Exploring the travel patterns, preferences and recommendations of Chinese university students living in Australia

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ABSTRACT

China is an important and growing market for the Australian tourism industry, yet our understanding of what Chinese independent tourists seek in the way of experiences is limited. Studies in Europe, USA and Australia show that Chinese international students tend to travel extensively while studying overseas, and consequently are able to provide insights into the needs, preferences and perceptions of the emerging Chinese independent market. Using Chinese tertiary students studying in Australia as participants, this research explores their preferences for, and perceptions of, Australian tourism products. Responses from surveys and follow-up focus group interviews reveal that iconic attractions, nature-based activities and photography are particularly attractive to this market. The Internet and word-of-mouth advertising are important sources of information; while costs, distances and lack of time are barriers to travel. Personal safety is also a key concern in natural environments. Students' travel plans for visiting friends and family and their suggestions for tailoring tourism products to meet the needs of independent Chinese visitors are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

The Chinese population has become more affluent in recent years, a trend that has seen a corresponding growth in the number of Chinese tourists travelling overseas (Sparks & Pan, 2009). Records indicate that since the start of the millennium, Chinese outbound tourism has more than doubled to approximately 80 million trips worldwide (Baggio, 2013). The number of Chinese tourists travelling to Australia has also increased dramatically, and in the year ending September 2012, China usurped the United Kingdom to become Australia's second-largest source of international visitors (Tourism Research Australia, 2012). This trend is predicted to continue, with the 2020 *Tourism Industry Potential Report* (Tourism Australia, 2004) forecasting that by 2020, the Chinese tourism market will become Australia's biggest source market and will contribute between $4.6 billion and $6.3 billion to the economy.

Despite the rapid rise in Chinese arrivals, we are only just beginning to understand this market's travel motives, needs, preferences and perceptions. Studies exploring international tourists' experiences in an Australian context have traditionally focused on aspects such as the facilities, activities and services offered at tourist attractions and destinations (Chen & Chen, 2010). Although these are useful in building a picture of tourists' expectations and perceptions, there has also been a recent recognition that tourists' attributes and characteristics are important in determining the psychological outcomes of participating in visitor experiences. For example, it is widely believed that differences in tourists' perceptions, expectations, beliefs, needs and preferences are all likely to impact on how sites are viewed and experienced, and that these differences are likely to be related to the individual's cultural background (Poria, Reichel, & Brian, 2005). This suggests that to capture this market effectively, we need to understand common preferences, perceptions and needs of Chinese visitors, as well as identify factors that either facilitate or hinder their access to various tourism attractions, services and experiences.

As well as an overall increase in the numbers of Chinese visitors travelling to Australia, there have also been more Chinese visitors choosing to travel independently rather than in tour groups (Cai, 2014). Unlike package travellers in a structured group with structured itinerary, these independent travellers generally only book a minimum of their transportation and accommodation arrangements prior to departure (Hyde, 2008; Tourism Australia, 2012).

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Researchers often note that regardless of whether they are travelling independently or in groups, Chinese visitors are difficult to access due to language barriers, restricted itineraries, and very short international trips (Weiler & Yu, 2007). To overcome these challenges, the current research samples from a group that is not limited by language difficulties and short stays, namely, international students from China.

International students are not generally categorised as tourists as their study commitments generally exceed the one year stipulation of 'tourist' (Weaver & Lawton, 2002); however, researchers have argued that this market regularly participate in a range of short trips and should therefore be considered as unique segment in the domestic tourism market (Min-En, 2006; Shanka, Ali-Knight, & Pope, 2002). Indeed, the propensity for Chinese students to travel in university holidays has been noted by researchers in Europe, USA and Australia (Field, 1999; Huang & Tian, 2013; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003), with some researchers referring to Chinese international students as China's first wave of independent travellers (King & Gardiner, 2013). As such, this market can provide a valuable insight into the travel needs and behaviour of the emerging and rapidly expanding Chinese independent traveller, not only for Australia but for other international destinations.

To further explore the needs and preferences of the Chinese market as well as investigate opportunities for developing products that appeal to Chinese visitors travelling independently, the proposed study examines the preferences, perceptions and travel needs of Chinese students studying in Australia via questionnaires and follow-up focus group interviews. Researchers were particularly interested in ascertaining students' current and prospective travel experiences, perceived barriers and facilitators to travel, planned visits by family and friends (VFR), and suggestions for how tourism experiences can be enhanced to appeal to the Chinese market.

