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Spatial and Temporal Behavior of Chinese Tourists in Europe

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Summative Evaluation of Tourist Experiences: Chinese Tourists in Europe

Introduction

The number of Chinese international tourists reached 155 million in 2019 and they spent US$133.8 billion in the international market (CTA 2020[1]). Apart from Asia, Europe is the most visited destination by Chinese tourists. Despite being the main western destination for Chinese outbound tourism, little is known about Chinese tourist in Europe (Jan and Wang, 2016). One striking trend that emerged before Covid-19, is the number of Chinese tourists who selected a customized tour increased by 315%, representing 8% of total trips to Europe (Ctrip 2019[2]). However, tourism research has not kept abreast of this important niche segment.

Tourist experience was a popular topic from 1970s onwards (Quan and Wang, 2004). Generally, there are two approaches to the study of the tourist experience, namely the social science approach and the marketing/management approach. The former refers to the tourist experience as a peak experience while the latter considers it as a consumer experience (Quan and Wang, 2004; Volo, 2009). Larsen (2007) found that the experience is influenced by expectancies, events and what are remained and constructed in the individuals' memory. Understanding how tourists evaluate their travel experience is important to tourism research. According to Chark et al. (2022), the retrospective summary evaluations are better predicted using an arithmetic average of all episodic evaluations, instead of the peak-end rule.

Based on 'customization' as the travel mode and considering the paucity of literature about Chinese tourists´ behavior in European destinations, this research aims to reveal how Chinese tourists evaluate their semi-independent travel experiences in Europe. In this study, 'semi-independent travel' refers to prospective tourists who get help from a travel consultant in designing and customizing their itinerary to their interests and in the end buy part of the package from the agency, such as guiding, transport, or accommodation.

Literature Review

When traveling to overseas destinations, group package tours dominate among Chinese tourists. The relevance of this travel mode has led researchers to study Chinese group tourists' pre-trip preference (Chen et. al, 2019) and expectation (Li et al., 2011), their evaluation of on-site service (Chen et al., 2018) and their shopping behavior (Tsaur et al., 2017, Kwek et al., 2019). For example, Chen et al. (2019) found that Chinese outbound tourists were individuals with diverse preferences when selecting group package tours priced at different levels. Regardless of budget, respondents showed a common preference for fewer designated shops and for direct international flights. Special attention has also been given to the influence of "face" on group tourists' behavior (Kwek

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[1] http://www.ctaweb.org.cn/cta/ztyj/202103/87a492a44eda4038b7fe8f6428ed3d5d.shtml

[2] https://www.traveldaily.cn/article/131273

and Lee, 2015), perception of the senior segment (Wang et al., 2013) and the phenomenon of zero-fare tours (Yan and Cheng, 2020). Kwek and Lee (2015) explored if and how the concept of "face" influences the touring experience of Mainland Chinese corporate group travelers on the Gold Coast, Australia. Wang et al. (2013) touched upon Chinese seniors' perception of group tour service features. Three factors were rated important for them: pre-trip briefing, restaurants and optional tours.

In contrast to group package tourists, independent tourists bear the burden of fully arranging their travel, but at the same time, enjoy total freedom on their own terms. This is a growing mode of long-haul travel that Chinese tourists use when they become more experienced. Cai et al. (2020) investigated Chinese independent tourists' experience to the Arctic from the hedonic and eudaimonic perspective. As a result, the authors recommended that Arctic tourism be positioned as a highly valued, exotic, and extraordinary destination for independent travelers who aim to enrich their mind and soul above material pleasure. Chinese international students in Australia were examined for their potential to provide insights into the future behaviors of young Chinese independent travelers. As compared to its counterpart-backpackers, Chinese youths tended to travel primarily with an education motive and conform to mainstream travel patterns (King and Gardiner, 2015). A few studies have analyzed the two types of travel mode to address destination image, satisfaction and motivation (Li et al., 2017; Lojo and Li, 2018).

