

SOCIAL SCIENCES

FRAMING THE JOURNEY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TRAVEL TELEVISION PROGRAMS IN MONGOLIA AND CHINA

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Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of travel television programs in Mongolia and China, examining their thematic content, production styles, and audience perceptions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines content analysis of selected programs—*1000 Cities I Travelled* (Mongolia) and *Welcome–Hello Russia* (China)—with survey data collected from 491 viewers in both countries. The findings reveal that Chinese travel programs, supported by state funding and advanced technology, tend to prioritize visual appeal and national image-building, often operating under ideological constraints. In contrast, Mongolian travel programs emphasize content and editorial freedom but are limited by financial and technical resources. Audience feedback in both countries indicates a shared desire for more authentic, culturally rich, and less commercialized travel content. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on travel journalism, media representation, and cross-cultural communication by highlighting how structural, cultural, and political factors shape the production and reception of travel media in Northeast Asia.

Keywords: travel journalism, media representation, destination image, Mongolia, China, television studies, cross-cultural communication

Introduction

Globalization has intensified the voluntary and involuntary mobility of people across borders. Among the various forms of movement, tourism has emerged as one of the world's largest economic sectors, driven by both business and leisure travel (Urry, 1990). As countries increasingly rely on tourism for economic and cultural exchange, media representations of travel destinations have gained scholarly attention for their role in shaping perceptions, constructing national identities, and influencing travel decisions (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Gartner, 1994; Gunn, 1988).

Television travel programs are a particularly influential medium in this context, as they present curated narratives of place, people, and culture. These programs are not merely entertainment—they serve as ideological texts that communicate values, aesthetic preferences, and socio-political perspectives (Hanusch, 2010). For audiences with limited direct experience of a country, such programs may be the primary source of cultural information, thus shaping mental constructs of destinations (Reynolds, 1965; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

This study offers a comparative analysis of travel programs from Mongolia and China, two neighboring countries with increasing cultural and economic interdependence through tourism. In 2024, Chinese tourists accounted for 18.3% of international arrivals in Mongolia, making China one of the key markets for Mongolian tourism. Conversely, Mongolia represents a

niche yet symbolically significant destination for Chinese tourists as part of cultural diplomacy and regional outreach.

Mongolia and China have distinct media landscapes and approaches to travel journalism. Mongolian travel programs often emphasize informative and critical content, though they are constrained by limited financial and technical resources. In contrast, Chinese programs tend to be visually elaborate, entertainment-oriented, and government-supported, reflecting broader objectives of national image-building and tourism promotion (Said, 1979; Munro & Richards, 2011).

Drawing on survey data from 491 respondents and content analysis of selected travel programs—namely Mongolia's *1000 Cities I Travelled* and China's *Welcome–Hello Russia*—this study investigates the stylistic, thematic, and ideological differences in travel programming. It contributes to the literature on media representation, tourism discourse, and cross-cultural communication by examining how travel television reflects and shapes cultural narratives in Northeast Asia.

Literature Review

Travel Journalism and Media Representation

Travel journalism has evolved into a significant genre within both the media and tourism industries. Often termed “couch travel,” this genre allows audiences to experience distant cultures vicariously and plays a key role in shaping perceptions of foreign countries (Hanusch, 2010). As Hanusch (2010) suggests, travel journalists function as a type of foreign correspondent,

not only reporting on places but also interpreting them through cultural, historical, and political lenses. This mediation influences how audiences understand global cultures and motivates potential tourists' destination choices.

Edward Said's (1979) work on Orientalism provides a critical foundation for understanding the ideological implications of media portrayals of foreign cultures. Said argues that Western media often constructs non-Western societies through a lens of exoticism and superiority. While Said's critique focused primarily on Western media, similar dynamics may be observed in travel journalism across other regions, including East Asia. In the context of Mongolia and China, travel programs may either reproduce or challenge national narratives and stereotypes through visual storytelling.

Image Formation in Tourism

The formation of a destination image is a multifaceted process that is significantly influenced by media content. According to Gunn (1988), image formation involves both organic sources—such as word-of-mouth and personal experience—and induced sources like media and advertising. Gartner (1994) expands on this by categorizing destination images into cognitive, affective, and conative components, emphasizing how media can trigger emotional and behavioral responses in audiences.

Gallarza, Saura, and García (2002) present a comprehensive model for understanding destination image, noting that it is the result of a complex interplay of psychological, cultural, and communicative factors. Their work underscores the importance of both content and delivery in shaping tourist perceptions. In the same vein, Echtner and Ritchie (1991) distinguish between common functional attributes (e.g., price, weather) and unique psychological attributes (e.g., atmosphere, friendliness), both of which are communicated through travel media.

Cultural Representation and Cross-Cultural Communication

Television travel programs are instrumental in constructing cultural representations that affect international understanding and dialogue. These representations are shaped not only by the content of the program but also by the cultural context in which they are produced (Munro & Richards, 2011). The framing of culture in media can either foster mutual understanding or reinforce existing prejudices, depending on how narratives are constructed, and which voices are amplified.

