Chinese Tourist Mobilities and Destination Resilience: Regional Tourism Perspectives

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Abstract: The exponential growth of Chinese inbound tourism to Australia has seen a commensurate increase in the presence of Chinese tourists in regional Australia. This exploratory study raises questions about the extent to which Australian destinations in general, and peripheral or regional areas in particular, are ‘China ready’, and why the vast majority of Chinese tourists tend to stay within capital city.gateway zones with only smaller numbers dispersing into regional Australia. This paper draws from the initial phase of a longitudinal study in the Great Ocean Road (GOR) region of southern Australia that examines Chinese tourists’ perceptions of the region and their associated levels of satisfaction with their experience at the destination. In particular, the dissonance between Chinese tourists’ expectations and their satisfaction levels is a key observation. The managerial implications of managing and marketing regional tourism to Chinese visitors are presented, and it is argued that the necessity to address and meet the demands of the Chinese tourist experience spectrum is pressing. The catch cry for tourist destinations to be ‘China ready’ resonates, and is especially pertinent for destinations beyond gateway cities where the tourism sector capacity tends to be constrained.

Keywords: Chinese inbound tourism, regional tourism, Chinese visitor mobilities, international tourist dispersal, destination resilience

Introduction

Chinese outbound tourism has grown exponentially since the turn of the last century and is forecast to have a continuing growth trajectory over the next couple of decades (Li 2016). At the end of 2016, the number of outbound Chinese tourists reached 135 million with an associated $261 billion in
spending (Xinhua 2017). The so-called Chinese tourism boom has become a global phenomenon with destinations across the globe pursuing new and more innovative ways to attract increasing numbers of travelers from China. Undoubtedly, this has been fuelled by political, economic, demographic and technological developments in the country, and this is brought into stark relief by estimates that the number of Chinese passport holders will double from 120 million at the end of 2017 to reach 240 million by 2020 (Bloomberg 2018). This will have massive implications for Chinese outbound travel and the numbers of Chinese traversing the globe. Since first registering annual double-digit growth in tourism in 2004, the flow on effects have seen Chinese tourists increase spending by 26% in 2015, to reach US$292 billion (UNWTO 2016). It is this potential to capture Chinese tourist expenditure that is unquestionably stimulating destination development efforts around the globe.

Chinese outbound travel has historically been tightly controlled by the central government but in recent decades, this governmental stranglehold on international travel has loosened considerably (Zhang 2007). In 1999, the Approved Destination Status (herein referred to as ADS) scheme was launched allowing Chinese tourists to travel to permitted destinations, but only as part of a guided tour. Since then, along with the relaxation of restrictions on outbound travel and simplification of destination visa application procedures, the practice of granting ADS has become more commonplace. By the end of 2013, more than 146 destinations were accorded ADS (ChinaContact 2015).

By June 2017, Chinese visitors comprised 14.6% of total arrivals in Australia, heralding an unprecedented watermark (Tourism Research Australia 2017). For the financial year 2016-2017, Chinese visitation was forecasted to overtake New Zealand and become the main source market to Australia (SBS 2015) (Figure 1). At the end of 2017 Chinese inbound tourism reached an unprecedented high with over 1.39 million arrivals worth over $AU10.4 billion (Ciobo 2018). Moreover, in acknowledgement of the value of Chinese inbound tourism to Australia, 2017 was designated as the China-Australia Year of Tourism (Figure 2).
Figure 1. International Visitors to Australia – Year Ending March 2017. Source: Adapted from Tourism Research Australia 2017b.

Figure 2. China-Australia Year of Tourism 2017. Source: Used with permission from Australian Government 2017.
Although Chinese outbound tourism is widely discussed in extant tourism literature generally (Li 2016), very few empirical studies have given particular attention to Chinese visitation to regional destinations away from gateway capital cities. This is vital on account of the destination level urgencies to ensure that tourists visitation and expenditure is dispersed extensively, in turn, ensuring wider ranging geographical participation. In Australia, the tendency for Chinese tourists to proliferate in and around gateway state capital cities such as Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, is common and this in turn has led to a containment of visitor night and tourist expenditure in capital cities (Figure 3). This has had an adverse effect on the pressures already faced by declining tourist numbers in regional Australia and has led to calls for a better understanding of the barriers that prevent travel beyond the confines of capital cities.

