Exploring Tourist Narratives about the Animals in the Shanghai Zoo

FAN HE
BA STUDENT, SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO, CANADA

Based on ethnographic research conducted in the Shanghai Zoo during the first quarter of 2021, this report will explore how tourists' interpretations of the zoo animals are shaped by sociocultural contexts beyond the zoo border, which is, in turn, triggered by the zoo settings. The research involves 20 hours of participant observation, three short interviews with some visitors encountered in the zoo, and three more extended interviews with some friends who had visited the zoo with the author. This research confirms that tourists in the zoo interpret the zoo animals through broader sociocultural contexts beyond the zoo border based on their expectations and experiences of how animals are presented in the zoo. It is further argued that the tourists' desire to interpret the animals is related to the search for authenticity necessitated by encountering both the familiar and unfamiliar. The analysis of these interpretations focuses on reproducing meanings through one's familiar experience in scientific, cultural, and living domains. Built on existing research on the socioculturally inscribed meanings about animals, the search for authenticity in nature, and the projection of personal experience on animals, this report looks specifically at the role of zoo settings and the interplay of the "familiar," "unfamiliar," and "real" in the Chinese sociocultural context.

KEY WORDS authenticity, meaning, interpretation, zoo animal, Shanghai, China

This ethnographic report is based on fieldwork research conducted in the Shanghai Zoo about how tourists talk about zoo animals situated in the zoo setting. This research is oriented to focus on how the tourists' interpretations of zoo animals reflect broader sociocultural understandings of the relationship between the human and the animal. Previous anthropological examinations and ethnographic research regarding the tourist experience in urban zoos have explored a vast number of topics, such as the politics of the tourist gaze (Braverman 2011; Walsh, Johns, and Dale 2019), framing of nature (Grazian 2012; Colléony et al. 2017), and reproduction of social norms such as gender (Garner and Grazian 2016). Most of the research is grounded in the North American context; some explore other places such as the Melbourne Zoo in Australia (Howell, Mc Leod, and Coleman 2019), London Zoo, Bristol Zoo, and Paignton Zoo in Britain (Reed 2017; Reed 2021), Menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes and the Paris Zoological Park in France (Colléony et al 2017), and Ishikawa Zoo in Japan (Yasuda 2013).

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Studies on zoos in China, however, including those examining issues related to the Shanghai Zoo, tend to focus on topics surrounding the tourist industry, urban planning, and biological or environmental studies using quantitative methods (see, for example, Shi, Liu, and Ye 2021; Li, Chen, and Yan 2021; Liu et al. 2021). Although many of the studies in a Western or Japanese context reflect the curatorial structures of the zoo, they tend to focus on how such structures lead and control tourist perspectives and experiences (see Grazian 2012; Colléony et al 2017; Yasuda 2013). Based on my research, I argue that tourists are also conscious and sometimes critical of such structures, reflecting on the zoo animals as unnaturally or ill-situated. The structured space of the zoo is thus not to be seen as merely a source of authority and power but through added layers of meaning produced in the zoo that are, in turn, subject to tourist interpretations based on cultural contexts and knowledge systems beyond the border of the zoo.

Context

The main field site of this research is the Shanghai Zoo. It is an urban zoo located at the center of a modern city, Shanghai, surrounded by busy traffic, modern neighbourhoods, and all sorts of public and commercial facilities. Except being free for some specific groups of people, such as people with disabilities and servicemen, the ticket for the zoo is 40 RMB (about 8 CAD) for adults and 20 RMB (about 4 CAD) for students, which is relatively low compared to most other public recreation places that are not free in Shanghai. It opens from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. from March to October, and closes half an hour earlier from November to February. The zoo covers an area of some 74 hectares and is said to have more than 5,000 precious[1] wild animals of more than 470 species (Shanghai Zoo, n.d.). It is also a public institution affiliated with Shanghai Landscaping & City Appearance Administrative Bureau (Shanghai Forestry Bureau). The zoo's official social media accounts are operated on platforms including WeChat and Weibo, where people actively interact with the zoo through commenting on or sharing posts about zoo animals. An examination of discussions in these online spaces then provides an additional angle for analyzing tourist interpretations of zoo animals. Animals in the zoo are generally classified and divided into different sections according to biosystematics, but some of the animals are also brought together because they are supposedly more "common" or because they are "native" to Shanghai. Most of the animals are either caged or kept in semi-open areas bounded by fences. Each of these sections includes display panels and other educational technologies, such as multimedia equipment and cartoon animal characters, displaying scientific "facts" on the one hand and advocating for animal protections in reference to local laws or international pacts. In particular, many of the scientific "facts" are explained in relation to normalized human physical appearances, such as size, or normalized human capacities, such as intelligence or memory.

