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Research Paper

Chinese behind the wheel: Factors affecting their satisfaction with international self- drive holidays

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to assess the factors influencing the satisfaction of Chinese tourists when they undertake self-drive international vacations. There are few existing studies about this independent travel market. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to gather initial views about the attributes contributing to self-drive satisfaction. A questionnaire-based survey was then employed in Shanghai. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to test the factors which significantly affected tourists' satisfaction. Analysis of the data reflected some of the findings from limited previous studies of other international groups: the scenery, road facilities, and available activities all have a significant positive impact on satisfaction. However, for the Chinese drive tourists, the responses of the local community to their trip, as well as key environmental issues, notably air quality, are distinctively important concerns. Implications are identified for international destination management organizations which are interested in promoting to and developing this self-drive Chinese market.

1. Introduction

Driving to a new destination with friends and family has been seen as a rewarding activity in itself, not merely as a means to reach a destination (Moscardo & Pearce, 2004). Being able to get behind the wheel enhances the flexibility of the tourists' itinerary and improves their access to more remote parts of a destination (Belasco, 1981; Carson & Taylor, 2010). Some benefits of this dispersal include bringing income to rural and regional areas and easing some of the congestion in city tourism sites (Laws & Scott, 2003; Sykes & Kelly, 2015; Wu & Pearce, 2016a). Building on these ideas, Fjølseth and Fyall (2015) argue that drive tourism is a catalyst for enhancing sustainable change in some emerging markets.

In the last five years, self-drive tourism has become one of most popular travel styles in China (Liu, Zhang, & Nie, 2012). The growth of this activity has been stimulated by increases in disposable income, improved paid holiday times, the development of a safer road network, and the dramatic rises in the number of privately owned automobiles (Jin & Wang, 2016). The Chinese are, however, not satisfied with driving in China. A group of pioneering tourists have started to drive in other countries, including in neighboring regions (e.g. South East Asia) as well as in other long-distance destinations (e.g. Australia and the USA) (Chan, 2006; Wu & Pearce, 2014). Considering the growing

numbers of Chinese outbound tourists, the self-drive market from this source has the potential to be quite large in the near future. The aim of this study is to understand factors contributing to the satisfaction of these international Chinese self-drive tourists. The work is planned as a descriptive, empirical study, seeking to isolate key influential factors relating to drive tourists' satisfaction through a sequential process rather than testing a theoretical framework. In the genesis of tourism studies on emerging topics and new markets, it can be argued that building an understanding of the dimensions of a topic and phenomenon can be a valuable precursor to developing deeper conceptual insights (Gomm, 2004).

2. Literature review

Drive tourism has been an important component of the tourism industry in many western countries for some time (Prideaux & Carson, 2011). Travel within the drive tourism sector includes day trips as well as extended travel in automobiles, motorcycles, four-wheel drive vehicles (4WDs), and recreational vehicles (RVs) (Prideaux & Carson, 2011). There are two key areas of study: firstly destination/route management, and secondly the analyses of drive market segments. Publications on destination/route management are somewhat limited and less immediately relevant to the interests of the present study

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(Carson & Cartan, 2011; Hallo & Manning, 2011; Hanrahan, Maguire, & Boyd, 2016; Hardy, 2003; Olsen, 2003).

Research about the behavior of drive tourists is more popular. Studies in this area cover different segments of the drive tourism market, for example, the senior and recreational vehicle using tourists (Pearce, 1999; Holloway, Green, & Hollway et al., 2011; Mahadevan, 2014; Viallon, 2012), parties of family tourists (Pennington-Gray, 2003; TRA, 2012), and international drive groups (Blackman & Haworth, 2013; Lohmann & Zahra, 2011). Using the types of vehicles tourists drive as a basis for classification, studies have explored issues concerning RV tourists, 4WD tourists, motorcycle tourists, and car-based tourists (Prideaux & Carson, 2011). In terms of the origins of tourists, the existing studies are mostly about drive tourists from mature markets, for example, North America (Counts & Counts, 2001; McHugh & Mings, 1991), Oceania (Hardy, Carter, Beeton, Olsen, & Horneman, 2006; Pearce, 1999), and Europe (Denstadli & Jacobsen, 2011; Viallon, 2012). Due to the changes in world tourist flows and the strong development of emerging economies (Li, 2016), a number of studies on domestic drive tourism markets in emerging economies have recently emerged (Liu et al., 2012; Lohmann, Santos et al., 2011; Yu, Wang, & Scott, 2011). Further, some researchers have noticed trends in the international tourist drive market, for example Chinese tourists undertaking RV trips in Australia (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

In terms of research themes, studies about drive tourists' behavior have covered a diversity of topics including building an understanding of the group culture and lifestyle (Hardy & Robards, 2015; Hardy, Gretzel, & Hanson, 2013; Higgs & Quirk, 2007), rally participation (Wu & Pearce, 2016a), tourists' motivations (Carson, Prideaux, & Taylor, 2009; Hardy & Gretzel, 2011), specific interests and preferences (Hillman, 2013; Lane & Waitt, 2007), social interaction (Holloway, Green, & Hollway, 2011), travel patterns (Lohmann & Zahra, 2011; Shih, 2006), community engagement (Hass, 2013; Onyx & Leonardo, 2010), and safety issues (Wilde, 2009; Wu, 2015).

