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An existential psychological perspective on Chinese career gap travel

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Abstract

This study examined travellers' reflections of meaning in career gap travel experiences, through an existential psychology lens. Specifically, it investigated how career gap travellers conferred and fundamentally shifted meaning in their lives. Eleven career gap travellers' reflections were interpreted through existential-narrative analysis. The study contributed to current knowledge by developing a career gap travel cycle including stages before, during and after the trip. The findings showed that career crises and existential anxiety for something more meaningful were the antecedents of career gap travel in the pre-trip stage. The trip itself comprised two stages: the early days of travel were depicted as pleasurable; however, long-term travel also involved existential challenges, such as anxiety and fear. The post-trip stage involved post-trip liminality and travel syndrome related to fear of failure and anxiety. The article concludes with a discussion of future research areas for career gap travel.

Keywords

career gap travel, existential psychology, gap year, narrative writing

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Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing number of Chinese tourists, both at home and abroad. Tourism researchers have suggested Chinese tourists' travel patterns deserve examination, as the new travel styles might have implications for both domestic and international tourism (Wu et al., 2015). One such topic triggering widespread interest among young Chinese people – while also attracting a great deal of media discussion – is career gap travel. In 2015, Gu Shaoqiang, a middle school teacher from central China's Hunan province wrote a one-sentence resignation letter: '*The world is so big, I want to have a look*'. It was posted online and quickly went viral, with many Chinese netizens discussing through social media how great it would be to experience career gap travel (Huang, 2016).

Gap year travel can vary, including volunteer tourism (Francis and Yasué, 2019; Lyons et al., 2012), overseas expeditions (Stott et al., 2015) and educational travel (Grabowski et al., 2017). Wu et al. (2015) discussed differences in gap year travel between China and western countries. The most popular period for gap year travel in western countries is pre-university; however, in China, due to the inflexible educational system, career gap travel is the most popular (Wu et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research addressing career gap travel, especially in a Chinese context, where working hard is highly valued and paid vacation is not yet a widely implemented policy (China Daily, 2018). Another reason for focusing on China, is that a large proportion of Chinese people do not identify as religious, yet at the same time, 'secular spirituality' emphasising personal growth and inner peace, seems to be strong among the Chinese population (Van der Veer, 2013). Further, the pursuit of spirituality is closely linked with existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophy primarily used to understand individual existence. It posits that each individual is unique in terms of understanding the world, good and evil and how one should live (MacMillan, 2009). Existential philosophy is popular in both career development research and tourism literature, including the application of and search for meaning and related existential concepts in the study of career decision-making, work values, career counselling (Maglio et al., 2005; Schultze and Miller, 2004) and career satisfaction (Ronkainen et al., 2015); the examination of authenticity and tourism (Brown, 2013; Kim and Jamal, 2007); existential angst and travel experiences (Shepherd, 2015); transformative experiences (Kirillova et al., 2017a); vacation cycles (Kirillova and Lehto, 2015); and spiritual experiences. However, there has been little application of existentialism in analysing career gap travel. To address gaps in knowledge regarding existentialism and career gap travel, and to contribute to a dynamic and holistic understanding of career gap travel, we did not simply attempt to extend current understanding from a general philosophical perspective, but instead integrate it into a number of established concepts in existential psychology, to gain deeper insight into the processes behind career gap travel.

Research background

Gap year

The concept of a gap year originated in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, and simply means a year off. Initially, it specifically referred to the time before entering university

(Wu et al., 2015). Gradually, the concept of a gap year expanded to describe 'any period of an adult's lifetime' (Wu et al., 2015: 160), including breaks ranging from post-university gap years, study breaks, to career breaks. Jones's (2004) definition of a gap year is widely used in tourism literature. According to Jones (2004: 8), 'a gap year is any period of time between 3–24 months which the individual takes out of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory'.

Gap year motivation has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention (Jones, 2004; Wu et al., 2015; Wu and Pearce, 2018). Wu et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive review of general motivations for gap year travel by using the push-pull framework. 'Push' factors include taking a break from study or employment, broadening horizons, informal learning, gaining life skills, enhancing one's soft skills, understanding oneself, enhancing one's CV, earning money, following trends, altruism, building civic awareness, enhancing one's status and religious reasons. 'Pull' factors include foreign cultures, the appeal of destinations, destinations with family connections and the positive impression of gap year tours. These studies undeniably played a significant role in understanding the phenomenon of gap year travel, especially individual desires to stimulate and influence gap year travel behaviours. However, specific antecedents of career gap travel require in-depth understanding, interpretation and analysis from an existential-psychological perspective.

