



Travel as learned behaviour: Western migrants in Hong Kong and Macau



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Learned travel behaviour is influenced by reference group membership.
- The existence of expatriate bubbles, excludes western migrants from total immersion into the local culture.
- As such, their travel patterns are influenced by others who also reside in this expatriate bubble.
- Expatriate travel patterns are consistent, regardless of origin, but substantially differ from the host population.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 August 2017

Received in revised form

5 January 2018

Accepted 7 January 2018

Keywords:

Western professional migrants

Learned behaviour

Hong Kong

Macau

Travel behaviour

ABSTRACT

This paper examines travel by western migrants who have moved to the Hong Kong or Macau Special Administrative Regions of China. Previous research suggests travel patterns are a form of learned behaviour. New migrants initially exhibit patterns learned from their home countries, but over time their patterns change and reflect more those of residents of their new countries as they learn and adopt new behaviours. This situation was not observed among western migrants. Instead, they exhibited patterns that were internally consistent, regardless of the migrant's origin, but different from those of the local Chinese populace. The paper argues that western migrants, who generally live in a parallel expatriate bubble to those host community, have learned travel patterns from others who also live in that bubble.

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1. Introduction

This study examines the travel behaviours and destination choices of Western migrants who live in the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions of China (HKSAR, MSAR, respectively). Differences between members of this group and the host population are framed conceptually within the context of travel as learned behaviour (Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004; Klemm, 2002). Past studies suggest that new migrants' travel patterns often reflect behaviours imported from their country of origin (Kang & Page, 2000), but over time emulate the habits of the

population in the receiving country as individuals learn and adopt new behaviours (Feng & Page, 2000). A number of factors that are unique to a group of Western professional migrants living in places like Macau and Hong Kong that have recent colonial pasts may mitigate against them adopting the travel norms of the host population, while residing in places far removed from their home countries may preclude them from perpetuating past behaviours. Instead, they may display unique travel behaviours that are function of membership in a diverse multi-national community that Jackson (2016) describes as functioning as a parallel expatriate bubble to that of the local population.

2. Context

2.1. Travel as learned behaviour

That travel represents a form of learned behaviour is now well

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recognised within the tourism literature (Fisher, 2004, 2009; Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014; Klemm, 2002; Möller, Weiermair, & Wintersberger, 2007; Stephenson & Hughes, 2005). Fisher (2004, 2009) suggests once learned a level of inertia can set in for past actions dictate future choices regardless of whether the learning came from the individual or as a result of the adoption of patterns that reflect broader cultural and social norms. He suggests “behavior becomes reflexive as a consequence of the culture in which it occurs and the experiences gained from a particular behavior” (Fisher, 2009, p. 37). When considered at a societal or country level, then, travel behaviour can remain remarkably constant over time (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014). Möller et al. (2007) add individual patterns may also change little after people reach the age of 45, for habits are difficult to break, even if there is an intention to do so (Light & Young, 2014). Indeed, Butler (2015) suggests that learned travel behaviour can become so ingrained that the desire to visit certain destinations can be traced back several millennia, while the “been there, done that, brought home the t-shirt and posted on social media” behaviour common now represents a form of learned behaviour whose origins date back several hundreds of years.

Evidence of such inertia in destination choice was noted in an analysis of 10 years of outbound travel surveys of Hong Kong residents initiated by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Lee, Deniczi-Guillet, Law, & Leung, 2012). The combined sample included about 12,600 respondents, of which 99.5% were interviewed in the local Cantonese dialect. The share of trips to non-Macau and non-China mainland destinations by distance from Hong Kong is shown for each year in Fig. 1. Three features are

notable. The first is the impact of distance on overall demand. Demand peaks relatively close to Hong Kong and then declines rapidly before small, secondary peaks are noted at distances coinciding with travel to long haul destinations. The decaying impact of distance on demand is a universal construct that has been found to apply to outbound travel from all economies (McKercher, Chan, & Lam, 2008). The second feature is the remarkable consistency in destination choice over time. Small variations that do occur are explained largely by differences in sample size and sampling error. Further analysis noted even smaller changes in visitation rates to specific destinations (city or resort region). Combined, these findings suggest that Hong Kong population as a whole replicates travel preferences learned over time, with little variation. The third is that the overall pattern is largely immune to change over time, in spite of the dramatic influence social media have had on tourism participation.