![Figure 3. Capital City Regional and Regional Visitor Nights for Chinese Visitors – Year Ending March 2017. Source: Adapted from Tourism Research Australia 2017b.](image)

In attempting to bridge the gaps in understanding of the Chinese traveler experience in regional Australia, this study presents descriptive data concerning the experience of Chinese visitors, specifically their perceptions and satisfaction levels across multiple dimensions in the Great Ocean Road (GOR) region of southern Australia (Figure 4). The decision to employ the GOR as the study site was predicated on the understanding that it is the third most visited region in Australia for international visitors, and although it continues to receive growing numbers of Chinese tourists, the region appears to be struggling to be more ‘China ready’ (Cheer 2017). Additionally, the
region is home to one of Australia’s most globally recognized icons, the Twelve Apostles: a group of offshore limestone stacks approximately 228 kilometers from Melbourne and a site that is prominent in the Chinese tourist imagination of Australia (Figure 5). Yet, despite its strong allure to Chinese tourists, the region has largely failed to achieve its potential for converting growing Chinese visitation into overnight stays, and has become more commonly regarded as a day-trip destination, hampering optimization of tourist spending and length of stay.

**Figure 4.** Great Ocean Road Region including Melbourne. 
Source: Used with permission from Tourism Australia Image Library.

**Regional Tourism: An Australian Context**

The ability for tourism to be an agent for regional development is well acknowledged and in Australia this is no exception, largely because of the potential for economic diversification, especially in regional areas that have undergone considerable social, economic and demographic transformation (Cheer 2017). In Australia, the experience of declining populations, diminishment of primary and agriculture sector returns, depopulation and extreme climate events including bush fires, floods and droughts have added to the precarity of life in regional towns, and overall destination resilience
(Courvisanos et al. 2016). Consequently, the search for economic renewal and diversification in many regional contexts is commonplace. For regional locations blessed with outstanding natural and cultural landscapes, the move toward tourism expansion is somewhat inevitable, and this is intensified if located in close proximity to state capital cities that act as gateways for international tourists (Kneafsey 2001).

For many regional destinations experiencing dramatic tourism growth, this inevitably leads to heightened demand for new infrastructure development, including essential augmentation and improvement to roads and highways that enhance access and reduce travel time, among other benefits (Urban Enterprises 2013). Additionally, the demand for tourism-specific infrastructure, especially accommodation and other aspects of the tourism supply chain including attractions, hotels and restaurants is also intensified, and very often is subject to private sector intervention, or public-private sector partnerships (Cheer 2017). More importantly, substantial pressure is brought to regional destinations, especially in marine and coastal areas where amenity, natural habitats and biodiversity are extremely vulnerable and at the same time under pressure for competing uses (for example mining and fisheries) (Ghosh 2011).
Although tourism has the potential to contribute to social, cultural and environmental development through increasing employment opportunities and enhancing amenities in regional areas (UNEP 2011), it can also lead to overcrowding, especially during peak holiday periods, intensifying contestation for space that can spark tensions between tourist operators, developers and local communities (Parliament of Victoria 2008). Moreover, regional tourism tends to have a paradoxical relationship with the natural environment, particularly if the destination leverages nature-based experiences while seeking to maintain high natural values and unspoilt landscapes. Nature-based tourism is especially common in regional locations and while it can boost the preservation and awareness of delicate ecosystems, it can also be more vulnerable to natural disasters such as bush fires, droughts and floods (Cheer 2017). Very often, inadequate government investment in infrastructure, combined with poor maintenance and development of publicly managed visitor assets results in sub-standard experiences at high profile and significant sites (Ghosh 2012).

