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# Ecotourism Reconsidered: Chinese and Western Participation in the Thai Elephant Industry

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Ecotourism Reconsidered: Chinese and Western Participation in the Thai Elephant Industry

An Honors Paper for the Program of Environmental Studies

By Miao (Jasmine) Long

Bowdoin College, 2019

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*For Kamee,  
Whom I hope to forever live happily and freely*

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## INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Pai in June, during the lush months of rain. When I first met Miguel, he was seated on a wooden bench inside a cabin cutting up passion fruits and laughing along with some tourists. The cabin was well-constructed but crude, made of a woven bamboo rooftop, supported by a screen of bamboo poles. Surrounded by bushes, fig trees and a running river, an elephant strolled around casually. It was the first day of my internship at Conserve Natural Forests (CNF), a local environmental NGO that devotes itself to wildlife conservation and reforestation in Pai, Thailand. Since Miguel registered CNF as a non-profit in 2014 and started to offer ecotours, it has drawn tourists by word of mouth from all around the world.

He nodded at me as he glanced around and quickly returned to his conversation with travelers from the U.S. and Germany. Raised in Germany with Mexican heritage, Miguel seamlessly switched languages from German to Spanish and English. When the elephant started to rip apart the bamboo shoots next to the cabin, Miguel turned and yelled gently, “Kamee, what are you doing? Leave the bamboos alone!” Kamee the elephant switched her tail, continued pulling down thick bamboo stems and eventually walked away satisfied. Miguel shook his head and smiled, “She won’t listen to me. She’s the queen here.” He then explained to the tourists how important this bamboo is to the ongoing reforestation efforts and how much Kamee enjoys eating it. “I am torn,” Miguel said, “I could have set up a fence around the bamboo, but I don’t want to accidentally hurt her.”

CNF caught my attention because it is one of the few elephant reintroduction projects in Thailand. At its early stage, CNF dedicated itself to reforestation efforts in response to the deforestation practices that have prevailed in Thailand since the 1930s. The canopy cover in Thailand has declined from over 70 percent to about 25 percent in fewer than 70 years (Delang

2002). Three years ago, Miguel Tagle, seeing increased interests in elephant ecotourism, decided to expand CNF into elephant conservation and started a unique elephant ecotour program to help sustain the organization. In my conversation with Miguel in the summer of 2018 he said:

The first two elephants we rescued arrived about three years ago. It was the time when elephant sanctuaries peaked, and Western tourists were demanding ecotours instead of elephant riding or shows... What many Western tourists want is the real nature experience. They want to see elephants in their natural habitat and that's exactly what we are giving them.

Since its establishment, CNF has been able to attract international tourists, mainly from Germany, the U.K. and the U.S. However, Miguel was troubled that CNF has failed to attract Chinese tourists' attention in the past few years. "They are here," he said anxiously, "I can see them on the street and hear about them going to elephant camps. Why are they not coming here? What do we need to do to attract them?"

I contemplated the question Miguel raised and decided to look into tourist participation in the elephant tourism industry. Through conducting field research and qualitative interviews with local workers, elephant experts, and travel agents, I learned that many Chinese tourists were indeed less inclined to participate in ecotourism (elephant sanctuaries and reintroduction projects), and more likely to participate in elephant riding or entertainment shows. Miguel shared his observation:

...five years ago, Western people were still riding elephants, but now many of them search for elephant sanctuaries...If you go to elephant camps where they have elephant riding, elephant drawing, elephant playing basketball, it's mostly Chinese tourists. It's like that in Pai, in Chiang Mai, anywhere in Thailand.

Through managing CNF for four years, Miguel has grown familiar with the elephant tourism industry in Thailand. His remarks revealed two trends: first, Chinese tourists participate more in elephant riding and entertainment camps than in elephant sanctuaries. Second, there has been a recent shift in Western tourist participation from elephant riding camps to elephant sanctuaries. Miguel's question about why many Chinese tourists continue patronizing elephant camps is a



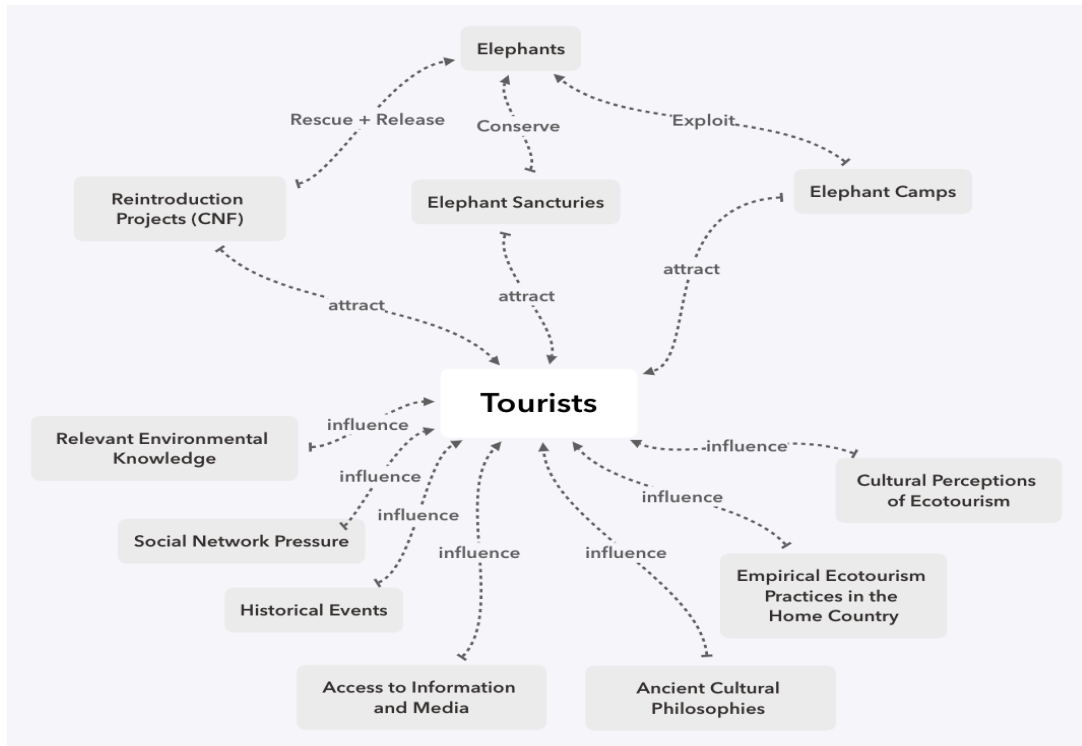
legitimate and urgent one, particularly because many elephants are reported to be mistreated in such camps. His question also raised a series of important questions: 1) How do Western and Chinese tourists participate in the Thai elephant industry and are there differences in their participatory behavior? 2) What factors influence tourist choices of elephant activities?

These questions are particularly relevant in the current climate for two reasons. First, Chinese tourists are one of the fastest growing sectors in the global tourism industry. Since 2012, there has been a great influx of Chinese tourists into Thailand and its number increased from 4.6 million in 2014 to about 10 million in 2017 (Thaiwebsites.com “Tourism Statistics” 2019). In 2017, the number of Chinese tourists who visited Thailand doubled the number of tourists coming from Austria, the U.K., the U.S., Germany, and France combined and accounts for more than one quarter of all tourists (Thaiwebsites.com “Tourism Arrivals” 2019). As an emerging global power, China has become an important stakeholder in global environmental affairs. According to a joint report by Ctrip (a Chinese travel service provider) and China Tourism Academy, 129 million Chinese tourists travelled abroad in 2017, which makes China the largest source of outbound tourists in the world (Ctrip and China Tourism Academy 2018).

Second, ecotourism has become a prominent niche market and is widely recognized as the fastest growing sub-segment within the global tourism industry, including in Thailand (Donohoe and Needham 2006; Weaver 2002; Weaver 2007). Since the mid-1990s, the Thai government has recognized the importance of sustainable development and sought to incorporate ecotourism practices into its core tourism strategy, particularly in the booming elephant tourism industry (Laverack and Sapon 2007). Analyzing different factors that shape tourists’ perceptions and interactions with ecotourism ideologies and practices will provide insights to explain Chinese

tourists’ seemingly low ecotourism participation (elephant sanctuaries and reintroduction projects) in Thailand and inform future Thai elephant tourism development.

As I sought answers to Miguel’s question, my conversations with CNF staff and tourists revealed their hypotheses. Some suggested that Chinese tourists need more education on animal conservation and more information about the harm of elephant riding and entertainment camps; some wondered if Chinese tourists simply do not care about animal welfare the way Westerners do; some believe that Chinese tourists lack environmental awareness in general. “Chinese tourists will ‘catch up’ just like Western tourists did once they have more environmental knowledge and values,” an Australian tourist said. But will they? Will Chinese tourists retreat from elephant riding and entertainment camps and pivot to sanctuaries the way Western tourists did? Starting with environmental knowledge and values, I pondered over this hypothesis and some others (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Synthesis of Tourist Position in the Thai Elephant Industry

The overarching goal of this study is to answer these questions, disentangle the complicated narratives behind Chinese and Western tourists' participatory behavior in the Thai elephant tourism industry. Figure 1 provides an overview of a step-by-step analysis I develop in the following chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of ecotourism and elephant tourism development in the Thai context. Chapter 2 explores how Western and Chinese tourists participate in Thai elephant industry and whether individual's environmental knowledge and values are useful predictors of tourist participatory behavior. Chapter 3 seeks to situate tourists in a social network where they project their culturally-informed understanding of ecotourism and nature onto new experiences when traveling abroad to explain the participatory differences between Western and Chinese tourists.

It has been a humbling process to investigate Chinese and Western tourists' divergent behaviors and reconcile how their social and cultural backgrounds have informed such a discrepancy. It is my sincere hope for this study to be helpful to CNF and other elephant sanctuaries to understand Chinese tourists' participatory behavior in Thai elephant tourism.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **ECOTOURISM DEFINED IN THE THAI CONTEXT**

Ecotourism is a complex and evolving concept central to my endeavor to interpret tourist behavior in the Thai elephant industry. Recognizing ecotourism as a culturally-sensitive concept lays the foundation for my analysis on how Thailand, a host society, adopted this foreign concept and how international tourists with different backgrounds interact with the Thai elephant tourism (Lin 2012). Tourist participation resembles an exchange between the host country, Thailand, that exports its tourism perceptions and tourists, who informed by their experiences, carry their own interpretation of ecotourism. Based on literature reviews and field studies, this chapter first introduces ecotourism's Western origin and its development into a globally-recognized concept. Then it situates CNF in the broader Thai elephant tourism context and outlines different elephant-engaged activities tour providers offer.

#### *1.1 Defining Ecotourism*

Ecotourism is often seen as a sustainable development strategy to support environmental conservation and local economic and social development (Ross and Wall 1999; Weaver 2001). Originating in the West, the ecotourism concept widely-accepted in literature is infused with intrinsic Western values (Cater 2006). Though not yet a universally accepted definition (Donohoe and Needham 2006), some researchers argue a consensus of certain common criteria of ecotourism in the West is emerging (Weaver 2005).

