

Small encounters, big experiences – on the significance of tourists' passing encounters with residents

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5

6 **Title**

7 Small encounters, big experiences – on the significance of tourists’ passing encounters with
8 residents
9

10 **Abstract**

11 This research note introduces the concept of ‘small encounters’ and highlights its importance for
12 the tourist experience. Defined as situations where tourists briefly encounter residents, small
13 encounters are temporally brief, physically distanced, cursory in terms of involvement and often
14 revolve around everyday situations. The concept is developed and elaborated in a dialogue
15 between our own empirical findings from a larger study of Chinese tourists visiting Copenhagen,
16 Denmark, and the literature on social contact, gazing, and mundane tourism experiences.

17

18 **Keywords**

19 Small encounters, conviviality, tourist-resident, gaze, social contact, mundanity

20 Introduction

21 This research note highlights the importance of what we refer to as ‘small encounters’ with
22 residents for the tourist experience. It is based on a larger exploratory study designed to enquire
23 openly about Chinese tourists’ experiences while visiting Copenhagen, Denmark. The study
24 found that brief communication and interaction with the residents or simply gazing at them when
25 they perform their mundane everyday life were among the tourists’ best experiences.
26 Interestingly, these valued encounters with the residents were often brief and without much
27 interaction. This indicates that encounters need not be long, deep, or interactive to be valuable.
28 This finding adds new perspectives to research stressing that appreciated tourist-resident
29 encounters emerge from prolonged or intense connections (Fan et al., 2017; Fan, 2020; Pizam et
30 al., 2000). It also questions the prevalent (but also criticised) notion that tourists, especially
31 Chinese tourists (Chan, 2008; Fugmann & Aceves, 2013; Jørgensen et al., 2018; Prayag et al.,
32 2015), are only drawn to and derive pleasure from gazing upon extraordinary sights (Urry and
33 Larsen, 2011).

34 As such, it follows a relatively recent line of research exploring the less recognised aspects
35 of the tourist experience, including the convivial and mundane facets of local life in destinations
36 (e.g. Edensor, 2007; Frisch et al., 2019; Jørgensen, 2020; Larsen, 2008; Maitland, 2008). Despite
37 this research, it is notable that “... mundane aspects of destinations including environments and
38 daily lives of residents are still rarely treated as contributors to destination attractiveness in line
39 with traditional tourism attractions in tourism literature. Instead, they are seen as a sideshow to
40 the ‘proper’ attractions of a destination” (Jørgensen, 2020, p. 4). This is noteworthy because
41 some destination marketers are beginning to frame their marketing around mundane
42 attractiveness. One example is Wonderful Copenhagen’s 2020 strategy ‘The end of tourism as
43 we know it’, which positioned ‘localhood’ and local encounters at its core (Gravari-Barbas et al.,
44 2019; Wonderful Copenhagen, 2018). This strategy suggests that many tourists desire to
45 encounter and connect with residents in everyday situations and experience local
46 neighbourhoods. As they write: ‘locals are not a nice little sideshow, but, rather, one of the major
47 attractions of a destination’ (Wonderful Copenhagen, 2020). This research note contributes to the
48 existing literature by introducing and defining the concept of ‘small encounters’ and
49 demonstrating its importance to the tourist experience and hence tourism marketing.

50 Based on the findings and discussion, which we present in this research note, we define
51 ‘small encounters’ as situations where tourists briefly encounter residents. Small encounters are
52 characterised by being cursory in terms of involvement, communication, and/or physical
53 interaction. They can involve elements of reciprocity and brief exchanges of words, handshakes,

54 and gazes, but can also be performed merely by gazing at residents. As we will further outline,
55 'small encounters' may happen by chance; for example, when moving between attractions. They
56 often revolve around every day and mundane situations. Finally, they potentially become big
57 experiences when they create emotional effects and reflections.

58 **Method**

59 The study adopted a qualitative inductive methodology (Veal, 2017). The data consisted of
60 35 brief semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) with independent Chinese
61 travellers visiting Copenhagen for the first time. The interviews explored the types of attractions
62 they favoured and what they generally perceived to be attractive about the city. The interviews
63 were conducted at the departure hall in Copenhagen Airport and at various attractions in the city
64 between November and December 2019.