Urry (1990) highlights the interconnection between tourism and modern concepts of work and leisure, suggesting that tourism functions as a structured form of escape facilitated by media. Furthermore, the global circulation of travel content allows for broader cultural encounters, though these are often filtered through national interests and production constraints.

Media Systems and Policy Influence

The structure and governance of media systems significantly influence how travel content is produced and presented. In countries like China, where media is closely tied to government agendas, travel programs often serve as tools of soft power, promoting domestic tourism and shaping international perceptions in line

with state objectives (Zhao, 2008). In contrast, Mongolia's media system allows for more editorial freedom, but limited financial and technological resources affect the quality and scope of travel journalism.

Studies comparing media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) show that political, economic, and cultural environments play a crucial role in defining journalistic practices and content production. These structural differences are evident in the contrasting styles, formats, and ideological framings of travel programs in China and Mongolia.

Method

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine and compare travel programs in Mongolia and China. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research aimed to understand not only the structural and stylistic characteristics of the travel programs but also the perceptions and viewing habits of audiences in both countries.

Research Design

The research was conducted in two stages: (1) a survey of audience members in China and Mongolia, and (2) a content analysis of selected travel television programs. This combined approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of both media production and audience reception.

Survey

A structured questionnaire was developed to assess audience engagement with travel programs, including frequency of viewing, preferred programs, and perceptions of content quality. The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert scales and multiple-choice items) and open-ended questions to allow for qualitative insights.

A total of 491 respondents participated in the survey: 309 Chinese citizens and 182 Mongolian citizens. The Chinese respondents represented 18 provinces, 30 cities, and two autonomous regions (including Hong Kong and Macau), while the Mongolian respondents came from 21 cities and provinces, including Ulaanbaatar, Darkhan, and Erdenet.

Demographic information such as age was also collected. Among Chinese respondents, 54.05% were aged 21–35, while 71.43% of Mongolian respondents were under 20 years old. Data were analyzed to identify patterns in viewership behavior, platform usage (e.g., TV vs. mobile), and audience critiques of current travel programming.

Content Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of program content, a comparative content analysis was conducted on two representative travel television programs:

- Mongolian program: *1000 Cities I Travelled*
- Chinese program: *Welcome—Hello Russia*

These programs were selected based on popularity, accessibility, and representation of national travel media styles. The analysis focused on:

- Thematic elements (e.g., cultural representation, history, nature, food, and customs)
- Visual and production techniques (e.g., camera work, editing, use of effects)

- Narrative tone and ideological framing (e.g., promotional vs. critical discourse)
- Degree of government involvement or editorial independence

A coding scheme was developed to systematically evaluate the structure, format, and communicative intent of each program. Comparisons were made based on visual style, content richness, audience engagement strategies, and alignment with national tourism goals.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the purpose of the research and participated voluntarily. Data collected from the surveys was anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. The analysis of television content was limited to publicly broadcast programs, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards.

Findings

Audience Demographics

The study surveyed a total of 491 individuals, including 309 Chinese and 182 Mongolian respondents. The age distribution showed significant differences between the two samples. Among Chinese respondents, 54.05% were between 21 and 35 years old, while in Mongolia, the majority—71.43%—were under the age of 20. This suggests that the Mongolian travel program audience tends to skew younger.

Viewing Frequency and Platform Preferences

Viewing frequency varied significantly between the two countries. In Mongolia, 86.26% of respondents reported watching travel programs "sometimes," whereas in China, 66.99% selected the same option. However, the percentage of viewers who "never" watch travel programs was notably higher in China (24.6%) than in Mongolia (2.75%). The proportion of respondents who watch travel programs "often" was similar in both groups (Mongolia: 4.4%, China: 4.21%).

Device usage also revealed distinct media consumption patterns. 71.98% of Mongolian viewers accessed travel programs via television, while 55.34% of Chinese viewers preferred phones and laptops, suggesting greater digital media engagement in China.

Audience Perceptions of Travel Programs

Respondents from both countries expressed critical views of current travel programming. Among Chinese viewers:

- 58.58% described the content as overly promotional.
- 27.51% reported a lack of originality.
- 26.21% found the programs boring.
- 24.92% rated them as uninteresting.

Mongolian audiences were slightly less critical but still expressed concerns:

- 39.56% found programs too promotional.
- 23.08% noted a lack of freshness.
- 17.58% labeled the content as boring.

Despite these criticisms, 50.55% of Mongolian and 43.69% of Chinese respondents considered travel programs useful for travel planning.

Preferred Travel Programs

When asked to name their favorite travel programs, Chinese viewers selected:

1. *Sister Over Flowers*

2. *Travelling Around China*

3. *Faraway Home*

4. *Couple Journey*

Mongolian viewers favored:

1. *Backpacking Trip*

2. *1000 Cities I Travelled*

3. *A Mongolian Who Is Looking for Mongolians*

4. *To Japan with Tumurbaatar*

These preferences indicate both regional production trends and differing audience tastes in tone and format.