In an effort to provide a practical framework for the ecotourism industry in the West, Donohoe and Needham (2006) extracted common themes from 30 academic articles on ecotourism published after 1990 in English and French and detected a pattern of thematic repetitions within the individual definitions. Due to their sources, the common key tenets and what they entail are

deeply rooted in Western influences. Donohoe and Needham (2006) identified six core criteria that are most frequently observed in Western ecotourism definitions with a slightly different order: (1) nature-based; (2) preservation/conservation; (3) education; (4) sustainability; (5) distribution of benefits and (6) ethics/responsibility/awareness. Moreover, the United Nations declared 2002 the International Year of Ecotourism and endorsed a definition of ecotourism that emphasizes efforts to actively contribute to conservation of natural and cultural heritage and to engage local and indigenous communities in planning, development, and operation (Québec Declaration on Ecotourism 2002).

The term “ecotourism” was first introduced into English-language academic literature in the mid-1980s (Weaver 2007). The concept of ecotourism developed under the influence of the Western environmental movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Blamey 1999). The first formal definition outlines ecotourism as:

“travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas... the person who practices ecotourism will eventually acquire a consciousness that will convert him into somebody keenly interested in conservation issues” (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1987, 13-14).

Similarly, Honey (1999, 25) also emphasizes travel to “fragile, pristine, and unusually protected areas.” At the heart of the Western ideology of ecotourism lies the pursuit of undisturbed pristine nature (Fletcher 2014). Such focus on wilderness developed under the influence of historical Western ecological values (Ye and Xue 2008). In the early process of Western civilization, the separation of urban dwellers from nature was seen as desirable and the wilderness became antithetical to the urbanization of Western society (Klein 1994; Jacoby 2014). A group of American writers, including Charles Carleton, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, depicted the

wilderness as desirable destinations and stimulated the public's interests in the growing conservation movement in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Klein 1994). The Wilderness Act in 1964 allowed the National Park Service to preserve national designated land from human intervention; however, Native American inhabitants living on the land were removed to create an illusion of uninhabited wilderness (Binnema and Niemi 2006). Human culture and nature are not merely incompatible, rather human influences are seen to “corrupt” and “constrain” nature as a place of “therapeutic withdrawal” from daily lives (Fletcher 2009, 275). Such visions exemplify a need to exclude human civilization from ecotourism experiences while many nonwestern ethnoecologies present no such separation (Fletcher 2014).

As ecotourism made its way into other parts of the world and served as a guiding principle for local tourism development, it became clear that ecotourism was not a universal but a culturally-constructed concept that needed to adapt to different cultural contexts (Cater 2006). Western definitions and criteria still dominate the academic ecotourism literature, yet more researchers are challenging the Western-centric definition and complicating this concept (Buckley et al. 2008; Cater 2006; Carrier and Macleod, 2005; Li 2008; Wang 2009; Xu 2013). The unique cultural and historical contexts of Thailand bred the development of the elephant tourism industry, which has diversified over the years in response to tourist demands and preferences.

### *1.2. Elephant Tourism Industry Development in Thailand*

The historical practice of elephant domestication left Thailand with thousands of captive working elephants. Though often associated with royalty and religious mythology, elephants face a contradictory predicament in contemporary Thailand (Kontogeorgopoulos 2018; Lin 2012; Markwell 2015). Acquiring elephants as private property was a common practice influenced by a

long history of training and exploiting elephants for manual labor, especially in the logging industry (Duffy and Moore 2010). About a century ago, the Thai logging industry employed 100,000 captive elephants and that number dropped to 3000 by 2005 (Dublin et al. 2006). As the number of elephants in captivity plummeted, the logging industry's toxic work conditions were consequently exposed (Laohachaiboon 2010). In pursuit of profit, many private owners doped elephants with amphetamines and forced them to work ceaselessly for up to five days (Laohachaiboon 2010). Captive elephants are no longer considered wildlife because they are regulated under the Department of Livestock, the Department of Transport, and the Forest Industry Organization rather than the Department of National Parks or wildlife related departments (Duffy and Moore 2010).

In 1989, the Thai government completely banned logging to conserve the remaining forests, which had been rapidly disappearing due to land cutting for agricultural use (Stiles et al. 2009). The ban stripped elephants' labor value and left 70 percent of them unemployed (Duffy and Moore 2010; Stiles et al. 2009). Following the ban, some elephants were released into national parks while others continued to be exploited for money (Duffy and Moore 2010). Taking caring of elephants is not an easy task since it requires both enormous financial and manpower investment. Though many elephants, born and raised in logging camps, were taught to eat, drink, and behave in certain ways that minimized their boarding costs, a full-grown elephant consumes close to 200 kg of food daily (Tipprasert 2002; Lohanan 2002). When forest preservation policies restrained privately-owned elephants from forests because of the rapid deforestation taking place in Thailand, elephant owners experienced hardship trying to sustain their elephants and themselves (Tipprasert 2002). Pressured by survival needs, many owners had to turn their elephants into street beggars (Stiles et al. 2009). The government soon banned elephant beggars in cities because of the destructive

influence on both citizens and elephants (Stiles et al. 2009). This ban forced elephant owners to seek alternative ways of generating profits; thus, many brought their elephants into the tourism industry when elephant tourism started to gain traction (Lohan 2002).

Thailand's long history of employing and exploiting elephants fostered a complex elephant tourism industry. For clarifying purposes, I will simplify the industry into three categories: elephant riding and entertainment camps, elephant sanctuaries, and elephant reintroduction sites. Each type of tour providers has its mission based on how it positions itself and what population of elephants they work with (Kontogeorgopoulos 2009). Reintroduction sites like CNF focus on rewilding and eventually releasing captive elephants while camps and sanctuaries keep elephants employed without any rewilding efforts. Though by definition, elephant riding camps, sanctuaries and reintroduction sites differ significantly, in reality the lack of clear and effective government policies and regulation blurs their boundaries.

With the purpose of rescuing elephants from extinction and managing the inflow of unemployed elephants after the logging ban, the Forest Industry Organization (FIO), under the Thai Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, founded the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC) (Laohachaiboon 2010). TECC trained elephants and offered some of the first elephant rides and entertainment activities, featuring elephants piling up logs and skidding trees (Duffy and Moore 2011). Following TECC's lead, elephant camps that train elephants for touristic activities became mainstream and began to offer a wider range of elephant entertainment activities, including but not limited to standing on their heads, pulling logs with their trunks, painting pictures, playing instruments, and playing basketball (Lin 2012). Since such camps are not defined as tour operators and regulated by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), they maintain a high level of autonomy (Duffy and Moore 2011; Kontogeorgopoulos 2009).



Elephant camps fail to comply with the conservation criterion of ecotourism since they often keep elephants in tough conditions: having them chained all day, fed poorly, and limited veterinary care (Schmidt-Burbach 2017). When a wild elephant is captured, or an elephant baby is born into an elephant camp, a human-elephant battle begins. To assert control over the elephants, mahouts (elephant caretakers from local tribal groups) employ a practice named “phajaan” or “crush” to force the elephants into submission (Schmidt-Burbach 2017, 13). Under the “phajaan” ritual, elephant camps separate baby elephants from their mothers at an early age, force them to accept humans riding on their necks, and employ extreme physical confinement (Schmidt-Burbach 2017; Laohachaiboon 2010). “Phajaan” is a cruel and spirit-crushing process that aims for elephants’ ultimate surrender (Schmidt-Burbach 2017; Laohachaiboon 2010). Many elephants suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in such an abusive environment (Schmidt-Burbach 2017).

In 1995, Sangduen “Lek” Chailert founded the Elephant Nature Park (ENP), the first elephant sanctuary with a Western ecotourism concept still foreign to the host Thai society (Lin 2012). Different from existing elephant camps, which employed Thai traditional practices of breaking elephants into submission, ENP offered an alternative that denounces elephant riding and entertainment and emphasized “treating elephants with love” (Lin 2012, 198). Its ecotourism effort was first rejected by Thai locals and traditional elephant camps because they were accustomed to years of using elephants for manual labor in both the logging and tourism industries (Lin 2012). Lek employed a “soft and cultural-sensitive approach” to infiltrate the elephant tourism industry by patiently educating the locals and gradually transforming their attitudes towards elephant ecotourism (Lin 2012, 206). Western countries morally and financially supported the development of ENP because it resonated with their beliefs in animal protection (Lin 2012). In the same

timeframe, the number of European and North American tourists travelling to Thailand surged (Song et al. 2003). In 1998, the Thai government began its “Amazing Thailand” ecotourism initiatives and implemented TAT’s national Ecotourism Policy (Laohachaiboon 2010; Lin 2012). The success of ENP over time spurred many other elephant tourism businesses to adopt similar models; however, ENP has had limited influence on enhancing bylaws or policies relating to elephant welfare and standards of care (Rattan, Eagles, and Mair 2012).

The Global Sanctuary for Elephants defines elephant sanctuaries as places of refuge or safety that “[address] an elephant’s inherent needs, while considering the immense physical and psychological impact that a sterile and dominant captive life has had on each being as an individual” (Global Sanctuary for Elephants 2018). Therefore, sanctuaries by definition ought not to offer elephant riding or entertainment activities but a variety of alternative activities: feeding bananas to elephants, bathing or swimming with elephants, making herbal medicine for elephants, learning how to make paper from elephant poo, and trekking with elephants (Wilson 2018). In their mission statements, many elephant sanctuaries in Thailand meet the common criteria for ecotourism: nature-based, conservation, education, and sustainability. However, in reality, loose regulations make it difficult to examine whether these ecotour providers honor the commitments made on their websites or in their advertising materials. For example, some elephant sanctuaries advertise “no riding” but provide secret riding services for tourists upon request. In addition, despite the rising number of elephant sanctuaries since 2010, 357 more elephants in Thailand were discovered living in worse conditions than five years before (Schmidt-Burbach 2017). In both elephant camps and sanctuaries, almost all elephants stay in captivity and so do their future generations (Lin 2012).

Elephant reintroduction projects extend beyond providing a shelter for captive elephants and actively engage in the rehabilitation process. Two-thirds of the elephant population in Thailand

are in captivity and are often described as “domesticated,” distinguishing them from their wild counterparts (Duffy and Moore 2011). However, this term has been challenged by scholars debating whether elephants have undergone the process of ‘domestication’ and scholars are afraid the frequent use of this term could normalize human interference in elephant life, hindering the reintroduction processes (Schmidt-Burbach 2017, 11). Thus, some scholars advised using the term “domesticated” with discretion because it justifies keeping elephants in captivity and exploiting them for human needs (Schmidt-Burbach 2017).

The Elephant Reintroduction Foundation (ERF), residing in Bangkok, is a prominent example of an elephant rehabilitation center. The predecessor of ERF was an elephant reintroduction project initiated by Queen Sirikit in 1996 to “offer an alternative future” for captive elephants, “one in which they [would] live out their remaining life in the forests, away from humans, as nature intended” (Elephant Reintroduction Foundation, n.d.). It has successfully reintroduced 84 captive elephants into the wild in the period from 1996 to 2012 (Kitjakosol 2012). CNF, modeling after ERF in Sublanka and Doi Pha Muang Wildlife Sanctuaries, is one of the few organizations that prioritizes not only captive elephant welfare but also reintroduction back into the natural environment (Conserve Natural Forests 2019). As a tour provider, CNF is unique for its mission of re-wilding captive elephants, but the significance of CNF’s mission should not take away the validity of the existence of other tour venues because less than 40 percent of the previously exploited elephants could be successfully re-introduced into the wild. In reality, each tour venue manages a certain elephant population and plays a role in alleviating elephant unemployment in the post-logging era. Compared to elephant sanctuaries and camps, CNF addresses an often ignored need to help eligible elephants return to their natural habitat in a four-stepped process, namely “rescue,” “reproduce,” “re-wild,” and “reintroduce” (Conserve Natural

Forests 2019a). The reintroduction project benefits captive elephants and their future off-spring as well as enriching the ecosystems (Conserve Natural Forests 2019a).

