendas were orchestrated by intermediaries to influence members' behavior, while member orchestrations were usually more discreet (Power Agenda). Finally, Power Contradiction was manifest in incidents where members acted contrary to self-interest.

Figure 3 models negotiated shopping experiences, contextualizing interactions of projected provider disempowerment and member self-empowerment in a matrix where the y-axis represents soft/invisible to hard/visible power, and the x-axis, low-to-high resistance. Group A members, with lived experience in Greater China, exhibited the most cultural familiarity. We therefore further differentiate the groups by cultural familiarity, with Group A exhibiting less dissatisfaction with the shopping component.

Figure 3

Group A power interactions are relatively soft and invisible, and only possible when providers can read situations and act accordingly to elicit attitudes. We believe that operators understand this target market and tailor strategies accordingly. One guide cleverly distanced himself from the shop when members exhibited discontent with the over-stay. Familiar with Chinese norms, Group A members reciprocated with equally soft reactions, tolerating repressive power, being more receptive to forced shopping, and acting tactically around intermediaries. They also better appreciated the offered products as culturally meaningful. Later, members became even more habituated and resigned through repeated exposure to shopping, being less intimidated and less dissatisfied with intensive shopping. This also reflects soft power strategies of providers to induce more accommodating responses, they being aware that hard-fisted strategies may backfire with this market. Accordingly, Group A

members locate in the lower left quadrant of their matrix where 'invisible power' and 'low resistance' intersect in sales interactions, producing less dissatisfaction with the shopping component.

Influenced by Western values emphasizing consumer power, Group B members were more resistant but less resilient to aggressive selling and easily intimidated, feeling powerless and finding it hard to accept loss of power. Members often behaved defiantly. Dissatisfaction arose in hard power exchanges when neither party was willing to compromise. Efforts to regain power only attracted increased provider pressure. Negative perceptions of the communist system, exacerbated by restricted understanding of China's business, social and legal structures, fostered uncertainty, helplessness and apprehension. We noted that members generally progressed from initially confrontational or defiant reactions to eventual submission or appeasement, and accompanying dissatisfaction with the shopping component. This temporal pattern was also observed in Group A, but is more dramatic in members born outside China. Their removal from Chinese culture also accounts for their inability to connect meaningfully with the culturally-infused products promoted in the tours.

Consistent with Foucauldian views that power is unstable (Cheong and Miller 2000), we noticed fluidity in member responses to disempowerment efforts and in intermediary reactions to those responses. Notable were collective exercises of member power. When a member was snubbed by the guide for not purchasing, other Group B members showed solidarity, instigating the guide to imply that local authorities may penalize uncooperative members. This demonstrates the guide's lack of skill and flexibility, and explicit exploitation of members' inexperience. His aggressive behavior engendered distrust, intimidation and exasperation. Such power exchanges were highly stressful for members; how they cope depends on both individual emotional intelligence and group cohesion.

5.1 Managing shopping experiences: Mitigating factors

Low price signals low quality and negative experience (Chen et al. 2011); often blamed are practices imposed to achieve low price by incorporating intensive shopping components in tours to cover operational costs. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with shopping does not necessarily equate to overall tour dissatisfaction (Kwek et al. 2014). We argue that operationalization, and not intensive shopping itself, underlies member discontent. To effectively manage shopping experiences, six influential factors must be considered (Figure 3).

To reduce potential friction, tour conditions must be transparent at point-of-purchase. Miscommunication and intent to conceal details from members were evident. Group B members were aware of the tour's shopping emphasis. Researcher 3 confirmed this with the travel agent but was assured that members had no obligation to buy. The itinerary for Group B, however, disguised the shopping component, with the jade shop phrased as Asia's largest jade exhibition centre. Failure to meet this verbal assurance produced an expectation/product delivery gap. In contrast, Group A's itinerary emphasized compulsory visits to designated shopping venues but no obligation to purchase. Several members assumed that such visits would not exceed one per day and evaluated the shopping component accordingly. Violation would inevitably result in disconfirmation of expectation.