65 One-half of the respondents stayed in Airbnbs, the other half stayed in hotels or hostels.
66 Most respondents were in their 20s and 30s and had prior travel experience in Europe; their
67 average length of stay in Copenhagen was four days. The interviews were conducted in Chinese,
68 then translated and transcribed verbatim in English by two Chinese research assistants. The
69 transcriptions were crosschecked between the two interviewers/translators to ensure the
70 correctness of the translations.

71 The research design applied open, unprobed questions regarding their best experiences, to
72 ensure unbiased top-of-mind answers, followed by more detailed questions to ensure
73 opportunities to go further into depth on relevant issues. Claims about the importance of certain
74 elements over others are based solely on the responses to the unprobed part of the interviews to
75 avoid potential bias. A thematic inductive analysis (Silverman, 2006) of transcriptions identified
76 key themes.

77 **Findings**

78 *Small encounters between Chinese tourists and Copenhagen residents*

79 The interviewees were asked about their *best* experiences in Copenhagen. Many mentioned
80 famous attractions, but approximately half of the respondents cited encounters with residents.
81 When asked to exemplify these interactions, it became evident that these positive encounters
82 were small in terms of time, proximity, and/or involvement. For example, one respondent
83 explained that residents helped them find their hotel when Google Maps did not work: "My
84 Google Maps didn't work when I just arrived so I couldn't find the location of my hotel. A guy
85 helped me and he was very nice." Another respondent narrated that Copenhageners had kindly
86 instructed her not to stand in the bicycle lane: "If we walk or stand in the wrong path like the

87 bicycle path, they would remind us immediately.” Others described their experience of being
88 around residents who were smiling and friendly, seemingly living a happy life: “People here are
89 very nice and friendly, and I feel they are very happy. I feel everyone I met, from service people
90 to strangers, they will smile to you and they look very happy.”

91 These are examples where small encounters happen through direct interaction between the
92 tourist and resident. However, the interviews also suggested that small encounters may happen
93 merely through observation or gazing. While walking on the streets of Copenhagen, the Chinese
94 tourists noticed and were affected by the unfolding mundane street life. They describe how they
95 gazed upon and took photos of people cycling, running, walking, parents with children, children
96 playing, kindergartens on tours, and so on. They marvelled at how relaxed, life-affirming, and
97 convivial these practices appear in Copenhagen compared to their home cities and lives. The
98 experience gained through observation or gazing is exemplified in the following quotes:
99

100 ‘... we didn’t have any interactions with the local people on purpose, but we smiled back
101 if they smiled to us and had small talks when we went shopping. These were great
102 experiences, and we felt the people here are very warm. (...) I just felt everyone is so
103 happy here; they are not stressed at all, unlike we are in China. *This is very a touching*
104 *point to me*’.

105 Another said:

106 ‘Copenhagen gives people a feeling of relaxing, people here are very leisurely. *I really like*
107 *this feeling*. Cycling is also a very good way to relax, and maybe they are just wandering
108 around aimlessly, so the kids could see the city. (...) I saw many people biking and took
109 many pictures of people biking here; it presented a strong local lifestyle’.

110 These examples also illustrate how small encounters become big experiences when they provoke
111 affective responses. It may be argued that the tourists experience otherwise mundane everyday
112 life situations through an affective and emotional gaze. Such poignant gaze elevates their
113 experience.

114 Together, this illustrates the following four analytical points: First, few and brief encounters
115 with residents can be enough to create valued experiences, big enough to be at the top of mind
116 when asked about their best experiences during the visit. Second, such positive encounters can
117 happen through direct contact or through observation or gazing. Third, brief encounters can have
118 affective and emotional impacts, potentially ensuring a lasting effect. Fourth, these encounters
119 involve evaluations and comparisons with one’s everyday life at home. Together we
120 conceptualise these as ‘small encounters’.

121 The next section further develops the concept of ‘small encounters’ by discussing it against
122 the related concepts of ‘social contact’, ‘tourist gaze’, and ‘conviviality’.