CNF is Miguel's dream. He came to Pai, Thailand with a passion for reforestation and conservation as well as a Western vision of ecotourism practices. With his year-long experience with reforestation efforts in Indonesia, Miguel founded CNF as a non-profit whose conservation effort was to reforest and rehabilitate captive elephants and eventually reintroduce them to Sub Langka National Park (Conserve Natural Forests 2019a). Anchala, a Thai elephant expert at CNF, always tells tourists that elephants are not here for their entertainment but to learn how to go back to the wild. CNF lives by a set of rules to promote elephant welfare:

“There are no chains. There is no riding. There is no bathing with tourists. There is no performance of any kind. All interactions are organic and natural. The elephants' safety and happiness are our priorities, and this ethos provides the foundation for the rest of the ecotour. For us, the most important part of allowing visitors to our project site is community outreach and education. We hope that by the end of the day, you will know more about sustainable tourism, forest restoration, and wildlife conservation” (Conserve Natural Forests 2019b).

Moreover, to minimize elephants' exposure to human interactions, visitors are only allowed to visit three hours a day; elephants are free to roam on the 80,000 square meter land and instead of herding elephants to visitors, visitors trek through bushes and rivers to meet them; the only interactive activity is banana-feeding; elephant hospital experts assess the elephants regularly and prescribe dietary supplements for pregnant elephants. CNF also actively engages the local community in its conservation projects. For example, local students are invited to visit and familiarize themselves with conservation practices. In addition, CNF employs local workers and encourages the Thai Army to participate in reforestation projects.

Miguel's vision for CNF is “a place where elephants are free, and tourists can experience the most natural way of interacting with them.” The underlying western-influenced ecotourism ideology guides the space and ecotour arrangements where tourists trek through bushes and rivers

to experience the wilderness and search for elephants in the natural environment for the ultimate “wilderness” experience. Built upon its ecotourism concepts, CNF invites tourists from around the globe to interact with its ecotourism ideal and the number of Western and Chinese tourists engaging reveals whether CNF’s model aligns with their ecotourism expectations.

### *1.3 When Theory Translates into Reality*

When concepts translate into practices, loose government regulation elephant tourism policies obscure the artificial boundaries drawn among each elephant tour venue and complicate the narratives around elephant activities they offer. Both riding and entertainment camps and sanctuaries are not exempted from such complication.

As one could imagine, elephant riding and entertainment activities are unnatural for elephants, but tourists are often kept in the dark about the real harm of such activities. My interviews with tourists reveal that elephant tour providers often make up inaccurate narratives that mislead tourists and conveniently justify their mistreatment of elephants. For instance, a Chinese tourist who rode an elephant on its bareback was told that chairs tied to elephant backs are the only harmful part of elephant riding and by freeing elephants from the pain of inserting screws into their skins, elephant bareback riding is a “natural” and favorable activity. The ride provider further explained to the Chinese tourist, “Elephants have great back strength. They can’t even feel your weight. This is already so much better than carrying wood logs.” What the tour provider failed to disclose is that a wild elephant would never allow random human beings to ride on its back with or without chairs (Schmidt-Burbach 2017). By dismissing the real harm of elephant riding, which is the spirit-crushing process, these tour providers artfully mitigate tourists’ doubts and shed a positive light on their business.

Some elephant sanctuaries deviate from their mission statements to rescue and conserve elephants. For example, a group of German tourists visited a sanctuary where mahouts at times hit elephants with curled spikes when elephants refused to walk on predetermined pathways. The tour provider explained to these infuriated elephant-lovers that unlike human skin, elephants' rough and thick skin allows them to endure an enormous amount of pain. To further comfort these German tourists, the tour provider claimed that the violent action was merely a friendly gesture to remind elephants of what to do next, not physical abuse. After overhearing the tour providers' justification, Miguel objected furiously by drawing attention to the fact that elephants would bleed from insect bites, not to mention curled spikes.

In light of the Thai elephant tourism reality, in chapter 2 and 3, I will explore Chinese and Western tourist engagement in the industry and disentangle multi-faceted narratives behind their observed behaviors.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **HOW DO KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES SHAPE TOURIST BEHAVIOR**

In the complex elephant tourism business, Miguel observed many Chinese tourists patronizing elephant riding and entertainment camps while Western tourists gradually retreating from such activities. The most common hypotheses from local workers and tourists in Thailand revolve around tourist environmental knowledge and values prior to their visits. For instance, some argue Chinese tourists choose elephant riding and entertainment camps over sanctuaries or conservation venues because they lack sufficient environmental knowledge about elephants and the elephant tourism industry while other suggest Chinese tourists lack pro-environment values. Intrigued by such hypotheses, I examined Miguel's observation and how environmental knowledge and values inform tourist participation in the Thai elephant industry.

## *2.1 Methods*

This study aims to answer a central research question: how do Chinese and Western tourists participate in elephant (eco)tourism in Thailand and how do different variables influence their decisions? In seeking comprehensive answers, I collected both primary and secondary data. Primary data derived from a mixed approach of field research, participant observations, in-person interviews, related websites, and online travel platforms. Secondary data was gathered from previous research studies.

My study area includes and participant observations took place mainly in Pai, Northwest of Thailand, with supplementary observations in Chiang Mai. I conducted participant observation as part of my internship at CNF's ecotour project site over a three-month period, from June to August 2019, about 175 hours. My participant observations included observing and engaging in conversations with tourists, local Thai workers, and staff members at CNF.

Informed by Icek Ajzen's theory of reasoned action that uses certain parameters to predict specific behaviors and derivative environmental applications (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen

1991; Kaiser, Wölfing, and Fuhrer 1999; Olli et al. 2001; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002), I hypothesized that individual environmental knowledge and values would influence tourists' choices of elephant-related visits. Thus, I modified the parameters and developed a series of interview questions to understand whether knowledge about Thai elephant conditions and environmental values inform tourist behavior in the Thai elephant industry (see Appendix 1 and 2). I conducted 30 pilot interviews with Chinese and Western tourists to inform the final version of interview questions and I interviewed another 115 tourists with the finalized version of questions. Interview questions aimed at examining possible connections between tourists' environmental knowledge, ecological values, hypothetical pro-environmental behaviors, and choices of elephant activities.

The 115 tourists I interviewed can be divided into two groups: the first being a random sample with 70 intercept interviews I conducted on the street with 30 Western and 40 Chinese tourists in Pai and the second being a sample with 45 CNF tourists, 15 Chinese and 30 Western. I intended to interview 30 Chinese CNF tourists, but only 15 scheduled visits during my research timeframe. It is worth noting that all CNF Chinese tourists I interviewed were provided with free admission while Western tourists were not. After careful consideration, to avoid systematic bias, I decided to exclude interviews of CNF tourists who were not randomly sampled and only used the 70 intercept interviews for the following analysis.

I then conducted semi-structured interviews with tour agencies, elephant experts, and Miguel, the founder of CNF. I took two trips to Chiang Mai and interviewed local travel agents about Chinese and Western tourists' participation in elephant activities and gathered elephant tourism brochures targeting Western and Chinese tourists. I informed all interviewees of the research purposes before the interview.



Aside from interviews, I researched popular travel platforms to understand Western and Chinese tourist engagement on a broader scale. I explored listings and reviews from the most popular travel platforms: TripAdvisor and Mafengwo, with the former mainly used by Western tourists, and the latter by Chinese tourists. Mafengwo is a leading travel platform that offers one-stop service from user-generated travel information to products with over 1 billion users (ITB China 2017). In addition to TripAdvisor users' concise reviews, Mafengwo users also upload over 10,000-word detailed travel blogs that thoroughly evaluate tour destinations. I searched "elephant" and "Thailand," and identified the top ten elephant tour providers. The search results suggest TripAdvisor generates its list primarily based on the number of reviews and the ratings from one to five stars, meaning the top tour providers are the most reviewed and loved. The list of tour providers on Mafengwo differs from TripAdvisor to some extent. Mafengwo ranks the list using a combined approach, considering the number of reviews and the number of mentions in blog posts, a unique section on Mafengwo. Instead of aggregating user ratings from one to five stars, Mafengwo categorizes user comments into "好评" ["good"] (4-5 stars), "中评" ["mediocre"] (2-3 stars), and "差评" ["bad"] (1 star). I first calculated the percentage of elephant sanctuaries among these top elephant tour providers on both platforms, which indicates the popularity of each elephant tour providers. I then gathered the overall ratings of the same top ten providers on both TripAdvisor and the percentage of "good" comments on Mafengwo. Together, the results paint a general picture of Chinese and Western tourist engagement in the Thai elephant industry. One assumption was made in this data gathering process that TripAdvisor results represent Western users and Mafengwo Chinese users. Mafengwo is a Mandarin-based website used almost exclusively by Chinese tourists and TripAdvisor is a much more international platform that is also used by some

Chinese tourists. To address this concern, I looked into the languages of the reviews on TripAdvisor and 80 – 90 percent of the reviews are written in English (about 1 percent in Chinese).

I also conducted a literature review on how culture could have informed tourist choices to address this data gap in my interviews and how it contributes to explaining the participatory differences between Chinese and Western tourists. The literature review supplements my first-hand information gathered in field research and interviews.

To conclude, field research, participation observations, interviews, travel platform research, and literature review together provide a holistic picture of Western and Chinese tourist engagement in Thai elephant tours.

## *2.2 General Tourist Participation*

Tourists make conscious decisions when choosing elephant tours in Thailand. From Miguel's observation over the past four years, the total number of Chinese tourists surged, but many, if not more, still chose to visit elephant riding and entertainment camps over sanctuaries and CNF. The inadequate documentation of tourist participation in Thai elephant tourism prompted me to seek alternative resources – previous surveys and self-conducted intercept interviews – to examine Miguel's observation.

I started with secondary resources. An interview survey with 248 Chinese tourists visiting Chiang Mai in 2013 uncovers that elephant riding tours are still in high demand (Sangkakorn 2013). These sampled Chinese tourists rely on website information, social media, word of mouth, and guidebooks. About 60 percent of the sampled Chinese tourists participated in elephant riding, making it the second most popular activity, following the 70 percent of tourists who enjoyed Traditional Thai massage (Sangkakorn 2013).

With this survey supporting the claim that Chinese tourists are enthusiastic about elephant riding in Thailand, I turned to primary sources to further investigate the ways Chinese and Western tourists participate in Thai elephant tourism. I gathered first-hand data on tourist participation in Pai, Thailand and my intercept interviews support Miguel’s observation that a greater percentage of Chinese tourists participate in elephant riding than their Western counterparts. While previous literature provides a broad overview of tourist participation, the intercept interviews sustain Miguel’s claim. Table 1 presents the basic demographic information of tourists I interviewed. There are more females than males in the sample, which aligns with the observed local tourist population. A variety of countries of origin were represented in the sample, across Europe, Australia, the United States, Canada, and China. Most tourists sampled are young (under 30), consistent with the general tourist population observed in Pai.

