Monkey and the mandate of heaven: rethinking the social construction of nature in ecotourism

Qingming Cui
School of Tourism Management, South China Normal University, Guangzhou, China, and
Honggang Xu
School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

Abstract

Purpose – Scientific knowledge is usually regarded as the basis for the management of natural environment and wildlife in ecotourism. However, recently, social construction approaches challenge the domination of natural science. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the social construction paradigm in ecotourism management, through conducting a content analysis of social media comments on an accident caused by a monkey in a Chinese ecotourism area. The results show that people commented on the accident from five aspects. First, the public expressed their compassion and mourning for the deceased. Second, people thought that the death was casual and absurd, yet life is full of uncertainty and people should cherish the present. Third, people commented much on the deceased tourist’s company, which is a famous sugar brand well entrenched in many Chinese people’s childhood memories. Fourth, people constructed the monkey as Monkey King, Golden Monkey (another famous sugar brand in China) and as a criminal. Fifth, people also gave their opinions about possible causes of the accident, namely, it was caused by “the mandate of heaven,” company competition, conspiracies or poor management. This study only seriously considers the comments about the mandate of heaven. This explanation is consistent with the Chinese traditional construction of nature as “heaven,” which is believed to dominate the natural and human worlds. Most people, including the managers, accepted the accident and did not explore further about the reasons for the accident. In this case, such a social construction of nature does not aid effective ecotourism management.

Keywords Social construction, Enchantment, Scientific knowledge, Wildlife tourism, Monkey, The mandate of heaven

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1. Introduction

Wild animals are critical for ecotourist attractions, yet existing studies about wildlife tourism have shown that tourism activities may affect wildlife negatively, such as changing the natural behaviors of animals, over-increasing or decreasing population size, damaging natural habitats and even causing animal diseases and deaths (Reynolds and Braithwaite, 2001; Orams, 2002). Scholars have paid much attention to investigating the impacts of tourist activities on wildlife and its habitats (Gao, 2011; Cong et al., 2012). By contrast, the impacts of wildlife activities on tourists, such as harm to tourists caused by animals, are often neglected (Li et al., 2012). In tourism, managing the danger that animals pose to tourists should be of equal importance as managing tourism impacts on animals.

The scientific paradigm argues that the management of tourist–wildlife relationships should be based on scientific knowledge (Fennell and Ebert, 2004; Rodger and Moore, 2004). For instance, a child was attacked to death by two dingoes on Fraser Island in Australia in 2001. Later, 31 dingoes were killed by the management team (Burns and Howard, 2003), for it was reasoned those dingoes had lost their supposed fear of humans. They were no longer wild because they often intruded into humans’ territories and actively interacted with or even attacked humans. Hence, these dingoes could be executed for their unnaturalness, only "wild" dingoes were included in ecological protection (Hytten and Burns, 2007). Policies of this kind highlight the significance and priority of natural scientific knowledge about wildlife in ecotourism management.

However, constructionism argues that nature is not only a scientific object, but also a social and cultural construction. Burr (2003, pp. 3-4) argues that “the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific.” The socio-cultural construction of nature is not necessarily aligned with the scientific definition of nature (Demeritt, 2002). Management of wildlife in ecotourism is essentially based on understandings of wild animals. However, people’s understandings of animals, especially those stakeholders other than scientists, are usually composed of social and cultural ideas from everyday life rather than from objective and well-defined scientific knowledge (Cui and Xu, 2012; Cui et al., 2012). Therefore, some scholars believe that the management of wildlife in ecotourism should also take into consideration the social construction of nature (Hytten, 2009).

