



# Perceiving tourist destination landscapes through Chinese eyes: The case of South Island, New Zealand



Minghui Sun <sup>a</sup>, Xiaoyu Zhang <sup>b</sup>, Chris Ryan <sup>c,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> New Zealand Institute of Tourism Research, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

<sup>b</sup> Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management, The University of Waikato Management School, Hamilton, New Zealand

<sup>c</sup> New Zealand–China Tourism Research Unit, The University of Waikato Management School, Hamilton, New Zealand

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines Chinese perceptions of New Zealand's South Island landscape.
- Offers an analysis through the filters of Chinese cultural values.
- Finds that *ying* and *yang* help shape perceptions – e.g. snowy mountains reflected in still water.
- Finds self-referencing and other values shape perceptions.
- Questions to what extent classical Chinese culture may be wholly relevant in the future.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings derived from a study of 235 Chinese tourists interviewed in Queenstown, New Zealand. The data were elicited by responses made to a process of showing photographs of South Island, New Zealand to informants, and then secondly by posing a series of options drawn at random and asking which were preferred and why. Among the images that drew strong favourable responses were those that showed snow covered mountains reflected in lake waters – an appeal partly explained by classical Chinese cultural associations of *ying* and *yang* through *shan* (mountain) and *shui* (water) and notions of harmonious balance in nature. However, the paper suggests that while perceptions of place are filtered through cultural understandings, of equal importance is the nature of comparison between the realities of dwelling in congested and polluted urban centres and the appearance of fresh, green open spaces. The paper confirms the usefulness of the research technique, the significance of culture in understanding tourist evaluations of holiday experiences and the importance of 'difference' in vacation destination choice.

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese visitors comprise the second largest national grouping visiting New Zealand, but differ significantly from that country's traditional markets of Australia, The United Kingdom and the United States. Those differences include the cultural dimensions described by researchers such as Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010), such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance and indulgence versus restraint (long-term orientation) (Schwartz, 1994; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Bond &

Hofstede, 1989; Hofstede et al., 2010). This paper, based on responses by Chinese tourists to photographs of South Island, New Zealand, made while travelling in that region, provides examples of nuance in the distinctions made at subordinate levels of the formation of destination image on their part. These landscape images and their construction give credence to Fang's (2003) view that a Confucian *ying–yang* retains importance for contemporary Chinese.

This paper therefore examines the statements made about Chinese tourists towards representations of New Zealand's South Island landscape. The research method sought elicitation of views derived from interviews and preferences for photographic images of landscapes presented to the respondents, who then selected and gave reasons for their selection (see Kelly, 1955; Pike, 2012, for descriptions of these methods and the concepts behind them). The

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Mindy.sun@aut.ac.nz](mailto:Mindy.sun@aut.ac.nz) (M. Sun), [caryan@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:caryan@waikato.ac.nz) (C. Ryan).

importance of the research lies in better enabling destination marketing organisations to select photographs that would most appeal to this market, and the elicitation of some further understanding of how Chinese evaluate landscapes while travelling overseas.

Sofield and Li (1998) among others have commented on the Chinese desire for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The importance of these cultural concepts of harmonious relationships between society and nature, and the individual components of nature as between mountains (*shan*) and water (*shui*) (see Ivanhoe, 1998 for an explanation), are reinforced by the lack of such harmony found in the daily realities of many Chinese living in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The levels of pollution in these cities has attracted international media attention (e.g. Sebag-Montefiore, 2012) and increasing attempts by the Chinese authorities to tackle the problems (e.g. in various statements following the November 2013 Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party – see *Communique of the 3rd Plenum of 18th Party Congress, 2013*). The comparison between the all too common examples of urban air pollution and traffic congestion found in these cities, and the open spaces of South Island, was found to feature strongly in the comments made by the sample of Chinese tourists used in this study. Thus added to classical cultural allusions are the experiential aspects of the reality when comparing the Chinese city to the rural ambience of South Island.

## 2. Background to the study

It has almost become a cliché to state that China is an important source of tourists given the rapidity of its growth over the last decade (e.g. see data from the *China Tourism Academy, 2013*). A quick review of the annual statistics generated by China National Tourism Administration, China Tourism Academy, or of other national tourism organisations such as Tourism New Zealand bears witness to that. Much of this growth is due to Chinese governmental policies directed through the Approved Destination Status (ADS) accreditation by which China permits its nationals to travel to other countries (see *People's Daily Online, 2014*). In the case of New Zealand, ADS approval was granted in 1999. What is not always appreciated is that the ADS agreement requires undertakings by the tourist receiving country based on government to government agreements. In New Zealand the regulations in force at the time of writing date from October 2013. Consequently in New Zealand all inbound tour operators (ITOs) must be accredited under the Qualmark scheme or by the Tourism Export Council.

