Beyond the stereotypes

Opportunities in China inbound tourism for secondtier European destinations

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Beyond the stereotypes: opportunities in China inbound tourism for second-tier European destinations

Abstract

The existing literature has often represented Chinese tourists in broad and stereotypical ways, as a new generation of bumbling camera-waving tourists showing minimal regard for the local environments that they encounter. However, as Chinese have become more experienced travellers, they have diversified and changed their behaviours. Amongst these various changes, an increasing number of Chinese tourists have begun exploring second-tier destinations. By focussing on Chinese travellers to less visited second-tier destinations, this paper goes beyond the stereotypical representations of this fast-maturing market. It illustrates the heterogeneity of Chinese tourism, and its advantages for second-tier European destinations.

Keywords:

Second-tier destinations, China, stereotypes, opportunities

Introduction

China's opening up to the world, developing economy and progressive government easing of travel restrictions have prompted an expanding flow of outbound tourists that is disseminating across the globe (Cai, Li, & Knutson, 2008). This growth has made China a highly targeted market for tourist destinations including in Europe. "Approved Destination Status" (ADS) was given collectively to all EU member states and members of the Schengen agreement in 2004 (except for the United Kingdom, which was a recipient in 2005). This had the effect of transforming China into Europe's fastest growing inbound travel market, as the number of Chinese travellers to European countries increased nine-fold compared to the year before (Du & Dai, 2005). The growth continued as Chinese visitation to Europe rose from approximately 1 million in 2000 to approximately 12.5 million in 2016 (ETC & UNWTO, 2013; European Travel Commission, 2016). In Europe, Chinese tourists have traditionally focussed on first-tier destinations and made frequent use of well-trodden routes through the continent. However, as Chinese become more experienced travellers, they are increasingly visiting second-tier destinations in their continuing search for new and different experiences and social capital. This surge is also evident in Scandinavia where the number of incoming tourists from China has risen by approximately 20% year on year from 2010 to 2016 ("Statistics Denmark," n.d., "Statistics Finland," n.d., "Statistics Norway," n.d., "Statistics Sweden," n.d.). This study uses Scandinavia as a case to investigate Chinese tourism to second-tier destinations in Europe. The focus of the paper is on the differences observed between Chinese tourism to first and second-tier destinations, and on the opportunities that inbound Chinese tourism offers to second-tier destinations in Europe in particular.

The scholarly stereotypes of Chinese tourists

With its rise onto the world stage, China outbound tourism has received increasing scholarly attention. The growing literature has recently been reviewed by various researchers (Andreu, Claver, & Quer, 2010; Cai et al., 2008; S. Huang & Hsu, 2005, 2008; S. Huang, Keating, Kriz, & Heung, 2015; Jin & Wang, 2015; Jørgensen, Law, & King, 2016; Keating, Huang, Kriz, & Heung, 2015; Keating & Kriz, 2008; Leung, Li, Fong, Law, & Lo, 2014; Tsang & Hsu, 2011; Tse, 2015). As observed by Jørgensen, Law, and King (2016), these reviews illustrate that the existing research on China outbound tourism has been limited in breadth and depth. Many studies have deployed similar (often quantitative) methods to investigate familiar issues such as motivations and image. Likewise, many prior studies have adopted macro approaches in attempting to understand China outbound tourists, thereby leading to homogeneous representations. Finally, many studies have not taken account of the interconnectedness between the cultural, political, social and legislative dimensions of China outbound tourism (Jørgensen et al., 2016; Tse, 2015). This treatment may explain why Chinese tourists are often described in broad and stereotypical ways, with most behaviours being attributed to a simplistic "motivations plus culture" equation. In such cases the 'Chinese tourist' is characterized as a: young/middle aged, urban, (upper) middle class, group traveller, with language difficulties and a need for familiar food, who travels to well-known destinations in near markets, Europe and the USA (Andreu, Claver, & Quer, 2013; Becken, 2003; Corigliano, 2011; Guo, Seongseop Kim, & Timothy, 2007; Kim, Guo, & Agrusa, 2005; Latham, 2011; M. Li & Cai, 2009, 2009; Ryan & Mo, 2002). With their tendency to generalize, though such descriptions are not necessarily incorrect, they ignore the complexity and heterogeneity of the Chinese travel market (Jørgensen et al., 2016). Some researchers have addressed this limitation by adopting a more differentiated approach. According to Fugmann and Aceves (2013), this is done as a direct response to the "stereotypical reporting and the disparagement of Chinese group tourists as a 'new generation of ugly camera waving tourists', 'grasshoppers' or 'duckling tourists' (Chan, 2008)" (p. 166). These researchers have argued that the motivations, behaviours and destination choices of Chinese travellers are experiencing constant diversification (e.g. Arlt, 2013; Jin, Lin, & Hung, 2014; King & Gardiner, 2015; Prayag, Cohen, & Yan, 2015). According to Arlt (2013), "the second wave of Chinese outbound tourism offers increased opportunities for destinations and tourism service providers in off the beaten track destinations to get a share of the Chinese outbound source market." (p. 132).