Disconfirmation in shopping induces dissatisfaction (Machleit and Eroglu 2000), producing negative post-trip word-of-mouth behavior. In our case, disconfirmation arising from unwillingness to execute advertisement promises, and service intermediaries' ham-fisted style, incited confrontation and defiance by some members in early tour stages, particularly in Group B. The identified disempowerment and self-empowerment strategies demonstrate the effects of hard power exchanges on members' shopping experience and satisfaction. Tactics implemented by service intermediaries solicit sales but do not optimize

tour experiences, and may damage destination image. Short-sighted business practices impact not only the long-term viability and sustainability of inbound tourism, but also China's image among overseas Chinese. Government regulation is therefore required to avoid sabotage of China's soft power aspirations. China introduced the *Tourism Law* partly to address such concerns, but its long-term effectiveness cannot yet be evaluated, some operators retaining unethical practices through loopholes and creative reinvention.

Hjalagar (2001) contends that tour operators are responsible for empowering tourists. We believe that service intermediaries understand their actions' negative consequences but are motivated by financial gain and member complacency. Operators therefore cannot be relied upon to empower. The observed tours corroborate Harris (2012), who found widespread 'service sabotage' by employees in all tourism sectors, but probably implemented in more disconcerting and systematic ways. Dissatisfied members are aware of complaint avenues but do not see the value of investing further time to overcome difficult compensation barriers. This generates negative word-of-mouth advertising detrimental to destination reputation. Encouraging and facilitating feedback from consumers is pivotal to service quality monitoring and recovery, and regulatory bodies and standards must be established to protect and empower tourists (Hjalagar 2001).

Effective management of members' emotions requires staff development and training in interpersonal skills and emotional labor. Member-provider power exchanges may be interpersonal, but provider willingness to exercise hard power is strengthened by perceived government complicity. Feelings of intimidation derive from beliefs that the state may punish 'misbehavior'. Post-trip reflections deemed these as irrational, but they came naturally during the lived experience. Tourism is especially effective for communicating culture and values, and meaningful tour experiences must connect tourists to these values in personal ways that foster deep emotional attachment (Tussyadiah 2014). Intimidation episodes reflect

ineffectiveness in China's exercise of soft power through tourism. Reliance on suppliers created through projections of an unsafe China similarly undermines the state effort. We argue that intermediaries can mobilize positive emotions to minimize dissatisfaction that otherwise results from ham-fisted disempowerment.

As discussed earlier, members' tolerance for disempowerment varies according to cultural background, and prior experience and knowledge of China. Different reactions observed in Groups A and B may also be explained by differing expectation and acceptance of power-distance (Menon and Bansal, 2007). Group A members, born in a more hierarchical society, tend to accept power inequalities. Tourism authorities and destination marketers must empower those who are likely to be victims of this power inequality, through improved communication using diversified channels before and during the trip. Hotlines for travel information/complaints could be provided in frequented locations. Authorities could also require tour contracts/itineraries to display dispute-resolution mechanisms.

While Group A members connected meaningfully with the offered cultural products, Group B members displayed disinterest, highlighting that providers must expand their product range to appeal to overseas Chinese. We also argue the importance of intermediaries' interpersonal skills as highlighted in the failure of some employees to adjust their situational responses. Appropriate training would foster more adaptive behavior. For long-term sustainability, the public and private sector both have an ethical imperative to minimize unethical business practices. China's *Tourism Law* and guide licencing system reflect efforts to create an environment conducive to ethical business behavior, but their effectiveness is influenced by actions and attitudes of individual businesses. Industry codes of conduct should be established in accordance with Chinese philosophical traditions such as Confucianism that emphasize honorable behavior based on ethics and harmony. This would resonate with recent attempts to reinvigorate Confucianism as an ethical, cultural and political nation-building

anchor (Buckley, C. 2014). Regular educational and awareness campaigns can also help promote ethical behavior among all stakeholders.

Our study contributes to the literature by identifying the reciprocal power dynamics that attend package tours, incorporating actor relations into understandings of tourist experience. Modelling power exchanges across different service interactions and sales strategies, and identifying attendant contextual factors, are key contributions. These contributions go beyond the narrow context of Chinese mass tourism packages to benefit all destinations and tourism settings where power imbalances are observed. Also innovative is the dual auto-ethnographic approach, which allows immersion in diverse power exchanges and enables analytical and theoretical development. This design reveals how the interplay of disempowerment and self-empowerment contributes to understanding tourist satisfaction. Shopping is an economic activity, but members' experiences derive from power exchanges and how effectively they negotiate these within contexts of nationality, connectedness, emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, and cultural understanding. We propose the concept of *powerscape* as the multifaceted geographical, socio-cultural, economical, and psychological context within which these exchanges occur, including diverse mass tourism contexts such as low-cost package tours and other inclusive products where such power-related interactions are seemingly ubiquitous and influential in contrast to persistent residual stereotypes.