The motives on the part of the tourist receiving countries under the ADS scheme were primarily economic as potential recipient countries sought new revenue created by the growing numbers of Chinese tourists, especially in the period following the global financial crisis in 2008. In New Zealand's case the 1999 agreement followed an earlier trade agreement in 1997 and an even longer period when New Zealand had generally been more supportive of Chinese policies than many other western parties (see Brady, 2008, and comments on the New Zealanders Rewi Alley and James Bertram).

From the Chinese perspective the system of ADS was prompted by both consumer and arguably political concerns. First there were concerns about the protection of Chinese citizens when travelling overseas. In many ways this concern can be partly attributed to past policies where the Chinese government has sought to protect the interest of overseas based Chinese for both collectivist and political ideological reasons (Liu, 2007; Thunø, 2001). Second, China has sought to control outbound travel through a series of mechanisms that include the approval of destinations and through how much money people might take and in what form, and the accreditation of authorised tour operators (Guo, 2002).

## 3. Literature review

In terms of the broader tourism literature, images, perceptions and the marketing of destinations have long been a staple of tourism research. A number of papers can therefore be cited as analysing relationships between image, expectation, subsequent satisfaction (Huang, Chen, & Lin, 2013), repeat patronage and/or other measures of place loyalty such as the willingness to recommend a destination to others (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). For example Beerli and Martín (2004) not only provided a list of place attributes that contribute to destination image, but also sought to assess the comparative contribution of organic and induced image and the respective roles of secondary and primary sources of image formation. Ryan and Gu (2008) built upon that model and argued that the output of publicly funded tourism marketing organisations was not tangible product but intangible image.

For their part Veasna, Wu, and Huang (2013), based on a sample of 398 respondents, concluded that destination image had a statistically significant positive impact on the formation of attachment values to a place, thereby confirming relationships between image and tourist subsequent satisfaction. Similarly Chen and Phou (2013) examined the pathway of cognitive knowledge, emotional response and behavioural outcome with a sample of 498 respondents at Angkor Wat, confirming the much earlier work of Bagozzi (1992) in the more general consumer behaviour literature.

In another study Ryan and Ninov (2011) examined the distinctions between holistic and particularistic components of a destination image with respect to the heritage based landscape of Dubai Creek as against a more holistic image of Dubai as a place of glitz, shopping and wealth. Their argument was that much of the literature about destination image was based on a notion of a homogeneous composition of image whereas in practice tourists would often come across zones of counter imagery, and it was therefore of interest to examine the relationship between the specific and the holistic.

With reference to this literature two considerations are apparent. First much of the research is quantitative in nature (Pike, 2002), and second it tends to be ensconced in Western cultural perspectives.

With reference to the issues of Chinese tourists to New Zealand, relatively little research exist outside of formal reports (e.g. Ryan, 2013). A search using the database, *Leisuretourism.com* and the search terms “Chinese tourists” and “New Zealand” found few results. These were a comparative study derived from the Canadian Tourism Commission examining Chinese tourists' interests (Yun & Joppe, 2011), a study of the role of Chinese students as a catalyst for tourism to New Zealand (Liu & Ryan, 2011), and a study of Chinese tourists' blogs about New Zealand (Sun, Ryan, & Pan, 2014). An earlier paper by Feng and Page (2000) had looked at the role of the Chinese diaspora as a determinant of tourism flows, but had primarily described patterns of activities while motives were oriented toward family and relationship building. A similar paper by Becken (2003) had also been undertaken while she was at Landcare New Zealand. In short, while data existed as to numbers of visitors and patterns of travel, little was known about how they perceived New Zealand other than satisfaction ratings tended to be above 80% (*Tourism New Zealand, 2013*).

In areas where relatively little is known Yin (1994) suggests that qualitatively based case study approaches are pertinent. One reason is that while respondents will reply to specific questions, there remains an issue as to what extent any given question possesses pertinence to the respondent, especially if non-response options are not provided in quantitative studies.

Certainly significant evidence exists that Chinese cultural perspectives differ from those of the West without a need to examine the studies that have used Hostede's dimensions of cultural

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