In terms of geographical coverage, the recent exponential growth of Chinese tourism to Europe (ETC & UNWTO, 2013; European Travel Commission, 2016; Xie & Li, 2009), has not (yet) spurred a corresponding rise in research. Studies that investigate Chinese tourists to European destinations remain relatively scarce (Jørgensen et al., 2016). The geographical coverage of the few existing studies has been confined to broad perspectives on Chinese tourism to Europe generally (Andreu et al., 2013; Xiang, 2013) and to the most frequented destinations such as Spain (Lojo, 2016), Germany (Fugmann & Aceves, 2013; Xiaoyang, Tobias, & Werner, 2011), Great Britain (de Sausmarez, Tao, & McGrath, 2012) and Italy (Corigliano, 2011). This means an almost complete absence of studies on Chinese tourism to second-tier destinations. Only a single paper has been identified on this topic (Cavlek, 2016).

This study aims to diversify the research base by investigating China outbound tourism to less frequented (second-tier) destinations, in this case to Scandinavia. Secondly, the researchers approach the investigation by using a holistic networked approach that does not assume for example motivations or culture as being more influential than other factors.

Second-tier destinations

There is no instrumental definition of what constitutes a second-tier destination. This may be because it is a relative term that depends on contextual factors and the perspective that is brought by users. Some researchers have used transportation links to define first and second tier destinations (King & Choi, 1997), whereas others have referred to the degree of inclusion in tour packages as a significant causal factor (Lojo, 2016). This paper adopts a looser definition, which recognizes the relativity of the concept, is limited to the European context and based on the current travel patterns of Chinese tourists to Europe. In this paper, a second tier destination is thus viewed as a place that is not a traditional first-tier destination for Chinese tourism to Europe (see Figure 1), but somewhere that has shown the potential to attract Chinese tourists (Andreu et al., 2013; ETC, 2011; EU SME Centre, 2015).

[Figure 1: European first-tier destinations for China outbound tourists and Scandinavian destinations]