However, few ecotourism studies examine the effectiveness and limits of the construction paradigm in environment management. In 2016, a tourist was killed by a falling stone that “probably was kicked down by a monkey” at a scenery site [1] in China. This accident ignited extensive discussions in Chinese social media and provided an opportunity to reflect on Chinese people’s cultural concepts of nature and their effectiveness in ecological management. Through analyzing online comments on this accident, this article sheds lights on the following questions: What is the Chinese people’s construction of nature as reflected in this accident? Is this construction of nature an extension of Chinese traditional culture? Can a traditional concept of nature effectively guide the management of ecotourism sites? Subsequently, on the basis of discussions of the above questions, this article examines social construction approaches in ecotourism research.

2. Social construction of nature and animals in tourism

As an epistemological approach, social constructionism has the following basic stances: it holds a critical attitude toward established knowledge; it stresses the specificity of history and culture; it emphasizes that knowledge is generated by social processes; and it proposes that knowledge be integrated with social action (Burr, 2003). Social constructionism argues that knowledge in any form is socially and historically comparative and that there is no
certain kind of knowledge that is absolutely better than other kinds. Berger and Luckmann (1991) point out that while scholars attach importance to research into theoretical knowledge, including scientific knowledge, they neglect the importance of knowledge stemming from daily life. In daily life, people act relying on common sense more than scientific knowledge. “Theoretical thought, 'ideas', Weltanschauungen are not that important in society” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, p. 26).

From the perspective of social construction, nature is not merely a physical and objective thing waiting to be truthfully revealed by scientific knowledge (Proctor, 1998). Instead, nature is tightly connected to social, historical and cultural contexts (Zhu and Yin, 2017). People’s understanding of nature changes along with the changes in social formations and historical conditions. There is no one single and pure nature but multiple natures (Macnaghten and Urry, 1995).

Studies on the social notions of nature and animals challenge the dominant role of scientific knowledge in guiding ecotourism management. Kellert (1985) argues that the majority of management approaches for endangered species relies on only biological assessment and technical solution and rarely takes into consideration the influence of social and daily ideas. Akama (1996) criticizes national parks in Kenya as being built on the basis of Western environmental values, but many of these are irrelevant to Kenya’s local values. For example, the management of the park is funded by international organizations and funds. The park mainly serves foreign tourists who can afford it but deny access to poor locals. In fact, many African children have never seen large indigenous wildlife in flesh (Cohen, 2002). In accordance with natural scientific knowledge, Kenya’s national parks are kept pristine naturally and objectively, but the knowledge about such management cannot solve the problem of uneven social access to natural resources (Cohen, 2002).

In the scientific paradigm, the value of wildlife is universal and transcends borders and regions. But in reality, the value of the same species is regarded differently by people from different countries (Cohen, 2010). Even the scientific value of wildlife is not objective or constant but is closely related to human perceptions (Notzke, 2016). For example, the first group of wildlife researchers recruited by the Australian Antarctic Division thought that it was important to study the influence of tourism on wildlife. But scientists subsequently recruited by the Division after 2004 thought that studies on water pollution, mining industry, nuclear issues and petroleum leaking were much more important (Rodger et al., 2009). The recognition of animals’ importance therefore varies on the value systems of those who study the wildlife.

For the social constructionists, scientific knowledge cannot optimally direct wildlife tourism. Science is a rational understanding of the world by scientists (Schütz, 1962). However, non-scientists often base their attitude toward wildlife on more “commonsense” notions. Although scientific knowledge could become common sense through education, in many instances, the two perspectives are not well aligned. Therefore, besides scientific knowledge, we also need to take into consideration the specific local, social and cultural contexts to incorporate different people’s attitudes toward animals into ecotourism management.