Most studies emphasise that a gap year has positive effects, and the experience is good for gap-takers (e.g. Grabowski et al., 2017; Hermann et al., 2017; King, 2011; Wu et al., 2015). Positive effects include increased maturity and self-reliance (King, 2011), gaining cultural capital (Blackburn et al., 2005), increased personal growth (O'Reilly, 2006), establishing self-confidence (Calkin, 2014) and strengthening employability (Heath, 2007). Specifically, a pre-university gap year could develop social values and experiences necessary for better adaptation to college life (Rose Birch and Miller, 2007; Stehlik, 2010). When remunerated or voluntary work is involved, it is valuable to both individuals and society (Snee, 2014; Stott et al., 2015).

Contrastingly, negative effects of a gap year are scarcely mentioned in literature. It should be acknowledged that a gap year can be costly and time-consuming (Wu and Pearce, 2018). First, without sufficient funds, a gap year could place a person heavily in debt, before returning to education or employment. Second, without good planning, a gap year could become a wasted year (Jones, 2004). Third, people could experience reduced employability, as employers might not recognise skills gained during a gap year (Jones, 2004). Fourth, a long-term break from academic work and routine may have negative effects on motivation and progress (De'ath et al., 2002). Specifically, it could make a person unable to catch up with the 'rhythm of real life' or create unrealistic expectations (Liu et al., 2013).

Career gap travel in China

In China, competitive university entrance examinations and inflexible administrative procedures for older-age university entrants make pre- or post-university gap years hardly achievable. Thus, most Chinese gap year travel is in the form of a career break, taken by individuals in their late 20s and 30s (Wu and Pearce, 2018). Wu and Pearce

(2018) developed the term ‘gap time’ to differentiate between the term gap year in western countries, and summarised five characteristics of Chinese gap time travel. First, in China, gap-based vacations are mostly career gaps (Wu et al., 2015). Second, the age group of career gap travel of China is late 20s and early 30s, and slightly more are male than female. Third, the duration of gap travel ranges from 1 month to over 1 year, and the majority of gap-takers travel alone. Fourth, career gap travel is self-sponsored, rather than dependent on others. Fifth, the most popular destinations for gap travel are Europe, Southwest China (usually Yunnan and Tibet) and Southeast Asia.

Due to the private nature of career gap travel, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of career gap travellers; however, there have been fierce discussions on the Internet about this type of travel in China (Huang, 2016). Yet little is still known about the causes, experiences and effects of such travel in China.

An existential perspective on career crises and travel

Career crises, such as anxiety, stress, burnout and lack of meaning, have recently been given attention through an existential lens by scholars (MacMillan, 2009; Ronkainen et al., 2015). Savickas (2000: 60) suggested that the term career should be redefined as a ‘framework for personal meaning and self-management’. Likewise, the concept of vocation should also be reconceptualised from an existential perspective (Ronkainen et al., 2015), as it ‘complements the notion of career by addressing the assigning of meaning or sense making’ (Lips-Wiersma and Mcmorland, 2006: 150). An existential perspective holds that people strive to find meaning in their careers, and inner affirmation of why a career is worthwhile is particularly important for those working in high-pressure occupations. This affirmation may derive from beyond the self and personal profit, and may include some spiritual dimensions (Lips-Wiersma and Mcmorland, 2006). In fact, Lips-Wiersma (2002) found that if individuals could not find meaning in their careers, they would encounter a career crisis and attempt to change job paths. Additionally, Cohen (2003) posited that career crises or transitions could be understood from the existential perspective of ‘a boundary situation’, as described by Jaspers (1970: 179), or a situation in which a person has to evaluate meaning associated with one’s career, and the opportunities it provides for authentic existence, before making a transition. Further, Cohen (2003) stated this process will continue until one finds a career that provides a sense of authenticity and meaning. This is line with Maglio et al.’s (2005: 79) statement that ‘a career is a project of one’s adult productive life in which the struggle for authenticity is most acute’.

Existential concepts within tourism studies have long been established, with existential authenticity as the main focus. After Wang (1999) categorised different types of authenticity, the application of existential authenticity enjoyed enormous popularity in tourism studies. For example, Brown (2013) posited that tourism works as a catalyst for existential authenticity, while Kirillova and Lehto (2015) developed a five-phase vacation cycle model by employing concepts of existential authenticity and anxiety. In another study, Kirillova et al. (2017a) investigated the impact of tourism on the existential dimensions of authenticity and anxiety. Using similar existential concepts, Kirillova et al. (2017b), also studied the essence of transformative tourist experiences. However,

though a number of works advanced understanding of the impact of tourism on personal changes – especially transformative impact – we feel there is a paucity of research exploring the career gap travel cycle through an existential psychological lens, within a Chinese context. Thus, we attempted to address the construction of meaning by career gap travellers from pre-trip to post-trip, to add a comprehensive view to the field. Specifically, the present study addressed the following research question: What triggers people to take a career gap year, and how do they find meaning in their travels?

