A visual analysis of a cultural tourism destination

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This research investigates how a relatively unknown town that is elected as cultural capital of Europe can use visual materials to attract visitors from totally different areas in the world, particularly China. The study uses visual cues for two purposes: first, to evaluate the motivating factors that lead travellers with different cultural background to select their travel destination, and second, to explore the influence of visual communication in the promotion of cultural tourism. The research studied the impact of visual information during several stages in the visit: before the visit in the decision-making process; during the visit in the experience stage; and after the visit in the post-experience evaluation. It was found that visual material can help to frame the experience in all three stages. For that reason it is advisable for destinations to employ some kind of visual identity system management to package the city image into a clear brand.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture, Leeuwarden 2018, Chinese visitors, destination branding, flanking research

Introduction

The European Capital of Culture project (ECoC) started in 1985 on the initiative of Melina Mercouri and Jack Lang, Ministers of Culture of respectively Greece and France (European Commission 2013). Each year two European cities are awarded this coveted title and in the past 30 years 60 well-known and less well-known cities have been granted this honour. As the title suggests, the ECoC is mainly directed at other European countries and its people. The ECoC needs to balance the interests of many stakeholders, both inside and outside the community (Lähdesmäki 2013, Vatter 2014), in what Ooi et al. (2014, 420) call 'the poetics and politics of the ECoC project'.

This research investigates how Leeuwarden, a relatively unknown town in the northern part of the Netherlands that was elected as ECoC, can use visual materials to attract visitors from totally different areas in the world, particularly China. The research is part of a longitudinal project that will monitor changes in the expectations and perceptions of the destination from the time before the town becomes cultural capital until two years after that event. This is the first in a series of flanking research studies that monitor the occasion. The aim of this first study is primarily to investigate the attractiveness of Leeuwarden as a destination in general and specifically the quality of the visual material that is used as promotion.

Cultural visitors

Visitors of cultural sites frequently use visual information to make their choice of a destination. Besides the internet they use brochures, books, TV programmes and on-line movies as visible mediators (Ooi 2002) and to minimise risks of the planned journey. Because of its lively quality, 'visual material

appears to be especially memorable and the salience that this confers may make it particularly forceful' (Joffe 2008, 85). This is especially relevant since 'there is increasing competition for customers – who have only a limited amount of time – and growing competition for coverage by the media' (Van Aalst & Boogaarts 2002, 208).

Recent years have seen a tremendous growth in the Chinese economy, and following that a corresponding increase in Chinese people that have both the desire and the means to visit foreign places, particularly in Europe (Guancha 2014). The first years of this exodus saw Chinese tour groups who tried to cram as many European countries as possible into one trip. In later years, however, these Chinese travellers have become more discerning. Especially returning visitors tend to organise their tours around certain themes and spend more time in each country. Some of the themes are heritage and culture (Dede 2013). ECoC is a concept that fits very well into this trend.

Leeuwarden has a number of features that could make it an attractive place for Chinese tourists to visit. It is the capital of Fryslân, a province of the Netherlands that is known for dairy farming, agriculture and water management, three topics of great concern in China, which suffers from problems in these areas. In the ECoC tender, Leeuwarden cleverly made use of this connection, both in the themes and content of the so-called Bid Book (Stichting Kulturele Haadstêd Leeuwarden-Ljouwert 2013) as in the visual imagery of the official logo (see Figure 1) and the adapted logo of Leeuwarden-Ljouwert 2018. The truth is that Leeuwarden has its own variant of the Frisian language and historically there has been tension between the capital and the surrounding countryside. Suddenly the town has become bilingual, adopting the official language of the surrounding province and even using

the Frisian name Ljouwert. This is a nice example of what Aiello and Thurlow (2006, 158) call 'the privileging of certain mythologies'.