Figure 3 also provides an inductive framework for extending power-related research. Power exercises evoke psychological and emotional responses which deserve further interrogation. We observed a progression in members' response to power; however, more research is needed to better understand this evolution, e.g., drawing on Chinese cultural values of *Face* and *Harmony* (Kwek and Lee 2015). We followed strict protocols in conducting the research and claim high inductive reliability in the model, subject to deductive

validations. For instance, our qualitative evidence identifies various factors that influence tolerance to hard power, including cultural background, prior experience and knowledge, and skills of intermediaries. Their effects need to be quantitatively verified. Another worthy topic is whether members' ethical stances influence their own perception of power relations.

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FIGURES

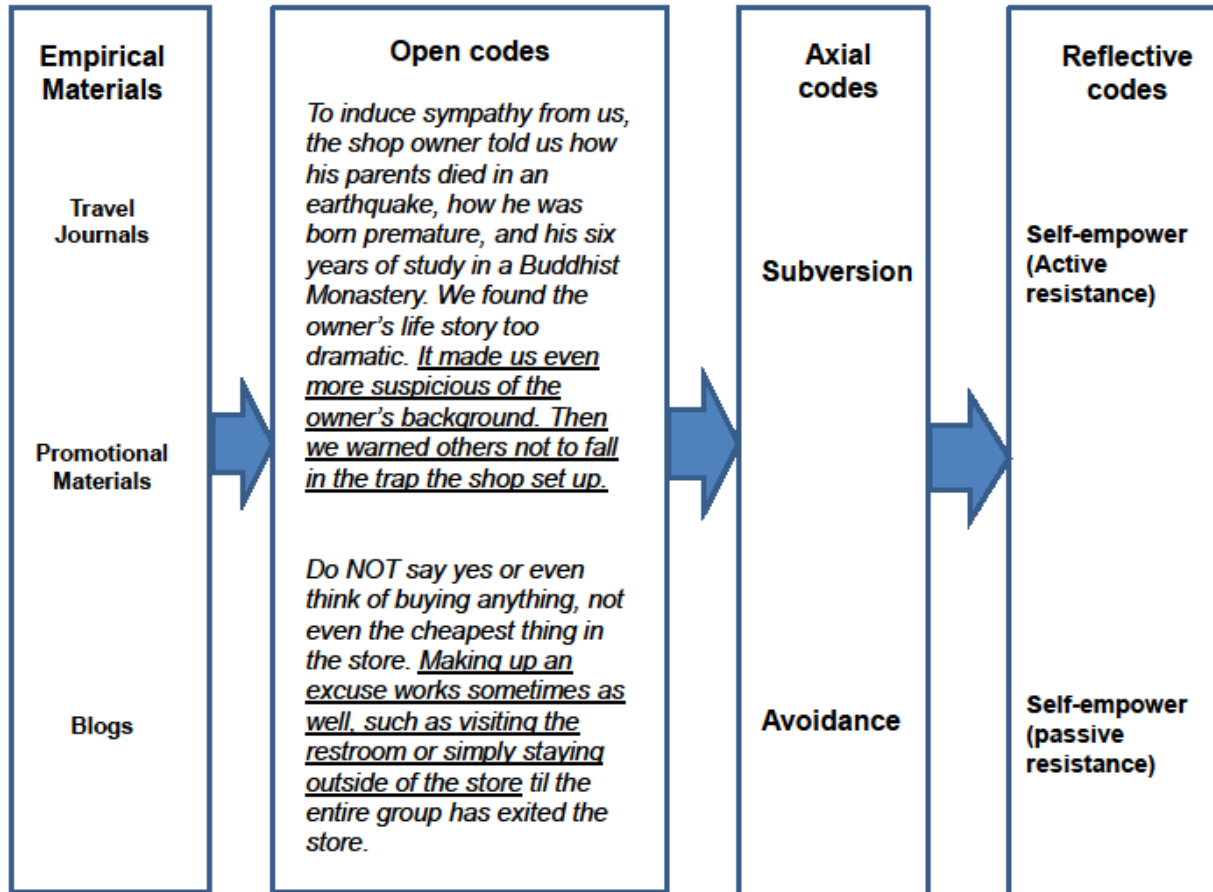
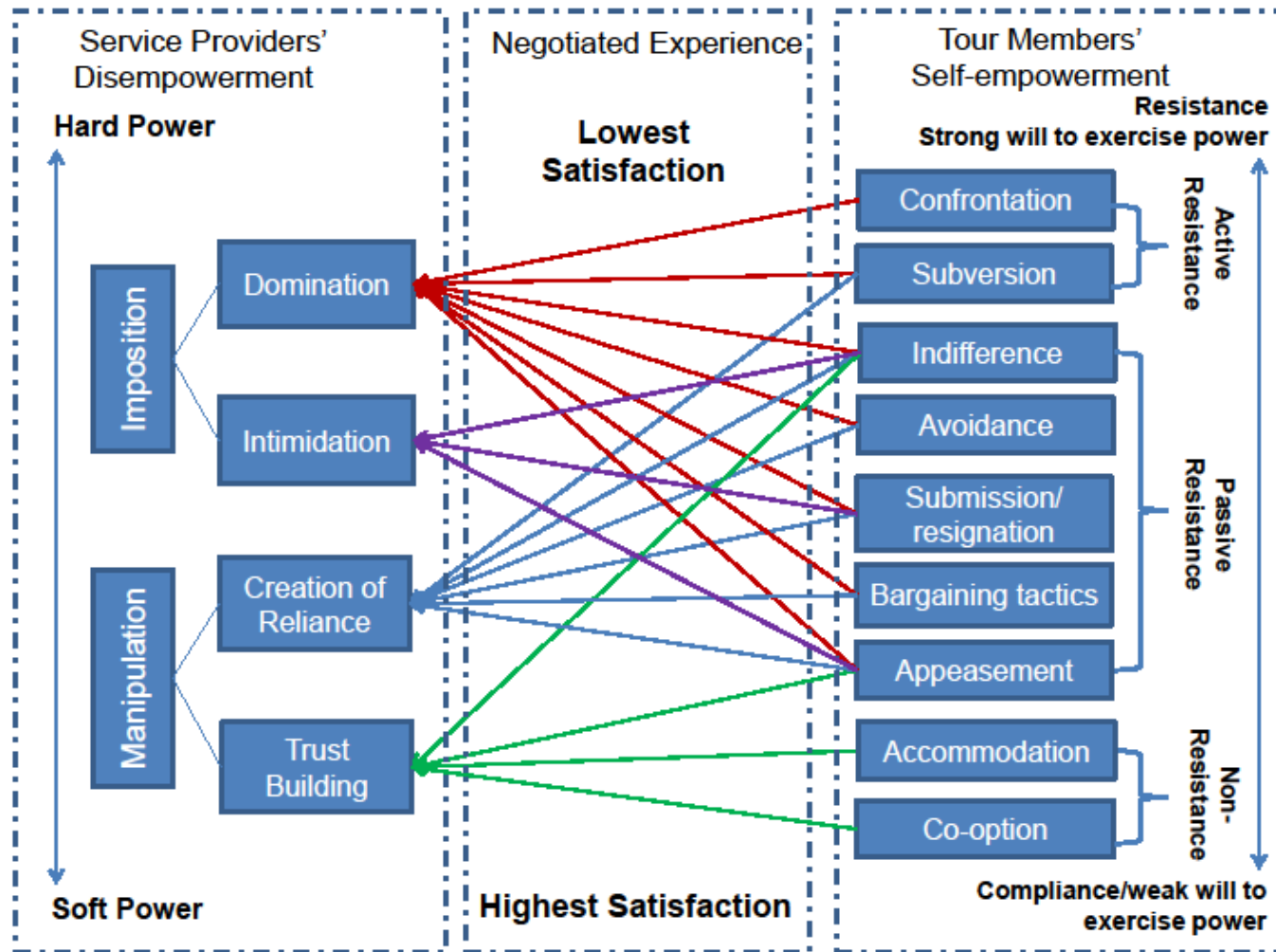


FIGURE 1. CODING PROCESS



Note: Arrows between panels indicate tour members' responses to disempowerment strategies.