Theoretical framework

Existentialism emphasising the subjective meaning of human experience, uniqueness of the individual and personal responsibility reflected in choices provides a useful framework towards understanding the causes, experiences and effects of career gap travel. In existentialist philosophy, to live contrary to one's true self is considered living inauthentically, or in *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). Existential authenticity is a central concept of existential philosophy, depicting a state of being in which one is true to one's own values (Wang 1999). Both Sartre (1969) and Heidegger (1962) believed that 'all choices are situated and all situations involve choices, indeed, people can choose to live authentically or in *bonne foi* (good faith) even in a situation of oppression' (as cited in Brown, 2013: 179). Applying the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre to the tourism context, Brown (2013: 179) posited that tourism offers 'not an occasional chance to be truly oneself, but a reflective space that is conducive to self-insight and to the examination of life priorities, and that could be a stimulus for the choice of a life of good faith'.

Existential anxiety

Existential anxiety, also called angst, is defined as 'the apprehension cued by the threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality' (May, 1977: 205). Sartre (1969) stated that existential anxiety is motivated by the multiple choices we face and the different life directions each person carries, as well as understanding we are the ultimate decision-makers of our choices. Similarly, Heidegger (1962) posited that responding to the call of conscience means being ready to face anxiety. Additionally, Tillich (1954) categorised existential anxiety into three domains: anxiety about fate and death, meaninglessness and alienation and guilt and condemnation arising from not fulfilling one's authentic potential.

Anxiety has been viewed as the companion of authenticity, as anxiety makes people reconsider existence and start to take action towards reclaiming one's personal value system (Kirillova and Lehto, 2015). For instance, if a job is frustrating because one could not see the meaning in it, this may indicate a person lives inauthentically, which may prompt him or her to make changes more in line with an authentic way of living. Moreover, Kirillova and Lehto (2015: 115) stated that anxiety is a powerful motivator that has the capacity to work like 'a springboard to existential authenticity by transforming individuals and the world around'. Studies have shown that tourists might experience existential anxiety from pre-trip to post-trip (Kirillova et al., 2017b; White and White, 2004). Thus, for individuals who take time for reflection in the form of a gap

year and realise they need to change some aspect of their lives, anxiety may be one key factor.

Search for meaning and authenticity during travel

Travel, especially long-term travel, offers time and space for people to reflect and examine their lives, which is the central idea of existential philosophy's search for meaning and authenticity. Brown (2009: 184) compared travel to a psychotherapist, 'permitting the tourist a time of self-reflection'. Furthermore, there are several parallels between existentialism and psychotherapy, as both focus on the real and false self (a term first used by the psychoanalyst Winnicott in 1971). As such, existentialism is explicit in its attempts to apply these philosophical ideas and concepts to psychological theory (Van Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2005). Further, it focuses on essential life dilemmas and the big questions in life, and entails the importance of decisions and commitment to discovering individual truth. Moreover, there is a call for more applications of existential philosophical and psychological concepts and theories in tourism studies, especially in non-European and culturally diverse contexts (Kirillova, 2019).

Furthermore, Chinese career gap year travel needs such existential psychological analysis. All individuals experience constraints and limitations, contingencies upon their own existence and relate to their fates with a power to take some stand, to make decisions, no matter how trivial. These decisions (including the decision of career gap travel) often come to the fore at key points in life, especially when conditions force confrontations with existential authenticity around contingencies, constraints and limitations, including death. Anxiety arises as a powerful motivator for avoidance (repression) and the problems that entails (May, 1961). When avoidance also entails an intolerable abdication of essential responsibilities, individuals may seek a new, more authentic path, thereby seeking freedom through new choices and options. To discover these, and actualise potentialities not (yet) experienced through their normal existence, freedom for self-discovery may be sought. In the present study, a career gap year can be seen as a means of such self-discovery.

Methodology

The research paradigm underpinning this study is critical realism, which assumes a realist ontology, constructivism epistemology and naturalistic methodology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Since Polkinghorne (1988: 1) stated, narrative is 'the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful', a narrative approach was adopted in this study (Richert, 2010 ; Smith, 2007 ; Lieblich et al., 1998) . Narrative approach is 'focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell' (Moen, 2006: 5), which is also in line with the existential philosophical tradition emphasising possible meanings in experiences. Thus, the complementarity of narrative research and existential philosophy provides methodological cohesion among the aims, conceptual background and methods to ensure consistency in this study.

Sampling and data collection

In line with the research paradigms above, this study applied a multi-qualitative research design with methods of written reflective narratives and follow-up interviews to dig into the narratives from 11 participants (seven men and four women), who left their careers to take a gap year for travel. Purposive sampling with criteria was used to select participants. These criteria included first, all participants should be of Chinese nationality and had either completely quit or temporarily left their jobs; second, the travel period should be at least 3 months; and third, participants should be able to re-narrate and describe their experiences of career gap travel. The criteria were to make a distinction between long-term travel experiences during a career break and general travel (Jones, 2004). Participants were recruited through the first author's personal contacts and messages posted on popular online travel communities in China.