When it comes to regional tourism development, one of the most decisive factors underpinning the success and/or failure, concerns the fostering of effective government policy, planning and management regimes (Mowforth and Munt 2009; Ritchie and Crouch 2003). The principles of good governance in regional tourism contexts revolve around accountability, transparency, participatory, effectiveness, consistency and power (Wray et al. 2010; Ruhanen et al. 2010). Moreover, good governance aims to harness efficiencies in decision-making, innovation and empowerment of actors while mitigating conflicts to enhance comprehensive awareness, social equality and accountabilities in values and actions in a sustainable way (Farmaki 2015).

Destination marketing for regional locales in particular can have considerable impacts on the nature of tourism development and should be integrated with sustainable management and development objectives in mind to ensure that the needs of both visitors and residents are met in regional communities (Parks Victoria 2015). Small businesses in rural areas, integrated into regional communities are often called upon to fill services gaps (Spillan and Hough 2003) but often struggle to do so given the capacity constraints they face from human resources and financial capital perspectives (Irvine and Anderson 2004); this is especially relevant in marketing and in gaining access to key actors in the tourism supply chain (Canoves et al. 2004; Hall 2004).
Additionally, efforts to build regional tourism cooperation are hampered by the absence of effective and collaborative human social networks (Cheer 2017). This is particularly pertinent when it comes to binding regional tourism operators in an attempt to work cooperatively and toward enhancement of region-wide tourism competencies. In practice, however, this is challenging on the basis that individual operators and townships within a region are in direct competition with each other for the limited number of international visitor nights. This is often exacerbated by local government boundaries that intersect and cut across destination borders within the same tourism region, thus having the implication that tourism development becomes prone to political demarcations and inter- and intra-regional competition.

**Chinese Outbound Tourism Context**

The present day Chinese outbound tourism boom arguably had its genesis in the 1980s when the Chinese government relaxed the constraints on international travel and accorded ADS to a number of countries including Australia. ADS meant that the barriers to travel were lifted facilitating the provision of more direct flights and the associated flows of Chinese investment in destination countries, and this has been the case in Australia. Chinese outbound tourism is unique, not just because of the sheer volume and growth potential but also due to its socialist system backdrop and outbound tourism policy frameworks (Tse 2015). While Chinese outbound tourism is partly influenced by market forces, it is still ultimately under the control of the state and this maintains a situation where outbound visitation can be somewhat unpredictable and prone to wider bilateral political contexts (Tse and Hobson 2008; Xie and Li 2009; Mak 2013).

As the number of outbound destinations available to Chinese travelers have expanded, shifts in China’s outbound tourist flows are likely to be influenced by demand and supply drivers rather than Chinese government barriers to travel (Li 2016). In 1983, Hong Kong and Macau were the only two approved destinations for Chinese travelers. However, following China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), it embarked on accelerating the development of outbound tourism through the relaxation of travel restrictions and simplification of approval processes. This is reflected in the number of destinations conferred with ADS destinations – from 2 in 1998, to more than 146 in 2013 (ChinaContact 2015).
At the end of 2016, 122 million were trips made by Chinese travelers with the expectation that this would balloon to 97 million in the early 2020s at an average annual increase of 7.6% over 2014, 2015 and 2016 (World Travel Online 2017). Similarly, the expenditure of Chinese travelers is expected to grow exponentially as demonstrated in 2016 when a new record of global outbound tourist spending was broken by Chinese travelers with a 12% increase (Peltier 2017). To a large degree, rising disposable incomes, an appreciating currency, improved travel facilitation and an easing of restrictions on foreign travel fuels this, and China’s outbound tourism evolution has aligned with the growing proportion of the population who are financially able to undertake outbound travel (Wang and Sheldon 1996; IHG 2014). In terms of destination countries, Thailand, South Korea and Japan are the top three popular short-haul destinations while the United States and Australia are the two most popular long-haul equivalents (ranked 6th and 13th respectively by Chinese tourists in 2016) (World Travel Online 2017).