Leeuwarden was the birthplace of Mata Hari, the notorious exotic dancer and spy during the First World War. A statue of Mata Hari is shown in Figure 2. M.C. Escher, the world-famous graphic artist was also born in Leeuwarden, incidentally in a house that today forms part of the Princessehof Ceramics Museum. Some examples of Escher's work are shown in Figures 3 and 4. Escher is well known in China, and the ceramics collection of the Princessehof Museum is one of the finest outside China. Recently the museum commissioned a series of ceramics that show the connection with Escher (see Figures 5 and 6). So with the fast growing number of Chinese visitors to the Netherlands (Gowling 2014) the question arose whether it would be feasible to attract Chinese visitors to this relatively unknown town.

China is slowly opening to the western world. On the one hand there has been an explosion of English language schools in many cities in China, on the other hand search programmes such as Google and social media such as Facebook are banned. Especially people who were born before 1990 often have limited command of English (Wang and Lam 2009) and this creates a barrier for them to appreciate the cultures of Europe. Thus it seemed appropriate to focus the research on other ways of conveying information to visitors, both prior to and during their visit.

Three phases can be distinguished in a tourist trip: making decisions about where to go and what to see, the tour itself, and the evaluation of the journey (see Figure 7, based on Wilson et al. 2012). In each of these phases visual material can play a part to help the visitor. At the same time it creates

Figure 1: Official logo of Leeuwarden 2018 with adapted logo

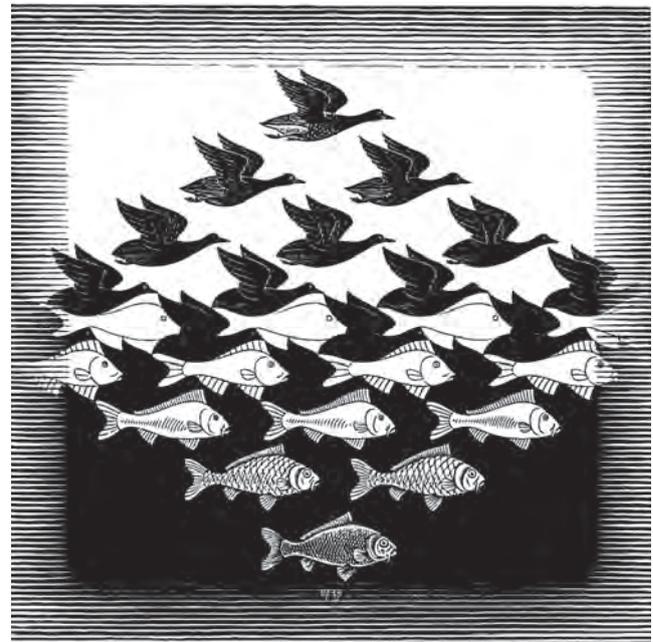**Figure 2:** Statue of Mata Hari

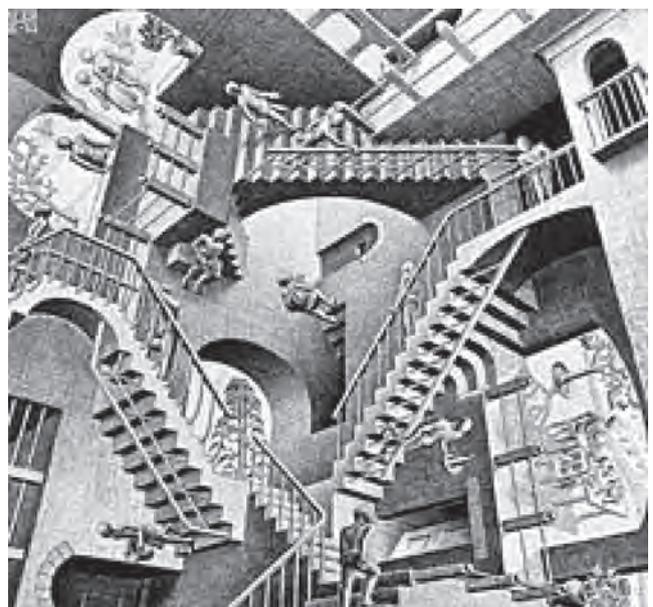**Figure 3:** Escher: Sky & water

Figure 4: Escher: Relativity

opportunities for the destinations to frame these three stages (Richards and Munsters 2010). Before the visit visual information acts as the visible mediator that helps to translate and interpret local cultural attractions to tourists and offers advice to help them decide where to go and what to do (Ooi 2002). As a result, 'new' tourism destinations strive to offer an image that is unique and clearly recognisable, in order to increase their attractiveness for tourists (Richards and Munsters 2010). During the visiting progress, visual information is more helpful than other kinds of introduction because images have a more direct impact on visitors and can be understood more directly by visitors from various origins. After the visit visual materials can help travellers to keep memorable experiences when they have finished their journey.