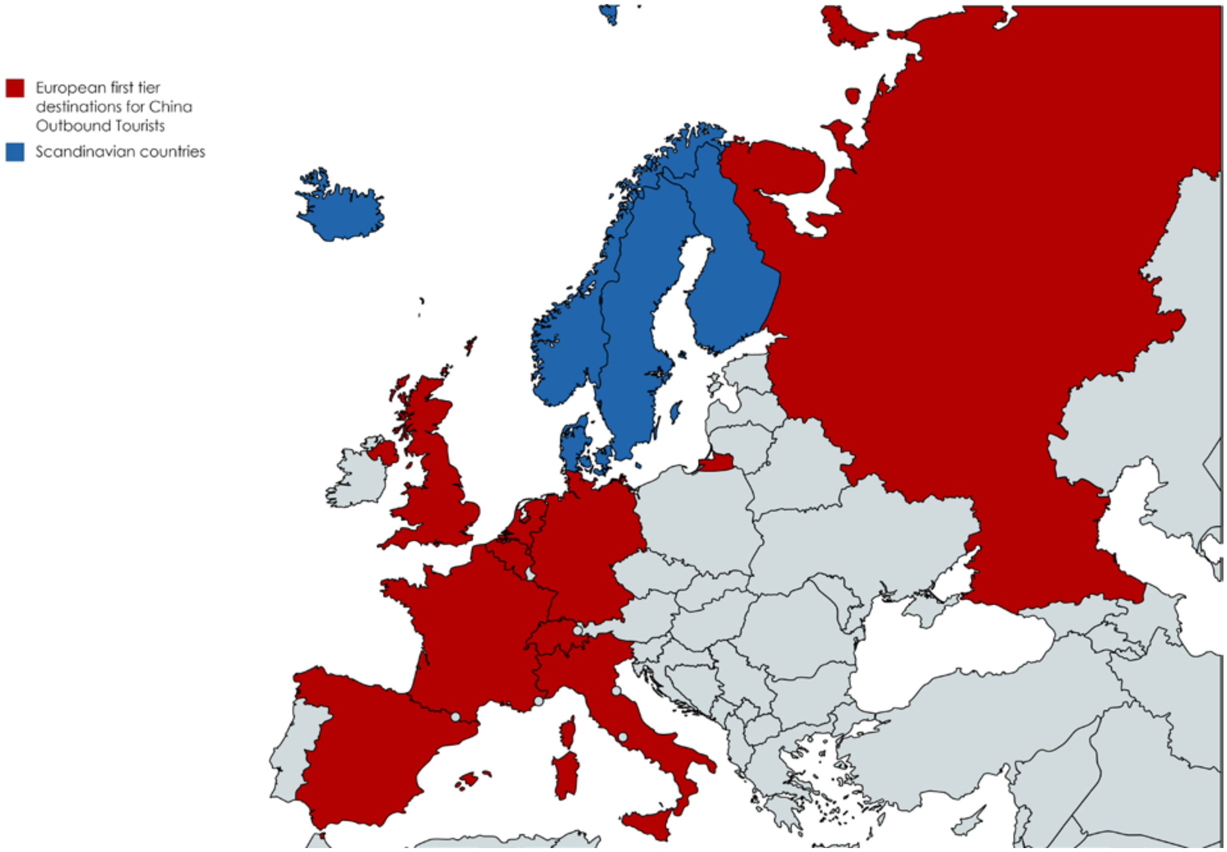

Figure 1 highlights first-tier destinations for China outbound tourists (red), as well as the countries that are considered part of Scandinavia in this study (blue). The existence of first- and second-tier destinations within nations should also be recognized, as some local or regional destinations within the countries marked as first-tier in Figure 1 may have a greater resemblance to second-tier destinations in terms of inbound Chinese tourism. This is for example the case in Spain, where Lojo (2016) found that various cities could be categorised between major and minor destinations for Chinese group travellers. “Barcelona and Madrid are the protagonist cities of Spain (…) other main destinations are the cities of Seville, Granada, Mijas, Ronda and Cordoba. (…) part of the principal destinations are also the cities of Toledo and Zaragoza. The cities that appear in less than 40% of the tour packages have been considered as minor destinations.” (p. 515). As was mentioned previously, this paper applies a loose definition of second-tier destinations, and the authors will leave it to the readers to decide if the findings of this study apply to their specific destinations.

Method

As mentioned previously, reviews of the existing literature on China outbound tourism have suggested that the literature has been focussed on linear and static representations and that understandings of the interconnectedness of cultural, political, social and legislative aspects in China outbound tourism have been neglected (Jørgensen et al., 2016; Tse, 2015). In addressing this issue, the present paper applies a holistic networked approach to the study of Chinese tourism to Scandinavia. A qualitative methodology was used. However, instead of choosing a big sample within a narrow group, the researchers adopted the opposite approach. A wide group of different actors was selected to comment on the same phenomenon from different angles. This approach provided the researchers with insights into all aspects of the distribution system. The data collection approach that was adopted means that the study does not offer grounds for generalisability, but that it offers specific insights on Chinese tourism to Scandinavia and indications that may be applicable to other second-tier destinations in Europe. These findings are worthwhile for practitioners and researchers on their own terms, but also as a foundation for other researchers who wish to build on them.

The study is based on 52 in-depth interviews with suppliers, intermediaries and tourists. Most interviewees were recruited via purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2004; Patton, 2001) as the goal of the data collection was to maximise the depth and richness of the data (Kuzel, 1992). Each of the interviews lasted between 35 and 70 minutes.