**Table 1** Demographic information of interview participants by gender, age, and countries (N=115)

	<i>Valid number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	84	73.0%
Male	31	27.0%
<b>Age</b>		
<20	3	2.6%
20-29	88	76.5%
30-39	19	16.5%
>40	5	4.3%
<b>Country of Origin</b>		
Western	60	
Australia	3	5.0%
Austria	4	6.7%
Belgium	2	3.3%
Canada	3	5.0%
France	3	5.0%
Germany	16	26.7%
Lithuania	1	1.7%
Netherlands	7	11.7%
Romania	1	1.7%
Spain	5	8.3%

United Kingdom	3	5.0%
United States	12	20.0%
Chinese	55	

Table 2 shows that respondents’ elephant tourism participation results are broken down into four categories: elephant sanctuary, refuse to participate in any elephant-related activities, riding and entertainment camp, and not interested. As shown in Table 2, most Western tourists interviewed chose to visit elephant sanctuaries (about 80 percent) and none participated or planned to participate in elephant riding or entertainment on this trip. A quarter of Chinese respondents visited or planned to visit elephant sanctuaries on this trip and about one-third of Chinese tourists participated or planned to participate in riding and entertainment camps.

**Table 2** Number and percentage of Western and Chinese Tourist participation in 4 types of elephant tour sites (N=70; 40 Chinese, 30 Western)

	<i>Sanctuary</i>	<i>Refuse to Visit Any Elephant-related Sites</i>	<i>Riding and Entertainment Camp</i>	<i>Not Interested</i>
<i>Western</i>	25 (83.3%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)	2 (6.7%)
<i>Chinese</i>	10 (25%)	16 (40%)	12 (30%)	2 (5%)

Table 2 supports Miguel’s observation that a greater percentage of Chinese tourists participated in elephant riding and entertainment camps (30%) than their Western counterparts (0%) while a greater percentage of Western tourists visited sanctuaries (83.3%) than Chinese tourists (25%). It is worth noting that distinctions among elephant tour venues are sometimes blurred, thus tourist participation is more nuanced than Table 2 presents. For example, a 38-year-old woman from Beijing who claimed to know the harm of elephant riding and visited an elephant sanctuary said, “We went to a good sanctuary. They only let us ride for 15 minutes so it is easy on the elephants. We didn’t want to ride for long, which we heard is harmful to elephants.” Tourists also expressed confusion regarding the impact of elephant riding and elephant shows. A 26-year-

old Chinese woman deliberately avoided elephant shows but chose to go elephant riding because she was aware that elephants were often mistreated in elephant circus shows. “Elephant entertainment camps are just brutal. I heard that those poor elephants are always beaten up in such camps. It’s just not natural to see elephants do such tricks, but I don’t know much about elephant riding though,” she says.

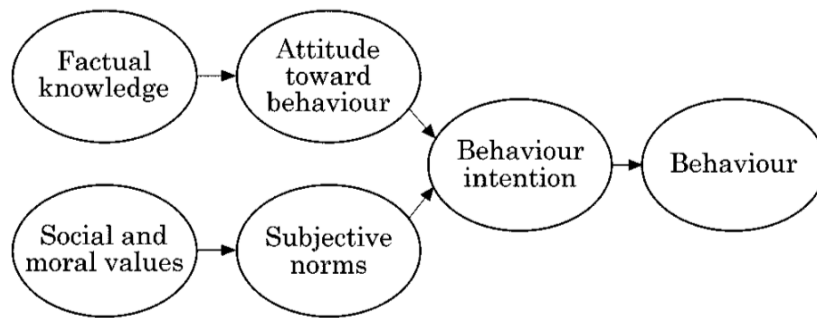
The most unexpected is the group of Chinese tourists who refused to visit any elephant-related sites. Compared to Western tourists, many more Chinese tourists sampled said no to visiting elephants altogether. Among the 40 percent of Chinese tourists who refused to participate in any elephant activities, many expressed deep concerns towards the elephant riding and the entertainment industry. They opted out of any elephant-related activities due to ethical or safety concerns or both. According to two Chinese tourists, “After that incident, I just do not think I can ride an elephant ever.” The incident refers to a recent tragedy at the Sam Liam Thong Kham elephant camp where a Chinese tour guide was trampled and killed by an elephant (Zuo 2017; Mai 2017). Subsequently, the Chinese Consulate also advised tourists against participating in elephant riding activities.

To conclude, as sources support Miguel’s observation that a higher percentage of Chinese tourists ride, and more Western tourists choose elephant sanctuaries, the interviews also bring to light an unexpected portion of Chinese tourists missing from Miguel’s claim -- those who refuse to participate in the elephant tourism industry altogether. In the rest of this chapter, I will analyze how specific environmental knowledge and values inform tourist participatory behavior.

### *2.3 Environmental Knowledge and Values*

To explain Chinese tourists' low participation rates in sanctuaries and reintroduction sites, my conversations with tourists and CNF staff reveal a hypothesis: Chinese tourists have lower environmental awareness and less specific knowledge about the Thai elephant tourism industry, which directly impacts their choices to visit elephant riding camps. Ajzen and Fishbein's theory of reasoned action (1980) inspired me to investigate whether knowledge and values could explain the divergent Western and Chinese tourist participation.

The theory of reasoned action (Figure 2) suggests that individual attitudes and subjective norms are important indicators of behavior. The developed version, the theory of planned behavior extends the theory of reasoned action by including influences beyond people's control (Ajzen 1985; Madden, Ellen, and Ajzen 1992).



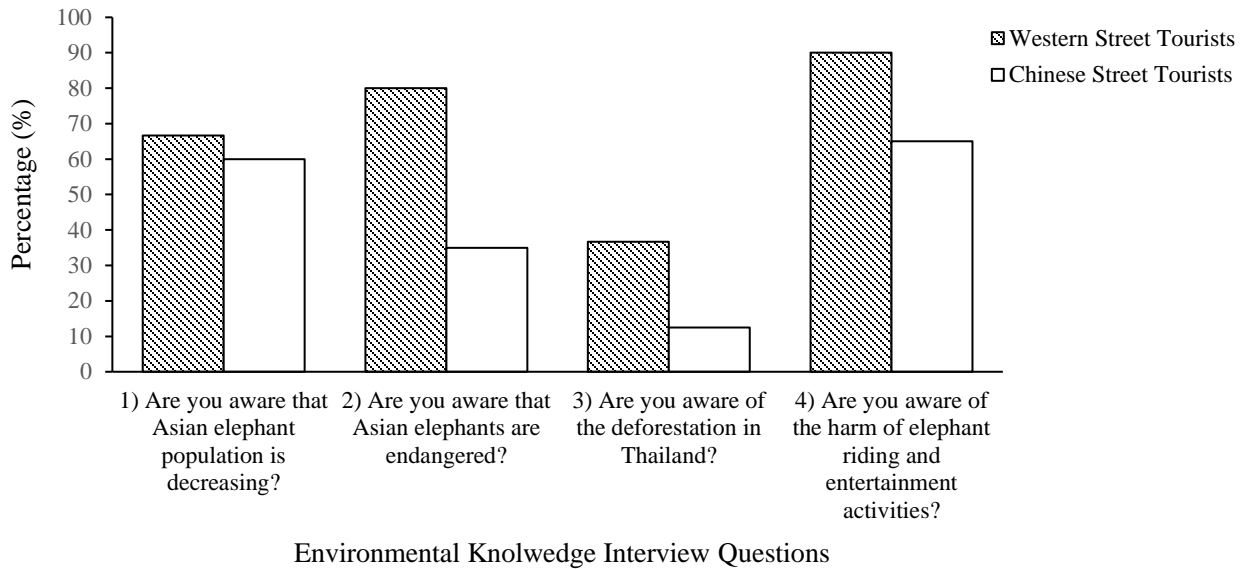
**Figure 2** The Theory of Reasoned Action

Fishbein and Ajzen argue that people are essentially rational and “make systematic use of information available to them” (Ajzen and Fishbein 1975, 15; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002); therefore, their attitudes influence behavioral intentions, which then shape their behavior (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). They detect a high correlation between behavior and a specific attitude toward that behavior (Ajzen 1985). Kaiser (1999) applies Ajzen's framework to ecological behaviors and suggests that factual knowledge about the environment, social and moral values concerning the environment, and ecological behavior intention are great predictors of actual

ecological behaviors. Many apply the theory of reasoned action and the theory of planned behavior and try to identify correlations between environmental attitudes (knowledge and values) and behaviors, yielding mixed results studies (Kaiser 1999; Steg and Vlek 2009; Heath and Gifford 2002; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Axelrod and Lehman 1993; Kaiser and Gutscher 2003). Kaiser (1999) conducted surveys using twenty-eight general items grouped into three categories: environmental knowledge, environmental values, and ecological behavior intentions and finds that environmental knowledge and values account for 40 percent of the variance of ecological behavior intentions, which predict 75 percent general ecological behaviors.

Informed by previous research, I designed interview questions to investigate how environmental knowledge and values could shape tourist behavior in the Thai elephant tourism industry. I employ a two-step analysis to understand whether tourists' environmental knowledge and values contribute to their observed participatory behavior in Thai elephant tourism. I first evaluate whether there is a difference between Western and Chinese tourists' responses to the environmental knowledge and value questions. If a difference exists, I then examine whether there are correlations between the specific questions and tourists' choices of elephant activities.

As shown in Figure 3, a higher percentage of Western tourists possess relevant environmental knowledge than that of Chinese tourists. The first three questions concern indirect knowledge while the last question is more closely linked with tourist choices of elephant-related activities. Both groups are least aware of the deforestation process taking place in Thailand.



**Figure 3** Tourist interview responses to environmental knowledge questions. Results show the percentages of Chinese and Western tourists who answered “yes” to these questions (N=70; 40 Chinese, 30 Western)

There are noticeable knowledge gaps between these two groups’ responses to question 2, 3, and 4. 80 percent of Western tourists are aware of Asian elephants’ endangered status while only 35 percent of Chinese tourists are. 36.7 percent of Western tourists are aware that deforestation is a serious problem in Thailand while only 12.5 percent of Chinese tourists are. 90 percent of Western tourists recognize the harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities compared to only 65 percent of Chinese tourists.

The knowledge gaps prompted me to employ the second step of the analysis, which is to investigate whether tourist knowledge about elephants and the elephant tourism industry is a good predictor of their choices of elephant activities. According to Figure 3, 80 percent of Western tourists are aware that Asian elephants’ endangered status while 35 percent of Chinese tourists claim to be and Table 3 indicates that among those Western tourists who answered yes, about 87 percent visited sanctuaries.



**Table 3** Number and percentage of tourist interview responses to the question whether they are aware that Asian elephants are endangered. (N=70; 30 Western, 40 Chinese)

	<i>Sanctuaries</i>	<i>Refuse to Visit Any Elephant-related Sites</i>	<i>Riding and Entertainment Camps</i>	<i>Not Interested</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Western answered yes</i>	20 (83.3%)*	3 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.2%)	24
<i>Western answered no</i>	5 (83.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (16.6%)	6
<i>Chinese answered yes</i>	6 (40.0%)	5 (33.3%)	3 (20.0%)	1 (6.7%)	15
<i>Chinese answered no</i>	4 (16.0%)	11 (44.0%)	9 (36.0%)	1 (4.0%)	25

Note: \*Percent refers to the percentage of Western tourists who answered yes chose to visit sanctuaries.

