



## Chinese model for mass adventure tourism



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Domestic experiences shape outbound expectations.
- Chinese rafting is passive mass tourism in modified rivers.
- Western rafting expects individual safety responsibility.
- Chinese model has ~80 million participants already.
- Cultural differences apply across outdoor tourism.

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### ABSTRACT

China has evolved a new domestic model for river-based adventure tourism, a form of passive mass tourism characterised by short trips, in small unguided rafts without paddles, on heavily modified watercourses with exclusive control of access, receiving up to 10,000 clients per site per day. This is very different to international models, which expect much greater individual involvement and responsibility for safety. Client satisfaction is moderate and repeat business low, but the Chinese domestic model nonetheless generates a billion-dollar annual turnover nationwide, with participation to date by around one quarter of China's 18–35 year-olds. This domestic model shapes the expectations of Chinese tourists travelling overseas, with implications for practical safety and satisfaction, and theoretical tests of culture-linked expectation disconfirmation.

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### 1. Introduction

Most recent analyses of adventure tourism indicate a high degree of homogeneity worldwide, with participants travelling internationally to undertake the same activities in different places (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Buckley, 2006, 2007, 2010a; Carnicelli-Filho, Schwartz, & Tahara, 2010; Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2012, 2013; Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie, & Pomfret, 2003). Here, in contrast, we describe and analyse a large-scale adventure tourism activity with ~100 million participants, which is restricted solely to mainland China, and has previously been described only in Chinese-language academic and popular literature. We argue that this domestic model shapes expectation of outbound Chinese tourists, with broader implications. The activity, known as piaoliu, involves descents of heavily-modified low-flow natural watercourses in small unnavigable rafts, with up to 10,000 clients per

day. It has some similarities to a fairground flume ride (Poff, Larson, Spencer, & Shimoda, 2006) and some to Western-style whitewater rafting (Buckley, 2009), but is different from both.

There are apparently no previous examples where any commercial tourism activity has reached such a large scale without any analysis in the Anglophone travel literature. It seems that this has happened partly through linguistic confusion. The direct Chinese translation for rafting is piaoliu, but the direct English translation for piaoliu is river drifting. In China, piaoliu refers both to Western-style whitewater rafting, offered commercially by a small number of expatriate tour operators on the great rivers of the western provinces; and also to Chinese-style whitewater drifting, offered commercially on much smaller whitewater watercourses in the eastern provinces. Most of the Chinese operations are known as piaoliu ziyou, free river drifting, which means that there are no guides, oars or paddles.

In the English-language literature, Western whitewater rafting tourism has been examined from a variety of perspectives, including product structure and packaging (Buckley, 2006, 2007, 2009); communications (Buckley, 2010b); client motivations

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(Buckley, 2012; Fluker & Turner, 2000); client experience (Holyfield, 1999; Holyfield & Fine, 1997; Jones, Hollenhorst, Perna, & Selin, 2000; Wu & Liang, 2010); guide choreography (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999); emotional labour (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013; Jonas, 1999) and economics (Northeast Natural Resource Centre [NNRC], 1997; Siderelis & Moore, 2006). All of these studies assumed that the Western model of whitewater rafting is standard, and few felt it necessary even to describe that model in any detail.

In Chinese-language academic analyses of piaoliu, the main focus has been on the strengths and weaknesses of commercial operations and management systems (Chen, Luo, & Wen, 2001; Hu & Wang, 2008; Huan, 2009; Li & Bao, 1995; Li & Zhong, 2007; Lu & Lin, 2009; Luo, 2008; Qin, Jiao, & Yan, 2009; Wang, 2005; Wen, Chen, & Yang, 2002; Wu, 2007; Xia & Liu, 2009). Lin and Li (2004) and Zhou, Luo, and Chen (2007) examined the advantages of operational standardisation. Yang, Huang, Li, and Chen (2006) argued that improved environmental management would help in brand building. Kong, Huang, and Zhu (2005) investigated the role of climatic variability on rafting in Zhejiang Province. Zong and Zhi (2007) examined risks from landslides. Fu, Tian, and Tong (2009) identified scenery as the key influence on satisfaction for 150 piaoliu participants in Sichuan. All of these Chinese-language analyses assumed the Chinese model of piaoliu as standard, and none described it in any detail or compared it to Western approaches.