Selected participants were invited to write reflections of their career gap travel in a way that was meaningful for them. This method was suggested by Elizabeth (2008), who argued that participant writing has been neglected in gaining insight into human being's life-worlds, and the free-writing style allows participants to generate narratives of self-reflection related to ordinary and troubling dimensions of daily life. The method of participants' written reflections has a relative advantage over interviews, during which participants might be influenced by the interviewer's reactions to private or sensitive issues. The writing instructions were open-ended. The support questions covered before, during and after career gap travel by including the following questions: Please describe the process of deciding to take career gap travel; what were the best moments of career gap travel; what were the difficult moments in career gap travel; what were the changes associated with the career gap experience; how/why was the trip meaningful to you; and please describe your current life. A total of 54 pages containing 26,411 words from 11 participants were collected.

Participants were recruited from diverse industrial and cultural backgrounds, between 23 and 35 years of age and from mainland China (see Table 1). Participants' occupations prior to travel included IT, education, banking, real estate, media, automobiles and cosmetics. Among the 11 participants, two travelled with same-sex friends, three travelled with a partner and six were solo travellers. Destinations included Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Travel duration ranged from 3 to 12 months. All participants reported engaging in no volunteer activities during their trips. At the time of this study, they had returned from their career gap trip in the last 2 to 6 years. Pseudonyms for participants have been used, and identities and personal information removed, to protect anonymity.

Data analysis

Participants' Chinese narratives were first translated into English by the first author, who is fluent in both languages, and the English narratives were then shared with the other authors. Three steps were used to analyse the data. First, thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was conducted to extract emergent themes, with the aid of NVivo 11. Each participants' personal career history and prominent

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Name	Gender	Age	Occupation pre-travel	Duration (in months)	Date of travel	Place visited	Companion	Time since return	Current profession
Huang	M	30	Bank	12	2017	Egypt; Israel; Turkey	Alone	2 years	Self-employed writer
Yu	F	27	High school teacher	3	2015	Multiple destinations in Europe	Boyfriend	4 years	High school teacher
Yao	F	25	Cosmetics industry	4	2013	Cambodia; Nepal	Best friend	6 years	Self-employed freelancer
Lu	M	28	IT/Senior manager	3	2017	Multiple destinations in Europe	Alone	2 years	Travel photographer
Guan	M	29	Engineer	4	2013	Yunnan	Alone	6 years	Engineer
Xia	F	33	Journalist	4	2013	Australia, New Zealand, Cambodia and Vietnam	Alone	6 years	Self-employed freelancer
Liu	M	28	Real estate/Salesman	3	2015	Tibet	Alone	4 years	Self-employed inn-keeper
Luo	M	33	Commercial real estate	3	2015	Europe	Girlfriend	4 years	IT/Entrepreneur
Niu	M	24	IT/Salesman	4	2013	Cycling to Tibet/Tianjin	Friends	6 years	IT/Designer
Chen	M	27	Auto industry	5	2014	Lijiang; Tibet	Alone	5 years	Auto industry
Li	F	30	IT	12	2015	Multiple destinations in Europe and Asia	Husband	4 years	Self-employed freelancer

Table 2. Data extracts with codes, categories and themes applied.

Data extracts	Codes	Categories	Existential themes
I quit my job in August 2017 to fulfil my 10-year dream of traveling to Egypt. My thought was very simple at that time: on the one hand, there was a bottleneck in my job, and there was no room for a promotion in the company; on the other hand, I thought that, even [if I] quit that job, I could easily find a new job to start a new life when I came back. Though some people advised me to apply for maintaining the position but suspending the salary at the time, I did not follow, as I was worried that the company may not allow me to have a leave for more than one month. Also, I was a little bit careless about the continuation of my job; so, I didn't even talk to the supervisor – just directly delivered a resignation letter. (Huang)	1. Fulfil dream 2. No opportunity for promotion 3. Difficulties applying for holiday leave	1. Dissatisfaction with current job (2, 3, 4, 5, 6) 2. The job impacts life (3, 6, 9) 3. Boredom (7, 9) 4. The value of travel (1, 8)	Career crisis (1) Existential angst (2, 3) Search for meaning through travel (4)
Talking about my job, I had worked there for 14 months. I had to work for almost 14 to 15 hours per day. I do not have my personal life and suffer the difficulty of balancing life and work. Another thing is I do not like the work atmosphere of raping others' will under the pressure of my supervisor. As such, after one year's struggling, I decide[d] not to continue my current life. A long, deep travel seems to be a good way to review my life and to find a better self. (Liu)	4. Long working hours 5. High pressure 6. No freedom or private life 7. Lack of power to continue one's current job 8. Travel can be useful for life reflection		
I plan to leave Beijing, a place with heavy pollution. I am also tired of such a life of 'day in and day out'. It is lifeless here. After working for so many years, I feel that time goes faster and faster, especially during the past three years. I haven't learned anything and made no progress in my job. I really get bored of it. (Yao)	9. Boredom of day in and day out		

