

CHANGING NEEDS OF CHINESE VISITOR SELECTION OF ACCOMODATION IN NEW ZEALAND

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INTRODUCTION

The accommodation industry in New Zealand is a diverse industry with a range of accommodation provisions available to guests; choice varies from small owner-operated establishments to exclusive lodges to multinational chain hotels. This broad range of accommodation provides potential guests with a dilemma when choosing accommodation especially if they are unfamiliar with the classifications. Accommodation managers are also faced with the ever-changing use of resources to attract and retain guests. Chinese tourists, the largest and fastest growing outbound tourist market, have received considerable attention from the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2013). Chinese tourist growth in visitor arrivals to New Zealand continues to be strong; despite a drop in early 2019, the market is expected to grow strongly during the forecast period of 2018 to 2024 (Ministry of Business, 2018).

The Chinese inbound tourist market for New Zealand accounts for 8 per cent of total visitor spending and continues to grow strongly due to the emerging middle class and industrialisation of China (Tourism New Zealand, 2014). Notably there are positive shifts towards ensuring quality products are sold within China; despite the 4.3 per cent decrease in Chinese shopping tours during the period of January to May 2014. New Zealand has experienced a 63.3 per cent increase in Chinese independent holiday tourists during this same period (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Since the China Travel Law was introduced in October 2013, there has been an 18 per cent increase in the length of stay of Chinese Visitors in New Zealand; up one day from 6.5 to 7.5 days (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Solid increases in general visitor visas have also been noted. The change in the China Travel Law has also caused a higher ratio of younger Chinese holiday tourists to visit New Zealand. The shopping tour market usually consisted of an older than average profile, so the shift in age may reflect the decrease in shopping tours or the relative ease of travel for younger people (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

As the economy in China continues to thrive, with the increase in disposable income, more public holidays and an expanding middle class, the growth of the outbound Chinese visitor market continues. Many of these visitors have traveled within China, but often to a lesser extent abroad. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the China Outbound Tourism Research Institute (COTRI) estimate that by 2020 there will be 100 million outbound Chinese tourists making it the largest tourism market in the world (Liu, Lin, Zhou, & Chandnani, 2013). Not only is the middle class Chinese segment growing, Liu et al., (2013) also state that China boasts the biggest number of "self-made millionaires and billionaires in the world" (p.7). The Hurun Report (as cited in Liu et al., 2013) showed that the number of billionaires in China had increased by 30 per cent in one year 2010 to 2011.

A plethora of studies have been conducted to examine the underlying motivations, expectations and behavioural patterns of Chinese tourists in the context of different products and destinations. Some studies have realised different behaviours and traits exhibited by Chinese tourists and attributed differences to the cultural factors (Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011; Sparks, 2009). Further studies have used focus groups of Chinese tourists to investigate if their desires and requirements were met throughout their international travel experience (Li et al., 2011; Tsai,

Yeung, & Yim, 2011; Yoo, McKercher, & Mena, 2004). These studies found changing expectations of authenticity, high quality service, respect and an understanding of cultural requirements were important (Li et al., 2011). There have also been previous studies on the factors used in the selection of accommodation by guests (Callan & Bowman, 2000; Lockyer, 2005; Lockyer & Roberts, 2009; Poon & Low, 2005) however, there has been little research into the choice of accommodation in New Zealand by Chinese visitors. With continued growth of Chinese visitors, it is necessary for New Zealand accommodation providers to gain a better understanding of Chinese visitors in terms of accommodation preferences and criteria. The results of this study will help New Zealand accommodation operators to consider better facilities and services to Chinese visitors, as well as effective strategies to ensure increased Chinese visitors through positive visitor experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOMMODATION PROVISION

Factors influencing guests' selection of accommodation can be complex (Lockyer, 2005). The stages of accommodation selection can be considered in the context of consumer behaviour where need recognition, pre purchase search, and evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post purchase evaluation are all important stages (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). Wang, Vela and Tyler (2008) researched the role of Chinese culture in influencing their expectations and perceptions of the hotel service quality in the United Kingdom. They found that cultural backgrounds could influence a tourist's perception of hotel quality depending on attributes such as décor, operating environment and staff service. Wang et al., (2008) stated that due to rapid modernisation taking place in China along with increasing disposable income, the Chinese market is increasingly expecting hotels to have large, modern lobbies, guest rooms and facilities. Due to this increase in expectations, Chinese tourists can often be disappointed when visiting overseas hotels to find small lobbies, which lack a sense of arrival, and small cramped guest rooms.