One gap in this literature is direct work on international tourists' satisfaction with drive tourism. Tourist satisfaction is, of course, a key topic in tourism and hospitality research (Kozak & Kozak, 2016), and developing an improved understanding of the factors influencing international drive tourism satisfaction is central to this study. A few existing studies about drive tourists' satisfaction do provide some directions for the present work. In an early review of the drive tourism work, Pearce (1999) noted that the activity was satisfying because it was relatively easy to do, fitted in well with gender roles for men and women, and offered a degree of independence, privacy and flexibility for its participants. Hardy (2003) reporting on self-drive tourism in the United States, explored the key factors for the successful development of touring routes. She reported that for the Cascade Loop in Washington State and the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail in the USA, the scenery was a key feature shaping the success of a route. Nevertheless, this factor represents only a part of the possible issues influencing the driving tourists' good times. Denstadli and Jacobsen (2011), working in Norway, examined how aspects of travel motivation, the desire for visual experiences and an array of activities were important motivations in route selection. They also observed that the perceived qualities of road facilities affected tourists' driving satisfaction and loyalty towards two travel routes in their part of Scandinavia. They also noted that the weather could have a significant influence on drive tourists' satisfaction. Further, Fjelstul, Wang, and Li (2012) analyzed the online reviews about campgrounds and suggested six factors influencing American RV travelers' satisfaction. These six factors were campground attributes, campsite attributes, outdoor activities, surrounding area, campground policies, and the staff.

It is notable that the satisfaction studies about drive tourists have concentrated on domestic drivers or drivers from neighboring countries in the western context, and little attention has been paid to examples of

international tourists who choose to drive in another culturally different country. In the changing dynamics of global tourism flows, the number of tourists traveling out of China and indeed out of Asia is becoming a globally important topic (Pearce & Wu, 2016). In a recent large scale survey of Chinese outbound tourists, World Tourism Cities Federation (WTCF, 2016) indicated that self-drive tourism is considered as one of the most popular new activities that Chinese tourists are interested in experiencing in the near future. Some of these outbound Chinese tourists are hiring cars or RVs or, alternatively, borrowing vehicles from their international friends or relatives to explore the visited destinations. This trend is less apparent within Asia as it is possible to hire a driver for a relatively modest fee. For example, in Indonesia it is possible to hire a car and driver with a very good price (e.g. US\$30 per day). In western countries, however, such services are considerably more expensive, and to avoid such costs, Chinese tourists can choose to drive themselves.

In one study of this topic, Pearce, Wu, and Chen (2015) assessed more than 10,000 pictures posted by Chinese tourists who wrote blogs about their driving experience along the Great Ocean Road, an iconic Australian drive route. They identified that Chinese tourists were impressed with the scenic views, the encounters with local animals, the driving culture, the distinctive accommodation, local food, commercial activities and the historic sites. The opportunities to observe and interact with the local community and their lifestyle were also highly appreciated by the Chinese. Case studies and views coming from specific situations represent a start to understanding the determinants of satisfaction. The more generic factors influencing drive Chinese tourists are clearly worthy of attention and researching this topic at the broad level may produce a range of forces not uncovered by the kinds of specific studies done in any one setting.

The aim of this study is therefore to expand upon these formative research efforts. The research seeks to assess directly a rich set of themes which may influence international Chinese self-drive tourists' satisfaction with their experience. Two research methods, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire based survey, are employed in sequence. The former method assists in identifying the potential attributes, while the latter examines the relative power of these themes in shaping satisfaction.

3. The interview-based study

3.1. The process of semi-structured telephone interviews

Initially semi-structural telephone-based interviews were undertaken in December 2015. The participants were recruited through two approaches. Firstly, on-line travel communities where Chinese tourists post rich blogs about their travel experience (Wu & Pearce, 2016b), were accessed. Qyer, which focuses on independent overseas travel, was selected as being particularly valuable for the detail available in the posted blogs. Those who wrote blogs about their overseas self-drive experience in 2014 and 2015 were firstly identified. Online personalized invitation messages were sent to 91 of the posters. The research project was introduced and the researchers' identities were disclosed. Positive replies were received from 22 of the blog writers. Fourteen respondents were available for interview at mutually convenient times. The second approach adopted was through three key informants, including a tour guide, and two personal contacts, all with some extensive outbound travel experience. They were requested to help locate some suitable interviewees. Ten contacts were made, and six of them were finally interviewed. In all 20 interviews were conducted. By using a combination of approaches as outlined, tourists from different parts of China were contacted and included in the sample.

All the interviews were voice recorded with the participants' permission. The interviews lasted from 17 to 46 min. They were helpful in specifying the attributes influencing Chinese drive tourists' satisfaction. Table 1 presents the profiles of the 20 interviewees.

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