Following the last two decades of expansionary developments in Chinese outbound tourism, the transition has characteristically seen a shift from fast-paced sightseeing group tours with packaged intensive itineraries, to slow-paced tours with in-depth experiences (E(鄂) and Zhao 2007). The underlying purpose of travel for Chinese tourists also demonstrates a progression from visiting friends and relatives (VFR), to travel for business, and in the present: growth in leisure-focused travel (Xie and Li 2009). Visiting multiple countries within a single package tour no longer appeals to high-spending tourists and instead, slow-paced personalized travel with unique experiences is favored, and increasingly sought by Chinese consumers. This trend is expected to become more widespread with increasing demand for international travel from China’s middle-class who, unlike the generations before, have become seasoned travelers (WenQian 2017).

One of the key drivers of growth in Chinese arrivals at a destination level is the ease attached to obtaining entry visas, facilitated by the offer of visa-free entry; this has contributed to freeing Chinese travelers from having to make travel arrangements via an organized tour group or travel company. The so-called ‘free travel’ pattern of Chinese tourists has underlined rapid growth trajectories and this is expected to continue into the third decade of the 2000s (Xie and Li 2009). Barring domestic economic crises and so long as economic growth continues to raise incomes and the Chinese government refrains from
The implications are clear – destinations will advantage themselves if they are able to develop a solid online presence and in particular, if they successfully leverage user-generated content.

**Research Setting**

The Great Ocean Road region is a 243 kilometer, mostly-coastal highway that stretches from Torquay along the southern coast of Victoria and in a westwards direction toward the South Australian border, taking in several local government areas including the Surf Coast, Colac Otway, Corangamite,
Moyne, City of Warrnambool and Glenelg Shires (Parliament of Victoria 2008). The GOR region embraces spectacular natural attractions alongside rich agricultural landscapes and volcanic plains in the hinterland. In recognizing the importance of its potential in tourism and its inherent limitations, tourism expansion in the region has been aligned to five master plans, one of which is Tourism Victoria’s Regional Tourism Action Plan. This plan, initiated in 2006, attempted to apply a new model to a broader GOR region and included adjacent regions, Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula. However, the lack of collaborative and cohesive advocacy by successive State governments and deficient maintenance of public tourism assets, infrastructure and facilities, as well the variability in service quality has led to an inertia limiting expansion and innovation in tourism (Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism 2015).

The GOR region currently attracts in excess of 5 million visitors annually, while growth in real tourist spending remains far more restrained (Tourism Victoria 2016; 2017). For the most part, this is a result of the region being conceived of as a day-trip destination because of its proximity to the State’s capital, Melbourne. From 2011 to 2016, domestic day-trip visitors grew 2% more than domestic overnight visitors (6.3% and 4.4% respectively) (Tourism Victoria 2016). The period 2012 to 2017 saw international overnight visitors increase by 10.6% while day-trip visitors increased by around 11.7%, and international overnight visitors grew by 10% more than day-trip visitors (Tourism Victoria 2017).

In addition to generally low yields and poor dispersal of visitors throughout the region, another key challenge is reducing seasonal variations in visitation. Over 33% of visitors arrive during the peak summer period in December, January and February, and this is contrasted with around 19% in the winter season in June, July and August (Tourism Victoria 2014). Therefore, the enhancement of existing experiences and development of new visitor experiences is pressing to ensure visitors stay longer and that their satisfaction levels are enhanced. Generally, the GOR region has a fragmented presence to visitors both offline and online, resulting in visitors’ knowledge about the region and its narrow range of offerings that are at times not in alignment with Chinese tourist preferences. Furthermore, during peak periods, the region receives high visitation only to key attractions such as the Twelve Apostles, with much less visitation to the hinterland and beyond (Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism 2015).
Method and Findings

A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was employed over seven consecutive days in the Australian autumn of 2016. This period coincided with the exploratory phase of what is now a multi-phase undertaking. Semi-structured interviews complemented the surveys undertaken, and these were conducted at various townships in the region including Lorne, Apollo Bay, Princetown and Port Campbell (see Figure 5). A final sample of 91 Chinese tourists were surveyed alongside 23 in-depth semi-structured interviews. This sample size was largely driven by convenience sampling in principal with particular targeting of Chinese respondents in line with the research question. Chinese respondents were not stratified and instead were chosen on the basis that they were from the mainland irrespective of whether they were Fully Independent Travelers (FITs) or group travelers. Survey results were entered into SPSS with qualitative data manually coded.