Cultural differences are reflected in a number of ways, such as communication, rules of social behaviour and service (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). These cultural differences could influence attitudes of travel characteristics such as trip duration, travel mode, expenditures, length of stay and accommodation preferences (Yoo, McKercher & Mena, 2004). These characteristics may not only be influenced by cultural differences but also by geographical distance which was evident in a study by Gilbert and Tsao (2000) who found that Chinese customers were more price-sensitive than Western customers. Chinese buyers were more concerned with the price than with the quality of a product, whereas Western customers cared more about the quality than the price of a product. This finding appears to contradict the view that Chinese markets are seeking larger, more modern hotels and facilities, which may cost more.

ACCOMMODATION SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS

There has been interest in the differing needs and wants of both business and leisure travellers alike when selecting hotel accommodation. For many, business travellers may be viewed as filling a gap on weekdays, whereas for others this travel may be their core business. Knutson (1988) reported that business travellers considered the following important factors when selecting a hotel: clean, comfortable, well maintained rooms, convenient location, prompt and courteous service, safe and secure environment and friendly and courteous employees. Furthermore, business travellers in the economy segment were more price sensitive to rates than were mid-range or luxury travellers.

Further to this study, Lockyer (2005) found a relationship between price and location, where if a traveller wanted to stay in a particular location, they were more likely to pay more for their accommodation. He also found that location was a determining factor in business travellers' hotel selection decisions. However, price was a less important consideration in their selection, as often accommodation was selected and paid for by their companies.

Lockyer (2002, 2005) also found that the cleanliness of the room or hotel was ranked by potential business guests as the most valued hotel attribute, followed by bathroom and shower quality, and quality of staff service. A study by Cobanoglu, Corbaci, Moreo and Ekinci (2003) revealed that there were significant differences between male and female travellers in the perceived importance of security, food and beverage, complimentary goods, parking and health sensitivity when selecting accommodation, in particular a hotel. Lockyer (2002) also found that safety and security of a hotel or motel was important to most female business travellers, whereas, there was no distinction between male and female visitors in the study by Tsai, Yeung and Yim (2011).

Although leisure travellers may have some differing needs from their business counterparts, they do share common preferences in hotel selection, such as clean, comfortable, well-maintained rooms, convenient location, prompt service, safe and secure environment and friendly and courteous employees. Knutson (1988) found that they were more concerned about rates and the availability of recreational facilities. Callan and Brown (2000) found in their study that leisure travellers placed a greater emphasis on staff attitude and behaviour and on the value that they received for the price paid. This concurs with Yesawich (2006) who reported that value for the price paid was one of the most influential factors for hotel selection among leisure travellers. Lockyer (2005) also agreed that travellers looked more carefully at the value received for the price paid when staying for leisure purposes. Although this study was not necessarily designed to examine the purpose of their visit, the review of these studies offers greater insight.

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND THE CONCEPT OF 'GUANXI'

Chinese people attach great importance to establishing long term-relationships and although this is difficult when travelling, the personal connection practice known as 'guanxi' is a major characteristic of their culture and relationship marketing in China (Wang, Vela, Tyler, 2007; Gilbert, & Tsao, 2000). Guanxi can be likened to manaakitanga, which is loosely translated as 'hospitality'. More specifically, relational connections are based on reciprocity, mutual obligation and trust. Wang, Vela and Tyler (2007) noted that "Chinese tourists coming from a high-context society attach great importance to such ritualistic behaviour such as smiling, greetings and handshaking" (p. 320).