experiences were summarised. A report of emerging themes was created, both in Chinese and English. The final report was then forwarded to participants via WeChat, to confirm the main themes. Table 2 provided an example of the thematic analysis. Second, follow-up interviews were used to further confirm the themes based on participants' narratives, and the results were integrated into thematic analysis. During the process, all authors analysed the data individually and collaboratively. When different interpretations arose, the authors reflected on them critically. Third, the authors conducted a holistic narrative analysis of content and form, with snippets being interpreted within the context of the whole story (Lieblich et al., 1998). Holistic-content reading mainly focused on meaning in career gap travel stories, whilst holistic-form reading was used to 'discern the structure of the narrative, development of the plot and cohesiveness of what is told' (Ronkainen et al., 2015: 258).

It should be noted that interpretation of the narratives in this study was conducted through the lens of existentialism, which required the authors to pay more attention to how existential themes such as meaning, fear and anxiety or angst were expressed in participants' narratives. This study took the 'story analyst' approach to narratives, which was described by Smith and Sparkes (2009: 281) as 'an analytic process that considers stories as fundamental data for systematic, rigorous, principled narrative analysis'. Specifically, the interpretation process was: first, the authors made interpretations separately; second, research meetings were held to discuss contested interpretations; and third, considering the ambiguity of the concepts of meaning and angst or anxiety, the authors developed various explanations based on discussions in research meetings. Although there were slight differences over some trivial points, the researchers reached consensus on the storyline and chief content through continuous comparing and contrasting of key viewpoints and analysis.

Results and discussion

We followed Kirillova and Lehto (2015) and Smith and Sparkes (2009) in presenting career gap travel narratives through a pre-trip to post-trip timeline, using an existential lens. The first phase illustrated pre-trip narratives of crisis of meaning. The second phase described the search for existential authenticity through career gap travel. The third phase elaborated on the effects post-trip.

Pre-trip: Narratives of a crisis of meaning

Existentialist philosophy attempts to understand and provide answers to conditions and dilemmas people face. Crisis of meaning in existential philosophy refers to the state of one's life as frustrated by emptiness, boredom, hopelessness and pointlessness. Skaggs and Barron (2006) argued that a crisis of meaning would appear when an individual ignored the voice from his or her heart. All participants in this study manifested different levels and types of crises of meaning related to their jobs and life.

Career crisis as the catalyst of questioning life's meaning. Linder-Pelz (2002) summarised some causes of career crises as not enjoying one's occupational role or field, talents not

been recognised or valued by one's employer, and struggling to find a work-life balance. In this study, three participants identified a career crisis a the trigger for questioning meaning in their lives. Participants discussed two types of career crises: a crisis caused by the macro-industry situation and a crisis caused by a company's personnel structure adjustment. This extended Linder-Pelz's (2002) observations of the general causes of career crisis to some contextual factors; however, the deeper cause of taking career gap travel should be attributed to the need for existential meaning. This is in line with Pines' (1993) statement that career works as a socially constructed 'hero system' for meaning. For example, Chen reflected on his job as a salesman in the automobile industry, as he thought automobile manufacturing and sales belonged to old-fashioned businesses:

> Speaking about why I took career gap travel, I think it was purely because at that time, the whole automotive market was sluggish worldwide. The company was going to lay off workers. Though I was confident about my performance at the company, I also felt a little bit bored with the lifestyle of day in and day out, and I wanted to have a look around the world.

For Guan, he decided to quit his job due to the company's personnel adjustment, as his department merged with other branches:

> I had stayed in this company for ten years. If it had not been the adjustment of the personnel structure of the company, I would not have reflected on what I had done over the years. . .I would not have questioned my lifestyle and life goals.

Existential angst for something more meaningful. Participants' yearning for career gap travel was caused by a sense of dissatisfaction with meaningless work. This finding was not surprising, as Montgomery (2002) suggested that travel and creative activities are good ways to deal with career fatigue or crisis. Motivation for career gap travel, however, cannot simply be attributed to escape (Prentice, 2004). Specific motivations included the pursuit of freedom, self-challenges, explorations and seeking more possibilities in life. Participants addressed dissatisfaction with their stable nine-to-five jobs and lifestyles while searching for something more meaningful. Yao, who worked at a state-owned enterprise, stated, 'My working days at the company were comfortable during the year, and overtime was extremely rare. And there was almost no competition between colleagues. Despite the comfort and good pay, I could not learn anything, just day in and day out, like a machine. But even if I found the easiest job I could find, I still felt tired and always felt there was something missing in my life'.

