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Teasing the boundaries of ‘volunteer tourism’: local NGOs looking for global workforce

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Ongoing scholarly discussions on international volunteer tourism focus primarily on volunteer tourists as subjects and local communities as their near-static objects. This ethnographic study reverses that focus. Five developmental Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are explored as active agents that see tourists and travellers as a resource and a free workforce in Dharamsala’s Tibetan diaspora settlement in India. These NGOs have found a unique way of increasing the volume of volunteer tourism by offering tourists and travellers accessible volunteering opportunities on the spot, particularly as English-language tutors for Tibetan newcomers. Tourists and travellers in Dharamsala are backpacker oriented and usually interested in Tibetan culture, representing a perfect target group for NGOs offering them meaningful encounters with Tibetans. This study aims to broaden the scope of scholarly discussion and conceptualization of volunteer tourism. It provides an example of how volunteer tourism could become an increasingly effective tool for NGOs in the Global South, in an increasingly equitable manner. It also demonstrates how the method found by the Tibetan NGOs contests the current critique of commodification in volunteer tourism. Within volunteer tourism, true empowerment of local communities can only occur when the locals are in control and able to set their own goals.

Keywords: volunteer tourism; NGOs; development; backpacking; Tibetan diaspora; India

Introduction

In the manner of many other dislocated people or ethnic minorities, the Tibetans have become a principal tourist attraction, in this case in Dharamsala, a major tourist destination in India, especially oriented towards backpacker tourism (Bookman, 2006; Hampton, 2013; Prost, 2006). An increasing number of tourists and travellers look for deeper interactive experiences with the inhabitants of places that they visit in the Global South (Mostafanezhad, 2013a; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Several Tibetan NGOs have found creative ways of involving them in their agenda by offering free and accessible on-the-spot volunteering opportunities: a method that is explored in this study. I focus particularly on five NGOs whose main goal is to offer education – in particular language teaching – to Tibetan newcomers, that is, those Tibetans who have relatively recently migrated to India. There are also, for example, politically and environmentally oriented Tibetan-run volunteer tourism NGOs in Dharamsala, but they neither recruit volunteers in the same numbers, nor use methods as original as the language-oriented volunteer tourism NGOs explored in this

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study. As the Tibetan diaspora community in Dharamsala is basically run by NGOs and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), which governs the ordinary affairs of the Tibetan diaspora settlements in South Asia (McConnell, 2012; Roamer, 2008), the volunteer-hiring NGOs play an important part in community development and adult education.

I consider 'volunteer tourist' as the closest generic concept that describes the tourists and travellers volunteering for Dharamsala's NGOs, although the NGOs describe them simply as 'volunteers'. As Mostafanezhad (2014) notes, the academic concept of volunteer tourist does not originate from the grassroots, or from the tourists themselves, who might be unaware of it, and might more readily associate themselves with terms such as volunteer or traveller. The tourists or travellers volunteering in Dharamsala's NGOs typically travel for pleasure but seek something more important in addition, wishing to serve 'communities in need' (Coren & Gray, 2012; Simpson, 2004; Sin, 2009; Wearing, 2001; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). The five Tibetan NGOs on which I focus in this study handle volunteer tourist flows independently, whereas typical volunteer tourism programmes often share the tourist industry's common dependency on foreign agencies and involve fees, with foreign managers or volunteer-sending agencies as middlemen (e.g. Conran, 2011; McGehee, 2012; Salole, 2007; Wearing, 2001; Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Although this article is mainly constructed around the literature concerning international volunteer tourism, my academic background includes studies on tourism development and on indigenous or local knowledge. My intention is not to review the literature here, since it can be found elsewhere (e.g. Brigs, 2013; Brigs & Sharp, 2004; Butler & Hinch, 2007a; Escobar, 1995; Sillitoe, Bicker, & Pottier, 2002). Much of this scholarly writing pays attention to local (indigenous) knowledge within tourism or development studies, inspiring me to take notice of the local agencies that utilize the tourist flow in Dharamsala. I therefore ask: what are the most important forms and applications of volunteer tourism created by the five local NGOs focused on in this study, and how do they differ from the cases discussed in the existing literature? I seek to reverse the typical subject-object relationship that sees locals as the objects of volunteer tourists.