The lead author of the current paper acted as the principal investigator for the survey projects used in the Lee et al. (2012) study and has access to the raw data set as well as the questionnaires. What Lee et al. (2012) did not report was that a series of laddered questions was used to ascertain the total number of overnight pleasure trips taken in the previous 12 months to the Macau SAR, the adjacent Guangdong Province of China, elsewhere in China and overseas. All tolled, respondents reported just over 38,000 individual overnight pleasure trips. China was the preferred destination, accounting for almost 70% of all trips, with Macau representing another 17% of overnight pleasure trips. Collectively, then the China mainland and Macau accounted for just over 85% of all trips, while all other destinations reported by Lee et al. (2012)

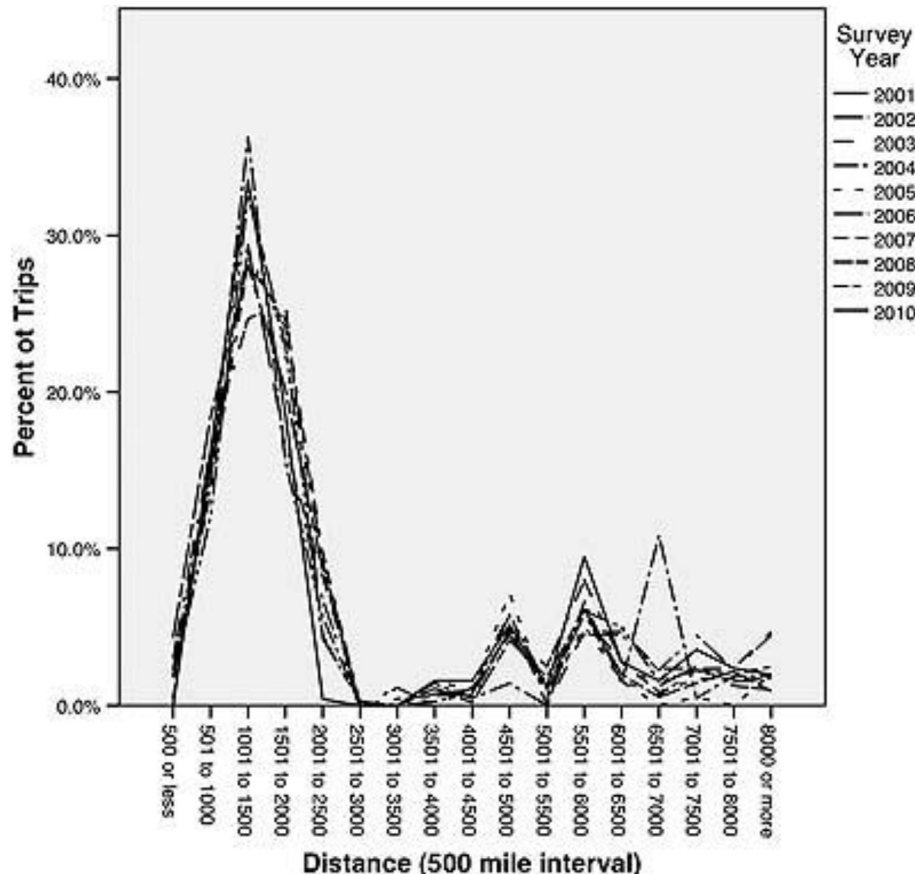


Fig. 1. Outbound travel by Hong Kong residents over time.

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