Xiao, who worked for an enterprise directly under the central ministry of China, wrote, 'I had worked there for three years. The company is a state-owned enterprise under the central ministry. Actually, the platforms and development prospects were pretty good, I had interesting colleagues there, and the salary was average. If the full score is 100, I gave about 80 points for this job. I left my job because I was not willing to spend my whole life there. I wanted to find out if there were any possibilities for work and lifestyle'.

Liu, who worked for an Internet company with a good salary, stated, 'I do not want to stay at work until 11 pm every night, like a working machine. I want to have my own

life'. Rising existential angst due to job dissatisfaction becomes a trigger for career gap travel; however, it is courage that finally makes career gap travel a reality. Multiple participants stated it was not an easy decision to quit their jobs for career gap travel.

During the trip: Search for meaning and authenticity through career gap travel

Preference for long distance and cross-cultural destinations. Regardless of the reasons for travel, participants preferred new places and cross-cultural encounters. For example, Huang toured cities in Egypt, Jordan, Israel and Turkey; Yao and her friend backpacked in Cambodia and Nepal and enjoyed the scenery and local historical sites; Xiao, Yu and her boyfriend visited the natural and cultural sights of European countries; Lu toured cities in Japan and drove around the Baltic Sea and Mekong River; Guan immersed himself in Yunnan, enjoying the slow-paced lifestyle and interacting with locals and other travellers; Xia backpacked in Australia, New Zealand, Cambodia and Vietnam and experienced bungee jumping, sightseeing and zip lining; and Li and her husband took a road trip to Asia and Europe, visiting 25 countries. Participants' preferences of traveling to multiple destinations provided some support to Butcher and Smith's (2010) findings regarding gaining cultural capital by traveling more places and gaining more knowledge about the world.

Notably, although most participants reported the journey and experience were significant and meaningful, ten participants also mentioned the fatigue and hardship of long-term travel. This can be illustrated in Xia's narrative:

> In the beginning, I was excited about everything, but gradually I began to get tired and bored of carrying a big bag and walking around every day. If the scenery was not extremely beautiful, I would stay in a hotel and sleep. When I went back home, I got sick, because I was too tired. To be honest, I didn't enjoy the journey that much, and I really hated the poor road conditions in Cambodia. . ..So, it took me four months to realize that, actually, I still liked my previous job very much, it was just I needed to know how to balance work and rest. In fact, simply touring one place after another is also boring and meaningless.

Travel anxiety

Unlike previous studies emphasising only the positive effects of a gap year (Grabowski et al., 2017; Hermann et al., 2017), this study showed that travel anxiety – specifically anxiety induced by loneliness, homesickness and insufficient linguistic and cultural skills – impacted CGP. This was in line with Lyons (2010)'s conceptualisation of cross-cultural hardship travel. Further, travel anxiety also comes from travel expenses, uncertainty about the future and nervousness about visiting unfamiliar places, especially overseas (Ward et al., 2001). For instance, Huang stated, 'Even though I visited four countries in a very economical way to save some money, my bank account was almost empty after that. I was thinking how I could survive after the trip. . . Maybe I would have to live with my parents temporarily to look for the next job'.

Some participants also mentioned lacking money to finish the trip as a cause of travel anxiety. Ou wrote, 'I rode about 5673 kilometers (winding routes) and lost my wallet

half-way through the trip. I had to stay in an old and shabby youth hostel for the remaining journey, with only twenty yuan left in my pocket'.

Additionally, multiple participants mentioned travel anxiety related to visiting unfamiliar places alone. Yu noted nervousness when visiting Paris and some parts of Europe:

> In the third week of our trip, a terrorist attack happened in Paris. Lots of our friends sent messages asking us where we were and if we were okay. . ..We did not go anywhere on that day. We spent a whole afternoon rescheduling our travel plans for the remaining two months in Europe. It was like a formal meeting. The final conclusion was that the Nordic countries were too cold, too many refugees were in Central Europe, Spain was close to North Africa, and France was not stable. So, after exclusion one by one, we found that we could only stay in Portugal or Corsica. . ..The whole trip was like seeking safety in flight.

The anxiety induced by homesickness associated with long-term gap travel was illustrated by a statement from Yu,

> I still remember when I first arrived in Italy. I shouted that I would not get tired of spaghetti, even after eating it for ten consecutive days. But finally, I couldn't bear it at all after five days. Later, no matter what type of food from a Michelin restaurant or five-star recommendations from TripAdvisor, after eating, I still felt that only the white porridge and pickles from my home were the most delicious food. While looking forward to the next trip and next meal, I often missed the bed, sofa, rice porridge and pickles from my home at the same time.