Open-Ended Responses: Desired Program Features

Open-ended survey responses revealed contrasting preferences for travel content. Chinese audiences desired documentary-style programs, emphasizing humor, realism, history, and culture, while also preferring minimal advertising. Respondents expressed interest in travel content that explores daily life, legends, rural lifestyles, and forgotten cultural practices.

Mongolian audiences emphasized realism, educational value, and cultural representation. Environmental awareness, archaeological themes, and the opportunity to explore lesser-known and remote areas. They also supported the idea of affordable, independent travel, and content that promotes scientific thinking and personal development.

Discussion

This study set out to compare travel television programs in Mongolia and China, analyzing both audience perceptions and the structural characteristics of selected broadcasts. The findings reveal major differences in production quality, narrative framing, and audience expectations, shaped by each country's media system, technological resources, and cultural values.

Audience Engagement and Media Consumption Patterns

The survey results demonstrate that while interest in travel programming exists in both countries, Mongolian audiences appear more consistently engaged, with a higher percentage watching at least occasionally and fewer respondents reporting complete disinterest. This may reflect differences in media saturation and the availability of alternative entertainment sources, as Chinese audiences have access to a broader range of digital and mobile content.

Device preferences also reflect a technological divide. Mongolian viewers primarily access travel content via television, while Chinese audiences increasingly rely on phones and laptops. This suggests that Mongolian travel programs may not yet be optimized for multi-platform distribution, limiting their reach among younger and more digitally active viewers.

Audience Criticism and Quality Expectations

Both Chinese and Mongolian respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the promotional tone, lack of freshness, and repetitive content in current travel programming. However, the criticism was more pronounced among Chinese viewers, possibly due to higher expectations stemming from greater investment in production quality and more competitive media environments.

The responses also suggest that audiences are increasingly looking for authentic, educational, and rich cultural content. This reflects global trends in travel journalism, where viewers seek programs that provide deep cultural insights, local perspectives, and unfiltered experiences (Hanusch, 2010). Both Mongolian and Chinese respondents emphasized the need for less commercialism, more realism, and a greater focus on culture, history, and daily life.

Differences in Production and Narrative Framing

The content analysis confirmed significant differences in style and production values. Chinese travel programs such as *Welcome–Hello Russia* benefit from state funding, advanced equipment, and government coordination, allowing for polished visuals, diverse formats, and detailed storytelling. However, this comes at the cost of editorial independence, as Chinese programs are often subject to censorship and designed to promote state-sanctioned narratives.

In contrast, Mongolian travel programs like *1000 Cities I Travelled* exhibit greater narrative freedom, with hosts able to discuss sensitive topics such as politics and social issues. Yet, budget constraints, limited technical resources, and tight production timelines restrict their visual and thematic scope. The result is a more informative but less immersive viewer experience.

These differences align with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media systems framework, which links media content and quality to broader institutional factors such as government regulation, market structure, and professional norms.

Cultural Perspectives and Travel Ideologies

Audience preferences reflect deeper cultural values. Chinese viewers emphasized aesthetic experience, emotional storytelling, and historical depth, which align with the country's broader emphasis on national heritage and soft power diplomacy. Mongolian viewers prioritized environmental awareness, realism, and personal development, pointing to a travel ideology that is educational and introspective rather than entertainment driven.

The contrast in tone—Chinese programs as visually poetic and Mongolian programs as content-oriented and modest—illustrates differing national attitudes toward travel, culture, and media. These distinctions are not only stylistic but also ideological, reflecting how nations position themselves and their citizens in a global tourism discourse.

Conclusion

This study provides a comparative analysis of Mongolian and Chinese travel television programs, exploring differences in audience engagement, program content, production style, and cultural representation. Through the combination of survey data and content analysis, the research highlights how media systems, economic conditions, and cultural priorities influence the nature of travel journalism in both countries.

Mongolian travel programs are characterized by their informative tone, editorial independence, and focus on local authenticity, but they are constrained by limited funding, technical resources, and a narrow range of program formats. In contrast, Chinese travel

programs are visually rich, well-funded, and professionally produced, supported by state institutions that use media as a tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy. However, these advantages come with ideological constraints, as program content must align with state narratives and avoid politically sensitive issues.

Audience responses from both countries reveal an ardent desire for more realistic, educational, and less commercialized travel content. Viewers value programs that offer genuine insight into culture, history, and everyday life, indicating a growing demand for travel journalism that moves beyond surface-level tourism promotion.

Ultimately, travel television plays a vital role in constructing national images, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and influencing tourist behavior. In an era of increasing mobility and global interconnection, the evolution of travel programming in both Mongolia and China will likely continue to reflect broader transformations in media, culture, and international relations. Further research could expand this comparison by incorporating other countries, platforms (e.g., YouTube, social media), and audience segments to better understand the global dynamics of travel media.

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