123 **Discussion**

124 *Small encounters as a form of ‘social contact’*

125 A concept related to, yet different from ‘small encounters’, is that of ‘social contact’ in tourist
126 resident encounters. Fan (2020) argued that positive outcomes from tourist-resident social
127 contact could emerge in two ways. First, through ‘co-created relationships’, where tourists and
128 residents contribute and benefit. Here residents gain a sense of pride and well-being by
129 supporting tourism, while tourists acquire an enhanced experience and social connections.
130 Second, there are less favourable ‘scripted relationships’ with minor engagement between
131 residents and tourists. In this case, residents may benefit economically and experience limited
132 intrusion into their private lives, but tourists supposedly lose authenticity, personalization and
133 meaning in the encounter. Here, tourist-resident encounters are positive only if they have a
134 certain quantity (e.g. duration and number of encounters) and quality (e.g. strength, intensity,
135 and/or valence) (Fan et al., 2017; Pizam et al., 2000).

136 Our study suggests an additional option. As discussed, tourists can gain authentic quality
137 experiences and meaning from non-scripted encounters despite only minor engagement with
138 residents. The interviewees had brief but friendly encounters with residents in mundane
139 situations or were merely watching them as they performed their everyday activities. In these
140 encounters, limited recognition of the tourist’s presence – a friendly smile, nod, or short, polite
141 exchange seem sufficient to create a valued experience. Thus, our notion of ‘small encounters’
142 supplements the established understanding of how social contact can contribute to the tourist
143 experience.

144 *Small encounters as ‘gazing’*

145 ‘Small encounters’ also draw on the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry and Larsen, 2011) since tourists often
146 encounter others by gazing at them or visually consuming the situation. However, whereas the
147 tourist gaze is primarily directed at places, buildings, and objects, ‘small encounters’ are specific
148 to engagement with residents. For instance, Urry and Larsen describe the ‘anthropological gaze’
149 as the skill to ‘scan a variety of sights/sites’ and being ‘able to locate them interpretively within a
150 historical array of meaning and symbols’ (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p. 20). Moreover, whereas the
151 tourist gaze is often staged and tied up with the ‘extraordinary’, ‘small encounters’ are not staged
152 and often relate to the ordinary social life within destinations; however, in the eyes of tourists,
153 such ordinary social life can also seem extraordinary. This attention to ordinary social life leads
154 us to our third theoretical inspiration, which is Maitland’s work on ‘conviviality’.

155 *Small encounters as ‘conviviality’*

156 Our understanding of ‘small encounters’ also relates to what Maitland has loosely defined as
157 ‘the convivial’:

158 ‘... being around city residents and workers going about their daily routines was a valued
159 experience. The humdrum occurrence of seeing an office worker at their keyboard became
160 a point of interest, a pleasurable and convivial experience. (...) The emphasis is on the
161 everyday and an appreciation of the conviviality of the ordinary’. (Maitland, 2008, p. 23)

162 ‘Small encounters’ and ‘conviviality’ both address the positive contribution of distant and
163 mundane interactions between tourists and residents to the tourist experience.

164 Although there are similarities between the concepts, there are also differences. Maitland
165 argues that tourists appreciate convivial aspects because they visit certain places “away from
166 planned tourism areas and well-established tourism zones” (Maitland, 2008, p. 17). However,
167 our interviewees had valued ‘small encounters’ within, around, or between Copenhagen’s key
168 sights and tourist areas.

169 Maitland also suggests that only specific tourists appreciate mundane and convivial
170 experiences. These tourists are described as older repeat visitors who travel independently and
171 are likely to visit friends and relatives as the main purpose of their visit (Maitland & Newman,
172 2008, p. 232). This description does not apply to our interviewees, as they are culturally distant,
173 long-haul travellers, mainly first-time visitors, and are not likely to revisit the destination. This
174 finding is more in line with the research of Jørgensen (2020), who found that the seemingly
175 mundane lifestyles of residents “play an important role for Chinese tourists visiting the Nordic
176 countries – as motivators to visit and as tangible or intangible attractions during the visit” (p. 1).
177 It also supplements the findings of Larsen et al. (2021), who found that sightseeing tourists on
178 hop on-hop off buses eagerly glanced at and enjoyed the passing mundane street life of
179 Copenhagen when moving between big attractions. Thus, ‘small encounters’ are also part of
180 traditional sightseeing tourism.

181 Together, this indicates that conviviality may emerge within and not only outside ‘tourist
182 bubbles’ and for a broader group of tourists than indicated by Maitland. The close association
183 between ‘small encounters’ and the concept of ‘conviviality’ also suggests that ‘small
184 encounters’ may not be unique to the Chinese context.