The global concept of ecotourism itself is thought to be primarily the result of Western constructionism (Cater, 2006). Chinese tradition has different understandings of nature from that of the West (Buckley et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2008). Ye and Xue (2008) argue that the modern concept of nature in the West is dominated by a separation between nature and human, with biblical notions giving man domination over nature. For its part, the Chinese traditional concept of nature is largely shaped by the unity between human and nature. This ontological difference requires Chinese ecotourists’ experience of nature to entail cultural
complexities. Chinese tourists usually do not regard nature as an object for learning, exploring the truth and gaining knowledge. Instead, they are accustomed to appreciate nature with an aesthetic and indeed moral viewpoint (Xu et al., 2013). The Chinese gaze of nature is deeply influenced by Chinese culture, including philosophy, history, religions, literature and arts (Li, 2008; Sofield and Li, 2011). Chinese tourists are often “people-oriented” in enjoying nature by complementing nature with added cultural elements (Yu, 2012). Therefore, Peterson (1995) thinks that when Chinese tourists visit natural scenic sites, they behave as if they are going on a pilgrimage to a historical, cultural or political center. Xu et al. (2014) agree with social constructionism that ecotourism management in China also needs to take into consideration the Chinese cultural construction of nature.

However, Chinese society has undergone significant transformation since the mid-20th century. Western knowledge “went East,” influencing China with Western theories, thoughts and cultures. On the other hand, the education and training in traditional culture that Chinese people received during this period was not as comprehensive or systematic as in prior periods. Therefore, contemporary Chinese tourists’ expectations and hence experience of nature have also changed. There have been studies illustrating the differences in notions of nature across different generations (Gao et al., 2018) and across different social classes (Cui et al., 2017). As the social situations have changed, so it becomes necessary to examine the continuity of traditional notions of nature in contemporary society and the efficiency of the notion of cultured nature in solving tourism problems in the Chinese context.

3. Research methods

In April 2016, a tragedy happened at a Chinese ecotourism site where a tourist was hit on the head by a stone falling from a mountain and subsequently died. This accident was reported by major online news media including caijing.com.cn, thepaper.cn, news.qq.com, ifeng.com and so on. The majority of the first wave of reports on the accident claimed that the stone involved was kicked loose by a monkey on the mountain and hit a retired manager of a well-known enterprise resulting in his death. Days later, in the second wave of reports, the scenery site’s administration gave its official response stating that there was no direct evidence proving that the accident was caused by a monkey. Many netizens commented on the accident.

This research analyzes netizens’ comments using qualitative content analysis to explore how people perceived the accident and constructed the animal and nature in this accident. Social construction approach is an important paradigm with which to conduct qualitative content analysis. The focus of this approach is that understandings of reality are constructed through interpersonal interactions or language (Krippendorff, 2004).

To reveal the cause and effect of the accident, the authors conducted a four-day on-site investigation at the ecotourism site. The authors investigated the monkey area which is the main place for watching monkeys, and another area where the accident had happened. The first author also talked to a manager and two staff to better know the details of the cause, progress and solution of this accident.

3.1 Data collection

The first step of collecting data is to choose a unit of analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). In this case the unit of analysis was each social media comment on the reports. The second step was sampling (Krippendorff, 2004). After sifting through online news media, we chose comments on Caijing micro-blog as the sample [2]. This is a reputable social blogging medium in China. On this micro-blog, there were 484 comments on the reports. This sample
was suitable for analysis in that the quantity of comments was ideal and the boundary of the sample was clear. A convenience sampling was used. When the whole subject is enormous and it is difficult to obtain randomness, convenient sampling is regarded as a proper option (Etikan et al., 2016). For a qualitative research, Patton (2002, p. 244) points out that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.” The reasonability of sample size depends on what the researcher tries to study and prove. However, information saturation is still a criterion arbitrating whether the size of samples is enough (Fusch and Ness, 2015). In the process of data analysis, when the number of coded data samples reached 200, the information was basically saturated and no new category arose until the end of coding. Therefore, the authors presumed that the comments from Caijing micro-blog were information saturated and the sample is reasonable.