Figure 6. Chinese tourists in the Great Ocean Road region.
Source: the authors.
**Respondent Profile**

Among Chinese respondents to this study, 44% were Millennial/Generation Y (22-35 years) \((n=40)\), followed by Generation X (36-51 years old) 29\% \((n=26)\), and Generation Z (<21 years old) 11\% \((n=12)\). Grey Nomads (>69 years) made up only 3\% \((n=3)\). In terms of gender, male respondents slightly outnumbered female respondents and comprised 53\% \((n=48)\) and 46.2\% \((n=42)\) respectively. With regards to occupation, 39.6\% \((n=35)\) were professional workers, followed by students (22.0\%, \(n=20\)) and those who work in the trades and services industry (16.5\%, \(n=15\)). Travel for holiday and leisure was the most overwhelming driver of visitation to the region with around 80\% \((n=72)\) reporting this as their key motive for travel.

**Mode of travel**

Insofar as the trajectory of travelling to the GOR is concerned, the vast majority of respondents, 87.9\% \((n=80)\) travelled from the East via capital city Melbourne and through Geelong. This indicates the important role that gateway cities play as the staging point for journeys into regional areas. Once in the region, the towns of Port Campbell, Apollo Bay and Lorne enjoy the highest cumulative percentage of visitation at 72.0\% \((n=64)\), 61\% \((n=55)\) and 49\% \((n=44)\) respectively. A plausible explanation for this visitation pattern is that the three townships are more or less equidistant from each other and appear as defined stages along the Great Ocean Road, and underlined by the trajectory toward the iconic Twelve Apostles.

For more than half of the Chinese visitors who journey to the GOR region, 73.6\% \((n=67)\), travel arrangements were organized by a tour operator with only 21\% \((n=22)\) travelling independently. This indicates that Chinese tourists are still very much travelling to the region as part of an organized tour, and overwhelmingly with the intention to undertake a day-trip only and returning to Melbourne later in the day. Only around 37\% \((n=34)\) of respondents stayed overnight in the region, signaling that the barriers to remaining in the region overnight remain significant and that countering the practice of tour operators containing visitor nights and expenditure in Melbourne is a formidable obstacle.
Utilization of visitor information sources

Tour companies and travel agencies were the chief source of travel information for Chinese visitors with around 44% (n=40) reporting having done so. Travel review websites such as Ma Feng Wo, Qunar and TripAdvisor are used by 32% (n=29) of respondents and of these, 22% (n=20) were Millennials. When it comes to the process of destination information gathering (as opposed to booking), Chinese tourists are heavy users of social media as an information source for their trip to GOR with WeChat and Sina Weibo used widely, and particular attention paid to micro blogs. Recommendations from friends and relatives (word of mouth and ‘word of mouse’), official tourism websites (e.g. Tourism Australia, Visit Victoria, etc.) and official destination websites (e.g. Corangamite Shire, Surf Coast Shire, etc.) revealed much less reliable as a source of destination information. This is instructive and demonstrates the enduring influence (although declining) of the retail travel distribution chain for Chinese inbound tourists to Australia.