I begin by introducing the literature on volunteer tourism relevant to this study, and give an overview of Dharamsala's tourism setting. After discussing my methodological choices, I explore the original methods used by the five Tibetan NGOs to attract tourists and travellers as volunteers, in particular for language teaching to Tibetan newcomers. In the penultimate chapter, I explore how this method potentially expands existing boundaries and conceptualizations of international volunteer tourism. I conclude by discussing the applicability and limitations of this study as well as recommendations for further research.

Literature review

Conceptual dilemmas concerning volunteer tourism

As, for example, McGehee (2012) and Vrasti (2013) note, the experiences and motivations of volunteer tourists have generally been the most examined phenomenon in studies on volunteer tourism (e.g. Barbieri, Santos, & Katsube, 2012; Brown, 2005; Conran, 2011; Crossley, 2012; Godfrey, Wearing, & Schulenkorf, 2014; Mostafanezhad, 2013a; Mustonen, 2005; Sin, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Wong, Newton, & Newton, 2014). The benefits of volunteer tourism (e.g. increased cross-cultural understanding) versus the drawbacks (e.g. dependency on volunteers, and their effects on the local communities) have also been discussed (e.g. Guttentag, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008; Lupoli & Morse, 2014; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; McIntosh & Zahra,

2008; McLennan, 2014; Mostafanezhad, 2013b; Mostafanezhad, 2014; Simpson, 2004; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012; Wearing, 2001).

According to Guttentag (2009) and Raymond and Hall (2008), studies on volunteer tourism have often taken too positive an approach, emphasizing its benefits while ignoring its failings. However, several scholars have demonstrated more recently that the better income and privileged amount of free time that volunteer tourists possess compared to their targets can reflect global inequalities, manifested in the Global South (Conran, 2011; McGehee, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013a; Palacios, 2010; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012). It has also been emphasized that commodification has become a danger within volunteer tourism as the for-profit agencies have multiplied, and compete with each other for volunteers and their payments (Coren & Gray, 2012; Lyons & Wearing, 2008). Furthermore, volunteer tourism has been accused of neo-colonialism, in that it considers unskilled or inexperienced volunteer tourists, who are most often of Western middle-class, as having something important to offer for the Global South (Brown & Hall, 2008; McGehee, 2012; Palacios, 2010; Raymond & Hall, 2008). Moreover, Vrasti (2013) and Mostafanezhad (2013a) see volunteer tourists as neo-liberal messengers, whereas Griffiths (2015) questions this popular criticism by discussing how the affective experiences of the volunteers might contradict the neo-liberal logic.

Despite the existing critique and the great amount of scholarly literature on various aspects of international volunteer tourism (see Wearing & McGehee, 2013 for a review), the local communities have often been dealt with as objects of 'the tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990). The current academic concept of volunteer tourism is based on the definition of volunteer tourist, disregarding the local actors in the Global South. An example of this is Wearing's much quoted sentence from his seminal work (2001):

The generic term "volunteer tourism" applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment. (Brown, 2005; Coren & Gray, 2012; Godfrey et al., 2014; Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008; Lupoli & Morse, 2014; McGehee, 2012; Ong, Lockstone-Binney, King, & Smith, 2014; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012; Vrasti, 2013; Wearing & McGehee, 2013)

Although some discussions aim to broaden conceptualization based on this definition, they still tend to be volunteer-centred (e.g. Lyons & Wearing, 2008). This is problematic because the actors in the Global South are as integral a part of the phenomenon as the volunteer tourists. If this is ignored, the agents in the Global South can easily become subdued as passive objects of those from the wealthier nations – a line of thought that this study aims to challenge.