Interestingly, all Western tourists who are unfamiliar with elephants' endangered status still chose to visit sanctuaries and Chinese tourists' choices of elephant activities had less to do with such knowledge. As highlighted in Table 3, among all Chinese who possess such knowledge, 20 percent still chose to ride elephants. For those Chinese lacking endangered status knowledge, 36 percent visited sanctuaries, and 11 refused to participate in any elephant-related activities.

Table 4 details tourist responses when asked about their awareness of deforestation in Thailand. Similar patterns to Table 3 show that the majority of Western tourists visited sanctuaries disregarding their knowledge of deforestation while Chinese tourists' choices of elephant tour venues varied according to their knowledge. All Chinese tourists aware of deforestation in Thailand chose sanctuaries or refused elephant activities altogether, and Chinese tourists without such knowledge participated in a variety of elephant activities.

**Table 4** Number and percentage of tourist interview responses to the question whether they are aware of the deforestation in Thailand. (N=70; 30 Western, 40 Chinese)

	<i>Sanctuaries</i>	<i>Refuse to Visit Any Elephant-related Sites</i>	<i>Riding and Entertainment Camps</i>	<i>Not Interested</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Western answered yes</i>	9 (75%)*	1 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (16.7%)	12
<i>Western answered no</i>	16 (88.9%)	2 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	18

<i>Chinese answered yes</i>	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5
<i>Chinese answered no</i>	8 (22.9%)	13 (37.1%)	12 (24.3%)	2 (5.7%)	35

Note: \*Percent refers to the percentage of Western tourists who answered yes chose to visit sanctuaries.

An overwhelming number of Western tourists (90 percent) are aware of the harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities, and the vast majority of Western tourists visited elephant sanctuaries (Table 2). Table 5 indicates that having knowledge about the harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities does not matter as much for Western tourists in terms of what elephant activities they chose because even those who are not aware of the harm still visited elephant sanctuaries.

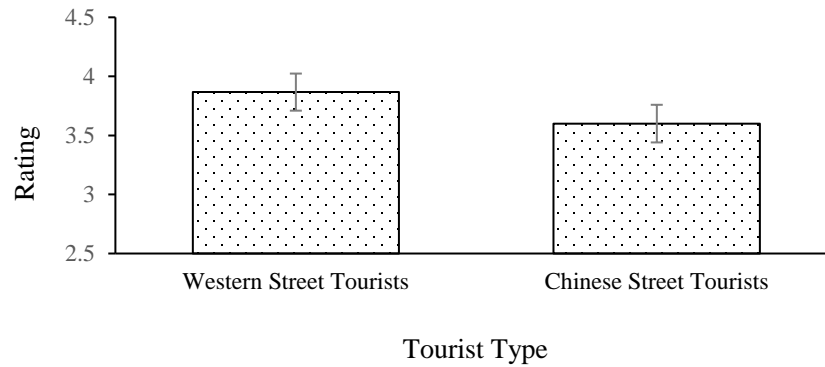
**Table 5** Number and percentage of tourist interview responses to the question whether they are aware of the harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities. (N=70; 30 Western, 40 Chinese)

	<i>Sanctuaries</i>	<i>Refuse to visit Any Elephant-related Sites</i>	<i>Riding and Entertainment Camps</i>	<i>Not Interested</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Western answered yes</i>	23 (85.2%)*	3 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.7%)	27
<i>Western answered no</i>	2 (66.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (33.3%)	3
<i>Chinese answered yes</i>	5 (19.2%)	15 (57.7%)	5 (19.2%)	1 (3.8%)	26
<i>Chinese answered no</i>	5 (35.7%)	1 (7.14%)	7 (50.0%)	1 (7.14%)	14

Note: \*Percent refers to the percentage of Western tourists who answered yes chose to visit sanctuaries.

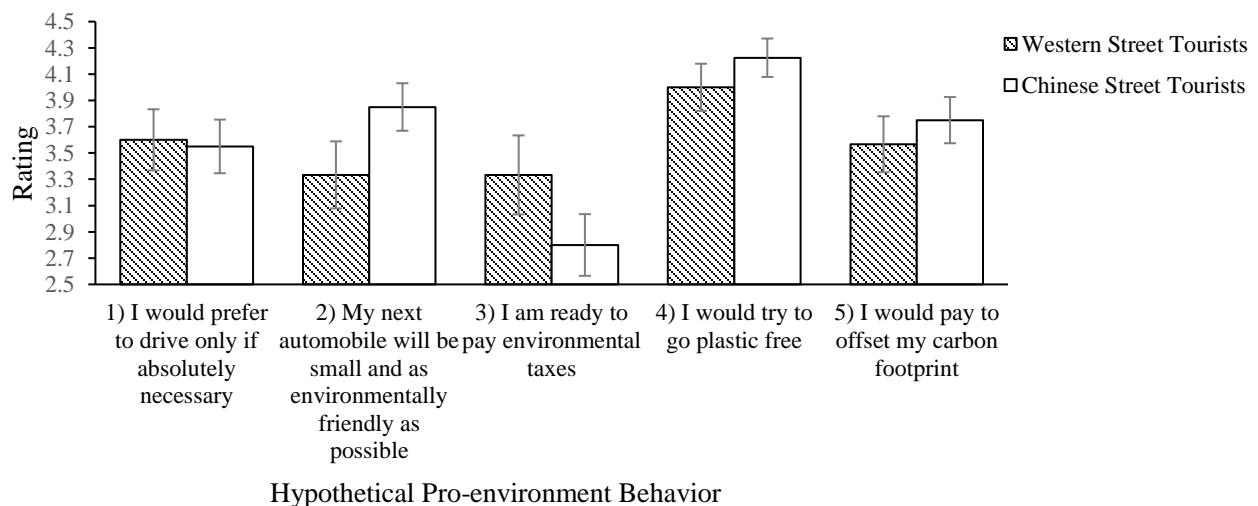
However, Chinese tourists are less predictable than their Western counterparts when considering their knowledge. Among the 65 percent of Chinese tourists who understand the harm of such activities (Figure 2), 57 percent of them refused to participate in any elephant-related activities and about 20 percent still chose riding and entertainment camps (Table 5). As for the Chinese tourists who are not aware of such harm, 36 percent picked sanctuaries and half elephant riding and entertainment camps. In addition, tourist reviews on Mafengwo further substantiate my

interview results that many Chinese tourists aware of the harm of elephant riding still visited and gave five-star ratings to such elephant camps. Many of their reviews reveal conflicting feelings about elephant riding and entertainment camps. For instance, among the 814 four-star or five-star ratings (out of 959 ratings total) on Maesa Elephant Camp, a great number of Chinese tourists recognize the “残忍” [“brutality”] of elephant training and express a sense of “可怜” [“pity”] towards the elephants, but at the same time, they are also fascinated by elephants’ skilled paintings and performances (Tempo 大宝 2019; Babysmart 2017; Masa 2019; 喵了个咪 2018; 小仙 2018; 大洋样 2017). One tourist commented, “I would recommend Maesa Elephant Camp...They offer elephant activities such as riding, feeding, and shows. In order to learn such skills, elephants must have been beaten up. It’s just hidden from tourists. Don’t go if this bothers you.” [“推荐美莎...有骑大象、喂大象、大象表演等节目。你想让大象学会这么多技能，不可能不打大象的，只是不会让你看到。介意的就不要去了”] (Eco1009 2018). Another comment by Kele says, “To be honest, the elephant performance is amazing. Disregarding the painful training elephants went through, it’s safe to say that this performance is the best I have ever seen.” [“说实在的这个表演真的非常棒，不考虑大象被训练时的痛苦，整个表演可以说是我见过最最精彩的”] (Kele 2018).



**Figure 4** Tourist self-ratings (from 1 to 5) of the extent they are concerned about climate change, 1 being the least concerned (N=70; 30 Western, 40 Chinese). Mean Western street tourists' rating is slightly higher than Chinese tourists, but not significant ( $P > .05$ ). Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error of the mean.

Figure 4 shows that when asked to rate how much they are concerned about climate change (Climate change here serves as a proxy for broader environmental attitudes) from 1 to 5, 1 being the least concerned, on average Western tourists rate 3.87 while Chinese tourists 3.55, rendering no significant difference. Similar to their attitudes towards climate change, there is not a significant difference between Chinese and Western tourists' response to hypothetical pro-environmental behavior questions (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** Tourist ratings (from 1 to 5) of how willing they are to perform hypothetical pro-environment behaviors, 1 being the least willing (N=70; 30 Western, 40 Chinese). Mean Western street tourists' rating is not significantly higher than Mean Chinese tourists' rating (Two-Way ANOVA,  $P > .001$ ). Error bars represent  $\pm 1$  standard error of the mean.

Tourist responses speak to the oversimplification of the common hypothesis that fewer Chinese tourists choose elephant sanctuaries or reintroduction project sites over elephant riding and entertainment camps because they lack adequate knowledge or awareness about elephants and the elephant tourism industry and once obtaining more knowledge and higher environmental values, they would visit elephant sanctuaries. Interview responses reveal that on average Western tourists indeed have more knowledge about elephant tourism than Chinese tourists, but no significant differences are detected with environmental values and hypothetical pro-environmental behaviors between the two groups.

However, interview results suggest that relevant environmental knowledge informs Chinese and Western tourist choices of elephant activities differently. Through comparing and contrasting tourist behavior, I discovered that Western tourists chose to participate in sanctuaries disregarding whether they have relevant knowledge about elephants' endangered status or harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities; however, most Chinese tourists with relevant environmental knowledge refused to visit any elephant-related activities rather than visiting sanctuaries and many Chinese tourists without such knowledge patronized riding and entertainment camps.

Where does such a discrepancy emerge? Maybe there is social pressure to participate in elephant sanctuaries in Western societies that does not exist in Chinese society? Maybe there are cultural influences in the Chinese society that make elephant riding more appealing? Since environmental knowledge fails to fully explain tourist participation, there must be other influencing forces that incentivize tourists with such knowledge to choose riding camps over sanctuaries. The hypothesis that environmental knowledge and values are the deciding factors of tourist participation exemplifies an isolated approach to explain tourist participation behavior

without recognizing tourists' interactive relationships with their social environment. Western and Chinese tourists visit Thailand carrying their own understanding of ecotourism, shaped by cultural and historical influences.

In Chapter 3, I will examine other factors interwoven with tourist choices of elephant activities in Thailand, including access to ecotour information and media, cultured ecotourism concepts, and ecotourism practices at home to explain how tourists' home societies inform their distinctive participatory behavior in the Thai elephant industry.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **OTHER EXPLANATORY FACTORS**

In Chapter 2, I employed previous studies and my interviews to support Miguel's observation that elephant-riding and entertainment activities are more popular among Chinese tourists than their Western counterparts. Interview results also reveals that compared to Western tourists, young Chinese tourists on average hold less environmental knowledge, especially about elephants and the Thai elephant tourism industry but share similar levels of concerns for climate change and willingness to perform hypothetical pro-environmental behaviors.