Perception of GOR region and Twelve Apostles

In seeking to examine Chinese tourists’ perceptions of the GOR region, the key objective was to ascertain gaps between levels of expectation and satisfaction. Respondents were asked to rate their overall perceptions and satisfaction levels regarding tourist infrastructure and services (this included accommodation, public transport and other associated tourist services), destination environment (natural values) and in particular, the Twelve Apostles experience (Table 1). This suggests that despite what are arguably very modest expectations, Chinese tourists’ levels of satisfaction are at similarly ordinary levels. The most notable exception was satisfaction with Internet access and this is largely due to variable and often unreliable Internet bandwidth in regional Australian locations. This has implications for the sharing of photos and micro blogs online.

When it comes to the GOR destination environment (Table 2), all the elements surpassed visitor expectations, particularly cleanliness and the natural and cultural heritage of the region. An absence of ‘things to do’ was reported, highlighting that beyond the key attraction of the Twelve Apostles, there was little understanding of the diverse attractions available in the region. Yet despite the benign sentiments expressed, the majority of Chinese tourists agreed that they would provide positive word of mouth to family and friends.
However, Chinese tourists show slightly negative perceptions over all variables of the Twelve Apostles (Table 3). Only cleanliness, uniqueness and safety were positively perceived by Chinese tourists. The uniqueness of the GOR received the highest scores, while safety and security surprised most respondents. The availability of shopping facilities received the lowest scores showcasing gaps in the experience spectrum for the region. Moreover, the quality of tour guides at the Twelve Apostles disappointed visitors. Most importantly, 70.3% of tourists (n = 64) were willing to pay entrance fee to the Twelve Apostles, of whom 43% (n = 39) considered that a sum of $10 was acceptable, so long as the money was redirected into the management and upkeep of the attraction.

Table 1. GOR tourist infrastructure and services expectation and satisfaction level - Chinese visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOR tourist infrastructure services</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public transportation</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and wine</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist attractions</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping facilities</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. GOR tourist destination environment expectation and satisfaction level - Chinese visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOR destination environment</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural beauty</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road safety</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums, history and heritage</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value for money</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness of local people</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things to do</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of tourist services</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. 12 Apostles expectation and satisfaction level - Chinese visitors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twelve Apostles</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Satisfaction</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural beauty</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist facilities</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverage</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of tour guides</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking facilities</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The current inbound Chinese tourist market to Australia is mostly comprised of two clusters, 30-44 year olds and 45-59 year olds, as well as residents from big cities or provinces namely Shanghai, Beijing and Guangdong, and dominated by group package tours (TRA 2017). Chinese FITs and semi-FITs are set to grow as the cohorts of Chinese tourists become more seasoned travelers and the entire market matures (TRA 2015). This was demonstrable in this study where it was found that the majority of Chinese tourists visited the region with a tour operator, with comparably smaller numbers driving themselves.

Furthermore, the numbers of group tourists remain overwhelmingly larger than FITs. Constrained with limited budget and time, organized group tours provide Chinese tourists with fast-paced, intensive itineraries meaning that limited time is available for side trips outside of the main urban areas (South Australian Tourism Commission 2013). Additionally, isolated examples of visitation to famous scenic outlooks, beaches and public parks that involve no extra cost are typical stop-off points. In general, the Chinese package tourist market has been low-yield and high-volume (South Australian Tourism Commission 2013). Weiler and Chen (2016) state that visitors who choose a tour based largely on its low price still have expectations for memorable experiences. This was also evident where the desire for outstanding natural and cultural experiences was high, and in particular, experiences that overcome English language barriers were sought.
In general, English language barriers experienced by Chinese tourists are articulated as a key impediment to experience optimization (TRA 2014a). Respondents who reported that they could not speak or read English well or at all, corroborated this sentiment, and this tended to have a strong negative impact on their willingness to recommend particular destinations to family and friends. However, and in contrast, Chinese FITs reported high levels of confidence in their ability to overcome English language barriers and this is due to most tending to be educated in English and having travelled extensively prior to visiting Australia (TRA 2014). This highlights the importance of providing travel information and interpretations in Chinese (Li 2011) and especially when it concerns the consumption of tourism related services and the making of payments for transactions (Zheng and Yan 2013).