METHODS

The study employed a mixed methods approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to analyse the factors that influence selection of accommodation by Chinese visitors to New Zealand. The study included a survey and the findings of four in-depth interviews conducted with three accommodation operators (one in Dunedin and two in Queenstown) and a member of the regional tourism organisation. This approach is in line with the constructivist research paradigm which supports a more tentative, inductive and interpretive form of data collection and analysis (Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton & Oakes, 2000).

The survey drew a total of 100 responses from Chinese visitors. Respondents were asked a range of 23 close-ended and open-ended questions, which examined where these visitors were from, their length of stay, the purpose of their visit to New Zealand, their method of travel in New Zealand, type of accommodation preference and

rating, preferred attributes of accommodation, and how New Zealand accommodation providers could improve their accommodation. To avoid ambiguity in the questions and to ensure that all of the questions written on the survey were clearly understood by the participants, a Chinese speaking national administered the survey which helped with any language barriers. The data collection was carried out in Dunedin over a period of three weeks, in a South Island town in New Zealand. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were assured of confidentiality. Despite some language interpretation it is believed that the respondents answered the questions honestly. All respondents that were approached completed the survey and no surveys were discarded.

A literature search was conducted and semi-structured interviewing was employed allowing more probing in order to clarify and seek for explanations (Robson, 2011). A list of interview questions guided the semi-structured interviews; however, the flow of conversation was dependent on the answers given by the interviewee. The questions related to how accommodation operators and tourism organisations could better prepare themselves for the Chinese market and provide an authentic experience for visitors. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, ranging between 15 and 30 minutes in length. The audio-recorded interview data was transcribed and analysed against the survey data and secondary research.

RESULTS

The focus of the research was to look at factors that are the key drivers in influencing Chinese visitors when choosing accommodation in New Zealand. The majority of respondents were from Shanghai (21 per cent) and Jiangsu (Eastern China) (20 per cent). Another 8 per cent were from Guangzhou (Southern China) whilst 7 per cent came from Tianjin, North China and 7 per cent came from Henan, in Central China. The rest of the respondents were from other provinces in China but the numbers were less significant. The majority of respondents (34 per cent) were in New Zealand for 11-15 days, whereas, 18 per cent would spend over 30 days in New Zealand and 16 per cent between 6-10 days. Visitors staying for 16-20 days were 13 per cent and 12 per cent would stay 21-30 days. Three respondents were unsure of how long they would stay. The main purpose respondents gave for their visit to New Zealand was for a holiday (51 per cent), whilst 36 per cent indicated that they were visiting friends and family, 12 per cent were studying and 1 per cent on business. The majority of respondents (66 per cent) stated that their visit was 'just the right length', whereas, 18 per cent stated that it was too long, and 15 per cent said that it was too short.

Figure 1 represents the respondents' preference of accommodation with 48 per cent preferring to stay in a hotel while 32 per cent were very interested in bed and breakfast accommodation. Fifty one per cent of respondents also prefer to stay in chain hotels rather than other accommodation, and 10 per cent preferred to stay in 5-star accommodation, 36 per cent would stay in 4-star accommodation and 15 per cent would stay in 3-star accommodation.

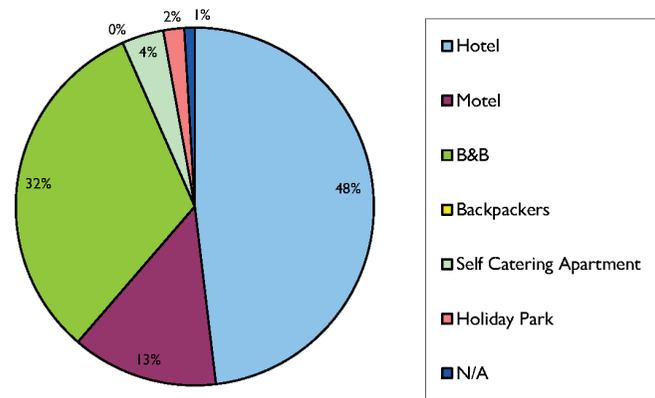


Table 1. Accommodation preferences.