Travel fear

In addition to these travel anxieties, six participants described travel fears at their destinations. Li wrote, 'I dared not fall asleep completely when traveling at night in some parts of Europe; I must hold my personal belongings tightly all night'. Similarly, Yu noted her boyfriend was robbed in Italy and described a scene on a train:

> Despite dressing in black or gray almost every day, my boyfriend was robbed twice. Cheaters, thieves, and the unknown were always emerging. I still remember that on the train to southern Italy, we were sitting in the middle of the carriage. I don't know from where and when, but our carriage was full of black people. After a while, the train attendants came to check the tickets. Suddenly, one of the black people quarreled with the attendant. The more they quarreled, the louder their voices became, and it seemed that they would fight. My seat was only 15 centimeters away from them. . ..I was thinking, if the person is saying 'I am going to take out of my gun', or something similar in Italian, I could not understand it at all, so what should I do? Fortunately, the person was pulled away later on, but the scene was really frightening.

The narratives of travel anxiety and fear in this study supported findings by Crotts (2004) and Williams and Baláž (2015) indicating that tourists from collectivistic cultures usually have a high level of uncertainty avoidance. The results were also in line with Brown and Aktas's (2011) illustrations of travellers' various anxieties regarding destinations, especially when traveling abroad.

Participants' narratives also included complex feelings regarding long-term career gap travel overseas. Though long-term career gap travel provided relative physical and

social isolation for the benefit of reflection and inner probing, the trip was not without stress, loneliness and sometimes, pain (Lyons, 2010). Chen described that he just went to the bathroom, and after coming back, his dishes were taken away, because nobody could keep an eye on his food for him. Xia mentioned that she was bitten by some kind of insect in Australia, then had an allergic reaction, with pustules all over her body. Even if she received ointment, she hoped somebody could help her apply it. The pain and itching spoiled her trip.

Notably, in their pre-trip narratives, all participants mentioned they wanted to seek meaning through career gap travel. Happy moments and difficult times during career gap travel, as well as intense engagement with travel partners and new people, made participants temporarily put aside their pre-trip questioning of the meaning of existence. As Li wrote:

> Despite being long term, career gap travel was similar to any kind of traveling I had conducted before, and one does not take the whole time to 'think about life' solemnly. Basically, one's former life is completely left in the 'before', with little review and reflection. When walking, I only focused on the road, I focused on the smell of rice while cooking, and I begin to think about the arrangement of my future life only two weeks before I returned home.

Post-trip: Finding meaning?

Almost all participants acknowledged the value of career gap travel in terms of personal growth, spiritual uplifting and self-fulfilment. Specifically, the value of career gap travel was increased by meeting new friends from different cultural backgrounds, trying new things, breaking previous stereotypes, challenging oneself and finding courage to face uncertainty. These findings supported previous studies on the positive effects of pre-university gap year travel (Grabowski et al., 2017; Hermann et al., 2017; King, 2011; Wu et al., 2015). Moreover, this study confirmed the negative aspects associated with career gap travel, such as financial struggles, anxiety, fears and loneliness. Nine participants suggested that one should not resign impulsively, though they did not regret their initial decisions. As Li wrote, 'Resignation will not change anything, nor will travel. What really determines the way of life is the accumulation before you resign and the choice of your next career'.

Post-trip liminality and existential angst

Post-trip liminality refers to a situation in which one has quit his or her previous jobs and the associated social networks, but has not yet found a new job or a new social network. Multiple participants mentioned that China's rapid economic growth and fierce job market competition could lead to a situation in which a career gap traveller might not be able to find a satisfactory job for quite a long time post-trip. Additionally, after leaving a job for at least 3 months, one's job skills might not necessarily be improved, or one might even become a stranger to one's previous work. Further, there is a possibility that an employer might think a person who resigned to travel must not be a reliable employee. These points can be illustrated by Lu, Guan and Li's statements:

> After my return from this trip, I thought I could find a job whenever I wanted, but in fact, I waited for nearly half a year, and I still could not find a suitable job! Because of my long working experience, plus the impact of the travel experience on myself, now I have started to think more seriously about how I want to develop my future career; as a result, it entered into the state of 'I am choosy about the new job; the job also chooses me, too'. (Lu)

Li discussed feeling alienated from a previous social circle, due to long-term career gap travel:

> I feel I am alienated from my previous friends, with whom I worked and studied, because I embarked on a long time and distance trip. Though we managed to catch up, when they talked about their jobs, gossip news of show business, old acquaintances, and so on, I couldn't give any comments and thoughts. I could not just show what I saw and heard during the journey. It is just like I no longer belong to that social circle.

For Li, a strong feeling of existential angst could be found through social comparison with classmates. She stated, 'some of my classmates in big companies have been promoted to high-level positions with higher salaries. I cannot be the kind of person my parents expected, who earns millions of dollars a year. I finally became the person who cannot even get a residence permit from Shanghai'.