The interviewed intermediaries (n=22) (see Table 1) included China based outbound tour operators who work with Scandinavia as a destination; online travel agents (OTAs) who send Chinese tourists to Scandinavia; DMCs who work with incoming tourism from China; tour leaders/guides who accompany Chinese tourists on their travels to/in Scandinavia; and finally, national DMOs. An element of snowballing was evident, since some interviewees within China's tourism industry helped the researchers to contact other relevant interviewees. The researchers adopted this approach because it was difficult to access the top Chinese tourism industry leaders without contacting other industry actors. All of these interviews, apart from two that were conducted remotely via WeChat Call, were conducted face-to-face in Beijing at the offices of the respective companies. The tour leader representatives have been anonymised based on their own request.

[Table 1: Intermediary Interviewees]

Nr.	Type of company	Company Name	Representative Role	Interview Method
1	Tour Operator and Travel agent	Caissa Touristic, Hotel Management Dept.	Manager of Hotel Management Dept.	Face-to-face
2	Tour Operator and Travel agent	Caissa Touristic Beijing	Vice President for Beijing Branch	Face-to-face
3	Tour Operator and Travel agent	CITS (China International Travel Service)	Deputy General Manager	Face-to-face
4	Tour Operator and Travel agent	CYTS (China Youth Travel Service)	Product Expert, Europe Travel Center	Face-to-face
5	Tour Operator, Travel Agent, Wholesaler	Oriental Nordic OY (China Office: DFDS and Silja Line)	Owner	Face-to-face
6	Tour Operator and Travel Agent	New World Travel Agency	Manager of outbound business	Face-to-face
7	Wholesaler	Grand Vision International Travel Service	Europe Director	Face-to-face
8	Wholesaler	China Bamboo Garden International Travel Service	Product Operation Manager – North and East Europe, Russia	Face-to-face
9	Niche Wholesaler	Beijing Albatros Travel	Director	Face-to-face
10	OTA	Ctrip	International Market Manager, International Hotel Department	WeChat Call
11	DMC	NordEU	General Manager	Face-to-face
12	DMC	Tumlare	Destination Manager Finland	Face-to-face
13	Niche DMC	Stopover Finland	Project Manager	Face-to-face
14	DMC and Wholesaler	DMC Scandinavian Incentives	Inbound Tour Consultant	Face-to-face
15	Supranational DMO	Scandinavian Tourism Board	Chief Representative	Face-to-face
16	National DMO	Visit Sweden (China Office)	Travel Trade Manager	Face-to-face
17	Tour Leader	Large Chinese tour operator	Tour Leader	Face-to-face
18	Tour Leader	Large Chinese tour operator	Tour Leader	Face-to-face
19	Tour Leader	Large Chinese tour operator	Tour Leader	Face-to-face
20	Tour Leader	Large Chinese tour operator	Tour Leader	Face-to-face
21	Tour Leader	Large Chinese tour operator	Tour Leader	Face-to-face
22	Scandinavia Based Tour Guide	Independent	Tour Guide	WeChat Call

The supplier interviewees (n=16) (see Table 2) included local and regional DMOs, accommodation providers, attractions and transportation companies. Only companies that expressed an interest in China inbound tourism were included. Aside from this, attempts were made to provide a broad representation of different kinds of actors based on geography and type of business. In terms of geography, six destinations in Scandinavia that are popular among Chinese tourists were selected. These were: Greater Copenhagen, Denmark; Funen, Denmark; Helsinki, Finland; Stockholm, Sweden; Oslo, Norway and Sognefjord, Norway. An effort was made to include representatives of DMOs, attractions, accommodation providers and transportation/infrastructure providers in all destinations. With two exceptions, all interviews were conducted face-to-face at the premises of the respective companies in the six destinations mentioned.

[Table 2: Supplier Interviewees]

Nr.	Type of company	Company Name	Representative Role	Interview Method
1	DMO	Wonderful Copenhagen/ Chinavia	Project Manager	Skype
2	DMO	Visit North Zealand	Marketing Director	Face-to-face
3	DMO	Developing Fyn	Marketing Manager	Skype
4	DMO	Visit Stockholm	Marketing Manager	Face-to-face
5	DMO	Visit Helsinki	Marketing Manager	Face-to-face
6	DMO/Attraction	Visit Flam/Flamsbana	Sales and Marketing Manager	Face-to-face
7	DMO	Innovation Norway	Director of Tourism	Face-to-face
8	Accommodation	Restel Hotels	Key Account Manager	Face-to-face
9	Accommodation	Thon Hotels	Director of International Sales	Face-to-face
10	Accommodation	Nordic Choice Hotels	Sales Manager	Face-to-face
11	Accommodation	Fretheim Hotel	Director	Face-to-face
12	Accommodation	First Grand Hotel	General Manager	Face-to-face
13	Attraction	Odense City Museums	Marketing Coordinator	Face-to-face
14	Attraction	Egeskov Castle	CEO	Face-to-face
15	Attraction	Vasa Museet	Head of Marketing	Face-to-face
16	Transport/Attraction	Tallink Silja Line	Sales Manager, International Sales	Face-to-face

