

Sinification of the world tourism and Public Relations: What to do with western-originated Public Relations as a response?

**Sinificación del turismo mundial y Relaciones Públicas:
¿Qué hacer con las Relaciones Públicas de origen occidental como
respuesta?**

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Abstract

In this study, we presented and discussed the challenges posed for Western-originated public relations by sinification of the world tourism. Chinese international tourists are now on the top of the list of world travelers. Many countries try to attract Chinese tourists with all the tools available to them. However, public relations field has an inherent deficiency which is its Western assumptions that are often go unnoticed. This article points out why such a model is far from being conducive to promoting a destination for Chinese tourists. First of all it ignores guanxi which is a cultural construct that is influential over commercial relations in China. Secondly, its unit of analysis (i.e. individuals) is problematic. Thirdly, it is not applicable in a context where government is the major actor rather than the consumers. The article also includes discussions on how to segment Chinese outbound tourists, and PR interventions and recommendations. Although the scope of the article involves how to attract Chinese tourists to a particular destination, we also keep a critical view on the topic considering the potential negative consequences of the arrival of a higher number of Chinese tourists.

Keywords: Tourism, Chinese tourism, public relations, Western values, guanxi

Resumen

En este estudio presentamos y discutimos los desafíos planteados para las relaciones públicas de origen occidental debido a la significación del turismo mundial. Los turistas chinos son unos de los principales viajeros internacionales del mundo. Muchos países intentan atraer a los turistas chinos con todas las herramientas disponibles para ello. Sin embargo, el campo de las relaciones públicas tiene una deficiencia inherente que son sus

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suposiciones occidentales yb que a menudo pasan desapercibidas. Este artículo señala por qué este modelo está lejos de ser propicio para promover un destino para los turistas chinos. En primer lugar, ignora el guanxi, que es un constructo cultural que influye en las relaciones comerciales en China. En segundo lugar, su unidad de análisis (es decir, los individuos) es problemática. En tercer lugar, no es aplicable en un contexto donde el gobierno es el actor principal en lugar de los consumidores. El artículo también incluye discusiones sobre cómo segmentar a los turistas chinos, e intervenciones y recomendaciones de relaciones públicas. Aunque el alcance del artículo involucra cómo atraer a los turistas chinos a un destino en particular, también mantenemos una visión crítica sobre el tema considerando las posibles consecuencias negativas de la llegada de un mayor número de turistas chinos.

Palabras claves: Turismo, turismo chino, relaciones públicas, valores occidentales, guanxi

Summary

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical Frame
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Discussion and Conclusions
6. References

Sumario

1. Introducción
2. Marco teórico
3. Metodología
4. Resultados
5. Discusión y conclusiones
6. Referencias

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, Chinese outbound tourists topped the list of the world travelers not only in terms of their numbers but also their spending, surpassing American tourists (Goldman Sachs, 2018; Nielsen, 2018; the European Commission, 2018; UNWTO, 2018a, 2018b; WTOF, 2018; WTTC, 2018). It appears that it is just the beginning, as the relevant figures continue to rise every year. World tourism, until recently predominantly involving 'globally Western' tourists is getting diversified or in more specific terms, sinified. Various countries are planning to reposition their tourism programs to cater for the expected arrival of masses of Chinese tourists (e.g. Moy & Phongpanichanan, 2014; Raspor et al., 2016; Stranjančević et al., 2016; Suntikul, Tang & Pratt, 2016; Vada-Pareti, 2015). They are engaged in public relations

campaigns to attract a higher number of Chinese tourists. However, there is a problem to begin with: The public relations models are Western-originated and they don't come to terms with the parameters of the Chinese social reality. As Sriramesh, one of the leading scholars in critical approaches to public relations stresses in each and every work of his summa (e.g. Sriramesh, 2009, 1992; Sriramesh & Takasaki, 1999; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009), public relations can't make (a realistic) sense without considering cultural, political, social and economic conditions of the society in which public relations and its public are situated. For example, while the public in the globally Western contexts refer to individual consumers, Chinese don't fit that schema as some of them can be better conceptualized as family decision makers, while heavy government involvement and regulation over the economy invalidates wild assumptions of Western-originated public relations models (cf. Taylor & Kent, 1999). Thus, in this article, we discuss how the Western-originated public relations models can be reformed to match the characteristics of Chinese international tourism. The paper consists of 4 sections other than introduction and conclusion through which we provide an overview of Chinese outbound tourists and how to segment them followed by PR challenges, interventions and recommendations.