Research approach

The method of the research combines a qualitative phase with a quantitative one. In the first phase, half-structured interviews with open questions were used to collect the primary expectations and perceptions of Chinese visitors to Leeuwarden. In

the second phase of the study, an online survey was used to test whether the opinions from the first study correspond with those of a wider range of people in China.

First phase of the study
In the first phase, Chinese tourists to Leeuwarden were interviewed about their expectations regarding their visit and their experiences. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and then transcribed and translated into English. In the interviews the researcher made use of two different sets of visual information. Visual methods used in tourism research can be:
> (a) collected from secondary sources and later studied by relying on analyses such as content or semiotic analysis
> (b) created for the purpose of a research project by either the researchers or their research participants, or
> (c) used to create data by using techniques of elicitation (Rakic and Chambers 2012, 5).

Figure 5: Ceramics on table in museum Princessehof

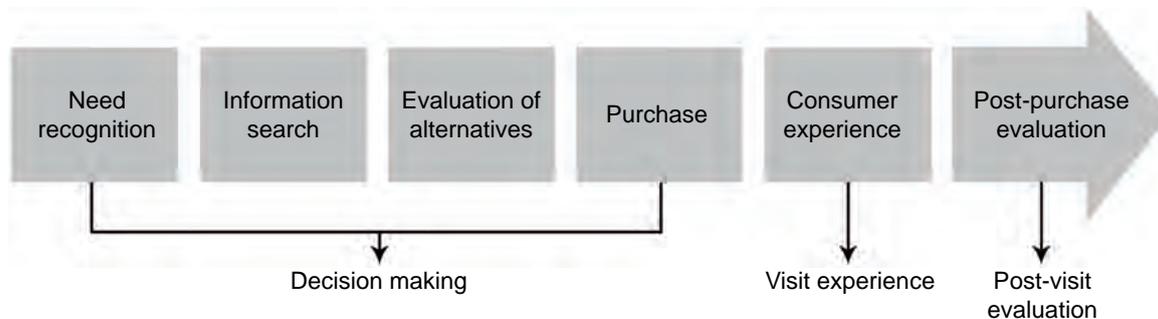**Figure 6:** Ceramics plate at Princessehof inspired by Escher

Figure 7: 6 Stages in consumer decision making (Based on Wilson et al. 2012: 30)

In this study we used the second and third methods. Firstly, photographs of attractions in Leeuwarden which tourists can obtain during their visiting were collected (see Figure 8: photo of Leeuwarden). For some of these photographs, matching pictures from China were selected with similar composition, light and objects (see Figure 9). Questions were asked such as: 'which picture is more attractive to you?' During the interviews photographs were shown to interviewees first and questions were asked that served as a 'lead-in' to a more focused inquiry into the influence of a destination's view in shaping of the city image. At other times, when the questions were about expectations, the interviewee would first describe their imagined idea of the destination and the interviewer would then present a matching photograph with the question whether that photo was a good illustration of the interviewee's description.

As a second visual cue the researcher designed a Chinese version of a tourist brochure for Leeuwarden that highlights some of the town's main tourist attractions (see Figure 10). As part of the interviews, the brochure was shown to the respondent and related questions were asked, like 'how would information in Chinese help you during your journey?'