Although existing studies have shown that organizations play a crucial role within volunteer tourism, the focus has often been on Western volunteer-sending agencies, whether for-profit or non-profit (McGehee, 2012; Ong, Pearlman, & Lockstone-Binney, 2011; Raymond, 2008; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Smith & Font, 2014; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Where volunteer tourism organizations in the Global South have gained most attention, they have usually been the partners of foreign actors (Keese, 2011; McGehee & Andereck, 2008; McLennan, 2014; Raymond, 2008; Sin, 2010; Zahra & McGehee, 2013). Sin (2010) and McIntosh and Zahra (2008) have also examined volunteer tourism from the host's perspective, but they still concentrated on organized tours arranged by volunteer-sending agencies. Exceptionally, Guiney and Mostafanezhad (2015) note that numerous volunteer tourists in the orphanages of Cambodia did not arrive via sending

agencies, but they do not discuss any reversal of the subject–object relations between the volunteer tourists and their local hosts as such.

Wearing, McDonald, and Ponting (2005) call for approaches that take note of the decommodifying and communalizing effects of the NGOs involved in volunteer tourism, allowing also the ‘inclusion of the “other”, that is, the host community’s view, not as a component of the study but as a fundamental part of the development of the approach’. I support this call in studying the five locally run NGOs in Dharamsala that do not receive volunteers through any sending agencies. One is a branch of an NGO partly based in Europe, and two of them have had foreign Tibet supporters among their founder members. The other two were founded solely by Tibetans. All five NGOs manage volunteer tourists independently in Dharamsala, and their managers are local Tibetans. Although it has been argued that volunteer tourism organizations are not social movement organizations (McGehee, 2012), the focus NGOs of this study are connected to the Tibetan social movement, ideologically or through their various networks.

The tourist setting in Dharamsala

India today hosts slightly less than 100,000 diaspora Tibetans (Central Tibetan Administration [CTA], 2009). The Tibetans became a minority group within the People’s Republic of China over 50 years ago, and their migration flow to India has continued ever since. Dharamsala, home to over 14,000 Tibetans and around 20,000 Indians, can be regarded as the capital of the Tibetan diaspora, since their religious leader the 14th Dalai Lama, the CTA and the most important Tibetan NGOs have their headquarters there (CTA, 2009; Huber, 2001; Prost, 2006). Large numbers of religiously motivated tourists or pilgrims visit Dharamsala, as well as activists interested in Tibet issue, due to its lively NGO scene (see Määttänen, 2001; Vukonic, 1996). Apart from the numerous Buddhist pilgrimages that Dharamsala receives from other parts of Asia, especially for the Dalai Lama’s major teachings, most tourists originate from the same places as the volunteer tourists, namely North America, Europe, Australia, Japan and South Korea (see Keese, 2011). In Prost’s (2006) terms, Dharamsala is a part of a Himalayan ‘hippie trail’, loaded with backpackers but lacking package tourism. In addition, the town attracts Indian and Tibetan tourists from other parts of India and abroad. Among all these are plenty of foreign researchers, photographers, journalists and other professionals exploring Tibetan culture.

McLeod Ganj, where the majority of Dharamsala’s foreign tourists gather, has in particular become a scene for what Smith (2009) calls indigenous cultural tourism; a cultural minority has become a tourist attraction (also Bookman, 2006; Butler & Hinch, 2007b). Although the Tibetans are neither indigenous people of India, nor traditional inhabitants of Dharamsala, diaspora communities are the most accessible places to explore Tibetan culture, since travelling independently in all parts of Tibet is difficult within China. The Shangri-la image of Tibet has belonged increasingly to Dharamsala ever since the People’s Republic of China started to rule Tibet (Anand, 2007; Lopez, 1998; Prost, 2006), despite Chinese officials making some efforts to restore Tibetan culture for tourism purposes from the late 1990s onwards (Kolås, 2004). Anand (2007) describes Dharamsala’s recent history as a ‘transformation from a poor refugee settlement to one of the most popular tourist destinations of India, a change from a small, dilapidated village to a cosmopolitan small town’. Hence, ‘touristification’ (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 2009) of Tibetan culture is characteristic of McLeod Ganj, whose main streets are occupied by restaurants, shops and cafes with names referring to what Anand (2007) calls ‘Exotica Tibet’.