I then examined the hypothesis that Chinese tourists' insufficient environmental knowledge and values about the Thai elephant industry is the main reason behind their enthusiasm for elephant riding and entertainment camps. Admittedly, young Chinese tourists show knowledge gaps in elephants' endangered status, Thai deforestation, and the harm of elephant riding, but interestingly, environmental knowledge informs Chinese and Western tourists' participatory behavior in different ways: first, many Western tourists, even those who lack relevant knowledge, still chose to visit sanctuaries whereas half of the Chinese tourists under similar conditions visited riding camps; second, many Chinese tourists who understand the harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities refused to participate in any elephant-related activities while the majority of Western tourists with such knowledge visited sanctuaries; third, some Chinese tourists who are aware of elephant harm still participated in riding while none of the Western tourists in this study did.

This chapter will dissect each finding and provide speculative explanations to address discrepancies in Western and Chinese tourists' information and media access, cultural philosophies, and ecotourism perceptions.

***Finding 1: Many Western tourists, even those who lack relevant knowledge, still chose to visit elephant sanctuaries whereas half of the Chinese tourists under similar conditions visited riding camps.***

**Explanation 1.1: Chinese Tourists' Limited Access to Information and Media**

In the digital world we reside in, social media and online platforms play an essential role in people's travel decisions. Among the Chinese tourists I interviewed, all but three mentioned that they consulted Mafengwo to some degree in their trip-planning and likewise for Western tourists with TripAdvisor and Facebook travel groups. For tourists who are deprived of relevant knowledge about the elephant tourism industry, search results on such travel platforms are likely to dictate their choices of elephant activities. Considering Chinese tourists' limited access to foreign search engines and social media platforms, they heavily rely on local platforms for information.

Mafengwo, one of the most popular Chinese travel information platforms, generates comprehensive official travel guides sorted by countries, cities, and themes using user reviews and photos. Mafengwo's official Thailand travel guide covers topics such as cultural destination highlights and food discovery, lodging and transportation options, and visa preparations. To date, this official guide has been downloaded over 3.7 million times (Mafengwo 2015). All but one of the elephant tour providers featured in this guidebook are riding and entertainment camps, depicting such activities as must-visits in Thailand. The travel platforms' sizable user base bestows it with immense power to influence Chinese tourists' information access.

To further examine biases in tourist access to travel information, I compared and contrasted search results on TripAdvisor and Mafengwo, the two of the most popular travel platforms in the West and China. As illustrated in Table 6, the top ten results in TripAdvisor when I searched "elephant" in "Thailand, Asia" are: Elephant Nature Park, Elephant Jungle Sanctuary Chiang Mai, Elephant Jungle Sanctuary Phuket, Patara Elephant Farm, Blue Elephant Thailand Tours, Phuket



Elephant Sanctuary, Maerim Elephant Sanctuary, Hutsadin Elephant Foundation, Elephant Rescue Park (TripAdvisor 2019). As I searched “大象” [“elephant”], Mafengwo yields the following top ten results: Maesa Elephant Camp, Maewang Elephant Camp, Pattaya Elephant Village, Maetaeng Elephant Park, Elephant Care Park Phuket, Thom’s Pai Elephant Camp, Elephant Nature Park, Ran Tong Save & Rescue Elephant Center, Elephant Poo Poo Paper Park, Elephant Conservation Center (Mafengwo 2019). Since TripAdvisor (2000) existed ten years prior to the establishment of Mafengwo (2010) and attracted a broader audience, there are many more reviews and ratings available.

**Table 6** The number of reviews and ratings of the top 10 most popular elephant tour providers on TripAdvisor and the number of reviews and blogs and the percentage of good reviews (4 – 5 stars) on Mafengwo. Sanctuary is simplified to providers that do not offer riding or entertainment activities.

	<i>TripAdvisor</i>				<i>Mafengwo</i>			
	Name	# of Reviews	Rating	Sanctuary	Name	# of reviews & blogs	Rating (4+)	Sanctuary
1 <sup>st</sup>	Elephant Nature Park	10,446	5/5	Yes	Maesa Elephant Camp	959 + 477	85%	No
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Elephant Jungle Sanctuary Chiang Mai	4,160	4.5/5	Yes	Maewang Elephant Camp	225 + 109	80%	No
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Elephant Jungle Sanctuary Phuket	1,824	5/5	No	Pattaya Elephant Village	439 + 67	65%	No
4 <sup>th</sup>	Patara Elephant Farm	4,144	5/5	Yes	Maetaeng Elephant Park	198 + 95	77%	No
5 <sup>th</sup>	Blue Elephant Thailand Tours	2,046	5/5	Yes	Elephant Care Park Phuket	258 + 2	99%	Yes
6 <sup>th</sup>	Phuket Elephant Sanctuary	1,140	5/5	Yes	Thom’s Pai Elephant Camp	190 + 81	80%	No
7 <sup>th</sup>	Maerim Elephant Sanctuary	1,306	5/5	Yes	Elephant Nature Park	87 + 35	89%	Yes
8 <sup>th</sup>	Hutsadin Elephant Foundation	1,729	4.5/5	No	Ran Tong Save & Rescue Elephant Center	69 + 18	86%	No
9 <sup>th</sup>	Elephant Rescue Park	1,246	5/5	Yes	Elephant Poo Poo Paper Park	38 + 11	79%	Yes
10 <sup>th</sup>	Green Elephant Sanctuary Park	819	5/5	Yes	Elephant Conservation Center	33 + 7	64%	No

As shown in Table 6, 8 out of the top 10 elephant tour providers on TripAdvisor are sanctuaries that do not offer riding activities and only 3 out of the top 10 on Mafengwo. The vastly different search results reinforce tourist preferences over time, which helps explain my first finding why Western and Chinese tourists choose different elephant activities. Imagine a Western and a Chinese tourist, both deprived of knowledge about elephant conditions and the harm of elephant riding, trying to decide with which elephant tour to participate, the search results at least partially account for Chinese tourists' choices to visit riding camps.

Beyond online travel platforms, travel agencies are also able to shape tourist decisions on elephant tours. Several Chinese tourists who participated in elephant camps indicated that they took part in a pre-designed and all-included (transportation and tickets) day trip that features a variety of hotspots, including an elephant riding camp. Since there were no substitute activities other than the elephant camp visit, they found this trip cheap and convenient despite their reluctance to visit an elephant camp. My conversations with Miguel also revealed that many tour agencies that host Chinese tourists in Pai have established exclusive and long-lasting relationships with nearby elephant riding camps and are inclined to promote such tours to Chinese tourists, thus they are indirectly responsible for high Chinese tourist participation rate in elephant riding and entertainment camps.

### **Explanation 1.2: Chinese Media Influence that Promotes Elephant Riding**

Films are an influential media form that has great potential to inform the public of tourism experiences. Sue Beeton, a PhD of Film-Induced Tourism, dedicates her studies to the increasingly strengthened link between travel and popular media (Beeton 2016). In 2012, a hit Chinese film *Lost in Thailand* led to a tourist boom in northern Thailand, which soon became one of the most popular tourist destinations for Chinese tourists (Sang 2013). *Lost in Thailand*, secured more than

\$200 million dollars in ticket sales, is among the top 50 highest-grossing films in the Chinese film history (Xu 2012; Mostafanezhad, Mary and Promburom 2018). A brief but memorable scene where the leading characters ride an elephant across a river established elephant riding as an iconic cultural symbol of Thailand and drove many Chinese tourists to seek the experience themselves. Thai elephant camps continue to take advantage of the film's attraction to advertise their riding tours.

In contrast to *Lost in Thailand* that vitalized elephant riding and entertainment camps, *Black Elephant*, a 9-minute independent Chinese documentary in 2017 exposed the cruelty of the elephant riding and entertainment industry and educated the Chinese public. The documentary is narrated from the perspective of a baby elephant who speaks of its traumatic experience of being separated from its mother and trained to entertain tourists. *Black Elephant's* powerful narrative stirred up elephant conservation discussions. Five Chinese tourists refused to partake in the elephant riding activities after watching *Black Elephant*. One of those five Chinese tourists claims, "I don't trust any elephant tour providers now. I have no way of knowing whether an elephant sanctuary or camp abuses elephants. I don't want to take the risk."

Though media influence needs to be further scrutinized, films like *Lost in Thailand* are likely to be a much more visible force to advocate for the cultural elephant-riding experience than independent films like *Black Elephant*, especially for tourists who might lack relevant knowledge about elephant conditions.

### **Explanation 1.3: Western Social Network Pressures Tourists to Retreat from Elephant Riding**

I situate tourists into an interwoven social network where they exchange ideas and influence each other through communities. When asked about how they discovered CNF, Western

tourists commonly referenced family and friends, Facebook groups, and TripAdvisor. For instance, several groups of Dutch, German, and American tourists explained that they joined their local Facebook groups where fellow tourists would post about what they should do or not do in Thailand. Group members often share educational materials such as videos of elephant abuse in riding and entertainment camps as well as recommend ethical elephant sanctuaries to visit.

The Western social network not only disseminates educational information on the Thai elephant industry but also forms solidarity among tourists against riding and entertainment camps. The solidarity fosters social peer pressure that results in a tourist hierarchy in many Western countries, with voluntourism and ecotourism at the top. For example, when asked about why he chose to visit CNF instead of a riding camp, a 24-year old German man laughed and said, “I can’t imagine what my friends would say if I tell them I rode an elephant when I visited Thailand. Man, that’s not cool. I will get roasted.” Similar sentiments were expressed by many young Western tourists who visited CNF but were not specifically mentioned by Chinese tourists.

***Finding 2: Many Chinese tourists who understand the harm of elephant riding and entertainment activities refused to participate in any elephant-related activities including sanctuaries while the majority of Western tourists with such knowledge visited sanctuaries.***

**Explanation 2.1: Chinese Tourists’ Limited Language Access to Sanctuary Information**

One explanation to Chinese tourists’ choices to opt out of elephant activities over visiting sanctuaries is Chinese tourists’ limited language access to sanctuary information. This restricted access to information extends beyond travel platforms such as Mafengwo to elephant sanctuaries themselves. Chinese tourists expressed their frustration with limited elephant tour options available on travel platforms and difficulties when booking ecotours because many elephant sanctuaries offering ecotours only have English websites. A 24-year old Chinese woman who

visited an elephant sanctuary told me that she could not find sufficient information about elephant ecotours from tour agencies or websites, “I talked to Chinese tour agencies and they kept trying to persuade me to go to elephant riding camps, but eventually I found a good sanctuary without riding through a friend’s recommendation. It was so frustrating.” When I asked a 25-year old Chinese man why he refused to participate in any elephant activities, he answered, “I know you are not supposed to ride elephants, but it seemed impossible to find an ethical elephant tour provider online. I heard some sanctuaries also abuse elephants, so maybe it’s easier to not participate at all.”

Since tourist choices of elephant tourism are not dictated by their environmental knowledge about elephant conditions, travel platforms and other social media outlets are well positioned to bring change. For instance, TripAdvisor took its first steps in 2016 when it partnered with World Animal Protection to end elephant ride ticket-selling on its websites. Its chief executive and co-founder, Stephen Kaufer stated, “our efforts will be enabling travelers to make more thoughtful choices about whether to visit an animal attraction” (Justin Sablich 2016).