Methodology

This paper uses online travel reviews (OTRs) to assess Chinese tourist experiences in European destinations. The OTRs of the study were retrieved from the online travel platform Mafengwo with 100 million users by the end of the year 2017. It is known as the travel bible among younger Chinese netizens (Baidu, Baike), where travelers can pick packages that offer differing levels of freedom, ranging from tailor-made packages, all-inclusive ones to short trips.

The reviews of interest were collected manually by entering the keyword "Europe". As such, it returned all the travel products to European destinations which could be customized according to customer's need. The majority of them are of multiple countries, such as a four-country tour France-Germany-Switzerland-Italy, whereas a few are promoting a single country, like an eight-day in-depth tour in Finland. In the end, 311 reviews in Mandarin were collected from 25 popular itineraries mainly within the year 2019 and 2018. The usable reviews were 277 as 34 were missing text.

This study adopts a content analysis approach to explore the evaluation of Chinese tourists. Content analysis is defined as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from the data to their context (Krippendorff, 2018). This is an unobtrusive method used to identify patterns and structures with the aim to capture the meaning of textual data. The content analysis was done inductively without pre-conceived categories so as to transform the unstructured reviews into an organized structure. The traditional content analysis consists of two procedures: the conceptual and thematic analysis in sequence. The conceptual analysis employed an open coding and recoding approach. Then, thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes of the OTRs. These themes tend to capture shared meaning around the central concept.

Results

The traditional text analysis is very informative in revealing users' cognitive, affective and holistic evaluations of their travel experiences. Table 1 shows the nine categories and four themes identified. Indeed, the nine categories - value for money, food, consultant, tourist guide, itinerary, transport, attractions/activities, lodging, future patronage/recommendation- are merged into four themes as follows.

Theme one—core attributes

The first theme is called core attributes, encompassing the attraction/activity and tourist guide category. The reviewers have rated the attraction category for varying reasons, depending on the travel product they purchase. The Nordic countries were deemed as fascinating destinations for the stunning natural beauty, like aurora, lagoons, ice and cave, and the amusing activities like dog sledding, visiting Santa Claus village, seeing the icebreaker, walking on the ice cap and undertaking shark-watching. In the countries like Italy, Greece, the hot spots and cities were a must-see for the visitors: the alluring sea and white building on Santorini blew the tourists away; the color and water of Venice let the traveler linger on there. The travelers were enthralled by the views of the central European countries, for instance Switzerland is picturesque for its nice residential buildings, good air quality and towering glaciers as a tourist reported: *Switzerland's scenery is really good, a casual shot is a star film-like scenery! The air quality is high, and you can see the snow-capped mountains in the town. This trip abroad is very satisfactory, looking forward to the next trip (France Switzerland Italy 14-days romantic tour).*

The reviewers thought of tourist guides as being dedicated, professional, warm, punctual and humorous. They knew the local cultures and attractions well, recommended intriguing activities and kept solving problems. The reviewers complimented them, in some cases for playing the role of good, warm driver and for not pushing forced shopping. For instance, one user shared: *The handsome guide also in charge of the ground transportation is very dedicated. He did not take us to do forced shopping, just escorted us along the way (Finland, Norway Iceland 12-day aurora tour).*

Theme two—supporting core attributes

The second theme is composed of food, transport and lodging categories. The reviewers rarely mentioned dining experience and transportation in the corpus. Despite that, the users appreciated the restaurant recommendation of consultant or roadbook, local home-eating experience, eating local specialties and delicious food at a reasonable price. For example: *We had a great time, especially the consultant arranged for us to dine at a local's house. We had a great time talking with our hosts (France, Switzerland Italy 14-days romantic tour)!* The transport, over the on-site stage, was praised by users for availability of pick-up and drop-off service, shuttle bus among localities, warm, responsible and punctual driver, charter service, good self-driving experience and using luxury vehicle. One review elaborated an experience: *The transportation is very good, especially the inter-country transportation, business car, door to door kind, absolutely praise (Czech Republic Austria Hungary 12-Days Big City Customization Tour).*