The notion of mediated travelling or tailored private tours was also discernible for Chinese FIT’s and appears to be a response to the presence of cultural and language barriers while travelling. This aligns with the notion of a maturing Chinese traveler (Li 2016) and the yearning for more individual non-industrialized tourism experiences.

This kind of tour is operated by locally-based Chinese entrepreneurs and/or franchised by giant travel agent companies in China like C-trip. With this tour, visitors could choose any vehicle they want to travel with, and they would be guided by the driver, but they have freedom to choose places to have a rest or stay overnight. (40-year-old male).

Even though Chinese consumers have progressively become more accepting of modernity beyond typical Chinese consumptive behaviors, the core values that drive purchasing behaviors remain culturally and ethically Chinese (UK Essays 2013). The assertion is that Chinese tourists are still by and large...
conservative consumers. For example, Chinese tourists tend to be strongly predisposed to preferring Chinese cuisine while travelling in Australia (TRA 2014). This was evident in this study where Chinese tourists tended to congregate and dine at two large Chinese cuisine restaurants in the region. Additionally, these restaurants have become defining stops for the vast majority of Chinese group tour coaches.

My friends suggested I take my lunch box because the food on the Great Ocean Road is expensive and unsavory. (55-year-old Chinese female)

The motivation for shopping is argued to be one of the key drivers of Chinese tourists abroad (Arlt 2006, 2008; Chan 2006; Li et al. 2011; Xu and McGehee 2012). This especially refers to the tradition of gift-giving after traveling to maintain interpersonal relationships with friends and relatives. In general, Chinese consumers are becoming mature and selective about where money is spent, shifting from mass products to more functional and practical commodities rather than luxury goods (Ziper et al. 2016). This purchasing pattern is especially relevant to Chinese wealthy ‘forties, thirties and twenties’, who will be predisposed to spending more on travel, entertainment and online shopping (Nelson 2011). Indeed, value for money rather than name-branded products appear to be preferred (Agrusa et al. 2011). However, Chinese tourists ranked Australia very poor in terms of value for money and availability of shopping opportunities (TRA 2014a). The preference for locally produced products was strong with the unique identity of the local region a major attraction as prestige is considered through the projection of authenticity and difference. This was a common refrain from respondents to this study.

I prefer to buy something unique, which you cannot find in any other places. Ideally, I will buy something produced in the local region like Manuka Honey made in New Zealand. (50-year-old female)

Akin to modern-day travelers of all nationalities, Chinese tourists are ‘Wi-Fi hungry’ and sharing travel experiences in real time is vital, thus, requiring reliable Wi-Fi services while travelling (TRA 2014a). The implications are that Chinese tourist predilections for sharing photos and micro-blogs while
travelling can be extremely advantageous to instant word-of-mouth. However, even though Wi-Fi hotspots have been implemented in several high visitation locations throughout the GOR region, internet bandwidth is generally unreliable and inconsistent (Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism 2015).

Conclusion

It is indisputable that the promise of continued growth of Chinese inbound tourism to Australia is set to continue. However, there is discernibly little empirical research concerning the holiday experience of Chinese tourists in Australia, and especially regarding time spent in regional destinations. As reflected in this study, natural beauty and high natural values in regional landscapes endure as a draw-card for Chinese tourists. Cleanliness, tourist infrastructure and road safety also underlines satisfaction measures and Chinese visitors report variable levels of satisfaction, but were especially satisfied with the nature-based travel experiences that the GOR region offered. When it comes to the perceptions that Chinese tourists had, what remains clear is that overwhelmingly, respondents arrived with high expectations in the hope that they would have a thoroughly unique experience leveraging Australia’s renowned rugged natural beauty. Respondents were also attracted to the perceived purity of local produce, especially seafood, in this case. Moreover, given that respondents were largely well-travelled, they took for granted that the region would offer the conveniences of Wi-Fi availability and that despite their English language deficiencies, they would still be able to engage and comprehend a reasonable depth of experience.