Findings and analysis of the first phase of the study
The interviewer used the three phases of the customer decision-making model as a basic framework for the interview questions. Ten interviews were held with a total of fifteen people. Examples of questions and answers from the interviews are:

First phase:
Q: How does visual information affect your imagination of a destination?
> *A: It gives a very intuitive feeling of local conditions, which creates a strong attraction for me. Pictures always catch my attention. When I feel attracted to a place, I will begin to plan a journey there.*

Q: When you consult a travel agency, will printed visual information affect your decision making?
> *A: Yes, even if the pictures may seem somewhat beautified, I still want to experience the places of interest personally. If the pictures are a little bit exaggerated, I think it is also acceptable.*

Q: Do you think brochures placed at the airport or hotel will be helpful?
> *A1: Of course they will be. First of all, the information is attractive, but this city is quite foreign to me so I will also consider other issues, like what there is to do here, what transportation and so on. I will normally search the internet to develop a good itinerary and check it online. So if I see a brochure at the airport, I will not make temporary changes to my plans.*
> *A2: Yes, if time is flexible and the destination is very interesting, I will make temporary travel arrangements. If there is really no chance this time, I can still arrange it for my next journey, or recommend it to other friends who plan to travel.*

Second phase:
Surprisingly for the Dutch researcher, many Chinese tourists found the photograph of Leeuwarden in Figure 8 more appealing than the picture of Guilin in China (Figure 9). The reason that interviewees gave are that it is a picture of a European town that shows a beautiful blue sky and that is green, even when there are no leaves on the trees. This appeals to many Chinese travellers, who come from heavily polluted cities.

Third phase:
Q: Generally, will you keep visual information material during your journey?
> *A1: Yes, it is also a way of remembering my travel experiences.*
> *A2: I keep it as a souvenir of my journey, because it is well designed and, the most important thing is that it is exclusive and unique.*

After conducting the interviews, the interviewer performed a first content analysis on the Chinese version of the interviews. Subsequently both the interviews and the codes were translated into English and discussed with the Dutch researcher.

The analysis generated the following categories:
• Personal status
• Travel preferences
• Information collection method
• City image
• Attention to visual information
• Significance of visual information
• Authenticity of information in tourist brochures.

Figure 9: Photo of Leeuwarden, Netherlands

Figure 9: Photo of Guilin, China

城市速写

座落于荷兰北部的历史文化名城莱瓦顿Leeuwarden，始建于十二世纪初，1504年起成为弗里斯兰省首府。十六至十八世纪以生产金、银器闻名，现为著名的乳品工业中心。莱瓦顿风光秀丽，气候宜人，更以其独特的弗里斯兰本土文化当选为2018年"欧洲文化之都"。城中随处可见古老的运河，景点非常集中，步行，自行车骑行或运河游船是游览这座城市最好的交通方式。游客可以用一天的时间信步徜徉于古镇小巷，参观博物馆，品尝当地美食，感受古老的欧陆文化。莱瓦顿又是一座典型的大学城，这里拥有古老的历史却又不乏青春活力，市井繁华中兼有宁静平和，精巧怀旧的小情致却也从不拒绝简洁明丽的现代气息。

莱瓦顿，一座能给你带来

惊喜 的城市!

文化看点

如果说数学逻辑是画家们广泛的弱点，那么埃舍尔就会是个奇迹。这位20世纪画坛中独树一帜的天才就出生于莱瓦顿。埃舍尔的作品多以平面镶

看点之视错觉大师埃舍尔 嵌、不可能结构、悖论、循环为特点，明明是向二楼上去的楼梯却不知为什么返回到了一楼，鸟儿在不断的变化中却不知什么时候突然变成了鱼儿，这就是埃舍尔所描绘的幻想的异次元空间，它具有不可思议的征服力。

若您走多了水泥森林，若您听厌了暮鼓晨钟，卷草纹与罗马柱也渐渐淡了，那么，来看看一片大路的边缘怎么样。细窄的巷子远远去了，尖顶的塔楼远远去了，除去了人文主义的，广阔的原野与海岸，骏马和鸥燕，这里还有另一重的欧罗巴...