3.2 Data analysis

Before coding netizens’ comments, we looked through all of them to have a comprehensive impression of them, and then we started coding each of the comments. Social media comments are usually short and target only one thing, and the message they are trying to convey is plain and simple. After excluding comments with unclear attitudes such as those that contain only an emoji or ellipsis, or other invalid comments that cannot be coded, we had 327 valid comments and we labeled these comments from C1 to C327. We coded them according to their targeted things and intentions. In the coding process, we discovered that the targeted objects in the comments were mainly the monkey, the enterprise and the deceased. Besides, there were also comments about the whole process (cause and result) of the accident and the way the tourist died. Finally, the above comments were divided into five categories. Under each category, there were many sub-categories, for example, the construction of the monkey includes constructing monkey as Monkey King or as Golden Monkey. Figure 1 contains all the coded categories and the percentage that each sub-category occupies in the population of the sample. In demonstrating our findings, we kept micro-blog users anonymous. We gave each of them a number and substitute words for emojis in the comments.

4. Content analysis of social media comments on the monkey accident

The social comments contain five main categories: compassion and mourning for the deceased; correlating the deceased with the company; the concepts of the monkey; thinking of life and death; and explanations for the accident. These and their contents are shown in Figure 1.
4.1 Compassion and mourning for the deceased

The tourist eventually died in hospital, for whom netizens expressed their condolences and sympathies. There is a nuance between the two. Comments related to compassion and regret contained the words such as “pathetic,” “tragic” and “unfortunate.” For example, “How unfortunate the accident is!” (C32) and “This is the most tragic accident I’ve seen in real life” (C29). Mourning refers to different meaning. The most common emojis expressing the idea of mourning in were “pray” and “candle.” These emojis were often accompanied by words such as “farewell” and “rest in peace.”

4.2 Thinking of life and death

Being hit by a falling stone kicked loose by a monkey is a quite unusual way to die. This evoked people’s reflection of life and death. Some people thought of it as “too casual” or arbitrary. For example, “What a casual way to go!” (C38). Some others thought of it as baffling and unusual. “If he really went this way it is too surreal.” (C92). For some people, this way of dying was even absurd. C123 commented that “I shouldn’t have laughed, this is a sad story anyway, but I couldn’t hold it back […]” As indicated in the comments, dying itself is a sad thing, but this way of dying is somehow humorous. Even if humor is frowned upon under this circumstance, humor still mirrors the absurdity of this unusual way of dying. The death in the accident was so sudden and baffling that some netizens thought “life is full of uncertainty” (C141). Therefore, people should cherish what they have for now, and as they said “enjoy it while you can” (C129) and “live harder” (C131).

4.3 Associating the accident with certain company

The deceased tourist was identified later as a retired manager of a well-known enterprise, whose product, White Rabbit Creamy Candy, is popular among the Chinese people. White Rabbit Creamy Candy echoes in many Chinese people’s collective memory. Since the candy’s launch in 1959, it has been woven into the daily life of many Chinese, benefiting generation after generation. Thus, the deceased tourist evoked many memories. They commented “Oh White Rabbit, my childhood” (C15) and “White Rabbit was the best experience in my childhood” (C14). This memory was often mixed with compassion. For example, “rest in peace […] and thank you to White Rabbit” (C68). In saying so, people expressed their condolences to the deceased as well as gratitude to the enterprise.

Apart from the positive memory, people also recalled negative news about the enterprise. For example, C20 commented: “Is this (enterprise) the one that went viral for selling moon cakes that expired several years ago?” Many netizens were reminded of the “expired moon cakes event,” in which the enterprise was involved. Although the company the deceased had worked for had nothing to do with the event, and some netizens cleared up the misunderstanding in other comments, most netizens did not bother to learn the truth. Rather, they commented and thought of the accident according to their vague impression.

4.4 Construction of the monkey

Many netizens constructed the monkey as Monkey King in their comments. For example, C316 was straight forward by saying “Monkey King.” In the comments were also the lyrics from the theme music of Journey to the West, “I just climbed a few mountains, and crossed many rivers also. Ha ha.” The construction of the monkey as Monkey King was deeply influenced by the Chinese culture and actually physically irrelevant to this accident, even if cultural associations were invoked.