As Godfrey et al. (2014) note, volunteer tourists have much in common with backpackers: they tend to be youngish, prefer budget accommodation and emphasize the value of connecting with other travellers in bars and restaurants (also Mustonen, 2005). The tourism scene in Dharamsala, therefore, included potential volunteer tourists already before the NGOs reaching out to them started to multiply around 15 years ago. As alternative tourists, backpackers tend to seek deeper encounters and cultural experiences with the locals than package tourists might (Godfrey et al., 2014). Hence, Dharamsala offers a bonanza to organizations wanting to involve backpackers in their work. According to Prost (2006), the Tibetan refugees have ‘developed a history of dealing with foreigners’ and have a habit of offering ‘cultural or spiritual performances of Tibetan Refugeehood’ as return gifts to foreign visitors who sponsor the Tibetan diaspora community. Dharamsala’s organizations and institutions are the main facilitators of these various performances and offering volunteering opportunities is one way to allow visitors to relate to the Tibetans more profoundly.

Methods and material

I conducted a qualitative ethnographic study in Dharamsala using participatory observation and semi-structured interviews as fieldwork methods (e.g. Mikkelsen, 2005). I made four fieldwork trips, totalling 10 months during 2009–2011, my longest stay lasting almost 8 months. I interviewed 34 Tibetans, including community officials and Tibetan newcomers, and conducted a brief survey of the motivations of 100 foreign tourists and travellers in Dharamsala. I also volunteered in an English conversation class for one of the five focus NGOs of this study for several months. This article is particularly based on interviews with 14 Tibetan community officials, as well as information from the sample of tourists and travellers, and my experiences as a volunteer. I also reflect on my participation in some other actions of the five NGOs.

Volunteering and participation familiarized me better with the everyday practices of the focus NGOs and their language conversation classes than if I had taken the role of an outside observer (see Chambers, 2008). This method also allowed me informal discussion with a large number of Tibetan newcomers and volunteer tourists, which gave me a better understanding of their aspirations and motives. However, I was always open about my role as a researcher and I do not refer directly to these informal discussions in order to protect the rights of the discussion partners (see Ryen, 2011).

The interviews of the community officials included key informant interviews with the managers of the five NGOs and eight officials from other NGOs and the CTA. In one case, a Western long-term volunteer in a leading position assisted the interview since the Tibetan manager did not speak fluent English. Additionally, I interviewed one official of the CTA, in Europe in 2014, to obtain an up-to-date briefing on the Tibetan diaspora community situation. Given the risk that official positions can affect the statements of the representatives of organizations, I compared and cross-checked all statements with my other materials, including my fieldwork notes (see Chambers, 2008).

Most of the managers referred to the websites of their organizations as the most accessible source of current information on their activities, so these became the major literary data of this study. Two of these websites have been occasionally down during my research, and in one case I considered it better to refer to a blog as the most reliable online option. The websites also needed to be critically analysed and compared with the other materials, since their main purpose is to attract potential volunteers and supporters.

The purpose of the 100 brief interviews with tourists and travellers in March 2011 was to collect information on why they chose Dharamsala as a destination, since hundreds decide to volunteer there on the spot every year. I selected an equal number of men and women, but otherwise I used a convenience sample as I interviewed people in tourist-popular restaurants located in the three main streets of McLeod Ganj, where meeting them was easy (see Mostafanezhad, 2013a). The restaurants were also convenient places to hold an interview compared, for example, to the busy streets and it was easy to make participatory observations while socializing with the tourists and travellers in the restaurants. Most of them were young adults or middle-aged independent Western travellers, as foreign tourists and travellers in McLeod Ganj often are.

