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Qian Li

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Zhuowei Huang

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Grand Tour in 21st Century

Perspectives of Chinese Millennials and Their Parents

1. Introduction

Educational travel abroad has become more and more popular among Chinese millennials (born from 1983-2000), particularly high school students (born after 1995), in recent years. Similar with the Grand Tour in ancient Europe, these teenagers from upper middle-class Chinese families travel to developed countries (e.g., U.S., U.K., Australia, New Zealand, etc.) for leisure and educational experiences. The amount of participants of such trip grows fast. It reached 200, 000 in 2013 and was expected to surpass 300, 000 in 2014 (Nan, 2014). While tourism businesses are busy with this fast-growing market segment, one question appears to be important, yet, unaddressed: why is educational travel abroad attractive to Chinese teenagers and their parents? The purpose of the present study is to investigate this WHY question from perspectives of the demand side of this tourism activity – Chinese teenagers and their parents.

2. Key Literature

Previous studies on educational travel abroad mostly focused on college educational travel programs and research samples were predominantly drawn from college students in western countries (e.g., Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen, & Hubbard, 2006; Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2011; Tarrant, 2010). It has been found that motivations of this type of travel are different from general leisure travel motivations (e.g., Nyaupane, et al., 2011; Weirs-Jenseen, 2003). For instance, motivations of American college students to European countries for educational travel include achieving academic/intellectual goals, future career development, obtaining intercultural experience, developing cross-cultural skills, establishing family/ethnic heritage, socialization, escape/leisure, and language learning (Anderson, et al., 2006; Langley & Breese, 2005; Nyaupane et al., 2011; Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Weirs-Jenseen, 2003). In addition to travel motivation, existing studies have also documented the travel characteristics of college students' educational travel abroad, including destination choice, accommodation types, length of stay, and so on (e.g., Anderson et al., 2006; Dwyer, 2004; Nyaupane et al., 2011).

3. Methodology

The qualitative method of in-depth interview was used to collect data. Chinese teenagers with educational travel abroad experience in the past three years were qualified to participate. Snowball sampling was adopted in this study. The data collection stopped at the saturation point when the information provided by participants became repetitive and each additional interviewee added little to the data. Finally, a total of 30 students and 20 parents were interviewed from October 2013 to January 2014. A preliminary outline of interview questions was developed based on the literature and research objectives of this study. Two researchers coded the transcripts independently and compared the agreement on coding used. The semi-structured interview included the following questions: 1) the basic profile of the teenagers' experiences of educational travel abroad; 2) reasons of teenagers for educational travel abroad; 3) reasons of their parents for supporting the child's educational travel abroad. The data analysis was a continuous process including open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the entire procedure of data analysis, each transcript was carefully read multiple times by at least two researchers, to ensure that all the relevant data units were identified and synthesized.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Why educational travel abroad? – The kid’s perspective

Chinese millennials’ motivations for educational travel abroad are identified and categorized into five themes: (1) **Have a taste of college education in developed countries**. As the majority of teenagers plan to attend college abroad in the future, the trip is perceived as an opportunity to learn about local culture and universities in the destination country. In addition, many teenagers expressed their “**top university dreams**” in developed countries. Visiting prestigious universities has been regarded as “realizing” part of their top university dreams.

Because I will go abroad for college in the future, I wanted to learn about the education environment there [the US]. I wanted to see how people eat, where people live, how people commute, and how the school environment looks like. (Judy, 14 years old, visited the US)

(2) **Gain global perspectives**. The majority of Chinese teenagers expressed their eagerness to learn about different cultures and gain global perspectives through travelling abroad.

I want to have a global perspective. It means that I need to understand other different regional culture, learn about other nations’ ideas, and understand what are the differences between their ideas and ours...I’m very interested in US politics. I have heard so much about democracy in the US and read about it on books. I want to know how Americans have realized democracy, what democracy really means, and what is so good about it. (Ida, 18 years old, visited the US)

(3) **Improve language skills**. For those teenagers who aim to go abroad for college, foreign language skills are important. They are particularly interested in school courses offered by native-English speakers and the language immersion experience at host family.

The highlight of the trip was English learning. We had foreign teachers to give us lectures. It was an international project; we could communicate with international peers from others countries. I think it is very useful to learn English during the trip...The English education in China is like “mute English”. (Alex, 17 years old, visited the UK)

(4) **Develop social skills**. Many informants wanted to make international friends via the trip. In addition, living with host family was regarded as an exciting experience because they can take the opportunity to make local friends and develop social skills. Several participants also expressed their willingness to travel with their existing classmates because of the limited leisure time with friends at school.