Many netizens constructed the monkey as “Golden Monkey,” as they would relate the deceased to the White Rabbit Creamy Candy. They imagined the accident to be a result of
the company competition between the Golden Monkey Creamy Candy and the White Rabbit Creamy Candy. This construction was influenced by “brand culture” or association.

Apart from the constructions influenced by television and brand culture, among the most common comments were to regard the monkey as a criminal. For example, “take the monkey into custody and interrogate it” (C295) and “how should the monkey be dealt with? Should it be held accountable for the crime?” (C196). Some even went as far as commenting that the monkey should serve behind bars. All in all, this kind of comments treated the monkey as a human, as a criminal, and argued that it was legally accountable for the accident, although possibly in some cases “with tongue in cheek.”

4.5 Explanation of the accident
The explanation of the cause of the accident and various related suspicions accounted for the largest part of all comments. These kinds of comments could be categorized into four types. The first was the extension of the association of two brands and the construction of the monkey. This type of comments held the opinion that the death was caused by the company competition between the Golden Monkey and the White Rabbit. For example, “the company competition between the Golden Monkey and the White Rabbit resulted in violence” (C227). But no one really bought into this opinion. It was just a meme on social media.

The second type of comments were not uncommon online – namely, conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theory demonstrated netizens’ distrust in information circulating online. They thought that the official response was hiding the truth, and that there was some rare occurrence behind the accident. For example, “anyway I thought there was conspiracy behind it” (C260). Some people thought that the accident was caused by negligence, and that the one at fault used the monkey as a scapegoat. For example, “doesn’t anyone think this is a hoax […] could it be that the stone was thrown by a person… and then the blame was directed to the monkey […]” (C261). This resulted in even more distrust in the official response.

The third type of comments thought that the victim was fated to die. A typical comment was “he was one of a kind, but the Mandate of Heaven (天命, tian ming) has finally found him.” Coincidence in this accident reminded people of the obscure and mysterious fate theory. For example, “what else could you explain this with, except for fate???” (C190). “Sometimes you can’t help but believe in fate. In the face of fate, man is feeble. One can die in a flash, and it is inevitable. As the saying goes ‘you can’t live if you are doomed. Life is but an illusion’” (C178).

The fourth type of comments were relatively more rational, and compared with the previous three types, the fourth type was reported by only a small minority. It included suspicion of the accident. People doubted whether an investigation had been conducted by the management team to determine if the accident was caused by a monkey; they suspected that there was a loophole in safety management; they thought the scenic site’s administration should be held accountable and indemnify family members for the victim’s death. In contrast to the humorous meme, distrust-inducing conspiracy theory and the mysterious theory of mandate of heaven, this kind of comments were clearly held by a small number of bloggers.

The meme and conspiracy theory have little weight when discussing the Chinese traditional concept of nature. The fate theory could, to some degree, reflect a traditional construction of nature. The question of management was rational but limited to the lack of a sustained investigation of this accident, and cannot lead to an accurate conclusion. Therefore, we chose to further analyze the theory of the mandate of heaven and the monkey
5. Mandate of heaven behind the monkey: a critique of social construction of nature

5.1 Mandate of heaven (tian ming)

A man was hit by a falling stone kicked by a monkey, and then many people call it as a representation of the mandate of heaven. What does it mean and what kind of concept of nature does it reveal?

