

WP 53 ON RED ALERT: RESPONSES TO DEVIANT BEHAVIOUR OF CHINESE OUTBOUND TOURISTS DURING SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

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ABSTRACT

The tide of Chinese tourists have emerged to become the focus of many destinations keen to realise the benefits of such engagements. Chinese outbound tourists are widely dispersed across the world, where tourism literature have studied characteristics of such visitors, motivations for their travel, and the readiness of destinations towards such developments. However, this trajectory is not without its challenges. Recent instances of deviant behaviour concerning some Chinese tourists have painted a fairly negative image of such visitors. Despite these efforts, very little is known as to how destinations have responded to the deviant behaviour. Building on the current scope of service quality literature, this paper explores how a more coordinated approach to manage such service encounters arising in the future can benefit organisations.

Keywords: *China tourists, deviant behaviour, service quality*

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this working paper is on the Chinese outbound tourism market. Specifically, this market refers to the collective group of persons from Mainland China, as opposed to other Chinese tourists originating from places such as Singapore, Malaysia or Taiwan. In tourism literature, Chinese outbound tourists have been classified as an emerging market on the basis of their tourism growth potential (Cai, O’Leary & Boger, 2000; Tretheway & Mak, 2006; Zhang & Heung, 2002). In particular, Li, Hu and Zhang (2010) explained using the term ‘Red tourism’ to characterise the influence of communism ideologies on China’s tourism developments. While emerging markets have been coined since the 1980s, there has been some confusion as to what the term means. However, economists have some consensus that emerging markets refer to countries with low income per capita (Heakal, 2003; Khanna and Krishna, 2010; Martin, 2015). The prominent rise of China as an emerging market can be observed from outbound tourist statistics obtained from Euromonitor Passport database (2015) (see Appendices A to D). Two notable outcomes can be made from the appendices.

One, the volume of Chinese outbound tourists is far greater by absolute numbers than any of the other top 19 destinations featured. The second, is that the retail value of the Chinese outbound market is more than the accumulated total of the rest of the top 14 destinations. These staggering figures reiterate that the Chinese outbound tourist market cannot be ignored.

Yet, in recent times, the trajectory of Chinese outbound tourists has highlighted a few incidents involving deviant tourist behaviour. While these incidents are not exclusive to the Chinese outbound tourist market, their scale of entry to many destinations have repeatedly illuminated instances of deviant behaviour, thus painting the country's image in a negative light (Wan, 2015). In response to such incidents, the Chinese government has resorted to using two tactics: One, publishing a book on civilised travel abroad and two, setting up a document to blacklist errant tourists. Despite these efforts, very little is known as to how destinations have responded to the deviant behaviour. Building on the current scope of service quality literature, this paper explores how a more coordinated approach to manage such crises service encounters arising in the future can benefit organisations.

THE CHINESE OUTBOUND TOURIST MARKET

A growing number of studies has emerged within tourism literature to reflect the importance of the Chinese outbound tourist market. In examining motivations for travel, some scholars concurred that the Chinese tourists chose destinations that were perceived to be safe locations, and facilitated opportunities to view picturesque scenery and experience unique cultures (Chow & Murphy, 2011; Li et al, 2011). Other scholars have also picked up on the growing demands of Chinese tourists for sophisticated travel experiences, such as the quality of shopping (Agrusa, Kim & Wang, 2011; Xu & McGehee, 2012) and food (Chang, Kivela & Mak, 2010; Pearce, Wu, De Carlo & Rossi, 2013). Collectively, the Chinese tourists are a diverse typology and therefore provided destinations with an understanding of who these tourists are, and their behaviour patterns (Kwek & Lee, 2010; Xiang, 2013).

Knowing about the Chinese tourist profiles and travel motivations is one thing, but providing and managing suitable experiences is another. By interviewing Hong Kong residents about the impact of Chinese tourists, Siu, Lee and Leung (2013) found that while these visitors provided strong economic benefits to the destination, their social and environmental contributions were less obvious. In another study, Zhang and Murphy (2009) advocated for a highly integrated approach within tourism networks in order to realise the potential of the Chinese tourist market. Amidst the rapid speed of growth concerning Chinese outbound

tourists, several instances of deviant behaviour have surfaced. These include pouring hot water on a flight attendant (Chen, 2014), attempting to open the doors of a plane while in flight mode (Branigan, 2014), venting their displeasure by singing the Chinese national anthem in the transit lounge following a flight delay (Zhou, 2015) and shoving their way into a queue for tourist tax refunds (Ryan, 2015). On the back of the internet and social media, these exemplars have painted negative image of China.

SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality is a well-studied field in the area of marketing (Huang, 2008). In particular, service quality explores how consumer expectations of service are at least delivered by organisations (Grove & Fisk, 1997). Hence, the lens of investigations have often been framed from a dual perspective involving customer to business interactions (Martin, 2005). Moreover, it is often the case where service encounters often take place with other consumers present. As such, the behaviour of other consumers can either create favourable or unfavourable perceptions of service (Small & Harris, 2014).

Yet, there remains very little within tourism to assess how destinations respond to the service encounters when deviant behaviour of one group of tourists arises, and the impacts of such actions on other tourists (Loi & Pearce, 2015). The service encounter is made more complex in today's technologically-mediated environment where tourism behaviours are now captured and easily disseminated via the internet or on social media almost instantaneously (Law & Cheung, 2010). Such contents may easily tarnish the reputation of the tourist types, the service providers and the countries or regions involved in the incident. At present, the main response to such deviant behaviour has been from the host nation. In this space, the Chinese government has resorted to using two tactics: One, publishing a book on civilised travel abroad and two, setting up a document to blacklist errant tourists. The effectiveness of such tactics, and other plausible outcomes, will be discussed at CAUTHE 2016. This working paper is a timely discussion of how the management of service quality needs to evolve amidst the fast emerging pace of observing Chinese tourists in the tourism environment.

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