I recorded and transcribed all interviews with the officials. The short interviews with tourists and travellers were recorded but not transcribed; I wrote down any key points relating to the research questions of this article during the interview. I analysed the interviews and other materials using selective coding (e.g. Mikkelsen, 2005). This helped me to separate relevant discourses concerning tourism, travel and development issues in Dharamsala and categorize and code them. Afterwards, I linked and compared these discourses with each other (see Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Although my interviews do not offer (quantitatively) representative information, a certain saturation point was reached during the interviews and the data analysis, as similar issues began to repeat themselves (Bowen, 2008). These included, for example, how the NGOs attract and manage volunteer tourists, and the meaning of education and learning English for the Tibetan newcomers. I use several direct quotations in the analysis in order to give readers a better chance to evaluate some of my major interpretations based on the categorization and coding. The anonymity of the interviewees has been protected and the quotations taken directly from the websites are short, only illustrating some of my interpretations. They are not personal writings, and no individuals can be identified based on them (see Markham, 2011).

Findings

Creative educational approaches

A desire to experience the freedoms India is thought to offer, along with a wish to live near the Dalai Lama, has been a common and long-standing reason for Tibetans to migrate to India. However, it is currently often stated that the most important reason is access to modern education, religious or secular, which was not possible for them or their children in Tibet (e.g. Official informant 11, personal communication, March 25, 2011; also Swank, 2011). Tibetans who have grown up in Dharamsala have usually participated in the Indian schooling system, and already speak English and Hindi, unlike most of the newcomers, some of whom may be illiterate when they arrive (de Voe, 2005). Therefore, the education of the Tibetan newcomers has become one of the main developmental challenges that the Tibetan diaspora community in Dharamsala faces, and the main task of the five NGOs explored in this study.

Keese (2011) argues that there is little difference between marketing a project and marketing a location in volunteer tourism. Yet, the NGOs in tourist-heavy Dharamsala do not need to advertise the location, only the volunteering opportunities. Of my sample of 100 foreign tourists and travellers in McLeod Ganj, around 80 had clearly been drawn to the town by Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama or Tibetan culture. About a dozen of those added that they had also come to volunteer. When I asked the tourists and travellers why they had come to Dharamsala, one of them crystalized:

Dharamsala, for me it is some kind of a capital of the Tibetan community. They say that it's not really the capital of the state but the center of home and culture. And I think best way to see this culture is not in Tibet anymore, it is here ... That brings me here first. Of course the landscape, but landscapes you can also have in Manali so ... And it is this mixture of cultural, religion and political capital which makes it interesting, kind of a Vatican for the Buddhists. (Traveller, personal communication, March 9, 2011)

As the Tibetan NGOs are aware of the fact that most foreign visitors come to Dharamsala because of Tibetan culture, they use it as a marketing tool. For example, one of the NGOs of this study advertises on its website: 'We offer a range of free-from-charge long-term and short-term volunteer placements that allow you to immerse yourself in Tibetan culture' (lit-dharamsala.org). Besides website advertising, the NGOs reach volunteers by distributing leaflets, posters or magazines on the streets of McLeod Ganj, or by arranging happenings that potential volunteers and other supporters can attend. Additionally, people and organizations included in their international networks spread the word in tourist circles in Dharamsala or abroad. For example, I first learned about volunteering opportunities in one of the tourist-popular restaurants in Dharamsala, from a fellow backpacker who encouraged me to visit an English conversation class where she was volunteering.

English conversation classes are the most popular of the activities organized by the volunteer-hiring NGOs, in terms of both volunteers and Tibetan participants. They take place on a daily basis in McLeod Ganj. Altogether hundreds of Tibetan newcomers, both men and women, participate in them and dozens may take part in an English conversation class simultaneously. Participants are divided into volunteer-led groups with different discussion topics. The more volunteers, the smaller the groups, giving the Tibetans more English language practice. Volunteering is made so easy that almost anyone can do it; just speaking reasonable English and registering at the office of the host NGO will suffice. Volunteering is also affordable: 'We provide a wide array of long and short-term as well as prearranged and drop-in volunteer opportunities at no cost to both individuals and groups' (www.lhasocialwork.org). This type of education is inexpensive also for the Tibetans. One of the five NGOs charged 100 rupees only once when signing in (Official informant 12, personal communication, March 28, 2011), some charged slightly more annually.