Nature is translated as “ziran” (自然) in Chinese. However, traditional Chinese concept of “ziran” does not equate to the Western concept of “nature” (Ikeda, 2006). After the 17th century in the West, nature was used as a noun referring to the part of the physical world without humans’ involvement, such as natural rules, natural phenomena and natural environment (Williams, 2014). It is an objective concept. To learn about natural phenomena and understand natural rules, we require scientific and rational analysis. However, in the Chinese tradition, people use the word “ziran” as an adjective. “It is used to describe the natural way in which ‘all beings’ and ‘all people’ exist” (Ikeda, 2006, p. 11). Nature was later translated into Japanese as “ziran,” and then China adopted this translation. Before that, there was no corresponding relation between the Chinese concept of “ziran” and the Western “nature.” Therefore, using the word “ziran” (nature) to describe the objective physical world without humans’ involvement was not common in China before the late 20th century. When describing natural phenomena in daily communications, such as wind, rain, the sun and the night, Chinese people tend to use another word – “heaven” (天, tian). For example, we would say “tian is too strong to expose” rather than “the sunshine is strong.” In ordinary situations, “tian” corresponds to the modern physical “nature.” In this accident, it was a natural occurrence, as opposed to human intervention, that the stone was kicked loose by a monkey. Therefore, the accident is included in the scope of the “heaven” (tian), which explains why the netizens mentioned “heaven” (tian) instead of “nature” so many times in the comments. Using the word “ziran” to describe a natural occurrence is highbrow and literary, which ordinary people rarely do in daily life.

People regarded the accident as the will or mandate of heaven, reflecting the concept of “heaven” as fate. According to Yuzo (2012), the ancient Chinese concept of “heaven” has multiple meanings: heaven with natural laws, heaven as the root and dominance of everything, heaven as a harmonious mixture of everything and heaven as the source of morality and legislation. The concept of heaven shown in the accident interprets heaven as natural rules beyond human intervention, as the root and dominance of things in the world. In traditional concept of heaven, the emperor–servant relations, man’s life and death and poverty and wealth are all dominated by heaven (Yuzo, 2012). Heaven has its own operating laws and controls nature and humans. As many netizens said “life or death is fated. Poverty or wealth is mandated.” What they expressed was the concept of “mandate of heaven.” And as the manager sighed: “Among all the tourists on site, why this one got hit” (M01), implying that the victim’s death was mandated by heaven and heaven just fulfilled its will through the hands of a monkey.

It is obvious that the way the Chinese people expressed “heaven” (tian) and their concept of “mandate of heaven” are an extension of the tradition. This concept of mandate of heaven started in the Zhou Dynasty (Zhao, 2009), and it still influences the Chinese people unconsciously in their daily life.
5.2 Potential effects of the mandate of heaven on management

In the concept of mandate of heaven, nature operates by its own rules that exist independently of humans, and indeed humans are bound to those same rules. All man can do is to obey the mandate of heaven, the dominating rules, as opposed to manipulating the rules. According to the concept of mandate of heaven, many people believed that the accident was the unchangeable will of heaven, and they accepted it without a second thought. Only a few people doubted the management of the ecotourism site. By the time the authors conducted the on-site investigation, the social effects of this accident had already dissipated. According to the staff (S01), the managers paid compensation for the death and had consoled the family of the deceased, but had not investigated the cause of the accident, and nor had they taken precautions to prevent a potential same accident from happening again. It can be seen that when people think of natural occurrences as “unmanageable,” they will not undertake precautions to prevent future such accidents.

The influence of the concept of nature as a mandate of heaven on ecotourism management becomes more apparent when compared with the way Western countries address such issues. In the USA, there was a time that wild wolves in Yellowstone National Park turned to tourists for food, instead of fearing them. Zoologists first attempted to “re-wild” the wolves so that they could prey on animals for food instead of relying on humans. However, two could not return to the original state of “wildness” and were finally killed (Yinyueshuigu, 2016). That is one way to manage and control nature consistent with ecological and biological logic. Wildlife has its own natural behaviour patterns such as staying away from humans and preying on animals for food. Once animals stray away from these natural rules, it was felt appropriate that humans can take actions and intervene.

In the scientific paradigm, nature is also regarded as possessing its own rules. These rules are objective and can be learned and understood. Once understood, knowledge about these rules can be used to manage nature in certain ways.