I wanted to learn how to get along with Americans and make American friends. Since it was a group travel, I had to learn how to get along with others. It is important to learn from others. I think it is important to learn how to socialize whenever you can...and how to communicate with others in a new environment... It helps to improve the social skills through communication. (Janet, 16 years old, visited the US)

(5) **Achieve a sense of independence**. The majority of teenagers indicated that they would like to achieve a sense of independence through the educational travel abroad, which was the first time they travelled far without parents’ accompany.

I wanted to go “outside” by my own. I always travelled with my parents. This time, I can go with my classmates. It is an opportunity for me to gain independence. (Alvin, 16 years old, visited the US)

4.2 Why educational travel abroad? – The parents’ perspective

In addition to Chinese millennials’ travel motivations, their parents’ motivations for educational travel abroad were identified and grouped into six categories: (1) **Prepare for child’s college education**. For parents who aimed to send their child abroad for college, they wanted the child to learn about universities in the destination country and be well-prepared for college application.

My daughter has determined to study abroad. So I wanted her to know about the status of international students. Then she will have some psychological preparation ahead of time. She would know whether this [study abroad] is the life that she wants to have in a few years. (Ingrid’s mom, 40 years old)

(2) **Nurture child’s global perspectives**. The Chinese saying “read ten thousand books; travel ten thousand miles” were frequently mentioned by many parents. They hoped their child to broaden the view and gain global perspectives via the trip.

As a parent, I just want him to broaden the view. For example, the philosophy of US education and culture may be different from what have been described in magazines and media. I want her to learn about American education and culture by herself. (Irma’s dad, 47 years old)

(3) **Improve child’s language skills**. Many parents emphasized the importance of mastering a foreign language. They hoped their child to improve language skills in the destination country.

I told my daughter, if you think this trip is good for your spoken English, I will support you. I think language improvement is associated with the need to apply it. It affects learning motivation. I think travel will help her to improve English. (Lea’s mom, 44 years old)

(4) **Develop child’s social skills**. The majority of parents perceived the trip as a great opportunity for child to develop social skills and build relationships with peers, teachers, and host families.

I hope her to make more friends while travelling with other students. It is important for her to learn how to get along with others. The single-child generation especially needs this. I am actually “observing” whether she has the collective consciousness throughout the trip. For instance, whether she can get along with the host family... (Ingrid’s mom, 44 years old)

(5) **Boost child’s self-confidence**. Five parents wanted to utilize educational travel abroad to boost child’s self-confidence at school. It is because travel abroad experience has been regarded as a criterion for Chinese teenagers to maintain their “competitiveness” among peers.

My kid was at a transitional period at middle school. I hope her to stay ahead of the class. She needs to be confident about herself, because she will get into the foreign language middle school where all the best students of the city study together. If my kid wants to be confident among a group of very excellent students, she has to study hard; and she has to improve herself in many aspects. So, I want her to use the summer time and attend educational study abroad... She will be more confident after coming back. (Kiley’s mom, 49 years old)

(6) **Realize lost college dreams**. Most parents were born in 1960s and did not have a good educational opportunity when they were young. Several parents (born in late 1960s) reminisced about their past educational experiences and hoped their child could fulfill their lost college dreams, such as going abroad for college.

Study abroad has been my husband’s dream since his college age. Our generations have many lost dreams. Although we don’t want to admit that we want our kid to realize our dreams, we are doing it unconsciously. In 1990s, I had a business trip to the US. I found that the US was much more advanced

than China in many aspects. It is already impossible for me to go abroad for college education anymore. So I want my child to go abroad and see a different world. (Kiley's mom, 49 years old)

5. Propositions

A close look at two groups of stakeholders in the demand side of educational travel abroad can find that the travel decision has to be made by both parents and the child. Therefore, four propositions are summarized to elaborate the inter-relationships between Chinese millennials and their parents in terms of motivations for educational travel abroad (as illustrated in Figure 1).

Proposition 1: *Chinese millennials' motivations for educational travel abroad overlap with their parents' motivations.* Such overlapping has been reflected in motivations for having a taste of college education, gaining global perspectives, improving language skills, and developing social skills.