My research is focused on tourists in the Shanghai Zoo with a particular interest in animals. Most of these tourists are supposed to be urban residents with little real exper-

ience with wild animals. Participants of this research include three such tourists I encountered in the zoo, and three friends who accompanied me to the zoo. The research also briefly touches on people who discuss topics related to zoo animals through the official social media accounts of the zoo on WeChat and Weibo. New situations brought about by COVID-19 have had an impact on people's choice to visit the zoo. The general emotion of fear, health policies on inter-provincial as well as international travel, and the zoo's restrictions on the number of hourly visitors have limited people's access to the zoo. This has reduced the number of tourists coming to the zoo, especially those from places outside of Shanghai. Specific groups of people, such as elders, who are identified as vulnerable to the virus, may also be discouraged from entering the zoo as a public gathering place. Technological requirements also complicate zoo access for certain people, such as those without access to smartphones or the Internet, which is needed for making appointments and showing the health code necessitated by the local health policy[2].

Methods

I started this research with the following central question: How are zoo animal behaviours used as metaphors for human life experiences in tourist narratives, as produced through the tourists' experiences of, reflections on, and interactions with the zoo structures, as well as the animal knowledge learned both within and beyond the zoo boundary? Animals situated in urban zoos were of particular interest to me because I conceptualized the zoo as a place where the boundaries between the imagined dichotomy of "nature" and "civilization" have been blurred. Bearing this in mind, however, things started to be unsettled and confusing when I actually started my fieldwork with intensive field notes and reflections. Instead of interpreting the zoo animals as metaphors used by tourists, I found it is more appropriate to see them as objects through which the tourists connect what they see with what they have learned and experienced elsewhere. Meanwhile, the tourist narratives are not necessarily oriented to human life experiences but, in turn, informed by broader sociocultural contexts such as the representations of animals in popularized forms of zoology (and science in a broader sense), in popular cultures such as films and video games, and in cultural traditions such as the Chinese zodiac. I also found that other than just talking about animal behaviours, tourists were also reflecting on the appearances, names, and environments of the zoo animals. I, therefore, started to focus on how tourists' interpretations of the zoo animals are related to sociocultural contexts beyond the zoo border and whether this is influenced by settings within the zoo.

From January 30, 2021, to March 8, 2021, I visited the Shanghai Zoo five times and did about twenty hours of participant observation. Taking field notes and reflecting on my own experience as a tourist, I paid close attention to the animals, physical spaces, and curatorial structures in the zoo and my experience of such encounters and immersions. I also used drawings to record my sense of places and views triggered by a particular feeling of a division between the human spectators and the animals as spect-

acle. I then also related my experience to other tourists and observed their behaviours and narratives. Reflections on these conversations and actions in relation to what was going on in the zoo, particularly settings, scenes, or spots, were noted in accompaniment with both my own observations in the zoo and my observations of other tourists. Bearing in mind the idea of working from the data toward theories, I was as critical as possible in this stage about everything presented in front of me, as well as my preconceptions about things, unsettling and defamiliarizing such commonplace knowledge (Boas 2012). Sometimes it was overwhelming in terms of which exact things to record, but in general, I focused on both repetition and variation to understand the patterns of tourist narratives and how the particular interest and experience of each of them also played a part (Murchison 2010). Such observation thus helped me to both further my immersion in the zoo and explore my connections with other tourists, highlighting the commonplace reactions and understandings in the zoo that can be further explored in relation to some shared aspects of a cultural context.

To further my understanding about how tourists view and interpret zoo animals, I took one of my friends with me during the latter three visits to the zoo. I was grateful for them to accept my request and asked them to not worry about the research project, and just have fun like the way we always do together, through which interesting conversations about the zoo or zoo animals were continuously being generated. Although I still took field notes, much of my experiences or reflections had been "translated" right away into conversations about interesting discoveries, analytical speculations, or judgemental claims. This sheds light on the way interpretations of animals in the zoo are, to a great extent, produced through social interactions with a shared basis of knowledge, interest, and feelings of relationship. After each journey, I then had a semi-structured interview with my friend someplace outside the zoo, distanced from the immersive view of the zoo. The first interview was conducted right after the journey in a fast-food restaurant. Considering the awareness of being in a public setting and feelings of exhaustion after the journey, for the next two interviews, I tried to interview people online, with both of us sitting relaxedly in each of our homes. However, this allowed my friends to postpone the interviews. When one of the interviews was conducted several days after the journey, I felt my friend's memory became vague, and thus could not talk a lot about it. His memories of different journeys to the zoo were also mixed together.