On the other hand, the construction of nature as the mandate of heaven is a form of “enchantment of nature” derived from ancient society, when people believed in nature possessing some kind of mysterious and incomprehensible force. Max Weber (1998, p. 29) believed that modernity is a process of the “disenchantment” of the world, meaning that “principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” Disenchantment is a rational process. The forming of Western modernity is a process of disenchantment. Retention of a concept of nature as part of the mandate of heaven sustains a sense of the “enchantment” in modern society. The danger of this lies in the misinterpretation of causal relationships by reference to mysticism, claiming that causal relationships are agnostic and uncontrollable. This kind of social construction can bring about negligence in the management in ecotourism. This is the negative side of the social construction of nature that we attempt to reveal in this study.

If we approach this accident with “disenchantment” and a rational attitude, we can see the inevitability behind this random occurrence. The site of the accident was a scenic spot far from where wild monkeys usually gather. The victim was hit by a stone falling from the mountain when he was sitting and having a rest. The site had once worked previously with the Chinese Academy of Sciences to investigate the geological conditions at the accident site, and had concluded that the geological structure in the site was stable. Moreover, there had not been any stones falling prior to this accident, according to the interviewed manager (M01). Considering these factors, the possibility of a natural stone falling was low, but there remained the possibility of a monkey kicking a stone loose. That was why the first wave of
media coverage reported a falling stone kicked loose by a monkey. However, the police could not find substantial evidence to substantiate that thesis. Several tourists said that they had seen monkeys passing through the site, but it proved difficult to establish contact with them after the accident. Therefore, the second wave of reports said that there was no direct evidence proving the stone was kicked loose by a monkey. Finally, the management team presumed that it was highly likely that the falling stone was caused by a monkey despite failing to conduct any thorough investigation. That failure was shaped by references to the role of “fate,” and there was little or no consideration of the recent paradigm shifts in tourism development and environmental changes.

As ecotourism develops, more tourists will enter the monkey’s natural habitats, and the duration of stay may also increase. The more there is spatial and temporal co-existence, the more monkeys will habituate to human presence (Knight, 2010). Many tourists like to feed wildlife (Orams, 2002), thus monkeys will learn that they can turn to humans for food. According to the staff, when food supply is getting tight in winter some monkeys spontaneously turn to tourists for food or even take food by force (S02). It is relatively easy for tourists to be hurt in feeding and interacting with wild monkeys. Consequently, to prevent harm to tourists, the managers decided to proactively feed monkeys to reduce direct contact with tourists. That feeding probably leads to the increase in monkey population, which in turn increases the possibility that monkeys’ living areas overlap with tourists’ activity areas, and the possibility of tourists getting hurt by monkeys. Hence, ecotourism development may bring two changes to monkeys:

1. habituation to human presence; and
2. an increase in the population.

If monkeys were not used to humans’ presence, they would stay away from humans. If there is not a significant increase in monkey population, the possibility of them appearing on humans’ activity areas would be lower. From this point of view, the management of wild monkeys in this ecotourism site is problematic. Hence, recognizing the cultural construction of nature in ecotourism (Hyttén, 2009), at the same time it is suggested that priority should be paid to the scientific paradigm.

When the monkey population surpasses the carrying capacity of the environment, there are lessons to be learnt from how the Japanese solved their “monkey disaster” (Zhang and Watanab, 2009). This involves sterilization of the monkeys to curb population growth, culling some monkeys and moving others to new areas. However, each method is difficult to practice in China: sterilizing is too costly, killing wild monkeys is against Chinese laws and is morally controversial and moving monkeys to other places will probably turn them into an invasive species.