2. THEORETICAL FRAME

Soroko & Rashetnikau state that “[s]uccessful economic reforms, dynamic increase of disposable incomes and free time of working people, openness of China to the outside world have all contributed to the rapid rise in the number of Chinese citizens travel abroad” (2016: 94). Some researchers attribute high level of spending by Chinese tourists abroad to the emergence of consumer society in China, hedonism and generational differences (Zeng & Li, 2015), while some others attribute it to the Chinese belief that foreign products are superior in terms of quality, and group mentality (conformity to the group) considering the fact that tours rather than independent and solo travel are very common among Chinese tourists (Ding & Ao, 2017). Others doing research on Chinese tourists and Hong Kong residents in Hong Kong conclude that one reason Chinese spend more abroad is the health scare about Chinese products such as toxic toys etc. (Piuchan, Chan & Kaale, 2018). Thus foreign product safety and health constitute a major factor (Chomvilailuk & Vajirakachorn, 2015). In a study on Chinese visiting the United States, it was found that price value (lower prices compared to those in China for luxury goods) and quality (i.e. authenticity as opposed to fake goods

flooding China) were the key motivations while the influence of souvenir collection motive was insignificant (Davis, Qiu & Davis, 2017). They find foreign brand distributors more trustworthy (Davis, Qiu & Davis, 2017).

Wong et al. (2017: 138) identified 5 attributes of a shopping mall that makes Chinese tourists satisfied. They are quality of retailers (including retailers' product quality, sales services and reputation), convenience (i.e. 'easy to reach', 'long opening hours', 'one-stop shopping'), mall environment ('attractive environment, trendy design, and tidiness and cleanliness'), rewards (i.e. provision of rewards, gift vouchers and cash coupons), and customer services (i.e. customer and information services and "responsiveness and friendliness of customer service assistants"). This has implications for how to promote a destination for Chinese tourists. The features of shopping malls can be reconsidered and improved accordingly.

Usually Chinese international tourists avoid trying culturally new food in their touristic destinations. They prefer to eat Chinese food even in distant lands. This can be due to cultural factors, food safety concerns, differences in table manners (collective vs. individual meal) and personality differences (Wu et al., 2016).²

Top destinations for Chinese outbound tourists are nearby countries which makes perfect sense. It will be cheaper to visit nearby countries. They are Thailand, South Korea and Japan (Nielsen, 2018). They visit Japan for "food culture, historical culture, clean weather and beautiful environment and service" (Dongyang, Mori & Hayashi, 2015: 31). Some other destinations are noteworthy for similar attractions. For example, Chinese tourists visit Poland for "tradition, culture, historical sites, landscapes, and low costs" (Guszkiewicz & Nessel, 2017: 49); while in case of Switzerland the reasons are "nature, special natural attraction, easy access, pleasant climate/weather and lakes/rivers" (Liu et al., 2015: 120). Bali attracts Chinese tourists by its climate, cuisine, hospitality, and free visa policy (Rosyidi, 2018; Yuniarto, 2017). Chinese tourists are found to visit Britain mostly for "heritage sites,

² In terms of personality differences, although the notion of food neophobia is proposed, we argue that openness to new experiences as a personality variable is more applicable in this case for primarily two reasons: First of all, calling avoidance behaviors as phobia is completely wrong, as it is not a clinical case and does not require treatment. Secondly, as a principle of philosophy of science, we propose that we need to start with more generic and already researched variables before proposing a new and specific one. If we would follow the researchers' logic, for every behavior we had to look for a specific personality variable such as country neophobia, activity neophobia, drink neophobia, purchase neophobia etc. which are clearly wrong.

natural scenery and customer service” and rarely for “shopping facilities, food, accommodation, entertainment and night life” (Lin, He & Vlachos, 2015: 297). Finally, their main motivations for visiting Taiwan are “releasing tension, exploring culture and sharing travel experience” (Lin, 2014).