The tourist interviewees (n=14) (see Table 3) included both group package and independent tourists. The study focusses exclusively on leisure tourists residing in China, who have recently visited Scandinavia. To ensure the exclusion of other types of tourist, only Mainland Chinese (excluding Special Administrative Regions and Taiwan), who had lived in mainland China during the previous 5 years and who had visited Scandinavia within those years as leisure tourists, were recruited for the purposes of interview. These criteria mean that the results presented in this paper do not apply to other types of tourists e.g. Chinese permanently living abroad or business travellers. Most of the interviews were conducted via WeChat call, while others were undertaken face-to-face in Hong Kong and Beijing. The reason for the predominance of long distance interviews, was the challenge for the researchers of recruiting and organising face-to-face meetings with the prospective interviewees.

[Table 3: Tourist Interviewees]

Nr.	Type/length of trip	Origin	Countries visited	Interview Method
1	Group tour, 7 days	Beijing	All four countries	WeChat Call
2	Group tour, 7 days	Beijing	All four countries	WeChat Call
3	Group tour, 10 days	Nanjing	All four countries	WeChat Call
4	Group tour, 10 days	Shanghai	All four countries	WeChat Call
5	Group tour, 16 days	Shanghai	Finland and Sweden	WeChat Call
6	Independent, 3 days	Beijing	Sweden	WeChat Call
7	Independent, 5 days	Shanghai	Norway	Face-to-face
8	Independent, 8 days	Beijing	Denmark and Norway	WeChat Call
9	Independent, 8 days	Beijing	Finland, Denmark and Sweden	WeChat Call
10	Independent, 9 days	Beijing	Norway	Face-to-face
11	Independent, 10 days	Beijing	All four countries	Face-to-face
12	Independent + VFR, 4 days	Guangzhou	Denmark, Norway and Sweden	WeChat Call
13	Independent + Conference, 7 days	Beijing	Finland and Sweden	Face-to-face
14	Trip 1: Independent, 12 days Trip 2: VFR, 5 days	Shenzhen	Trip 1: Finland, Sweden, Norway Trip 2: Copenhagen	Face-to-face

Jørgensen's (2017) conceptual framework for analysis of tourism distribution was applied in the data analysis. The analysis was carried out by locating the particulars of each interviewee in accordance with Activity Theory, and then enrolling the actors as part of an interconnected distribution network in accordance with Actor-Network Theory. This enables the researchers to gain an overview of each individual actor and to analyse the interrelationships between the various actors. The approach views tourism distribution as “an ongoing and dynamic process of mediation, happening in a relational network of complex activity systems, rather than a linear, static and context free process from production to consumption” (Jørgensen, 2017, p. 317).

Findings and discussion

Chinese tourists as mature travellers

The study findings suggest that Chinese tourists to second-tier destinations are often more mature than those travelling to their first-tier equivalents. Previous research has demonstrated the relationship between the travel experiences, market maturity and other aspects of China outbound tourists such as behaviours and decision making (e.g. Agrusa et al., 2011; Chen & Lin, 2012; Huang & Tian, 2013; Zeng et al., 2014). Immaturity has long been acknowledged as an important cause of many of the particularities of Chinese outbound tourists. For example, their tendency to travel in groups, their exhibiting particular behaviours and highly specific requirements in terms of language, food and other basic needs (Hoare, Butcher, & O’Brien, 2010; Kau & Lim, 2005; Li et al., 2011; Ooi, 2004; Ryan & Mo, 2002; Youcheng Wang, 2008; Zhao, 2006). Similar issues were also reported as challenges by some suppliers in Scandinavia. However, the findings have shown that these issues were not present to the same degree in Scandinavia as in other destinations. One reason may be that Chinese tourists to Scandinavia are generally experienced travellers and that Scandinavia is not considered to be a first-tier destination:

> "… European tourism has developed many years in China. A lot of people maybe have already been to France, Italy, Switzerland. So, when they want to go again, they will choose some different countries. Maybe Scandinavia will be their second or third try..." (Intermediary_4)

> "Overall, I think that Scandinavia is usually never the first place where people go, so the market needs to be somehow matured already, before the people start to go to Scandinavia." (Intermediary_12)

The fact that second-tier destinations like those in Scandinavia are more prone to receiving experienced tourists means that some of the negative side effects and specific requirements of inexperienced Chinese tourists as reported in the literature are less prevalent. This is an advantage for DMOs and suppliers in such destinations, as more experienced tourists require less specialized and customized treatments.

The maturation of the Chinese market also means that tourist preferences are developing. This holds potential for second-tier destinations, as the Chinese tourists increasingly require deeper and more special experiences, longer holidays, self-development, lifestyle-oriented travel, and search for clean and unspoiled environments to contrast the current environmental situation in China:

> "Actually, you know, Chinese tourists, our Chinese clients, are much more experienced travelling. They are looking for something special to experience. Not something to just

watch, look, they want something that is different from where they live, what they eat or other scenic spots. Something special or something exciting.” (Intermediary_1)

It may be argued that many second-tier destinations offer opportunities for such experiences. The maturation of the market reflects two types of Chinese tourism demand to Scandinavia. On the one hand, there is a demand among Chinese tourists for new types of destinations and experiences in lesser known (for Chinese tourists) parts of the world. On the other, there is demand not only for more tourists, but also for different types of tourists amongst Scandinavian destinations and suppliers. The following sections provides examples of these two types of demand.

Demand for second-tier destinations

Second-tier destinations as a stage for in-depth experiences

Like most destinations (Fountain, Espiner, & Xie, 2010; Hua & Yoo, 2011; Li et al., 2011; Park et al., 2014), traditional attractions such as heritage and cultural sights were important pull factors for Chinese tourists travelling to Scandinavia. Natural attractions were a major draw:

> “The most important thing for the Chinese tourist [travelling to Scandinavia] is the natural landscape, both for older and younger people.”
>
> (Intermediary_7)

Some natural sights were considered as being unique to the region:

> “… the main thing I want to see in Europe is the Northern Lights, so I went to Scandinavia and I chose one country, that’s Norway, because I heard it’s quite good. And that there is a good chance to see the Northern lights in Tromsø.” (Tourist_07)

> “… there is no night in Nordic countries in summer. (…) That is really fantastic and that is really a unique experience I think.” (Tourist_05)

However, other attractions were found to be equally important. Several interviewees talked of Scandinavia as a ‘special’ place, due to its unique blend of ‘environment’ and ‘lifestyle’. When the interviewees spoke about the ‘environment’, they were referring to the cleanliness of the natural environment, including the sea and sky, as well as to the quaint architecture and feelings of safety:

> “The advantage is the environment, because it is clean” (Intermediary_06)

> “So, I think Nordic countries are pretty good, it’s safe. Most things are really safe, you don’t worry.” (Tourist_11)

Among other things, ‘lifestyle’ referred to observations that tourists made about the locals. Some respondents explained their perception that local people enjoy their lives, and are friendly. Others commented on the feeling of being in a place with a good social system:

> “… it’s a really different culture from other European countries. (…) You can experience the lifestyle of the Scandinavians and the special views of the North. (…) I think the first two important parts are the attitude and the lifestyle, and the other thing is the special views. “ (Tourist_12)

> "For me, what I remember most is the lifestyle and the local people of the Scandinavian countries (…) the people they don't have much social pressure. And they are enjoying their life there. That is what I like the most. And also, the environment is very good. Especially the air." (Tourist_02)

The focus on more intangible attractions differ from findings from studies conducted in other European destinations, where group tourists in particular have tended to focus more on traditional sightseeing (Andreu et al., 2013; Corigliano, 2011). While these findings may be more specific to Scandinavia, than to second-tier destinations in general, they indicate that Chinese preferences for second-tier destinations may depend on the type of destination that they are visiting. This indicates that second-tier destinations may have freedom and opportunities to market themselves and be appreciated on their own merits, as they do not have to live up to pre-set expectations like more famous and traditional destinations.

