Tourism Management 69 (2018) 422–433

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman

Examining Chinese adult children's motivations for traveling with their parents

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Family travel
Chinese adult children
Chinese senior parents
Travel motivations

ABSTRACT

This study examines Chinese adult children's holiday travel with their parents as a unique type of family travel. A netnographic examination of 158 detailed online blogs was conducted to explore the adult children's motivations for taking such travels. The results of the netnographic study revealed that the motivations for traveling with their parents by Chinese young adults include *health and recovery*, *novelty and knowledge*, *commemoration and celebration*, *dream fulfillment*, *family togetherness and relationship*, *compensation and reward*, *expression of filial piety*, *escape and relaxation*, and *pleasure seeking*. These motivations can be classified as parent-oriented motivations, family-oriented motivations and self-oriented motivations. The study identifies features of the adult children-senior parents' travel market and offers insights about the continuity of family roles in the social context of an aging Chinese society. Marketing implications for this growing Chinese market are provided.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on a specific type of family travel, i.e., Chinese adult children traveling with their parents. This is an emerging travel market gaining increasing popularity in China. A poll of 2000 respondents, of whom 29.8% were post-90s, 46.1% post-80s, 17.3% post-70s, revealed that, 58.9% of the sample had traveled with their parents since they had their jobs; at the same time, 81.2% planned to travel with their parents, and 70% indicated that traveling with their parents could contribute to more overall time for the generations to interact (China Youth Daily, 2015). In addition, Ctrip (2016), China's largest online travel agency, reporting on their longitudinal data on Chinese senior travel, suggested that Chinese seniors prefer traveling with companions, including their partner, families, adult children, friends, neighbors, and former colleagues. The seniors over 70, however, have strong preferences for traveling with their adult children. Ctrip (2016) also indicated that their products targeting seniors, "filial travel" ("孝心游" in Mandarin) and "happy tour for parents" ("乐开花爸妈游" in Mandarin), are actually purchased more by adult children than by seniors themselves.

Research on family tourism is booming both in the western countries and recently in China (Wu & Wall, 2016). However, existing family travel research is somewhat dominated by the analyses of nuclear families in western contexts (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014; Kluin & Lehto, 2012; Yun & Lehto, 2009). The opportunity exists to widen this line of inquiry (Lehto, Fu, Li, & Zhou, 2017; Li, Wang, Xu, & Mao, 2017; Wu & Wall, 2017). Although families around the world bear many similarities in values, strengths, and challenges, they all have unique characteristics shaped by their historical, cultural, social and economic context (Xu, DeFrain, & Liu, 2016). Indeed, the structural and special composition of the Chinese family and its underlying cultural influences deserve more academic attention; furthermore, the connotation of the term *family* includes both the Western definition of the *nuclear family* and the extended family, such as *parents-in-laws* (Lehto et al., 2017). Other members of the extended family, such as grandparents and in-laws, should be included to make the studies more inclusive.

Collective cultures prevail across Asia, and especially in China which is the focus of this study. Collectivism emphasizes in-group goals over personal goals, observance of the social norms and obligations, shared beliefs within a group, interdependence, and cooperation (Triandis, 1988). Specifically, in the Chinese family considerable value is placed on mutual obligations and interpersonal harmony among members. Unlike families in individualist cultures, where emotional detachment, independence, and privacy for children are recognized, Chinese families create interdependence between parents and children. Parents offer frequent guidance and have an ongoing involvement in the children's life. This involvement is not restricted to children at the younger age levels. In a reciprocal fashion, adult children even after

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.06.024
Received 30 October 2017; Received in revised form 3 May 2018; Accepted 20 June 2018
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reaching adulthood, still keep close contact with their parents, seeking their advice on important decisions, and considering their needs and desires. This collective orientation produces some family forms and activities which warrant international research attention.

It is worth reflecting briefly on the evolving nature of families (Yun & Lehto, 2009). As children grow older, leave home, and arrange their own life, they may be motivated to reinforce the bonds or compensate their parents for spending less time with them due to their new busy life (Bucx & Van Wel, 2008; Io, 2017). The seniors in China greatly value the sense of security, family love, and togetherness gained through family relationships. Adult children, influenced by the deep-rooted culture of Confucianism, often provide care for their senior parents. They consider it as a take-for-granted obligation (Zeng et al., 2014). In general terms, young Chinese adults are imbued with affection for their parents, responding to the demands of filial piety, and have a desire to reinforce family connections. Among the multiple ways of expressing filial piety, organizing tours for their parents and accompanying one's parents on holidays are becoming popular choices.

This study examines Chinese adult children's motivations to travel with their parents. In this paper, the term parents includes both one's parents and parents-in-law. The adult children are people who are above 18 years old.