2. Literature review

2.1. Chinese outbound tourists: motives, preferences and perceptions

Before the policy of 'reform and opening', temporary travel outside of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was rare. This situation changed when the Chinese government decided to gradually liberalize the practice of international tourism (Taunay, 2013). In 1997 China's Approved Destination Status (ADS) scheme was formally promulgated to allow Chinese citizens to travel in groups to foreign countries which had been granted ADS status, for leisure, at their own expense, and on private passports. In 1999, Australia became the first western country (along with New Zealand) to be granted ADS (Tourism Australia, 2012).

Despite the fact that 83.2 million border crossings in 2012 elevated the PRC to the status of the world's largest outbound tourism source market, research into this phenomenon remains limited (Arlt & Burns, 2013). As Arlt and Burns (2013) explain, even in China, tourism research has traditionally focused on tourism management issues within China. This focus is gradually changing, however, with researchers in China's key overseas travel destinations starting to explore the travel motives, preferences and perceptions of this rapidly emerging travel market. For example, a study conducted with 175 Chinese visitors in Brisbane, Australia (Packer, Ritchie, & Ballantyne, 2011) suggests that Chinese tourists want to see famous Australian attractions, natural landscapes, cities, beaches and Australian wildlife. They are interested in taking photographs, walking on the beach, touching wildlife, eating Australian cuisine, meeting locals, and learning about the Australian lifestyle. Respondents expressed high satisfaction with aspects

such as seeing attractions and beaches, and with other aspects of their visit, such as cleanliness of accommodation, service, personal safety, and the friendliness of the local people. They were less satisfied with opportunities to learn and find out about Australia, particularly in relation to accessing information in Chinese, accessing maps, and experiencing the Australian lifestyle. They were also disappointed with the limited opportunities to walk on the beach, touch wildlife, and eat the local cuisine.

Similar results were reported by Weiler and Yu (2006) who surveyed 401 Chinese visitors as they departed through Melbourne airport in Victoria, Australia. Respondents felt the most satisfactory aspects of the visit were the quality of the natural environment (mentioned by 22% of the sample), quality of specific tourist attractions (mentioned by 19%), and seeing beautiful scenery (mentioned by 16.5%). Twelve per cent also listed experiencing Australian lifestyle/culture. While contact with locals was a 'satisfier,' it was also an area where the travel experience fell short of expectations. In fact, 88% of respondents wanted more contact with locals than was experienced. The main reasons were to learn more about the lifestyle and to gain an understanding of Australian culture and values. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who were more experienced travellers were also more likely to want contact with locals. It should be noted, however, that experiencing Western cultures does not usually extend to visiting 'cultural' attractions such as visiting museums, galleries, theme parks, theatres, and special events because it is difficult for those from a non-English speaking and Confucian background to understand Western operas and sports (Yu, Weiler, & Ham, 2001).

Many of the respondents in Weiler and Yu's (2006) study also expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of food/restaurants (mentioned by 14%), poor service hours (also mentioned by 14%) and issues related to duty-free shopping (mentioned by 5% of the sample). Similar responses were obtained by Hossain, Salma, and Rolin (2004) and Li and Carr (2004), who reported that Chinese visitors' satisfaction with Australia's natural attractions, friendly people and the climate was high, but that they were less satisfied with shopping and dining experiences. Given that the Euromonitor International (2013) has identified the two main reasons for outbound leisure trips as sightseeing and luxury shopping, these perceptions of Australia's shopping opportunities are a concern. One of the factors attributing to the low satisfaction with shopping may be the unethical traditional practices of forced shopping and payments for activities not covered in the fixed tour itineraries (Dwyer, King, & Prideaux, 2007; Schaal, 2013). It is important to note that one of positive aspects of China's new Tourism Law, which came into effect on 1 October 2013, is to eliminate malpractices like Zero-Dollar tours based on broken promises and forced shopping (COTRI, 2013). Tourism Australia (2014) claims that this legislation has the potential to both improve Chinese travellers' experiences and deliver benefits to the Australian tourism industry.

Some of the responses obtained in the studies reviewed to this point may reflect the fact that Chinese tourists tend to travel in tour groups, both within China and overseas (Huang & Weiler, 2010). This trend can be attributed to a range of factors including limited English language competency, lack of overseas travel experience and the controlled nature of overseas travel by Chinese tourism organisations. Most Chinese visit Australia as part of a guided tour. In many cases, guided tours are relatively short and rarely offer opportunities to interact with locals (Weiler & Yu, 2006). Despite this shortcoming, Sparks and Pan's (2009) survey of 548 potential tourists in Shanghai revealed that this was still the preferred mode of travel for approximately two-thirds of their sample. The researchers did stress, however, that approximately half the sample expressed a preference for individual travel if the holiday was more than one week's duration.