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Jie Gao PhD Student

Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University

Deborah Kerstetter

Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, The Pennsylvania State University

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Never Too Old to Travel: Exploring Older Chinese Women's Perceptions of Travel

Jie Gao

PhD Student

Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

The Pennsylvania State University

812 Donald H. Ford Building

University Park, PA 16802

Phone: 814-865-5614

Email: jgao@psu.edu

Deborah Kerstetter

Professor and Professor-in-Charge of Graduate Studies

Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

The Pennsylvania State University

801D Donald H. Ford Building

University Park, PA 16802

Phone: 814-863-8988

Email: debk@psu.edu

Introduction

By 2050, 17% of the world's population will be 65 and older (United States Census Bureau, 2012), 78% will be living in less developed or developing countries (United Nations, 2005). In Asia, this represents over a quarter billion people. China alone is expected to be home to 322 million people aged 65 and over by 2050 (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2008). This population shift potentially represents a change in consumer demand that likely will have unprecedented impact on various industries, including tourism (Paxson, 2009; Sedgley, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2011). In China this is particularly true; over 50% of older adults travel and, according to Li and Zhong (2011), 9 out of 10 want to travel after they retire. However, the proposed study will focus on older Chinese women only, a segment of the population that is expected to have the greatest impact on the leisure travel (from now on referred to as "travel") industry.

The decision to conduct a study with older Chinese women is multifaceted. First, older Chinese women tend to have few social and family responsibilities. However, they also tend to feel "empty," which is correlated with different levels of psychological solitude (Hu & Zhang, 2005). According to Nawijn (2009) and Mitas (2010), travel may be a viable intervention for increasing positive mental health. They found that travel can generate positive emotions and may even relieve loneliness. Second, Chinese women usually retire 5 to 10 years earlier than men because of China's retirement policies. Thus, the time in which they may experience "emptiness" or decreased mental health is far greater than that of men. Third, in China 63% of tourists in 2010 were 45 years of age or older and, on average, females spent more on travel than males (China National Tourism Administration [CNTA], 2011). The spending behavior of females is similar to that documented by Patterson and Pegg (2011), who found that older women are financially able to respond to various travel options. Fourth, despite the fact that middle age and older Chinese women are traveling, there are many who do not travel. Is this due to financial concerns, social concerns, or some other factor(s)? According to Chen, Chen and Okumus

(2012), older people perceive few structural constraints (e.g., time, money), but it is unclear whether this applies to travel and, more specifically, older Chinese women.

Literature Review

Few studies of older adults and travel exist in the travel literature. With respect to motivation, a recent study by Yuan, Zhao, and Yue (2011) found that older females (i.e., 55+) primarily travel for scenery and nature. Unfortunately, their results are not generalizable to older Chinese women as the data collection instrument was drawn from studies conducted primarily in North America. Other studies have focused on segmenting the older adult market into groups that can be targeted with strategic marketing campaigns (e.g., Jiang, 2011; Li & Zhong, 2011); the transformative outcomes of travel (Roberson, 2001); the meaning of travel based on older adults' travel patterns (Gibson, 2002); and the influences of a person's history and life contexts on their life choices and leisure, including travel (Sedgley, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2006). According to Ray (2007), much more research [e.g., perceived constraints to travel, benefits of travel] is needed that moves beyond viewing older adults simply as consumers.

Older adults may face a number of constraints (e.g., few travel partners, limited budget) when considering whether to travel. In 1991 Crawford, Jackson and Godbey proposed a multi-dimensional Hierarchical Constraint Model that initiated numerous studies on the perceived constraints to leisure participation, but few focused on travel. Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2002) tested and confirmed the applicability of the leisure constraint model in a nature-based tourism context, but suggested that the travel industry would be well served by continuing to test the Model in a variety of travel contexts. Nyaupane, Morais and Graefe (2004) applied the Model to three nature-based tourism activities, and called for a reexamination of one of its dimensions. Nyaupane and Andereck (2008) also challenged the validity of the Model in a travel context when they found that one of its dimensions was not inclusive of all structural (i.e., place attributes, cost, and lack of time) constraints. Chen et al. (2012) introduced a new travel constraint model that includes a destination-specific constraint dimension (i.e., unfamiliar cultural constraints) that is critical to the early travel decision-making process. Overall, however, there is a dearth of research regarding perceived constraints to travel amongst older females and, more specifically, older Chinese females.