Contrasted with their post-trip satisfaction levels, there were discernible gaps between expectation and satisfaction levels with the vast majority of respondents reporting slight dissatisfaction with their stay in the region. Much of this was related to the extent to which the region was perceived to be ‘China’ ready’ insofar as helping Chinese tourists overcome the English language barrier. Additionally, most respondents had arrived in Australia having already had extensive travel experiences and therefore expressed some amount of dissatisfaction with the standards and provision of tourism services, especially the unpredictable nature of Wi-Fi and internet availability throughout the region.
Most significantly, Chinese tourists viewed the region as an ideal day-trip location meaning that they would not have to forgo the comforts and greater reliability of services and ancillary tourist experiences of the capital city gateway, Melbourne. This is a major impost for tourism sector stakeholders in the GOR region on account of this having considerable negative impact on the optimization of overnight stays and linked tourist expenditure. While on the one hand seeking natural beauty and high natural values in the region, Chinese tourists also wanted commensurate levels of tourism services and tourist infrastructure, and because of deficiencies in this regard, any chance of overnight stays are severely curtailed.

In sum, the implications for regional tourism destinations like the GOR region and their ‘China readiness’ rests largely on the success of being able to adapt and orient the regional tourism experience to Chinese tourist expectations. If destination experience and the ability to overcome language and cultural barriers is paramount, regional destinations like the GOR region must adjust to the nuances of the contemporary Chinese visitor. Being ‘China ready’ therefore holds enormous consequences toward the optimization of Chinese tourist satisfaction. This can be challenging in regional contexts where tourism infrastructure and associated services are often deficient. Moreover, being ‘China ready’ requires much more than simply translating signs and restaurant menus into the Chinese language. Instead, what is needed is a comprehensive understanding of the way Chinese tourists interact with and within regional destinations, and addressing the barriers that impede the attainment of optimal travel experiences.

For many regional destinations, the key to leveraging tourism for economic expansion is in successfully lengthening overnight stays and therefore maximizing tourist spending and dispersal throughout the region. That Chinese tourists are predisposed to visiting regional areas as day-trips largely, returning to capital city gateway destinations for the night, suggests that regional destinations must bridge the deficiencies in tourist infrastructure and services. Having outstanding natural beauty and well known icons like the Twelve Apostles is not enough. It seems that for Chinese tourists, the experience spectrum comprises several fundamental aspects including: suitable tourist infrastructure (especially hotels that match their tastes), reliable Wi-Fi and internet accessibility, Chinese language proficiency in service providers and in interpretation, unique shopping experiences and the importance of gastronomic experiences that leverage local produce.
Thus, one of the implications of this research is in impressing upon regional destinations to understand and address all of the components of the Chinese tourist experience spectrum. The allure of the capital city gateway will remain strong because of the disparities in tourist infrastructure and services. Unless regional destinations can bridge this gap, optimizing the returns from the growing Chinese inbound tourism market will remain stilted and under optimized. This holds enormous implications for further research and towards building a better understanding of contemporary Chinese traveler mobilities and for optimizing their travel experiences. This is especially critical for regional destinations that have in recent times labored under a disproportionate share of Chinese tourist’s visitor nights and expenditure.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge all researchers involved in the first phase of this research including Xuejiao Han, Rakshith Ramesh, Juan Reyes Ortiz, Winnie Li and Rida Hakeem. We would also like to thank the Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism Pty Ltd (Liz Price), Lorne Business & Tourism Association (Peter Spring and Chris Tutungi), Twelve Apostles Tourism and Business Association (David Pope), Corangamite Shire (Ian Gibb and Michael Emerson), Port Campbell Tourism Company (John and Josie McInerney), Lorne Cumberland (Lee Gordon) and Parks Victoria (Michael Smith). The National Centre for Australian Studies and the Graduate Tourism program also helped facilitate this study. This research was conducted under Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning Victoria Permit No. 10007957, File No: FF383494.

Notes

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