On the other hand, various complaints about Chinese tourists are voiced but nevertheless they are needed for cash-starved foreign economies. Thus locals’ reactions to Chinese tourists are often mixed (cf. Bellini et al., 2014). Chinese are considered to be rude and out of manners (Wang, He, & Bi, 2017), but this is stated to be due to cultural differences in China where for example eating on public transportation is considered normal (Soroko & Rashetnikau, 2016). A second set of complaints involve price rises mainly in housing and other tourism-related sectors. For instance, some people complain in Hong Kong that mainland Chinese buy apartment units built for Hong Kongers of lower income, then resell them back to HongKongers at higher prices (Piuchan, Chan & Kaale, 2018). This, complainers note, does not happen in Singapore as Singapore has regulations to protect its own citizens from such a price increase (Piuchan, Chan & Kaale, 2018). The third source of complaints is related to the Chinese casino tourists. Because of their gambling habit, huge land plots are allocated to casinos which also has negative effects over the local culture and living. Finally, another source of complaint refers to environmental negative impact of new construction areas developed for Chinese tourists. These complaints, of course need to be considered to boost local people’s welfare. The challenge and economically speaking the trade-off is in finding ways to increase the number of incoming Chinese tourists while protecting local peoples, cultures and economy from detrimental effects of such a development. Thus in this article, while we try to answer how to promote a particular destination for Chinese tourists to boost the number of incoming Chinese tourists, we are not oblivious to the negative side effects of such a boost, we rather keep our reservations with a critical point of view.

3. METHODOLOGY

The article’s methodology consists of literature review and theoretical discussion. In this section, with this methodology in mind, the notion of segmentation is reviewed with regard to Chinese outbound tourists. The number of research studies on Chinese tourism and Chinese tourists is growing. In our literature review, we are aiming at the portrayal and

critical discussion of the most recent and most relevant research on the subject. Our review brings up recurring themes in the literature such as segmentation. That is why we continue our discussion with the notion of segmentation within the context of Chinese tourism.

A large group of people can't be completely homogeneous. As the size gets larger, probability of heterogeneity increases. In that sense, Smed (2017) draws our attention to the diversity of Chinese outbound tourists that is not adequately addressed. Consistent with group theories in social psychology, Chinese outbound tourists are often perceived as homogeneous by out-group residents ignoring the intra-group diversity (cf. Wu, 2016). In fact we need a segmentation analysis for a closer look and clearer understanding of the characterizing properties of the Chinese outbound tourists. Chen & Noci (2014) is noteworthy as a research study in this direction. They identified four touristic clusters among Chinese tourists which are not associated with demographic differences, but which can predict the level of satisfaction and loyalty. They realized that psychographics (e.g. experiential and individual differences) provides a better account of segmentation rather than demographics (Chen & Noci, 2014).

Jun (2015) talks about two waves of Chinese outbound tourist, the former associated with group tours, short-term stays and lack of interest in other cultures, while the latter is characterized by independent tourists, long-term stays and a keen interest in other cultures. In fact, rather than being consecutive, these waves are simultaneous. In that sense it is better to call them segments or types rather than waves. Soroko & Rashednikau (2016) propose that they complement each other rather than alternatives.

In terms of age groups, Soroko & Rashednikau (2016) identify 3 most common age groups among Chinese outbound tourists: Millennials, early middle agers (a term we coin here) and what they call as the 'tourists of the third age' which refer to Chinese tourists over 60. This third age group is important, as they even travel off-season due to plenty of time they have. They mostly travel by tours, in groups; while the first two groups travel solo or with family members. The third age group is satisfied with typical tour packages featuring the most obvious, iconic touristic sites, while the first two groups are more inclined towards sensation seeking. The third age group usually travels on budget. In fact Chinese tour agents get good prices in bulk which decreases the costs of travel. Related to this point, Cheng (2017)

capitalizes on the notion of travel party composition for segmenting Chinese visitors to Taiwan which brings out 3 segments: traveling with friends, couple and coworkers. However, obviously such a conceptualization is quite limited as it misses solo travelers as well as other forms of companionships such as family members other than spouse. Furthermore, even group tours don't fit any category as group tour members are not necessarily friends.