There was no specific guidance on discussion topics in the NGO classes where I volunteered for several months, but culture-related subjects were favoured by both the volunteers and the Tibetan participants. In another NGO, where I volunteered in one conversation class, the topics were loosely defined by a Tibetan official. He explained:

So we really want, you know, have a close relationship between the volunteers and the students. So like we discuss topics like marriage, like friendship. What does friendship mean to you? And then like what is happiness? What do you do dream ... All these different sort of topics. (Official informant 9, personal communication, March 23, 2011)

Additionally, a Tibetan NGO manager and a Western long-term volunteer, who assisted the manager in English during the interview, explained: 'Especially like in the conversation class we try to have topic so that people who come here to volunteer are learning about Tibet while the Tibetan people learn English' (Official informant 4, personal communication, March 17, 2011). As the aim to inform the foreigners emerged also in some other interviews and websites of the NGOs (e.g. www.volunteertibet.org.in), it is clear that besides educating the Tibetans with the help of the volunteer tourists, the NGOs educate them about the Tibetan situation. This also emphasizes the connection between the NGOs and the wider Tibetan social movement.

Besides teaching conversational English, volunteers can perform other duties that 'require no qualifications or time commitment', such as web design, social work, kitchen work and office administration (e.g. lit-dharamsala.org). It is significant that volunteers can participate for a very short time, even for just a day. As one of the NGOs advertises: 'Whether you are skilled or unskilled or have only one day or six months available, rest assured there is always a way that you can participate' (<http://www.lhasocialwork.org>). In comparison, Simpson (2004) defines volunteer tourists as short-termers if they volunteer less than half a year, Hammersley (2014) defines them as short-termers if they volunteer less than 10 weeks, and McLennan (2014) defines 'medical voluntourism' in her fieldwork site as short-term when the trips lasted from one to four weeks.

While some scholars have seen inexperienced short-term volunteer tourists as doing more harm than good in the Global South because, for example, of their neo-colonial contribution and potential ignorance (e.g. Guttentag, 2009), the focus NGOs of this study attract them deliberately. Since they do not recruit volunteers via any sending organizations, it is perhaps the best possible way of attracting such a mass of volunteers, and of maximizing the limited resources. Especially the free on-the-spot volunteering options increase the quantity of volunteers and are of benefit to those who seek them, to the NGOs which might otherwise lack a free workforce and to the Tibetan newcomers lacking language skills. They also emphasize the decommodifying elements of these NGOs, particularly in comparison with the profit-making volunteer-sending agencies.

It is difficult to know the exact number of volunteer tourists in Dharamsala, when they can drop in for one day, or one conversation class. However, one of the NGOs estimates that approximately 600 people, from all over the world, volunteer in their organization annually, and that they host 15–50 volunteers daily, depending on the season (www.lhasocialwork.org). As their official estimated that they received more than 4000 volunteers from 2003 until the end of 2010 (Official informant 6, personal communication, March 25, 2011), it would seem that the number of volunteers has been growing slightly in recent years, perhaps in line with the global increase in volunteer tourism (see Mostafanezhad, 2013c). Another of the NGOs calculated in 2011 that they had worked with over 5000 volunteers from 45 different countries during the 3 previous years (<http://tibethopecenterindia.blogspot.fi>). However, according to the Himachal Pradesh Department of Tourism, the state receives over half a million foreign tourists per year, with Dharamsala being one of its most popular destinations (<http://himachaltourism.gov.in>; Prost, 2006), so the percentage of tourists and travellers who volunteer still remains low.

Dependency and the West

One of the focus NGOs of this study states in their website that finding a responsible volunteer can be difficult, although they do not usually have problems finding volunteers in general (<http://www.volunteertibet.org.in>). Conversely, another of them emphasizes that they are in 'desperate need of volunteers' (lit-dharamsala.org). This indicates that although it is easy to 'drop in' and become a volunteer, it is also easy to 'drop out', and that some of the NGOs get more volunteers than the others in relation to their needs. This is problematic particularly for the smaller NGOs in Dharamsala, as the NGO scene is dependent on sponsorships and charity work (Prost, 2006). Consequently, Guttentag's (2009) scenario that dependency easily becomes a problem within volunteer tourism seems a reality in Dharamsala (also Sin, 2010; Vradi, 2013). As one of the NGOs states: 'Many of our highly beneficial activities are totally dependent upon the help we receive from our volunteers' (<http://tibetcharity.in>).