看点之弗里斯兰马

在远离故土的这座典型欧洲小镇，您却不难发现青花瓷的身影，可若细细观瞧，那青釉婉转同勾勒的却尽是异域情怀。这便是明青花与外销瓷的延伸，欧洲本土瓷器。位于莱瓦顿市中心的大师埃舍尔M. C. Escher故居，现作为公主瓷器博物馆princessehof对外开放，这座博物馆以收藏欧洲和亚洲的瓷器闻名于世，馆藏丰富，涵盖明清青花，五彩以及各代名窑精品。也有大量亚洲各国及伊斯兰世界展品。更是探寻欧洲瓷器发展演变历史的绝佳去处。

看点之明青花与欧洲瓷

俗话说，站在岸上学不会游泳。亲身的工作经历，与真实顾客的沟通交流，让我们在校学生为将来步入社会打下坚实的基础。学以致用，学有所长。

Figure 10: Tourism brochure for Leeuwarden in Chinese created by Shenghan Zhou

An example of the coding is:

Finding of interview:

Q: When you travel, do you pay particular attention to visual information? What information helps you most?

A: Yes, because this is my occupational habit; in particular, outstanding visual design has always caught my attention. Graphical guidance is also very important for communication, especially in other countries with different languages.

Codes: Attention to visual information; significance of visual information.

Detailed method of the second phase of the study

Following the coding of the first study, an online survey was designed as a quantitative study to test whether the opinions from the first study also make sense for a wider range of people. The categories from the content analysis served as a basis for the items in the questionnaire. The Chinese brochure was also presented in the online survey. The survey consisted of five demographic questions, followed by eleven multiple choice questions about general travel behaviour. The main part of the survey consisted of 17 binary questions, 25 5-point Likert scale questions, and 8 multiple choice questions. Several of the questions allowed respondents to add extra comments. These 50 questions targeted specifically the use of visual information and Leeuwarden as a potential destination.

Example item in questionnaire:

Q: During your journey planning, does visual information have great significance for you? (5-point scale: 1 = not agree at all; 5 = totally agree):

(1) I am particularly sensitive to visual information, so publicity pictures of a destination are very appealing to me

(2) Information communicated through visual materials is more real, and it helps to build an image of the destination

(3) I rely on visual information; information only in text seems dull

(4) Visual information plays a good supporting role, but the more detailed explanation of the text is also essential

(5) I do not trust visual information because the pictures possibly do not represent the real world.

The sample of the second study may be called a mix of purposeful sampling and convenience sampling. It consisted of a group of 204 young professionals in China who work in the media and design industry and who are familiar with, or at least interested in the cultural features of the destination. Most of them attended the same design programme at Fuzhou University, in Fujian, China, as the Chinese author of this article. That made it convenient to reach them and to obtain a good response. At the same time their interest in culture would align with the target group of a ECoC.

Findings of the second phase of the study

The sample consisted of 57% females and 43% males. The median age (66%) was between 26 and 35. Most (62%) hold a bachelor's degree and 11% have a master's degree. Their main occupation is designer/illustrator/copywriter (32%) and half of them graduated between two and five years ago.

The respondents like to travel. Half of them travel up to two times per year, and the other half travels three times or more.

The main occasions are leisure or special events and exhibitions. Their travel preferences are shown in Table 1.

Natural landscape and cultural heritage sites are their main preferences. Table 2 shows that they spend a substantial portion of their disposable income on travel.

When asked about their travel destinations, 37% stated that they have never been abroad and 16% have been only to a nearby foreign country (see Table 3).

Almost half (47%), however, have been to Europe and half of those have been to the Netherlands. A few have even been to Leeuwarden, probably to visit their friends studying at Stenden University. When asked where they find information about their journey, 91% said that they use the internet, and only 1% of these travellers consulted a travel agency.

Use of visual information

The main section of the survey asked the respondents about their use of visual information. Questions were asked about visual information in the planning stage of a journey, but also during and after a trip. When asked how significant visual information is during the planning of a journey, the majority of the respondents answered that it is quite important (see Table 4).

The respondents find it easy to understand visual information; it helps to create their expectations and they rely on it. This reliance on visual information becomes even stronger during a visit when they do not have the leisure to study information in a foreign language (see Table 5).