Besides using hanging out with my friends as a method, I also interviewed three random tourists in the zoo who showed their interest in a specific scene of zoo animals by staying a long time and looking at them. I asked them several open-ended questions developed through previous participant observation and interviews with my friends. I also took field notes about both what I had been told and the physical settings where interviews were conducted. I intended for more interviews at the beginning. However, some circumstances in the field changed my plans. On the one hand, I was concerned about interviewing tourists with companions for longer and deeper conversations because any companions may affect what people may choose to say and whether they may be concerned about the companions looking or waiting for them. In fact, I interviewed a tourist I thought to be alone but was actually not. When his companion

appeared and asked about what was going on, I felt that his answers became very short in the hopes of finishing the interview as soon as possible. The atmosphere also became quite awkward and embarrassing. On the other side, just a couple of days before I actually started my research, several residents were tested positive for COVID-19 in Shanghai. Although the zoo was still open to the public, the public address system of the zoo was continuously advocating against gathering in the zoo. I also felt that there was a sense among people of what the media had depicted as "the second wave" of the pandemic. Thus, I thought that trying to talk to strangers at this point was inappropriate and might cause anxiety. As a result, I postponed these interviews until the very end of the whole data collection process, when people sometimes started to feel free to take their masks off in the zoo. Still, these interviews provided supplementary information about people's views on zoo animals with the immersion in particular zoo settings. The alternation between sole participant observation, and hanging out and interviews, then helped me negotiate the gaps between my interpretations of what I observed and how tourists interpreted their narratives themselves, furthering the situation of common grounds.

During the research process, I was concerned about my own subject position in the field. Originally, I was thinking of taking field notes in the rest area or in unsuspicious ways so that this would not make other people feel annoyed. However, I later found this difficult because I could easily lose information without taking notes right away. I then became aware of how I was presenting myself in the zoo in the way I took field notes. I started to wonder what kind of identity could be performed in the zoo and what was considered the "normal" behaviour in the zoo. Tourists may be easily identified as animal lovers if they walk alone and devote a lot of time to each of the animals. The equipment of the tourists also plays an important role. People with professional cameras, for example, present themselves as professional photographers and are thus understood as going to the zoo for work or practicing photographic skills. Since I need to take field notes constantly, my equipment is a notebook. Though I had no intention of hiding my identity as an anthropology student doing participant observation, it was more likely for other tourists to interpret me as some sort of zoologist observing animals.

This notion led me to reflect on Vincent Crapanzano's description of the field encounter, where both the ethnographer and the people in the field see each other with each of their own preconceptions (Crapanzano 2012). Gerald Berreman further suggests that how the people in the field perceive the ethnographer determines the ethnographer's access to data (Berreman 2012). Seeing me as someone empowered by some "professional" knowledge about animals may then result in a reluctance to talk about the scientific aspects of animals in front of me. This perception changed when I started to interview some of them. I presented myself as a Chinese student studying anthropology at a Canadian university and gave out my name cards with my affiliation and my email. As far as I know, anthropology is a little-known subject in China, so people might be confused about what I was looking for from them. Though all of the interviewees accepted the interviews quite easily, most of them provided short answers

and seemed quite nervous. Only with one of them did I have a longer and more comfortable conversation. In contrast, my friend-interlocutors were all willing to provide much more detailed answers and reflections because of both our existing close relationship and my subject position as not focusing on my research more than the experience of being with them. However, my presence, in turn, did have an impact on my friends' experiences. One of them said he came to be more conscious and reflexive of what he was seeing in the zoo after learning about my research project. Again, this shows how the tourist interpretation of animals in the zoo is shaped by perceptions of social relationships, oftentimes attending to what is supposed to be appreciated by the listener.

Two scenes aroused my moral awareness during my participant observation. The first was about the Gorilla house in the zoo, which was structured and depicted in an exotic way that speaks to the sense of the "primitives" and evolutionist models through totems, cave paintings, and cottages. The second one happened around the monkey enclosures, where tourists kept feeding the monkeys for fun, violating the rules of the zoo. Such behaviour is commonly understood as harmful to monkeys' health because of the uncertainty of food security and the monkeys' nutritional requirements. These scenes made me aware of how the way people perceive animals in relation to humans and human societies (as the same being of "uncivilized" people or an entertainment object to be interacted with) can have real and sometimes violent consequences.