Furthermore, post-trip existential angst can create uncertainty regarding one's future career. Liu now changes his job more frequently, and he explained why in his writing:

> After the trip, my life had not changed much in essence. What had changed was my mentality. The world in my mind is bigger, and I know very clearly that if you want to do what you like, it is very hard, but it is worthwhile to do so. Additionally, I feel I became more fickle-minded with grandiose aims, but modest abilities, after the trip. Since my career gap travel, this is my third job. I do not know how long I can do it, but I will try my best

Having confronted post-trip existential angst, some participants initiated significant changes in their lives, or even existential migration, while others went back to their previous lives, despite having a new mentality. This was not surprising as White and White (2004: 200) stated, 'long-term travel provides a neutral, transitional zone sandwiched between voluntary or imposed endings and new beginnings'.

Reconnecting with one's previous self, but with a new mentality. Four participants noted that although they went back to their previous careers and lives, they value their jobs, lives and the people around them more than before. They thought about who and what is most important in their lives, and they learned how balance life and work. This can be observed from Xia's statement: 'In the past, I was always curious about the world outside of China. I never stepped out of my country. I was born in China, then went to university, got married and found a job, working hard like hundreds of thousands of common Chinese people. I always thought how beautiful the outside world was. However, after traveling through so many countries, I found that even in developed countries, they have their social problems and inconveniences as well. There is no paradise in the world. But I can now choose to face my current life with a more open and peaceful mind after my CGP'.

Finding a new self with a new career. Participants who made significant changes were those who had very strong existential concerns pre-trip and were eager for an authentic life. Li, whose job was at an Internet company, became a part-time travel writer who works for the Lonely Planet. Lu left his nine-to-five job and became a travel photographer. Guan met his girlfriend in Yunnan during career gap travel and decided to reside in Lijiang, Yunnan province. Huang left Beijing and returned to her hometown to start her own business. All of them realised meaningful life changes. These findings can be compared and contrasted with the recent attention on existential transformation in the tourist experience (Kirillova et al., 2017b).

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to understand the career gap travel experience in a Chinese context, using existential psychological analysis, which enables exploration of angst, meaning searching and spirituality. Through analysis of their reflective narratives, we found that participants described a timeline of experience, starting from either a career crisis or an existential need for meaning before the trip. Then, phenomenologically, participants preferred long-distance and cross-cultural destinations to search for meaning, but experienced travel anxiety and fears, despite the experiential value of natural, cultural and humanistic encounters. However, after the trip, almost all participants experienced post-trip liminality and existential angst, due to an uncertain future. A final transformation was triggered after post-trip liminality, with some participants going back to their previous careers with a new spirit, while others entered a completely new occupational field to redefine themselves.

Since gap year travel has usually been depicted as a positive experience in terms of increasing employability (Heath, 2007) and improving social status (O'Reilly, 2006) in extant literature, this study contributed to providing a holistic view of the career gap travel cycle in a Chinese context, through an existential lens. Although the findings may be particular to Chinese career gap travellers between the ages of 25 to 35, it has new implications for understanding existential psychological models of vacation cycles (Kirillova and Lehto, 2015), travel anxiety (Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005) and fade-out effects of vacation (Kühnel and Sonnentag, 2011). Specifically, despite its conceptual nature, the existential psychological vacation cycle model acknowledged the liminal nature of the trip and the fade-out effect after the trip, but without mentioning the extension of liminality after the trip and lack of commitment to a previous or new life, especially for those who experience long-term gap year travel. Furthermore, the concepts of travel fear and transition were not explored within the existential vacation cycle model. Additionally, post-trip transformations were not the same for all the participants. Some participants reported travel did not change them, despite becoming poorer and unemployed. Others experienced a spiritual transformation, while others started to live a more authentic life.

Additionally, this study demonstrated and implemented the use of participants' narratives as data sources in existential psychology – a data collection method that had not been widely employed in tourism literature. Moreover, this study further confirmed that in the current consumer environment, it is far from enough to satisfy consumers' pleasure

experiences (Kirillova et al., 2017a). This is particularly important when considering consumers' experiences in the tourism and hotel industries, as the diversity and complexity of these experiences provide more occasions for meaningful encounters, even through hardship travel (Lyons, 2010). Tourism researchers could examine tourist satisfaction, motivations and intentions in the field of tourist experiences relating to self-challenge, making meaning and self-realisation. The unique existential concerns created by career gap travel, as illustrated in this study, provided a new research area in which issues of courage, authenticity and creativity, as expressed in and induced by career gap travel experience, could be an area of focus.

This study acknowledges several limitations. It is worth noting that the findings were based on analysis of the reflections of 11 career gap travellers. Although these narratives contain rich information, one should be cautious regarding generalising the findings to other career gap travellers. Further, the findings are placed within a Chinese context, where paid vacation policies are not well implemented. Thus, caution should be taken when generalising findings on Chinese career gap travellers to other ethnicities. As the data were collected after the trips and was based on participants' memories, there is a possibility of memory decay. Furthermore, narratives are just one data source, and the conclusions of this study are limited to information provided by this data source, leaving the possibility that other aspects of Chinese career gap travel might be missing. Thus, further research is required to examine whether there are any other existential psychological features existing among Chinese career gap travellers.

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