Segmentation can be also based on purpose of travel. We can differentially study business tourists, leisure tourists, students, family visitors (visiting their family who live abroad) etc. Some of the Chinese tourists visit another country not for vacation but for future possibilities of work, study or investment. For example, Vada Pareti (2015) notes that repeat visitors to Fiji which is a relatively remote destination are usually traveling for business purposes.

Another way to do segmentation can be area-specific. For example, Zou & Petrick (2016) investigate cruise tourism and identify 3 segments with regard to the perceived constraints that hinder Chinese tourists from preferring cruise tourism: Low-constraints, moderate constraints and high-constraints segments. By differentially aiming for different segments and adapting a revised version of the Western-originated idea of cruise tourism to China based on needs analyses (cf. Lyu et al., 2017; Lyu, Mao & Hu, 2018), the number of Chinese tourists and therefore tourism revenues in general can be increased.

Chinese tourism is also associated with gambling and casinos. In many different corners of the world, casinos are built to cater gambling 'needs' of the Chinese tourists. Li, Wong & Kim (2016) note that corruption crackdowns in China lead to decrease in casino revenues abroad and that Macau's revenues have already surpassed Las Vegas's. Thus, gamblers constitute another segment among the Chinese outbound tourists. Li, Wong & Kim (2016), in that sense, segment mainland Chinese visitors to Macau on the basis of their purpose of visit in the following way: Freedom seekers, multipurpose seekers, entertainment and gambling seekers. Freedom seekers are characterized by escapism, as they are in the mood of escaping their daily lives back in China. The third segment, as the name implies, visits Macau for gambling and entertainment. The rest constitutes the second segment which is the segment of multipurpose seekers. Their segmentation is based on four dimensions conceptualized as purposes of visit: Entertainment, relaxation, knowledge (i.e. to learn more about Macau) and prestige (i.e. visiting Macau is considered as an indicator of prestige in

mainland China) (Li, Wong & Kim, 2016). In another study with Chinese tourists visiting Macau, age differences are observed which may allow segmentation accordingly (Yang & Lau, 2015). On the other hand, despite of Macau's fame as a gambling venue, it is found that among Chinese tourists, relaxation and escape are more significant factors to visit Macau. In other words, Macau has other attractions than casinos to lure Chinese tourists (Park, Lee & Miller, 2015; Wong & Lee, 2015).

4. RESULTS

As mentioned in the introduction, sinification of the world tourism challenges Western-originated public relations models. For one thing, the public of the public relations activities can't be understood without reference to a major cultural construct which is *guanxi* (cf. Chen & Chen, 2004; Hackley & Dong, 2001; Lee & Humphreys, 2007; Luo, Huang & Wang, 2012). *Guanxi* is a major form of informal relationship in China, especially common in trade relations, which consist of favor (*renqing*), reciprocity (*bao*), face (*mianzi*), personal trust (*xinyong*), and affection (*ganqing*) (Wiegel & Bamford, 2015). In that sense, *guanxi* is a case of a win-win situation based on emotions and especially trust with the expectation of reciprocity whereby one matches her need with another's. In the case of Chinese tourism, especially considering the packages, Chinese tourists prefer to rely on agencies that they trust. They pay for the package, they accordingly meet the needs of the agency which is to make profits, and the agency meets their need to travel abroad without nuisance or any complication. If they meet the needs of their customers, it is hard for these agencies to go bankrupt, as the former customers will recommend the company to others. That is because the relationship is based on trust. However, globally Western tourists rarely prefer tour packages, and in those cases trust is not the basis of the relationship. Thus, for Chinese tourists, the PR activities should focus on building trustworthiness, while for Western tourists it would be other points such as enjoyment expected from the trips.