Dependency issues arise also in the context of language teaching. For example, the major native language in India, Hindi, is not taught to Tibetan newcomers by any of the focus NGOs of this study. According to one of their managers, this is because they do not have volunteers to teach it for free, while they can get plenty of Western volunteers teaching the major European languages (Official informant 11, personal communication, March 25, 2011). Hence, foreign languages that are unnecessary in India are nevertheless taught by volunteer tourists. Learning English is important for Tibetan newcomers as it is an official language of India, and is very useful in cosmopolitan Dharamsala, but learning foreign languages is also important if the Tibetans wish to migrate abroad, a common goal among the newcomers, who often face severe socio-economic difficulties in India (Frilund, 2014). In the words of an NGO manager: ‘And there is now a fashion in Tibetan community to go in a Western country to earn the money, to earn the better life. So we are giving like German lessons, like French lessons, someone like a Spanish’ (Official informant 12, personal communication, March 28, 2011). Additionally, another NGO manager stated about the situation of the newcomers:

They have problem with lack of the languages, you know. When they escape from Tibet, they have no other language, only that they can speak is Tibetan and sometimes they can speak Chinese but Chinese is not useful here, you know. You should learn English and also if they are planning to go to other countries, they should learn these France and Spanish ...

As these NGOs are the major organizations providing teaching for the adult Tibetan newcomers in McLeod Ganj, this type of education, based on volunteer tourism, might also direct their interests towards the West and strengthen the migration networks.

The mutual interest of the Westerners and the Tibetans in each other might be a strong factor in the success of the volunteer tourism NGOs in Dharamsala. Although there is a potential risk of the newcomers participating in Dharamsala’s volunteering scene becoming objectified, they are active agents, and the language classes are targeted to adults. The Tibetan participants are often curious about the foreign teachers and their culture, and are free to decide whether or not to participate. An equal relationship is also a goal of the NGO managers. As one of them stated: ‘my opinion is to give the culture exchange between the Westerner and the Tibetan. To share our culture, to gain the knowledge from the other. So that’s very important’ (Official informant 12, personal communication, March 28, 2011). So the model differs significantly from cases where the beneficiaries do not have free choice in participating (Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015), or are not really interested in participating. The locals in Vradi’s (2013) fieldwork site in Guatemala, for example, were not really interested in other cultures, or in learning English. They had inhabited their lands since time immemorial, and had no migration intentions as such. The diaspora Tibetans, in contrast, need foreign languages, especially English, and many have migration intentions (Frilund, 2014; CTA, 2009).

Discussions

Teasing the boundaries of the ‘volunteer tourism’

Focusing on locally run NGOs in Dharamsala allowed me to reverse the traditional subject and object relationship within volunteer tourism. I found the potential for three broad discourses, in particular, to reshape and increase existing conceptualization in volunteer tourism.

Firstly, there is a need for a clear distinction between volunteer-sending agencies and the independent organizations that hire volunteer tourists in the Global South, in order to avoid discussing them as synonymous (see Smith & Font, 2014), and to allow a more accurate critique. The volunteer-sending agencies have been accused of neo-colonialism, especially when they have sent unskilled or inexperienced volunteer tourists to the Global South (Brown & Hall, 2008; Guttentag, 2009; McLennan, 2014; Palacios, 2010; Raymond & Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004). They have also been accused of commodification and of promoting an altruistic image of volunteer tourism, while selling volunteering trips and competing with each other for resources and volunteers (Lyons et al., 2012; McLennan, 2014; Mostafanezhad, 2013a; Mostafanezhad, 2013b; Palacios, 2010; Simpson, 2004; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012). However, since the independent NGOs in Dharamsala attract volunteer tourists without foreign middlemen and often without payments, they cannot be accused of being inherently commodified or neo-colonial. It would also be paternalistic to question their ability to decide what constitutes an appropriate volunteer, even though they hire unskilled volunteers from the West, as they know local needs. Although they sometimes compete for volunteers, and sometimes recruit paying volunteer tourists more formally, any payments go directly to the host NGOs, not to middlemen in wealthier parts of the globe (see Coren & Gray, 2012). Moreover, the criticism that the placements of the volunteer tourism projects would be poorly selected and based on perceptions of the foreign actors rather than local needs (see Vrasti, 2013) cannot be generalized when there are projects founded and run by the locals in their own community.