Second-tier destinations as the (safe) 'unknown'

Most literature on China outbound tourism agrees that safety is amongst the most important factors for Chinese tourists when selecting destinations (e.g. Becken, 2003; Kim et al., 2005; M. Li et al., 2011; Sparks & Pan, 2009; Yu & Weiler, 2001). This was also the case for Chinese travellers to Scandinavia, who perceived the destination to be safe relative to other European destinations:

> "... generally speaking Scandinavia is much safer than Paris or Italy…" (TourLeader_04)

> "They perceive Scandinavia to be very safe. That means for example South Africa has difficulties because they think it is unsafe, Africa is unsafe in general, the middle-east is

> unsafe, also India to some degree, southern Europe also a bit, France a bit. But Denmark, Sweden, Norway seem like a safe place to be” (Intermediary_9)

Information (sources) and expectations were also found to be important factors in Chinese tourism to Scandinavia. The initial findings coincided with the literature on China outbound tourism generally, as it was shown that on- and/or offline word of mouth were of considerable importance as information sources for Chinese tourists to Scandinavia (N. Chen, Dwyer, & Firth, 2015; P. Wang, 2014; Yang, Jing, & Nguyen, 2016). However, the findings showed that unlike China outbound tourists generally, those to Scandinavia knew little about the destination(s) to which they were travelling:

> “Most of the places in Scandinavia, actually we are not so familiar with (…) I mean, I am not familiar with most of the scenic spots there. For example, I am familiar with scenic spots in France, in Swiss, but we are not familiar with scenic spots in Scandinavia.” (Tourist_03)

> “Maybe they will say. ‘I want to go to Scandinavia’. But I don’t think they will know much more than just the four countries.” (Intermediary_04)

A negative consequence of the lack of knowledge is that some tourists might not choose Scandinavia or other second-tier destinations for their travels, because they do not want to go to a place about which they know little. For those who chose Scandinavia, however, the lack of knowledge meant that they either had moderate expectations, (which it was relatively easy to fulfil) or were more open to whatever experiences they might encounter during their trip:

> “I didn’t know a lot about the countries in North Europe. So, in fact, I didn’t expect very much before I travelled there. But when I really arrived there, I just think there is a lot of attractive and interesting things there…” (Tourist_04)

This openness that is attributable to a lack of knowledge, reinforces the previous point that second-tier destinations are less bound by expectations, because Chinese tourists to these destinations are more open to new and unexpected experiences.

Demand for Chinese tourists

The analysis found that there is a demand for Chinese tourists amongst Scandinavian suppliers. Two advantages of China outbound tourism have been the primary focus in research and discussion of China outbound tourism - the numbers and the spending (e.g. China Daily, 2016; Chinese Tourists Agency, 2017; UNTWO, 2016). These advantages were also recognised by Scandinavian suppliers but more specific advantages of Chinese incoming tourism compared to other markets also emerged from the analysis. Three such advantages were: (1) that they had a unique perspective on tourism products: (2) that they visited at times when it was difficult to sell products to traditional costumers and: (3) that their consumption patterns differed from traditional consumer groups.

It has already been elaborated how the Chinese tourists valued intangibles such as the environment and lifestyle when travelling to Scandinavia. This reflects a perspective that differs from other tourist groups, especially in the case of those coming from near-markets. Another example of this perspective was that specific places or products could be sold to Chinese consumers in new ways:

> "… the ideas from the office in China are ideas that I would never come up with, some combinations (…) that is interesting with the market, that you really have to understand how to make a nice offer for the Chinese visitors. (…) You can sell Stockholm as a nature, hiking product." (Supplier_04)

The preceding quote reflects how Scandinavian cities might be sold as nature destinations to Chinese consumers. The fact that Chinese consumers have an interest and bring a perspective that differs vastly from typical consumers can be beneficial for second-tier destinations, since they may define or redefine not only their products, but their destinations when marketing to the Chinese market.