Table 1: Travel preferences of travellers (more than one answer possible; *N* = 204)

Traveller preferences	*n*	%
Natural landscape	156	76.5
Wild adventure	30	14.7
Cultural heritage sites	142	69.6
Rustic exploration	33	16.2
Small town roaming	75	36.8
Leisure experience	81	39.7
Other	4	2.0

Table 2: Proportion of dispensable income spent on travelling (*N* = 204)

Share of disposable income	*n*	%
10% spent on travel	55	27.0
20%	107	52.5
50%	41	20.1
75%	1	0.5

Table 3: Experience of travelling abroad (*N* = 204)

Experience of travelling abroad	*n*	%
Never been abroad	75	36.8
Have only been to nearby foreign country	33	16.2
Have been to Europe	40	19.6
Have been to the Netherlands	49	24.0
Have been to the city Leeuwarden	7	3.4

Visual information is significant for the respondents, and they are particularly attentive to it.

The section about the attractiveness of Leeuwarden after reading the Chinese brochure yielded a very positive response. Based on the information provided, the respondents deemed Leeuwarden an attractive city. They saw it as a typical European town worth a visit, especially if it can be included in a travel itinerary. Especially the local museums created interest (see Table 6).

All in all, the museums in Leeuwarden created a favourable impression: 71% of respondents answered in different questions that they would take time to visit the museums to see the collections.

The final question was about saving visual information, such as brochures, maps, tickets, etc. Fifty-five percent of respondents answered that they always keep these as souvenirs, while 40% stated that they do so when the material has been well designed.

Discussion

The demographics show that the group of respondents to this research is rather special. They are young professionals who work in creative professions. This makes them particularly susceptible to visual information. On the other hand, they are not so different from the returning visitors that Dede (2013) talks about. They are well educated, mobile, willing to spend a substantial part on their income on travel, and interested in culture and heritage. They may well be the avant-garde of the large number of Chinese that are expected to visit Europe (Gowling 2014, Guancha 2014).

At the same time these young and well-educated travellers still prefer information about the destination in Chinese. This reliance on visual information is partly created by incomplete foreign language competency. These young professionals still find it very convenient to have a travel brochure in their own language (M = 3.98, SD = 0.87). It gives them confidence, and they attach high value to it.

Leeuwarden will be European Capital of Culture in 2018. There will be a large number of visitors, and visitors from outside of Europe might be a substantial part of these, particularly people from China and other Asian countries. Visual information can play an important role in attracting these people by framing their expectations, but also their experiences and even their memories (cf. Aiello and Thurlow 2006). For the city of Leeuwarden it would be wise to invest in corporate visual identity management (Bosch 2005). Also the role of the museums is not to be underestimated (Van Aalst and Boogaarts 2002). It would also be wise to invest in flanking research that monitors the progression of the ECoC project (cf. Ooi et al. 2014) and the role visual information plays in the expectations and perceptions of the visitors.

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Table 4: Significance of visual information in journey planning, on a 5-point scale (1 = not agree at all; 5 = totally agree; N = 204)

Item	M	SD
I am particularly sensitive to visual information; pictures of a destination are very appealing to me.	4.03	0.92
Information communicated through visual materials is more real; it helps to build an image of the destination.	4.36	0.81
I rely on visual information; information only in text seems dull	3.52	1.12
Visual information plays a good supporting role, but the more detailed explanation of the text is also essential	3.91	0.95
I do not trust visual information because the pictures possibly do not represent the real world	2.93	1.14

Table 5: Significance of visual information while travelling, on a 5-point scale (1 = not agree at all; 5 = totally agree; N = 204)

Item	M	SD
I am particularly sensitive to visual information; visual communication is more intuitive for me	4.18	0.81
Information communicated by images is more understandable, especially in another country	4.55	0.72
I'm good at using graphics (logos) to identify a location or the usage of a facility	4.04	0.81
Compared to remembering road names, I prefer to use a (graphic) map	4.48	0.78

Table 6: Intention to visit a local museum (N = 204)

Intention to visit museum	n	%
Yes, I usually choose some representative cultural destination in my plan	87	42.6
If the local museums are special, I would choose to visit them	91	44.6
If I have sufficient time and no other destination attracts me, I would choose to visit a museum for a while	16	7.8
No, I'm not interested in museums; I feel they are a waste of time	10	4.9

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