Let us add that this search for trust in commercial relationships is coupled with overall mistrust for society and institutions (cf. Cheng, 2016). Chinese consumers are suspicious of PR campaigns and they question sincerity and benevolence of those campaigns. Related to this point is the fact that public relations in China started with a focus on interpersonal

relationship, whereas Western-originated public relations started with mass media models as the latter is much older than the former (Culbertson & Chen, 2003).

Secondly, the unit of analysis of Chinese PR is not necessarily individual consumers. In that sense, even the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the Western understanding of tourism can be questioned, as an individual free of all his social ties is presupposed. While noting the rise of independent travel habits of younger generations, for many Chinese, a more reasonable unit of analysis would be the family. That means the PR materials need to portray how a model family enjoys the trip rather than depicting a single tourist on the top of a mountain symbolizing individual self-actualization. This is also consistent with cultural and psychological studies concluding that China is high on collectivism (e.g. Fernandez et al., 1997; Huang & Lu, 2017; Sun, Horn & Merritt, 2004).

Thirdly, unlike the Western societies, the government is the most important actor among the constituents of the public of public relations in China. Chinese government has the power to direct the international tourist outflows by a number of intervention tools such as awarding a destination with 'the approved destination status'. Destinations which receive official recognition as such see notable levels of increase in the number of incoming Chinese tourists and tourism revenues (Arita, La Croix & Mak, 2012; Arita et al., 2011; He & Yunke, 2010). In fact, Chinese government sometimes utilizes this outflow as a weapon for negotiation with other countries. For a favor asked by Chinese government, the other country is promised to receive masses of Chinese tourists. The implication of this situation for public relations is the following: A PR program to attract Chinese tourists to a particular destination needs to convince the Chinese government first. This phenomenon was made even more visible with the Chinese-Swedish conflict over the mistreatment of Chinese tourists in Sweden (cf. Kuo, 2018; Noack, 2018; Vonberg, Wright & Halasz, 2018; Yen, 2018). Chinese government repeatedly asked for an apology from the Swedish government not only because of the rising global power considerations, but also because the Chinese government himself is the major actor to decide who among his citizens can visit Sweden or any other country.³ In this context, another related variable to consider in the case of public relations in a Chinese context would be heavy censorship of the media (Culbertson & Chen,

³ Of course there are other problems in Chinese-Swedish relations such as human rights conflicts, but they are out of the scope of our article.

2003). For example, a country can be a great destination for Chinese tourists, but may be in conflict with China. Then controlled media can ignore or even discredit that destination.

5. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

In a discussion of how to attract Chinese tourists to Greece in which Chinese tourists constitute a trivial proportion of the total number of incoming tourists, Kapiki, Fu & Mou (2014: 81) suggest the following:

“facilitation of accessibility (e.g. an official website about Greece in Chinese, simplification of visa issuing and a direct flight connecting the two countries); proper preparation of the accommodation sector (the understanding and respect of the Chinese culture and tourists’ habit can improve satisfactions); enhancement of the offered attractions (affordable luxury cruises and recreational activities on the islands, such as theme and amusement parks and agro farms); introduction of Greek food and its culture in a vivid way and interpreted in the Chinese language; and, improvement of amenities such as public safety and communications”.

For less frequented destinations, it may be recommended to collaborate with neighboring countries to form tour packages. For example, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Montenegro can collaborate with other Balkan countries (Bulatović et al., 2016; Iliev, Ilieva & Neikov, 2015; Raspor, Lacmanović & Popović, 2018).

Destination image is one of the key points to understand the mentality of Chinese tourists (cf. Li & Stepchenkova, 2016). For example, Hong Kong is a popular destination as a ‘shopping paradise’. The city image brings more tourists (Piuchan, Chan & Kaale, 2018; Wong et al., 2017). Thus image building should be one of the focus points of the PR activity.