Proposition 2: *Chinese millennials' aspirations for college education in developed countries are partially the extension of their parents' lost college dreams.* The parents tend to pass on their hopes and college dreams to the child, which seems to be well received by many teenagers based on the data analysis results. This is attributed to several factors related to Chinese culture, thinking much of education, as well as the single-child family structure in China, resulting in the fact that the majority of resources in the family are invested on the one child.

Proposition 3: *Chinese millennials show strong motivations for seeking a sense of independence via educational travel abroad, which is attributed to the single-child family structure in China.* Chinese millennials, as the single child in the family, have attracted large amounts of attentions from the whole family during their growing course. The parents frequently act as the child's proxy in many life events, leaving inadequate individual autonomy to the child. Educational travel abroad is therefore perceived as an opportunity to achieve a sense of independence by Chinese millennials.

Proposition 4: *Both of Chinese millennials' and their parents' motivations for educational travel abroad are shaped by multiple factors from the macro environment in China and in the world.* According to the data analysis results, the most noteworthy factor is people's negative perceptions of China's education system, as compared to their favorable attitudes toward the education system in developed countries. Another important factor mentioned frequently by informants is globalization that needs diversity, cross-cultural communications, and comprehensive perspectives in the world.

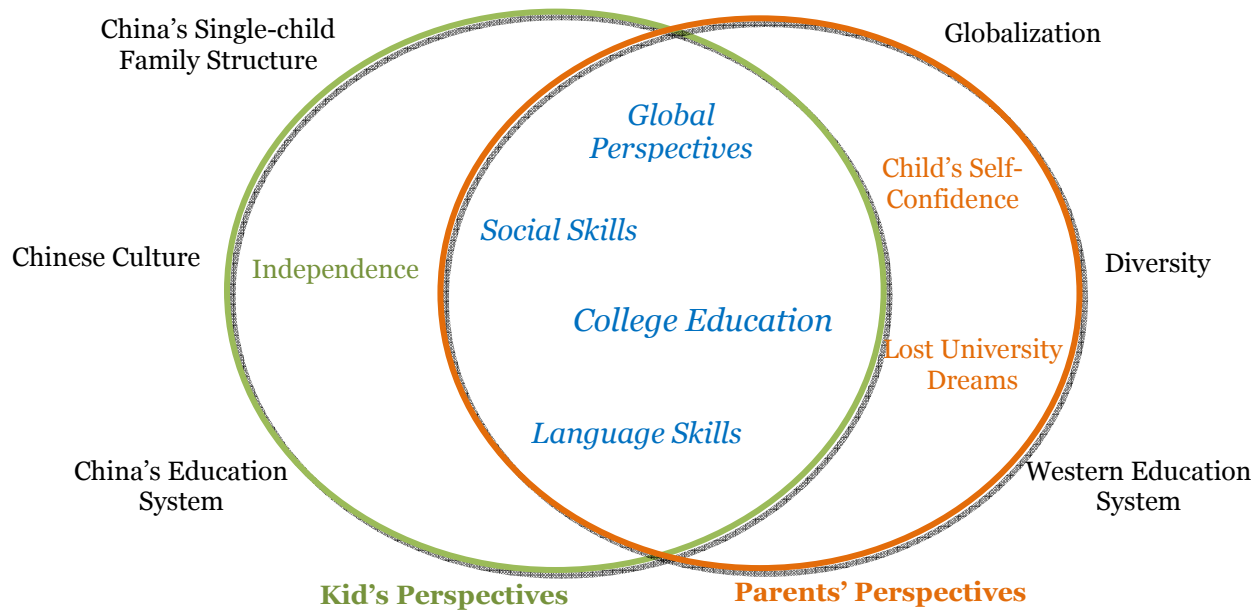


Figure 1 Pictorial Representation of Chinese Millennials' and Their Parents' Motivations

6. Discussions

The present study makes several theoretical contributions. First, this study differentiates from existing research on educational travel by integrating both students' and their parents' perspectives. Findings of this study suggest that Chinese millennials' and their parents' motivations for educational travel abroad are shaped by multiple factors from micro environment within the family (e.g., single-child family structure, generational relationship, etc.) as well as macro environment in China society and the world (e.g., Chinese traditional culture, educational systems, globalization, etc.).

This study has several practical implications for practitioners. It is estimated that the volume of educational travel abroad among Chinese high school students will continue to grow, providing more opportunities for tourism businesses in both China and destination countries. Findings of this study can help travel businesses develop appropriate products and marketing programs and cater to this fast-growing market segment. Further, this study helps destination marketers build up their market portfolios of Chinese millennials for outbound travel in the future.

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