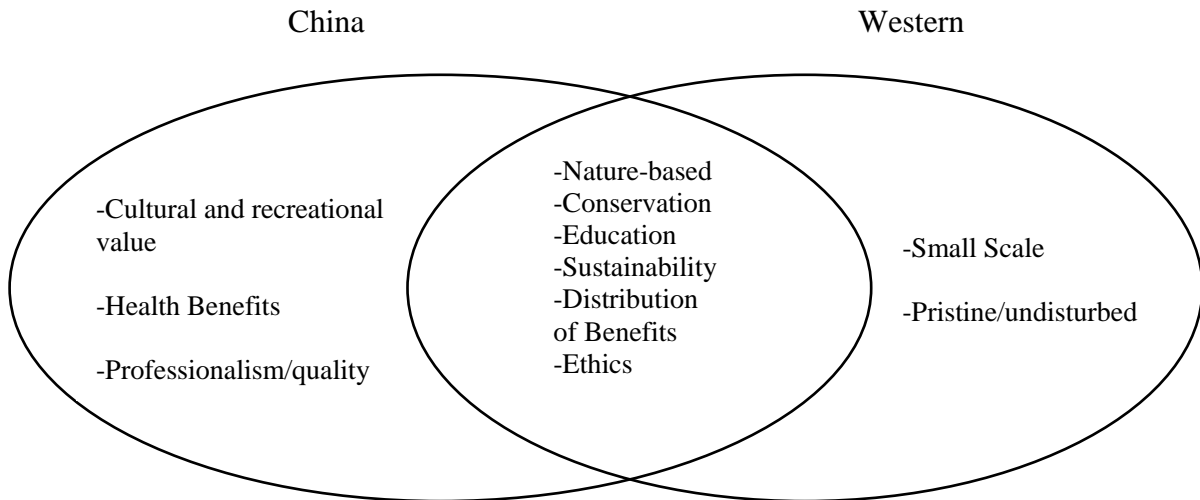
### **Explanation 2.2: Different Cultural Perceptions of Ecotourism**

The second finding suggests that many Chinese tourists with a high-level of environmental awareness and values refused to participate in the Thai elephant tourism industry altogether, which is not observed among Westerners. Since they are reluctant to visit riding camps, some Chinese tourists expressed the absence of a “cultural” experience in many elephant sanctuaries. When asked what they meant by “cultural,” two young Chinese female tourists who refused to participate in elephant activities explained that there is no meaning associated with just seeing an elephant. Elephant sanctuaries that features wilderness trekking and exploratory adventure do not provide an attractive culturally-immersive experience.

I ruminated on their comments and wondered if it is merely a personal preference or a shared sentiment. I was inclined to think the latter when I came across how Maesa Elephant Camp, one of the most popular riding camps among Chinese tourists, advertise elephant rides in Mandarin as an authentic recreation of “古代帝王及将领跋山涉水、驰骋于丛林” [“ancient Emperor experiences trekking through forests and waters,”] which is a deliberate choice of narration that aims to provide the “cultural” experience to which the two young Chinese tourists were referring (Mafengwo 2019). Chinese tourists’ expectations and preferences of nature-based tourism and ecotourism, which is recognized as a distinctive “Chinese gaze,” differs from those of Western tourists (Li 2008, 492). This gaze is a product of unique Chinese expectations for cultural values in their ecotourism experiences.

As the force of globalization has prevailed, Western values and knowledge, including ecotourism, have gradually made its way into China (Harris 2004). Though the definitions of ecotourism share some common core values across national borders, important distinctions still exist between Western and Chinese interpretations (Donohoe and Lu 2009; Donohoe 2011; Buckley 2008; Lu and Wu 2006). When ecotourism was first introduced into Chinese society, it was directly translated into *shengtai lüyou* (生态旅游), where *shengtai* means ecology and *lüyou* means tourism (Buckley et al. 2008). Relevant scholars endeavored to preserve the original Western concept instead of modifying and localizing it to suit Chinese needs (Buckley et al. 2008). Prior to scholars’ efforts to tailor the concept to meet domestic needs, the Chinese government promoted the ecotourism definition drafted by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (The International Ecotourism Society 2019).

As consensus on ecotourism started to emerge in the West, ecotourism researchers recognize the danger of uncritically embracing this “Western-constructed ecotourism” as a universal one-size-fits-all concept (Cater 2006, 36; Weaver and Lawton 2007). An ethnocentric perspective fosters universalistic ideologies that ignore other interpretations constructed by other societies (Cater 2006). As China internalized the Western ecotourism concept, common thematic priorities as well as distinct and culturally-specific preferences were identified. These conceptual differences guide divergent Chinese ecotourism practices, which then shapes Chinese tourists’ perception of *shengtai liyou*. Donohoe and Needham (2006) extracted common themes from 30 academic journals of ecotourism published after 1990 in English and French publications while Chinese scholars selected similar core principles with some deviations from 1,493 Chinese academic research papers from 1992 to 2015 (Zhong et al. 2016).



**Figure 5** Thematic priorities of ecotourism in China and the West (Donohoe and Needham 2006)

Two types of theoretical distinctions are present in the Western and Chinese ecotourism definition. First, some core values are interpreted differently when adapted to the Chinese context,

and thus shape Chinese tourists' perceptions and interactions with Thai elephant ecotourism (Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Cater 2006). For example, there is no single "nature," but "multiple natures" (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 95). Nature is not merely the physical space, but a concept that is economically, politically, and culturally constructed (Cater 2006). What nature encompasses and embodies varies across national boundaries. Both China and the West tend to improve upon nature to enhance tourists' enjoyment of nature but with different intentions and goals.

Second, Chinese *shengtai lüyou* reveals cultural-specific priorities that are not present in the Western concept, especially cultural and recreational values, health benefits and professionalism/quality (Donohoe and Lu 2009). Take a prominent example of the Yellow Mountains, one of the most-visited National Parks in Anhui Province that attracts millions of visitors each year. Chinese tourists' primary motivation for visiting the Yellow Mountains beyond its natural beauty is to connect with the cultural and historical meanings embodied by the natural landscape through poets and artists. Thousands of poems were written about the Yellow Mountains, with the most famous one by Li Bai, a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty, which established its status as one of the most iconic and respected mountains in China (Li 2008). Tourists' preference for natural reserves is often linked to their cultural values (Xu et al. 2008). For contemporary tourists, the ecological landscape is inseparable from the famous poems highly valued in Chinese society (Li 2008). China's rich cultural heritage nurtured a unique sense of aesthetics beyond the splendor beauty of nature or wilderness itself. Informed by the Chinese context, Maesa Elephant Camp's marketing slogan of an authentic recreation of "ancient Emperor experiences" provides an important but often ignored recreational value that is prized among Chinese tourists (Mafengwo



2019). Such cultural interpretations of nature highlight why some elephant sanctuaries might lack compelling narratives.

***Finding 3: Some Chinese tourists who are aware of the harm of elephant riding still participated in riding while none of the Western tourists in this study did.***

### **Explanation 3.1: Human Dominance Over Nature Informed by History**

Chinese tourists' collective desire to experience elephant riding overshadows their consciousness of the harm to elephants. As many Western tourists retreated from elephant riding activities because of increasing awareness and peer pressure, Chinese tourists have distinctive expectations and perspectives of elephant ecotourism, informed by *zhonghua wenhua* (Chinese common knowledge), including shared knowledge of traditional philosophies and cultural heritage (Li 2008). The cultural difference might divert Chinese tourists from following the trajectory of their Western counterparts.

In Chinese society, the Western dichotomy of humans and nature is much less present (Xu, Ding, and Packer 2008). A famous saying, *tian ren he yi*, meaning nature and man joined as one whole, originated over two thousand years ago. (Hou 1997). This unity of man and nature fostered a unique Chinese way of interacting with nature through ecotourism. Under the influence of the sense of uniting humans and their surroundings, many scholars have recently argued that the Chinese way of thinking is "relational thinking," suggesting they are inclined to learn by seeking connections and associations with themselves (Xu et al. 2013). When Chinese tourists encounter nature experiences, they imagine themselves closely integrated with the surroundings, distinguishing themselves from Western tourists' attempts to separate from nature (Xu et al. 2013).

The origin of human manipulation of nature in China can be traced all the way back to China's legendary first ruler, Yu the Great, who is said to have built hydro-projects to manage

flood and droughts over four millennia ago (Shapiro 2004). Though Daoism and Buddhism emphasize respecting nature, the dominant Confucianism philosophy exemplifies anthropocentric utilitarianism towards nature (Li 2008). Confucius thought of the human-nature relationship as a combination of harmony and alteration: “A sentiment of consanguinity between persons and nature . . . an awareness of active participation [by humans in] the well-balanced and harmonious processes that are the cosmos itself” (Shaner 1989, 164). Confucianism emphasizes the importance of managing, utilizing and controlling nature for the good of human society (Shapiro 2004). This embedded utilitarian view of nature has profound influence of human-nature relationships in the contemporary Chinese society (Cheng et al. 2016).

Informed by the utilitarian ideology of nature, China’s modern society has treated nature with hostility and destruction where wilderness was devalued, and human comforts prioritized (Shapiro 2004). In the mid-twentieth century, China’s leader Mao called for rapid industrialization to catch up with the West and started massive expansion and resource exploitation that resulted in great environmental degradation (Shapiro 2004). The Mao-era was filled with campaign slogans that used adversarial language to emphasize the need to conquer nature, win the war against nature, and alter nature for the human good. For example, during the “Great Leap Forward,” an attempt to achieve rapid industrialization in 1958, prioritized grain production over everything else to enhance agricultural yields to feed the growing population (Shapiro 2004). In addition, a series of land *reclamation* practices took place, including *huimu kaihuang* (毁木开荒), meaning destroying the forests and opening the wasteland for agricultural needs (Hou 1997; Shapiro 2004; Sofield and Li 1998)

The violent environmental history in China arguably established a higher threshold for human alteration and intervention in the natural environment as in this finding. The Mao-era is a

distinct and un-replicable period of time that leaves Chinese people with a legacy that exacerbated domestic environmental problem as well as reinforced extreme anthropocentrism when looking at nature (Shapiro 2004). The extreme human interference with nature and emphasis on human dominance cultivated a distorted human-nature relationship that is still hanging over Chinese environmental policies and projects (Shapiro 2001; Beeson 2010). The old unity of human and nature was overshadowed by the emerging consumerism and materialism (Ye and Xue 2008). The traditional utilitarian and exploitive perception towards nature was especially susceptible to the emerging need for comforts (Ye and Xue 2008). The unique group of Chinese tourists, shaped by ancient philosophies and recent history, are familiar with violence towards nature. Such familiarity might have mitigated the uneasiness when tourists choose to ride an elephant despite their increasing awareness of its harm.

**Explanation 3.3:** Empirical *Shengtai liuyou* Practices that Inform Chinese Tourist Behavior

As much as traditional environmental values and philosophies influence how tourist view their relationship with nature, Chinese tourists' ecotourism engagements in Thailand cannot be separated from the modern *shengtai liuyou* development in China. As consensus starts to emerge in the West on what ecotourism entails, Chinese *shengtai liuyou* definitions and practices are still at early stages of development (Donohoe and Lu 2009; Zhong and Liu 2017). Informed by the embryonic and domestic *shengtai liuyou* development, Chinese tourists further familiarize themselves with human alteration and intervention of nature to better satisfy human needs.