Figure 2: Powerscape in Chinese tour package setting

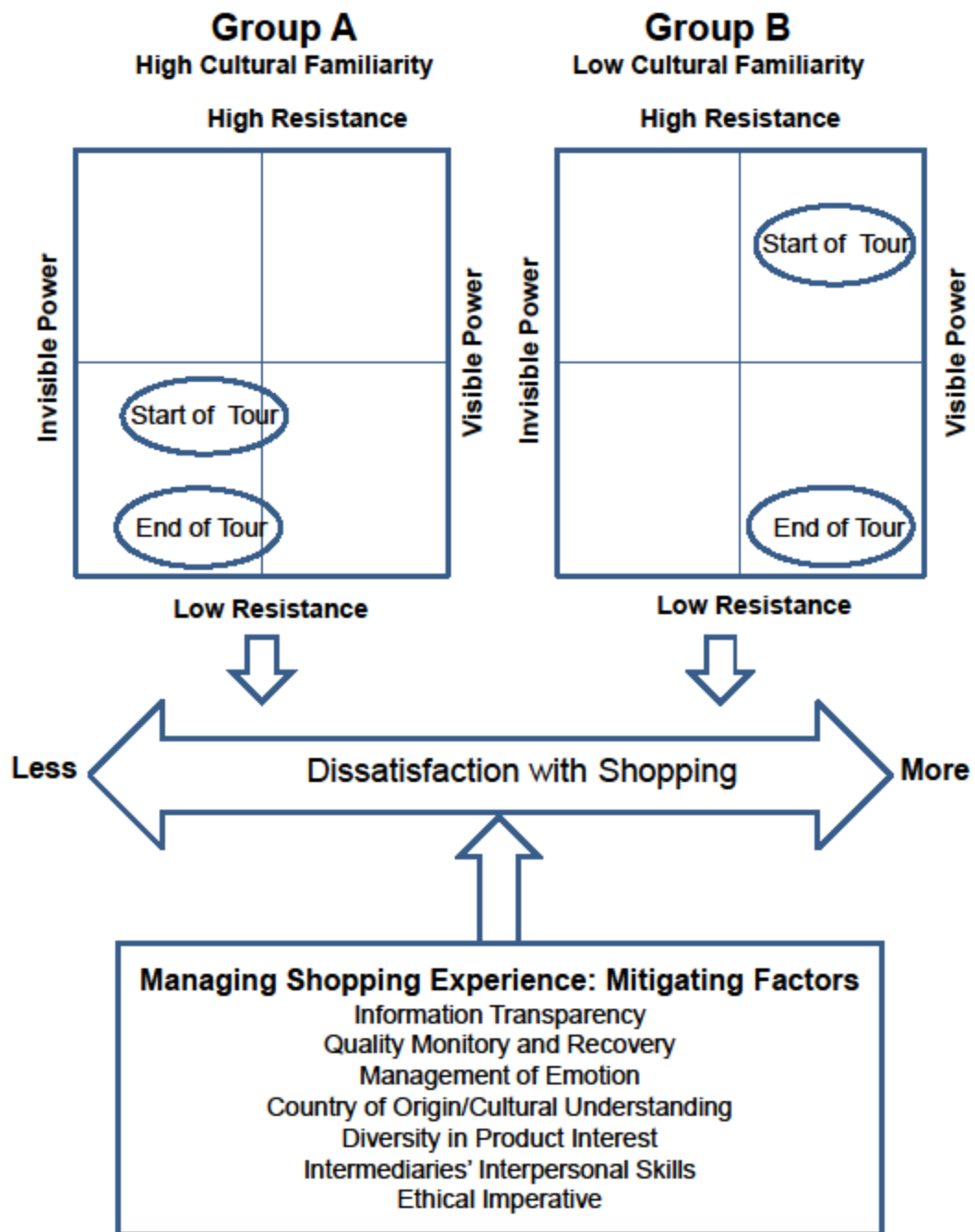


Figure 3. The negotiated shopping experience

ENDNOTE

ⁱ The Falun Gong movement is a religious sect prohibited in China (Penny, 2001). The past, present and future of Falun Gong. Retrieved on April 22, 2014, from <http://www.nla.gov.au/benjamin-perry/the-past-present-and-future-of-falun-gong>).