Secondly, the free drop-in volunteering system, where tourists or travellers may participate for as little as a day, or just few hours, without any pre-planning, challenges some of the established definitions of volunteer tourism. Particularly the drop-in and short-term volunteer tourists are often recruited from backpackers whose original intention was simply to visit Dharamsala, not to volunteer. So they do not necessarily volunteer in an 'organized way' or have 'holidays' as such, as in the most famous definition of volunteer tourism by Wearing (2001), cited in the literature review. The volunteers in Dharamsala may also travel looking for temporary jobs in Asia generally, or to study Buddhism or the Tibetan language in Dharamsala. This supports Guttentag's (2009) loose definition of the volunteer tourist as 'any tourist who participates in volunteer work while travelling' regardless of the main purpose of the journey. The case also supports the argument of Godfrey et al. (2014) and Mustonen (2005) that volunteer tourists share similarities with backpackers rather than differences, as the two categories often mix in Dharamsala. I cannot make exact statements on their neo-liberal contribution based on this study, but the free volunteering opportunities could be interpreted as decommodification of volunteer tourism (see Wearing et al., 2005). Although commodification of Tibetan culture is characteristic of Dharamsala in general, foreigners also become easily commodified and objectified because they are often seen as potential sponsors (see Prost, 2006), or those that should be educated about the Tibetan situation.

This leads to my final argument that any definition of international volunteer tourism should include the local actors. It should be recognized that volunteer tourism includes volunteer work *in cooperation with* the locals who may also be its *primus motor*. Although some projects have clearly failed to meet local needs, they cannot operate without local people, organizations or authorities. A lack of studies paying enough attention to the active agents in the Global South strengthens the disparity between the Third World 'them' and the Western 'us' by treating the former as a passive object in scholarly discussions, an attitude for which volunteer tourists have also attracted criticism (e.g. Hammersley, 2014; Mostafanezhad, 2013c). If this approach remains, no criticism of volunteer

tourism as a phenomenon, however welcome, will eliminate the disparity. Despite some studies having taken into account the perspectives of the locals when discussing the effects of volunteer tourism (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008; Sin, 2010), the locals have still remained objects in general. This may not be a problem within individual studies, as their focuses vary, but since it has become a norm within the field, it precludes the people in the Global South as subjects and active actors. Hence, there is also a risk that Western development ideals dominate scholarly perceptions of the goals of volunteer tourism, while outcomes hoped for or needed by the locals, such as migration out of Dharamsala, remain understudied. Repositioning the agents of the Global South as subjects and active agents revises the commonly accepted power relations, giving the locals more influence over volunteer tourism.

Conclusion and future research

As I have demonstrated in this study, examining volunteer tourism from the perspective of the local actors in the Global South teases the boundaries of the concept of international volunteer tourism. However, whether recruiting large numbers of unskilled or inexperienced volunteer tourists would be beneficial elsewhere than in Dharamsala, and whether it would be the most beneficial thing for the wider developmental goals of the host communities should be studied further. Although it seems to be possible in particular to teach basic conversational English to numerous Tibetan newcomers in Dharamsala using this method, it remains open to question whether it is more sustainable than, for example, recruiting smaller groups of committed longer term volunteer tourists.

As new forms of volunteer tourism emerge ‘rapidly as we speak’ (Sin, 2010), so do various types of locally run NGOs hiring volunteer tourists emerge in the Global South (see Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015). More studies are needed to evaluate their successes, failures and dependencies, especially because the locally run volunteer tourism NGOs could potentially help in promoting positive development rather than dependency and neo-colonialism with a neo-liberal overtone. In the end, volunteer tourism can only become truly sustainable when locals are in control, and able to set their own goals.

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