With its extensive land area, complex topography, rich biodiversity, and varied climate, China recognized its great potential to develop ecotourism and promoted it as a national agenda (Zhong and Liu 2017; Zhuang et al. 2011). After the term *shengtai liuyou* first appeared in Chinese

academic literature in the early-1990s (Wang 1993), China underwent rapid industrialization and economic development. This novel concept claims to provide a “win-win” strategy that promotes economic and social benefits to local communities without compromising environmental integrity (Perkins and Grace 2008). Increasing domestic academic research helped China localize the Western concept of ecotourism and find ways to implement *shengtai liuyou* practices that conformed with the China’s national situation. The Chinese National Tourism Administration (CNTA) declared the year of 1999 as the “Year of Tourism in Ecological Environment” and the year of 2009 the “Year of Chinese Ecotourism” with a slogan “Be a green traveler and experience eco-civilization” (Wang et al. 2009). Ecotourism in the West centers around a holistic system of sustainable tourism management, with bio-centric conservation at its core, while *shengtai liuyou* sites in China make greater human footprint, including hotels, restaurants, themed structures, statues, and other facilities (Li 2008). A society’s struggle between preservation of nature and economic development reflects its broader priorities and values (Bruun 2014). Since *shengtai liuyou* practices are still at the early development stage, Chinese ecotourism sites have yet to reflect the theoretical ideal Chinese scholars established.

A prominent example of Chinese *shengtai liuyou* is the Yellow Mountains. The motto of the Yellow Mountains ecotourism sites in Anhui Province is “Honest, Ecological, Civilized” (Bruun 2014). Within the park, nature is not at its raw state but constructed to enhance the cultural experience and better meet human desire for comforts. Unlike visiting natural areas in national parks in the West of the United States, such as the Yellowstone National Park, which offers an opportunity to escape civilization (Jacoby 2014), tourists in the Yellow Mountains are expected to follow the given stairways cut into steep rocks and are discouraged from wandering off the trail (Jacoby 2014). By interacting with ecotourism sites like Yellow Mountains, Chinese tourists grow

accustomed to a human imprint on the natural environment, such as artificial barrier for safety concerns, commercial vendors, well-paved rock paths, and temples for resting (Packer et al. 2014; Winter 2009). Overt human construction is considered good management and part of the experience (Packer et al. 2014). Such familiarity with altering the nature to satisfy human safety and comforts also helps explain some Chinese tourists' choices to visit elephant camps and highly praise of the elephant camps for their professional "civilized" process despite conflicting attitudes towards elephant riding and entertainment camps.

Augustus Woods, an American who travelled to China, also spoke to this discrepancy in tourist engagement with nature-based tourism in China:

The Chinese seem to prefer cultivated and managed natural beauty, appreciated at ease and in comfort, like the ancient poets who waxed lyrical about the Three Gorges of the Yangtze from their pleasure boats – not the messiness and hazards of wilderness. We Americans, Canadians and Europeans, raised on the legacy of frontier or colonialist societies with explorer-heroes, value adventure and thrill-seeking, testing one's courage and resourcefulness in the full harshness of nature (Woods 2017).

Such familiarity with human-constructed facilities and obsession with comfort in their ecotourism experiences create a disconnection between CNF and some Chinese tourists. Miguel shared an encounter with previous Chinese tourists who visited CNF. Through reforestation efforts, CNF exemplifies an attempt to create an ultimate primitive state of nature. And as part of the ecotour offered by CNF, tourists are expected to trek through bushes and wade through a small river to meet the elephant. However, to Chinese tourists, to be with nature does not equate seeking wilderness and enduring hardship (Xu, Ding, and Packer 2008). With the river running up to their thighs, a Chinese family asked for bridges or boats but ended up not going to see the elephants because they were not expecting this type of "raw" and "wild" experience.

## **Concluding Note:**

This chapter investigated what other influencing factors beyond lower environmental awareness and knowledge about elephant conditions are useful in explaining why Chinese tourists are inclined to patronize elephant riding and entertainment camps. Instead of viewing tourists as isolated entities, I situate Chinese tourists in their culture, history, and social networks to reveal that their decisions are not results of mere knowledge, but a combination of complex influences, including limited access to sanctuary information and media, a lack of social network pressure, anthropocentric view towards nature, and human-intervened *shengtai liuyou* practices at home.

With Chinese traditional philosophies guiding two-thousand years of developing and utilizing nature, along with Mao's war on nature, Chinese tourists developed ambivalent attitudes towards nature with an anthropocentric tendency to rationalize human violence and alteration of nature (Shapiro 2004). Chinese tourists are exposed to certain ecotourism practices that differ from Western interpretations of it since *shengtai liuyou* is built upon human enhancement of nature to craft comfortable experiences through managing and altering nature (Li 2008). Under such influence, Chinese tourists have grown more accustomed to nature-based activities with human intervention while Western tourists are inclined to minimize human modifications in their ecotourism experience. Such cultural immersion may have given Chinese tourists a higher threshold for human intervention in their nature-based tourism experience in Thailand than their Western counterparts, which explains Chinese tourists' distinct participatory behavior in the Thai elephant industry and informs possibly different future participation.

## CONCLUSION

In response to Miguel's initial inquiry on Chinese tourists' choices to visit elephant riding and entertainment camps over sanctuaries or CNF, this research finds the original hypothesis that attributes this phenomenon to Chinese tourists' lack of relevant environmental knowledge to be an oversimplification. Many Chinese tourists equipped with such knowledge refuse to partake in any elephant-related activities due to limited access to sanctuary information and their unfamiliarity with Thai elephant ecotours tailored to Western tourists' wilderness expectations. Chinese tourists' desire for elephant riding activities is informed by the degree of human intervention in Chinese *shengtai liuyou* and reinforced by media and anthropocentric traditional philosophies.

Chinese and Western tourists' distinctive preferences for ecotourism provide the research with a cross-cultural perspective, which encourages a reconsideration of how ecotourism practices are constructed. Western ecotourism's pursuit of cultivating pristine nature and Chinese tourists' expectations for comfortable interaction with nature are derivative of cultural and historical influences. When the Western wilderness-oriented ecotourism concept met the cultural context in China, conflicting goals and practices started to emerge, which ended up shaping tourist engagement in ecotourism destinations (Harris 2004; Xu et al. 2008). Rather than converging to the Western ecotourism ideal as they gain environmental knowledge, Chinese tourists might demand a different experience from what the Thai elephant industry is offering. I argue for an expanded understanding of how ecotourism is a cultured concept as a way to demystify Chinese tourists' participatory behavior.

This research aims to serve as a starting point to facilitate discussions beyond the assumption that Chinese tourists' travel choices are rooted in a lack of environmental knowledge or concern. A more nuanced understanding of the factors that shape participation allows us to

explore possibilities to accommodate Chinese tourists' preferences without compromising the core values of ecotourism. I provide the following suggestions for the Thai elephant sanctuaries and CNF to consider. First, spread awareness of the negative or harmful practices of the riding industry by collaborating with Chinese travel platforms and animal protection organizations. Second, increase the online presence of elephant sanctuaries and re-wilding efforts by providing online websites and booking information in Chinese. Third, craft cultural narratives that enhance the values of their ecotour experiences. Fourth, closely follow new ecotourism policies and trends in China and use this knowledge to adapt outreach strategies and develop activities for that audience. Future research should focus on how informational, cultural, and historical factors influence Chinese tourist participation in the Thai elephant industry. Such research could be an investigation of the relationship between Chinese tourists' interpretations of *shengtai lüyou* and the most attractive aspect of elephant riding entertainment activities. Or research could examine how tourists' professional backgrounds, educational levels, economic conditions influence their engagement with elephant activities in Thailand. As an emerging force in the global tourism industry, Chinese tourists possess immense potential to engage in a new form of ecotourism and embrace environmentally-friendly tourism activities.



**APPENDIX**  
**APPENDIX 1 WESTERN TOURIST QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Environmental Knowledge**

1. Are you aware that Asian elephant population is decreasing?
2. Are you aware that Asian elephants are endangered?
3. Are you aware of the harm of elephant riding and related activities such as elephant painting, elephant show?
4. Are you aware of the deforestation in Thailand?

**Ecotourism Participation**

5. Have you done any or are you planning to participate in elephant-related activities? If so, what specific activities?

**Existing Environmentally- friendly Behaviors**

6. Do you recycle at home? (separate trash and reuse)
7. IF answers no, ask “Are there separate labeled bins for you to leave your trash?”
8. IF answers no, ask “are you willing to separate your personal trash (plastic, paper, compost) and put them in labeled bins if facilities are available?”
9. In general, do you carry your water bottle, or buy plastic bottled water at home?

**Environmental Values**

10. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being the most concerned), how much are you concerned with climate change?
11. On a scale of 1-5 (5 being making the most difference), how much do you feel like you are making a difference by your personal efforts in helping the environment at large?
12. IF rank 3 or lower, ASK “Does it discourage from your current effort?”
13. IF rank 3 or lower, ASK “Does it discourage you from doing more?”

**Hypothetical Pro-environment Behaviors**

Five Statements: (1 means you totally disagree and 5 means you totally agree)

14. I would prefer to drive only if absolutely necessary.
15. My next automobile will be small and as environmentally friendly as possible.
16. I am ready to pay environmental taxes (raising fuel price or automobile tax).
17. I would try to go plastic free.
18. I would pay to offset my carbon footprint.

**APPENDIX 2 CHINESE TOURISTS QUESTIONNAIRE 中国游客采访  
(APPENDIX 1 TRANSLATED)**

**Environmental Knowledge**

1. 您知道亚洲象数量在减少吗？
2. 您知道亚洲象是濒危动物吗？
3. 来泰国前您知道泰国森林砍伐严重吗？
4. 您对骑大象·大象马戏等项目的危害有了解吗？

**Ecotourism Participation**

5. 这次来泰国您打算去与大象相关的活动吗？

**Existing Environmentally-friendly Behaviors**

6. 您家里会分类回收垃圾以及回收利用吗？
7. 如果答案否定，问“扔垃圾出去的时候有分类的垃圾箱吗？”
8. 如果基础设施完备，比如分类回收的垃圾桶，您会愿意回收利用废物吗？
9. 您平常会自带水杯还是买瓶装水比较多？

**Environmental Values**

10. 从 1-5 (5 表示程度最高)，您有多担心全球变暖？
11. 从 1-5 (5 表示程度最高)，您觉得个人的努力对环境有多大帮助？
12. 如果答案为 3 或以下，问“您觉得个人努力没有多少帮助，会让您觉得灰心并不想继续现在的环保行动和努力吗？”
13. 如果答案为 3 或以下，问“会影响您去做更多的环保行动和努力吗？”

**Hypothetical Pro-environment Behaviors**

14. 我只在必要的时候才会开车。
15. 我下次买车会买对环境友好的车。
16. 我已经准备好开始交环境税 (更高的油费或是车税)。
17. 我会尽量不用塑料。
18. 我愿意花钱抵消我的碳足迹。

**APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW LIST**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Designation/Occupation</b>	<b>Date/Time</b>
Miguel Tenerio Tag	Founder of CNF	Summer 2018
Anchala Nimitmala	Manager of CNF & Elephant expert	Summer 2018
Unidentified	Tour agents	Summer 2018

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