The reviewers valued the accommodation which was five-star, clean, spacious, comfortable, convenient with good location. Besides, users admired the hotels that had upscale facilities, luxury spa, good natural environment, welcome gift to guests, nice breakfast and a superb view of the

city/lake/mountain. They also felt satisfied if the place was low-priced/economical, or if they met good host and thought the place had good value for money. As one user's comment went: *The hotels in Helsinki and Lake Saimaa are particularly great with a welcome gift on the first night of our stay. The five-star hotels in Helsinki, needless to say, the location and environment are fantastic. Lake Saimaa's detached vacation home is really great, for it is surrounded by natural forest. The hotel also has spa center. After riding around the lake area, we enjoyed the comfortable spa service back in the hotel (Iceland Finland Norway 11 days customization tour).*

Theme three—agency attributes

This theme consists of travel consultant, itinerary category. The consultant, as one of the categories identified being evaluated most nicely, is the person who designs and customizes the travel itinerary by communicating with customers. The reviewers extolled them as responsible, patient, warm, professional, caring, thoughtful; they tend to be a problem-solver, available around the clock, good at communication, and making the detailed roadbook. Many users expressed gratitude for their service and assistance along the way. For example: *From the pre-departure ticket booking, unexpected events during the journey, to the care and sympathy after trip, the consultant is always the first to help me solve problems, so I feel warm. Really thankful (France, Switzerland Italy 14-day romantic tour)!*

The itinerary is assessed favorably among all texts as the consultant category. The reviewers loved travel trajectories which were reasonable, professional, not tiring, worry-free, complete, enjoyable, clear, smooth, tailored. They had no-whistle stops and tightly followed the roadbook; they were neither too intensive nor too loose, neatly coordinated and met the expectation. One thing worth noting is that roadbook is an important sub-item under the category. Roadbooks are books to be digital or traditional, provided/offered by the agencies to customers to assist the semi-independent leisure travelers in the tourism destinations with respect to the daily tour and hospitality. Users complimented the roadbook for it was nice, detailed, user-friendly and worth collecting for memory as one commented: *They gave us a very detailed and thoughtful roadbook, so we can basically follow it without any brain, which is especially awesome (Greece Italy 12 days honeymoon customization tour)!*

 Theme four—overall appraisal attributes

This theme focuses on the reviewer's holistic evaluation of the travel experience and service. It is made up of value for money and future patronage/recommendation categories. A total of 31 reviewers thought the personalized travel product they purchased were cost-effective. The price was within a reasonable range, or in a few cases, the users claimed that the price was not as expensive as they thought, or very competitive as compared to its counterparts. Among 277 pieces of texts, 41% of users, when typing the comment, either highly recommended the relevant travel agency/mode to others or would choose the same travel agency/mode in the future. They created desirable e-word-of-mouth on the social community.

The first two themes–core attributes and supporting core attributes, correspond to the structural model of the tourist experience proposed by Quan and Wang (2004). According to them, the tourist experience consists of two dimensions: the dimension touristic peak experience refers to the attractions that constitute the major motivations to tourism; the supporting consumer experience is the dimension that gratifies basic consumer needs on the journey, such as eating, sleeping and moving. The fourth theme is also widely investigated in the research inquires as constructs revisitation intention, satisfaction, loyalty, whereas the third theme, agency attributes, marks the

novelty. Under this travel mode, the role of it cannot be neglected when travelers retrospectively evaluate their travel experiences.