The number of studies on travel and well-being, particularly with older adults, is also limited. Milman (1998) explored the impact of travel on senior travelers' psychological well-being and found that travel did not lead to increased happiness. Five years later, however, Gilbert and Abdullah (2004) found that tourists experienced a higher sense of well-being before and after their vacation than their counterparts did. Similar findings were reported by Nawijn, Mitas, Lin, and Kerstetter (2013). Adopting a different perspective, Andereck and Nyaupane (2011) and Nawijn and Mitas (2012) focused on residents' perceptions of the way tourism influences their quality of life. These studies have not focused on older adults nor have they been conducted with older adults in China.

Purpose Statement and Study Objectives

The primary purpose of this exploratory study is to document the meanings of and perceived constraints to travel amongst older Chinese women. A secondary purpose is to document whether older Chinese women feel that travel contributes to their psychological well-being.

The objectives of the proposed study include: (1) documenting the meanings that older Chinese women attach to travel; (2) assessing perceived constraints to travel, and how older

Chinese women negotiate through them over time; and (3) identifying examples of how travel has positively contributed to older Chinese women's well-being.

Research Methods

In-depth, semi-structured interviews, which are considered to be a viable instrument for investigating the meaning of travel, will be conducted with a sample of 20 older Chinese women aged 50 to 59. This number of interviews is considered acceptable in exploratory studies (Ryan, 1995). This subgroup of older Chinese women was chosen because 54% of travelers in China are aged between 45 and 64 (CNTA, 2011), and many will likely be experiencing a transition from work to retirement due to China's retirement policy. Further, this subgroup tends to be more actively engaged in physical activities and traveling (Robinson & Godbey, 1997), and they generally spend more time traveling (Penalta & Uysal, 1992).

During summer 2013 a convenience sample of older Chinese women living in a medium sized city who are continuously provided with opportunities to travel will be identified through snowball sampling (i.e., each interviewee provides contact information for another potential interviewee). At the beginning of the interview participants will be asked to talk about travel and what it means to them. Follow-up questions will focus on getting participants to share stories of their travel experiences from their childhood, their 20s and 30s, the past 10 years, and the last year. Within each time frame, they will be asked, "Did you travel when you were [insert time frame]?" If they answer, "yes," they will also be asked to share their travel experiences (e.g., destination, partner, motivation, whether used a travel agent) as well as their memories. The focus of this series of questions is constraints to travel.

Expected Outcome

While there has been some research on the travel behavior of older adults, there has been a call for more in-depth study of the meanings and outcomes of their travel experiences (Roberson, 2001; Gibson, 2002; Patterson & Pegg, 2011; Sedgley et al., 2006). This study, which uses qualitative methods, will allow for the discovery of new meanings and a more in-depth understanding of older Chinese women's travel experiences. It is expected that the results of this proposed research will provide insight to the Chinese travel industry as well as any other destination attempting to attract the interest of older Chinese female travelers. For example, the results will contribute to our knowledge of the meanings associated with travel, which can be used by the travel industry to promote destinations. The results can also be used to develop travel products that respond to the needs (e.g., as a social connectedness, improving emotional and psychological well-being) of older Chinese women (Mannell & Snelgrove, 2011). Or, if the study results confirm the positive contribution of travel to individual well-being, they will also bring health care benefits to older people at a holistic level, which can reduce the financial stress of publically sponsored pension programs.

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