2. Literature review

2.1. Motivations for family travel

Families are not only the basic building blocks of a society but also the most important consumption units (Epp & Price, 2008; Fu, Lehto, & Park, 2014). Driven by the increasing importance placed on family togetherness and family relationships, family travel is a fast growing travel form (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). The growth of the family travel market has attracted increasing attention from both scholars and practitioners. The key themes studied in this area include family decision making patterns (Kang & Hsu, 2005; Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, & Tsai, 2004; Watne, Brennan, & Winchester, 2014), involvement in activities (Chen, Lehto, & Cai, 2012; Lehto et al., 2017), travel benefits (Durko & Petrick, 2013; Durko & Petrick, 2015; Schänzel & Smith, 2014) and travel motivations (Kim & Lehto, 2013; Kluin & Lehto, 2012; Yun & Lehto, 2009). Among the various themes within family travel, travel motivation is the most relevant to the current study.

Motivation is considered as a critical factor to explain tourist behavior (Crompton, 1979; Pearce, 2014). It serves as both an important criterion of market segmentation and a powerful tool in planning marketing strategies in tourism (Bieger & Laesser, 2002; Fodness, 1994). A clear and comprehensive understanding of tourist motivation is of great value to industry practioners because it facilitates more customized services, which in turn create more memorable customer experiences and foster repeat business (Pearce & Lee, 2005). As a result, motivation studies have gained considerable attention in tourism research (Hsu & Huang, 2008; Jiang, Scott, & Ding, 2014).

A family holiday is a very important "home making practice" which can build and strengthen the unit's intimate social world (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014; Obrador, 2012). Family tourism is fuelled by the desire to stay with family members and to promote a sense of togetherness (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012; Yun & Lehto, 2009), to create intra-family interactions and strengthen a sense of identity (Epp & Price, 2008; Fu, Lehto & Park, 2014), and to consolidate family values and sustain a sense of belonging (Higgins & Hamilton, 2014). Kluin and Lehto (2012) developed a 15-items family reunion travel motivation scale, covering four dimensions: family history and togetherness, immediate family cohesion, family communication, and family adaptability. Based on the different preferences for family holiday activities and expectation of cohesion, Lehto, Lin, Chen, and Choi (2012) classified four types of family travelers. They are "bonded and nature seeking", "attached and enthusiastic", "self-directed and recreation oriented", and "sociable and static" family travelers.

Family travel combines needs and desires of the different family members, e.g. parents and children, mothers and fathers, young children and older children (Gram, 2005). By contrasting the perspectives of parents and children on family holiday, Carr (2006) found that while parents preferred visiting cultural, heritage, and education-oriented destinations, their adolescent children enjoyed physical activities for fun. Wu and Wall's (2017) study on Chinese parents' motivations to visit heritage museums with children revealed that the key motivations are education, relaxation, creating positive experience for children, relationship enhancement, and extended family obligations. Similarly, Li et al.'s (2017) study of Chinese family vacations with young children identified five motivations, namely, spending quality time with children, creating pleasant memories, learning and development, compensation time for children, as well as rewarding the adults. In addition to the common nuclear families, families with distinctive features have also attracted academic interests. For example, Kim and Lehto (2013) assessed motivations for families with disabled children. Lucena, Jarvis, and Weeden (2015) reviewed the travel motivations for lesbian and gay parent families. These limited studies on the non-traditional nuclear families confirmed their distinctive needs and activities. It is thus appropriate to claim that more attention should be paid to the widening variety of non-traditional families in the market. One component of this diversity lies in the different cultural roles for and within families.

2.2. Chinese families under the confucian culture

2.2.1. Confucian five cardinal relationships

Due to China's long history, Chinese families are subjected to the influence of some traditional Chinese values. One of the most distinctive and influential philosophies or schools of thinking in China is Confucianism. This holistic world view contains multidimensional ideas and ideals. It defines the relationships between human nature and destiny, familial relationships and virtues, community norms and disciplines, social structure and political cohesion, as well as addressing religious beliefs and spiritual practices (Yao, 2013). Confucian ideas and ideals have been the cornerstones of the Chinese traditional way of life and they continue to exert a profound influence on modern Asian societies (Fu, Cai, & Lehto, 2017).

Confucianism is fundamentally concerned with moral principles and ethical virtues. These virtues provide the guidance and inspiration for interaction between individuals, communities, and nations (Tu, 1998). Confucius defined five fundamental human relationships, called "Five Cardinal Relationships" (Wu-lun, "五伦" in Mandarin). The five cardinal relationships define the relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. The links are assumed to be hierarchical and complementary. Every role in these relationships is distinct: "Between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and subordinate, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between elder brother and younger, a proper order; and between friends, friendship." (Hwang, 1999, p. 168). With each individual's roles and mutual obligations clearly defined, everyone should conform to the role and act properly (Buttery & Leung, 1998).

In particular, the Confucian family traditionally has been defined by its value system, including generational sequence, age grading, the dutiful bonding between parents and siblings, an ethical code and a morality widely shared and known to all. Further, in these well-defined roles, everyone had a specified assignment, and a sense of discipline and control. A consequence of this specification of ordered relationships meant that the legal power of males and rulers was far reaching, while the rights of women and children were minimal (Slote, 1998). For instance, one of the dominant virtues of traditional family hierarchy, filial piety, portrays the relationship between parents and children. Children and junior generations are expected to be respectful toward parents and the elderly. This virtue is also associated with a person's citizenship and

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