Lack of capacity was a challenge for Scandinavian destinations and may also be a deficiency for other second-tier destinations:

> "it is not easy to get some resources, I mean accommodation, overnight cruise or something like that, you have to pay more for it." (Intermediary_03)

A major reason for the capacity issue is seasonality in the Scandinavian tourism sector. This means that attractions and accommodation are at capacity during Summer, but lack guests during other times of the year. This is a broader issue that the Scandinavian destinations were working to alleviate. Some suppliers saw China outbound tourism as part of the solution to this problem, because many Chinese tourists travel throughout the year:

> "when we suddenly have guests who come in droves in the low season, in busses. They are low paying guests, but they are paying guests. For us, that is very, very interesting. It fills out blanks that we have not been able to fill previously…"

> (Supplier_12)

The influx of Chinese tourists outside the main season has advantages. The summer products and tourists were generally more generic and covered a larger geographical area during their visit, while the tourists visiting in other parts of the year, came for deeper experiences and typically stayed in the same destinations for longer:

> “Summer products are somehow different needs, different segments as well. Then the winter is Northern lights, its experience. (…) Scandinavian summer as one destination somehow, and then winter is totally different” (Intermediary_12)

A challenge that relates to Chinese inbound tourists was that both visitors and Chinese tour operators placed high demands in terms of hotel standards. These demands do not always align with their price expectations: “That is a peculiar thing about the Chinese, they want four star, but they want to pay two or one star price.” (Supplier_10). Although this was seen as a challenge for some, others also argued that it had positive side effects, because tour operators and tourists willingly book hotels outside city centres to reach a balance between hotel price and quality. Some hoteliers thus explained that they benefitted from the Chinese tourists because they were filling rooms that would be otherwise hard to occupy at certain times of the year:

> “It’s getting more and more important, because they also use the outside city center hotels, and a lot of markets like Europeans, Americans and others like Taiwanese, they want to stay in the city centres (…) They [the Chinese tourists] using other hotels than other markets are...” (Supplier_09)

These findings exemplify some of the particularities that make Chinese tourists attractive to destinations, compared with other markets where the tourists may be less flexible about for example their accommodation choices. They add to existing knowledge by pointing to advantages of China outbound tourism, other than sheer numbers and spending, which are often reported as the only appealing aspects (e.g. China Daily, 2016; Chinese Tourists Agency, 2017). The findings suggest that the uniqueness of Chinese tourists not only brings challenges, but also opportunities for practitioners in second-tier destinations, if they accumulate and take advantage of specified knowledge about the market.

Conclusions

By adopting an in-depth focus on a set of second-tier European destinations, this paper goes beyond the broad and stereotypical representations of Chinese tourists that have often been presented in the literature. It illustrates the heterogeneity of Chinese tourism to European destinations and points to specific advantages that the Chinese market offers to European second-tier destinations.

The study found that Chinese tourists to second-tier destinations are more mature than those travelling to their first-tier equivalents. This means that some of the negative side effects and specific requirements of inexperienced Chinese tourists are less present in second-tier destinations, than is the case for first-tier destinations. The increasing experience also means that the tourists have developing needs and preferences. This holds potential for second-tier destinations, because these may be better equipped to cater for such newer needs than their better-trodden counterparts. Such leanings include a preference for deeper and more special experiences, for intangible lifestyle related attractions and for clean and unspoiled environments that contrast with the current environmental situation in China.

Another advantage for second-tier destinations was that these are judged differently from their more famous equivalents. Chinese tourists have little knowledge about Scandinavia. This translated into a more open-minded approach to the destinations, which were judged on their own merits, rather than on their ability to live up to pre-set expectations. Such advantages were compounded by specific advantages of Chinese tourists compared with other tourist groups that were mentioned by the suppliers in the Scandinavian destinations. Firstly, the Chinese tourists had a unique perspective on tourism products, which meant that they could be reinvented and rebranded when sold to Chinese consumers. Second, the Chinese tourists visited European destinations at times when other tourists did not. Third, the consumption patterns of Chinese tourists differed from those of traditional costumer groups, meaning, for example that hotels with a traditional focus on business customers could also sell rooms to Chinese leisure consumers. Such advantages add to existing knowledge on China outbound tourism, by highlighting advantages of the market other than numbers and spending.

The findings of this study relate to the Scandinavian context and there is a chance that they are only true for this particular setting. The researchers have however argued that some of the broader observations may also apply to second-tier destinations in similar developed western tourism markets. There is a need to conduct further research in such markets in order to confirm this belief and to deepen and develop existing knowledge about Chinese tourism to second tier destinations.

Further insights are also needed about other types of secondary destinations, notably in less developed parts of the world. This work would allow for a separation of the advantages that apply to second-tier destinations generally from those that apply to destinations with specific characteristics.

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