Table 1. Summary of themes, categories, evaluations, and snippets

Themes	Categories	No. of positive evaluation (n=277)	Snippets from reviews
Core attributes	Attraction/activity	110	*Switzerland's scenery is really good, a casual shot is a star film-like scenery! The air quality is high, and you can see the snow-capped mountains in the town. This trip abroad is very satisfactory, looking forward to the next trip (France Switzerland Italy 14-days romantic tour).*
	Tourist guide	22	*The handsome guide also in charge of the ground transportation is very dedicated. He did not take us to do forced shopping, just escorted us along the way (Finland, Norway Iceland 12-day aurora tour).*
Supporting core attributes	Food	27	*We had a great time, especially the consultant arranged for us to dine at a local's house. We had a great time talking with our hosts (France, Switzerland Italy 14-days romantic tour)!*
	Transport	29	*The transportation is very good, especially the inter-country transportation, business car, door to door kind, absolutely praise (Czech Republic Austria Hungary 12-Days Big City Customization Tour)*
	Lodging	48	*The hotels in Helsinki and Lake Saimaa are particularly great with a welcome gift on the first night of our stay. The five-star hotels in Helsinki, needless to say, the location and environment are fantastic. Lake Saimaa's detached vacation home is really great, for it is surrounded by natural forest. The hotel also has spa center. After riding around the lake area, we enjoyed the comfortable spa service back in the hotel (Iceland Finland Norway 11 days customization tour).*
Agency attributes	Travel consultant	145	*From the pre-departure ticket booking, unexpected events during the journey, to the care and sympathy after trip, the consultant is always the first to help me solve problems, so I feel warm. Really thankful (France, Switzerland Italy 14-day romantic tour)!*

	Travel itinerary	145	*They gave us a very detailed and thoughtful roadbook, so we can basically follow it without any brain, which is especially awesome (Greece Italy 12 days honeymoon customization tour)!*
Overall appraisal attributes	Value for money	31	*When we arrived at the destination, we really experienced the value for money (Greece Italy 12 Days Honeymoon Customization) !*
	Future patronage/ recommendation	114	*We will continue to cooperate in the future if necessary ~ if friends need we will recommend ~ heart (16-day customized trip in France, Germany and Italy).*

Conclusion and Discussion

This study has employed traditional content analysis to reveal Chinese tourists' experiences to Europe. The aim is to investigate how Chinese tourists evaluate and comment on their semi-independent trips. Among categories, reviewers appreciated mostly the theme "agency attributes" —consultant and itinerary, followed by attractions/activities and lodging. In contrast, reviewers rarely appreciated the eating, transportation and guiding experiences over all 25 travel products. Almost half of the reviews showed tourist´s intention to select the same agency and travel mode in the future or to recommend such agency and travel mode to others.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, this research extends the understanding of Chinese tourists´ preference. Indeed, this study enriches the literature that focuses on international Chinese tourists, especially those travelling to Europe. More importantly, the study keeps abreast of a new travel mode for Chinese tourists. Customized tours - a mix of the independent and group tours - lie within the continuum of traditional travel modes. Last but not the least, the results of the thematic analysis extend the attribute list of post-trip evaluations, as with reference to this specific market the agency attributes become prominent.

In addition, the findings of the study have some practical implications for business suppliers. The study findings suggest that under this travel mode, the reviewers assess most favorably the agency attributes, rather than any category of the core attributes and supporting core attributes, which indicates that the agencies should at the pre-trip stage, make elaborate, tailored roadbook by listening to travelers' voice and assigning a professional travel advisor; after embarking on travel, the consultant should be still available for solving any unexpected incidents because, it appears from the results, that fulfilling these two rules will be the backbone of a satisfying travel experience. This travel mode may become more welcome in the post-pandemic age as tourists are eager to minimize direct contact with others. The customized tours will enable them to travel freely in small group, with familiar members.

Despite its contribution, the study is not free from limitations. First, as the author alone took on the task of content analysis, it is inevitable to introduce biases, which can be minimized by inter-coding. Inviting other coders to analyze the same texts will make the findings more reliable. Second, this study only focused on positive evaluations of tourist experience. Future research can also delve into negative evaluations and their entailing reasons to avoid one-sided representation. Third, the OTRs of the study were retrieved from one platform manually. To have more valid findings, future researchers can scrape larger dataset from various travel websites.

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