In a number of studies, language barrier (lack of either Chinese or English language support) is noted to be a major problem in promoting the destination country (e.g. Guskiewicz & Nessel, 2017). Some even claim that this barrier leads to preference for group tours rather than solo travel (Liu et al., 2015). Others point out to the gender divide: Females prefer tours more than males on average (Rosyidi, 2018), and age divide (Soroko & Rashetnikau, 2016). Soroko & Rashetnikau (2016: 95) propose that Chinese tourists prefer travel in groups by

tour due to the following reasons: “Language barrier, visa filing, fear for risk and price as well as aim to avoid other potential problems in a place that is unknown to them”. So these should be addressed to degroup Chinese tourists, as tourists traveling by package tours spend less than tourists incoming in other forms.

Considering the huge numbers of social media users in China, Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat will be good starting points to design and develop a PR campaign. Not only tourism operators (Liu et al., 2015), but also governments need to be active on those platforms in a permanent manner with a long-term planning perspective. In that sense, Yuniarto (2017) recommends the use of travel journalism on WeChat to promote Indonesia for Chinese tourists.

E-WOM (electronic word of mouth) and user generated contents such as Tripadvisor reviews tend to be more influential as they are not considered to be of commercial nature (Liu et al., 2015). Family, friends and social media are influential sources for Chinese tourists to decide on the destination and to plan the details (Rosyidi, 2018). Chinese tourists also check Chinese forums specialized in travel such as Qyer, Tuniu or Baidu (Soroko & Rashetnikau, 2016). Usually people write on forums to complain, positive feedback is less common. Thus, given the significance of E-WOM for Chinese tourists, the travel agencies can encourage Chinese tourists to write down their impressions after the trip (Miao, 2015). This feedback can form the basis for decision making for the Chinese planning to travel, if it would be appear on forums without any connections with the companies. The key point here is to overcome suspicions about commercial PR activities.

Films are known to contribute to the touristic destination image (Chiu & Zeng, 2016). Thus, a Chinese film taking place at the destination (e.g. a Chinese film shot in Mozambique) will be influential over potential tourists. In such a way, a PR activity will not be considered purely for profit, its effect will be stronger than explicitly promotional media materials. Another related way is through the so-called ‘marriage tourism’ or ‘wedding tourism’ instigated by celebrity marriages in the targeted destination (Yuniarto, 2017), as the Chinese celebrities are considered as Key Opinion Leaders in China. In this context, we can even call them as ‘destination ambassadors’, a term rarely used in academic tourism research (cf. Chen & Šegota, 2015; de Diesbach, 2012).

Pacific SIDS (Pacific Small Island Developing States) allow Chinese tourists to travel visa-free or with visa on arrival (Lau et al., 2017). Following this example, visa policies can be made more favorable to attract Chinese tourists.

In fact the touristic relationship is not necessarily over by the end of the trip: Post-travel purchasing behavior via online shopping platforms (e.g. in the case of Tsujimoto (2017) who studies this behavior for Chinese who had visited Japan) is a way to keep in touch with the former tourists in commercial terms.

In this paper we offered a brief overview of Chinese outbound tourists before discussing how to segment them for a better understanding of the situation. Then we proceeded to discuss challenges of sinification of the world tourism for Western-originated public relations models. This was followed by PR interventions and recommendations. Obviously, a higher number of both empirical and theoretical papers are needed for designing more realistic and appropriate public relations activities aimed at Chinese international tourists. In addition to the recommendations available in tourism research, from a PR perspective, we recommend PR activities based on trust and group belonging with an eye on the Chinese government as the major actor in Chinese international tourism. Endorsing online forum comments, shooting films in the destination, and celebrity weddings in the destination are among the recommendations. Furthermore, e-commerce platforms to keep in touch with the destination after the trip can be instrumental for post-travel purchases of destination-specific items.

Future research on the subject may focus on demographics of Chinese tourists and political conditions of Chinese tourism to further test the argument that Western-originated PR models and practices don't fit the case with Chinese tourists and Chinese tourism.⁴ Through collaboration with Chinese scholars on tourism, sources in Chinese language on tourism can be reviewed to come up with even more detailed discussions of the subject. The author is open for future research studies as such.

⁴ The author thanks the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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