There are thus two separate bodies of research literature, published in different languages in different journals. By studying the Chinese tourism products and tourist motivations directly, we show here that the English-language and Chinese-language literatures actually describe different activities. Very few Chinese citizens have taken part in Western-style whitewater rafting, because these tours are expensive and require prior outdoor experience; and very few inbound Western tourists have purchased piaoliu tours, because these are advertised only in Chinese and sold largely as components of domestic tour packages. From a practical perspective, Chinese tourists familiar with piaoliu, who purchase whitewater rafting tours in other nations, will find that the Western product does not at all match their prior experience and expectations. This has significant implications both for safety and for satisfaction.

Here, therefore, we used a mixed methods approach to characterise and analyse the Chinese domestic whitewater adventure tourism sector. Our first aim is simply to document a large and previously undescribed component of the global tourism industry. Our second aim is to provide a basis for comparison with similar sectors internationally. Our third aim, perhaps of greatest general interest, is to show how an apparently small cross-cultural misunderstanding, in this case from translation of the terms rafting and piaoliu, can generate significant practical concerns for the safety and satisfaction of tourists travelling overseas.

## 2. Methods

We analysed the Chinese domestic piaoliu industry in five successive steps. First, we identified and mapped all known commercial operators in the subsector. To do this, we used a combination of Chinese-language internet searches, domestic travel-agent brochures and other marketing materials, regional tourism organisation catalogues and portfolios, and snowball sampling of those involved in the industry. This is the same approach which would be used to generate a database of commercial operators in any country and industry subsector. Second, we selected a set of leading operators, using four criteria: greatest geographical concentration of operators; longest history of operations; largest numbers of clients; and most conspicuous and ubiquitous marketing. We obtained this

information from the same sources as above, plus the websites and marketing materials of each of the operators. We used these criteria in order to select the core or archetypes of the piaoliu sector, those operators which best represent patterns in the sector as a whole.

Thirdly, we conducted on-site audits of each of the selected enterprises, in order to characterise typical piaoliu products. Kristen McDonald, and in some cases also Duan Lian, Sun Lin, Chen Lan Xue visited each of these companies, took part in their tours, observed operational procedures, and conducted informal interviews with staff and clients. We took particular note of aspects such as: the scale of operations, the length of each tour in both time and distance, modifications to watercourses, the types of watercraft used, the mode of embarkation and disembarkation, the proportions of clients arriving on package tours, client preparedness and clothing, loan or sales of equipment and accessories, the content of pre-trip briefings, safety equipment and procedures, aspects of environmental management such as litter control, and the behaviour of clients and staff both on and off the water.

Fourth, we examined client motivations and satisfaction through a large-scale quantitative analysis. Chinese-speaking researchers KM, DL, SL, CLX distributed Chinese-language survey questionnaires on-site to 2080 tour participants, immediately after disembarkation. The authors also provided verbal explanations and further details if requested, and collected completed questionnaires. The surveys contained standard questions on participant demographics, and asked participants to rate the importance of 11 independent factors for motivation and 11 for satisfaction, using 5-point Likert scales. For analysis, we first compared response patterns for each of the 22 items independently, between the different sites and enterprises and between participants of different age and gender, to check whether they should be considered jointly or separately for subsequent analysis. We then graphed the frequencies of each Likert-scale response, for each of the 11 motivation factors and each of the 11 satisfaction variables separately. We used broken-stick graphs, which enable patterns to be visualised and compared directly, and also allow assessment of central-tendency of bipolarity in each set of responses. Broken-stick displays are commonplace in other disciplines. They are apparently novel, but nonetheless valuable, for presentation of Likert-scale data in tourism research. To test statistically for any differences in response patterns between the 11 items in each set, we used the amalgamated chi-square technique adopted by Ollenburg and Buckley (2007). That is, we aggregated the two lowest (negative) and two highest response (positive) categories for each factor, ignoring the central or neutral response; arranged the factors from highest to lowest ratio of positive to negative aggregate scores; and tested for differences between adjacent factors using 2x2 chi-square tests. We used this coarse but robust categorical approach, since Likert-scale responses are ordinal variables. Post-hoc range tests based on *t*-test statistics derived from means and standard errors, though widespread for Likert-scale data in social sciences research, are not strictly valid statistically.

Fifth, we conducted a small-scale qualitative study, through semi-structured interviews with 27 senior stakeholders in the industry. These included: enterprise owners and managers, life-guards and guides, sports and travel bureaux, the National Watersports Bureau, and relevant research organisations. We identified these individuals in two stages. First, we used subsidiary information compiled while constructing our national database, together with a large-scale snowball sampling of individuals involved, to produce a list of stakeholders across all components of the piaoliu sector. We then stratified this list by stakeholder groups as above, and constructed a ranking of approximate seniority within each group, based on position title and reputation amongst

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