185 *Small encounters and Chinese tourism*

186 Based on our initial findings alone, it could be argued that the importance of ‘small
187 encounters’ is unique to Chinese tourists. Many Chinese tourists travel at a relatively fast pace

188 with relatively short stays at each destination. This gives them little inclination or time to interact
189 with the residents for longer periods. Thus, ‘small encounters’ suit their particular way of
190 travelling. Research suggests that Chinese tourists are prone to ‘fill out the blanks’ by imagining
191 their experiences to align with their expectations (Li et al., 2019; Shepherd, 2008). It is possible
192 that our interviewees also do such imagining when they engage in small encounters, desiring and
193 expecting to meet happy and friendly Copenhageners. When not able to connect with residents
194 for an extended period or in a deeper dialogue, they might extrapolate their brief encounters to
195 meaningful engagement by imagining a more sustained connection. Thus, ‘small encounters’ can
196 act as cues to bridge the gap between experience and expectations for Chinese tourists. Research
197 also suggest that Chinese tourists are inclined to ‘cast a comparative “second gaze” (MacCannell,
198 2001)’ (Li et al.’s 2019, p. 507). This may also explain why our interviewees enjoyed casting an
199 self-reflexive, evaluating gaze on the everyday life of Copenhageners. But, whereas Chan (2006)
200 and Li et al. (2019) argue that this is part of the process of ‘patriotic identity reinforcement’, we
201 understand it as an reflexive association and comparison with their life at home.

202 With this being said, it is noteworthy that researchers have problematised the tendency to
203 reinforce an occident/orient divide by overestimating Chinese cultural and behavioural
204 uniqueness. Research also indicates that such ‘filling of the blanks’ is not unique to Chinese
205 tourists (Jørgensen & Ren, 2015; Li et al., 2021), and as argued, there are signs in the literature
206 that the importance of small encounters may not be unique to Chinese tourists.

207 **Conclusion and future research**

208 This research note has illustrated and discussed the importance of what we have termed ‘small
209 encounters’. We have defined ‘small encounters’ as situations in which tourists briefly encounter
210 residents. This can happen through brief interactions or gazing. We explained how the concept
211 relates and contributes to other tourism concepts, including ‘social contact’, ‘tourist gaze’ and
212 ‘conviviality’. We argue that sometimes little is needed to create valuable tourist experiences;
213 brief, distant, cursory, or mundane encounters with residents can be sufficient to create
214 memorable and meaningful experiences for tourists.

215 We have explored ‘small encounters’ specifically in relation to Chinese tourists, but based on the
216 literature also argue that it may well apply beyond the Chinese context. Future research must
217 explore if and how ‘small encounters’ matter to tourists of different nationalities and types.

218 Given that we have not evaluated or compared small encounters with more sustained social
219 contact, we do not claim that they necessarily provide equally powerful experiences. However,
220 our paper suggests that prolonged interaction or engagement is not a prerequisite for quality

221 tourist experiences through social encounters. Future research should explore the experiential
222 differences between short-and prolonged interactions.

223 The concept of ‘small encounters’ nuances prevalent ideas that tourism is mainly about gazing at
224 famous attractions, and that ‘convivial tourism’ and interest in mundane everyday life is reserved
225 for a small segment of independent travellers and only occur off the beaten track. We show that
226 tourists may not always gain their biggest experiences from the biggest attractions. In fact, this
227 may sometimes be the opposite, with big experiences emerging from small encounters. We do
228 not call for rigid distinctions between small and big experiences or differentiation between
229 tourists drawn to attractions and social life, respectively. Indeed, our key argument is that ‘small
230 encounters’ are part of traditional sightseeing tourism, that the in-betweenness (Mansfeldt, 2015)
231 of sightseeing is full of social encounters with residents – no matter how brief – and that these
232 encounters can be valuable tourist experiences. This has implications on how we understand and
233 develop tourist experiences, as well as for (destination) marketers as we have discussed in
234 relation to Wonderful Copenhagen’s new focus on meaningful encounters between locals and
235 tourists. By calling attention to the importance of ‘small encounters’, this research note sets the
236 scene for exciting future research into the significance of passing encounters with residents
237 across places and segments.

238

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