6. Conclusions
The accident opens a window to understand how the Chinese regard accidents caused by wildlife. The content analysis of social media comments discovered that people’s comments contain five categories: first, the compassion and sympathies for the deceased; second, citing the view that his way of dying was too absurd and casual, that live is full of uncertainty and that one should cherish what one has; third, relating the accident to White Rabbit Creamy Candy and people’s childhood experience with the candy; fourth, the construction of the monkey as Monkey King, Golden Monkey and as a criminal; and fifth, explanations of the accident including the traditional notion of mandate of heaven, conspiracy theory, company competition and finally asking if it was a question of poor management.
In the above comments, only the fifth category is closely related to people’s notion of nature. And in the explanations, only the traditional construction of mandate of heaven is worth a serious analysis. In this traditional construction, netizens ascribed the accident to the will or mandate of heaven. Mandate of heaven claims that heaven is dominant, has its own rules of operating and controls all beings including humans. What humans can do is to bend to heaven’s will. Humans cannot control heaven, thus cannot control and manage ziran (nature). Therefore, the accident was thought to be beyond humans’ intervention, and death was the victim’s fate designated by heaven according to its innate rules of operating. Humans could only accept the “intangible” fate arranged by heaven. And the monkey, as part of nature, was only a medium of heaven. This construction leads the cause of the accident toward mysticism and agnosticism. Thus, from this perspective, it was unnecessary for the managers to track down the cause of the accident and take precautions to prevent future accident.

As opposed to the construction of nature as the mandate of heaven, the concept of nature in scientific knowledge has it that natural phenomena and the natural rules can be understood through rational research. Once understood, nature can be managed. Through scientific and rational analysis, we discovered that monkeys adapt to humans’ presence and a consequent increase in the monkey population could then cause other similar accidents. The administration should control the monkey population and manage how close the monkeys can stay with humans.

Nature as a mandate of heaven is a traditional Chinese cultural construction, whose influence extends to today. This concept inherits ancient society’s “enchantment of nature,” claiming that nature has agnostic and mysterious forces. This, in practice, does not help with the solution and prevention of problems. In studying Chinese ecotourism, many scholars propose paying more attention to unique human–nature relations and the cultural construction of nature (Li, 2008; Ye and Xue, 2008; Buckley et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2014). However, we should also point out that a rational attitude in scientific research and the usage of scientific knowledge in ecotourism management are of equal importance.

This study has many shortcomings: first, the sampling of online comments has not taken into account social demography. Sampled netizens cannot represent the totality of any population. Thus, the generalization of the conclusion still needs more research to confirm. Second, in this study, not all stakeholders at the chosen ecotourism site were studied, especially face-to-face interviews with tourists. It needs more research to explore tourists’ reaction to this accident and how pervasive the influence of the construction of nature as mandate of heaven is among tourists.

Notes
1. The authors maintain the anonymity of this scenery site.
2. The website is not provided for the consideration of anonymity.

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**About the authors**

Qingming Cui is a Researcher in the School of Tourism Management at South China Normal University (SCNU), China. He also works at South China Ecological Civilization Research Center at SCNU. He obtained his PhD degree from Sun Yat-sen University, China, and visited The University of Manchester for one year. His research interests include wildlife tourism, ecotourism, sustainable tourism and tourism social theories. His research pursues to understand human–animal/nature relationships in tourism context from a social-cultural approach. Now, he is working on a project on tourism eco-compensation in elephant tourism and non-human primate tourism in Asian context.

Honggang Xu is a Professor and Dean of the School of Tourism Management at Sun Yat-sen University, China. She is a Fellow of International Academy for the Study of Tourism. She is Associate-editor of *Tourism Geographies* and Editorial Member of many journals such as *Tourism Management, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Management Perspective* and *Mobilities*. Her research interests include ecotourism, sustainable tourism, tourism mobilities and system dynamics. Her research mainly concerns human–nature relationships, tourist mobilities and sustainable tourism. She is currently working on a project on tourism mobilities and rural revitalization in China. Honggang Xu is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: xuhongg@mail.sysu.edu.cn

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