Finally, I also observed some of the posts of the zoo on WeChat and Weibo and people's comments on them. These posts are expected to frame the zoo animals in specific ways in accordance with the curatorial structures desired by the zoo. Such framings and resulting interactions were then compared with the observations made in the zoo. Specifically, I focused on a series of the zoo's posts on WeChat and Weibo about celebrating the Chinese New Year of the "Niu (牛/Ox)" in the Chinese zodiac.

Observations

Thinking through why tourists choose to stay and watch specific animals, I started to recognize patterns and variations in what tourists expect to see in the zoo and how this is related to the way they talk about specific zoo animals. I also recognized patterns in settings where tourists expressed their surprise. The way tourist narratives reflect broader sociocultural contexts can be further divided into three general categories, which are the scientific view, the cultural view, and the personal view. Although why each tourist comes to the Shanghai Zoo varies, they share some common views about what they were expecting from the zoo animals. I heard many times in the zoo when someone in a group expressed the uninterestingness of a zoo animal and suggested visiting another supposedly more preferable animal instead. Most of my friend-interlocutors also expressed their preference to see the "common" or "famous" animals such as pandas, tigers, and bears. The expectations of seeing something familiar were then destabilized when seeing the real animals. One of my interlocutors expressed his shock when seeing the elephants. According to him, he had never thought

of the elephants being so vivid with wrinkled skin and big ears, which changed the flat images of elephants in his mind. Behaviours of a familiar animal also seemed more likely to trigger a sense of discovery and novelty. Many tourists in the zoo showed their surprise and excitement when animals were moving or started to move. Two of my friend-interlocutors shared the sense that even when seeing animals just walking or eating, it was very surprising and exciting. I shared the same sense. Movement sometimes also means discovery. One of my interlocutors said that he was unconscious of a bird before it moved. The idea of discovering something then made him excited. Scenes recognized as fighting or "performing" are also obvious triggers for surprise and excitement among tourists. On the other hand, such a sense of astonishment also happened when the tourists encountered some "unfamiliar" animals. These animals were commonly referred to as "ugly" or "weird," but in turn, triggered a sense of excitement about their "rareness" or "exoticness." Some tourists related the unfamiliar animals with some familiar ones. One of the tourists, for example, said that the masked civets resembled mice. Two of my interlocutors, in turn, identified that the unfamiliar animal names alone could trigger a sense of novelty.

Expectations of the tourists also included the living conditions of the zoo animals' environments. One common assumption is that the animals in the zoo are caged or at least kept in a bounded area. Though tourists generally shared an empathetic view about caged animals being limited and unfree, they, in turn, wondered if animals would "flee away" when the physical restrictions, such as a fence, were seemingly insufficient. Similarly, such assumptions were also reflected when people talked about safety when looking at the supposedly "ferocious" animals such as tigers and bears. When I was visiting the zoo with my friends, jokes about whether the supposedly "ferocious" animals would "suddenly" and "abnormally" attack the tourists were common topics. Though there was indeed a possibility, none of us really thought it could happen. One of my friend-interlocutors talked about the sense of seeing the animals closely but "safely" in the zoo, which was an important reason for him to visit the zoo. As a result, the "ferocious" animals could be, in turn, seen as "docile" or "lovely". One of the interlocutors I encountered in the tiger area referred to the tigers as "big cats" and discussed how they looked like a warm and sweet family. She then concluded that the tigers in the zoo have little sense of "wilderness." The comparison between animals in the zoo and how they supposedly are in the wild was repetitively brought up by the tourists in the zoo. Most of my interlocutors shared the view that the zoo provided a limited, small, and undesired environment for the animals. One interlocutor argued that animals should not be kept in a bounded place, just like humans would not want to be limited in such a place. Another interlocutor considered the zoo facilities poor in comparison with the natural environment. He argued that the zoo was possibly not treating the animals properly because humans can only understand what the animals need from a human perspective, which is not necessarily what the animals truly need.

One common way of reflecting on the animals in the zoo was by referring them to some scientific or biological definitions, knowledge, or meanings. For example, most of my interlocutors talked about animals using words such as “habits,” “Felidae,”