The self-drive holiday travellers stated that all of their travel expectations had been met, whereas, 12 per cent of tour visitors suggested that their expectations had not been met through their experience in New Zealand. The key challenge for 55 per cent of the Chinese visitors was the language barrier. As they were unable to speak English, they found it very difficult to book their own accommodation or find suitable accommodation to match their travel budget as accommodation was expensive. Another issue raised was the difficulty in finding free Wi-Fi to keep in touch with family and friends in China. They also made comments regarding transportation (driving on the opposite side of the road, cost of public transport being high, and inconvenience or lack of transport options). Overall, respondents were happy with the customer service they received in New Zealand, with over 56 per cent being satisfied and 41 per cent being delighted. Only 2 per cent were unsatisfied, although they did not comment why.

Security, cleanliness of the room and staff friendliness were the three most important aspects for the Chinese visitors when staying in accommodation, whereas food and a central city location were not as important. Free Wi-Fi, signage in Chinese and free breakfast were rated highly. Figure 2 shows the level of importance.

Overall, 59 per cent of Chinese visitors rated the standard of accommodation in New Zealand as very good, 21 per cent thought it was excellent, but 4 per cent rated it as unsatisfactory. The respondents were asked what improvements could be made by New Zealand accommodation providers to ensure that their expectations were met of accommodation; of the 100 respondents, 33 stated that free Wi-Fi was important, followed by eight stating that there needed to be more Chinese employees or sign in Chinese. Other responses included slippers, toothbrush and toothpaste, improved customer service, thicker duvet (room was very cold), to the provision of adaptors and two respondents commenting that accommodation was very expensive in relation to the quality.

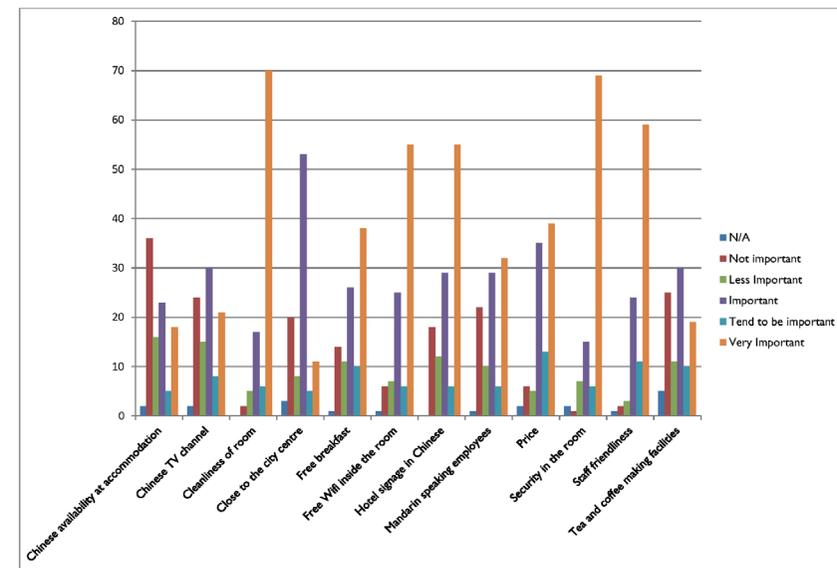


Table 2. Accommodation factors.

Interviews with accommodation providers highlighted the need for ensuring that New Zealand towns are 'China ready'. The interviewees commented that although Tourism New Zealand (TNZ) provide information, many smaller accommodation providers and attraction providers alike, have not necessarily taken this on board. They believed that accommodation operators not only needed to consider the needs and wants of Chinese visitors in relation to providing clean and comfortable accommodation but also other essential services. As many older visitors are unable to speak English, the need for Chinese signage and some simple and common phrases could be considered as beneficial. They highlighted the need for safety and fire hazard information in rooms to be in written in Mandarin. Greeting Chinese visitors in their own language was found to go a long way to demonstrate friendliness. They acknowledged that not every accommodation provider could be expected to employ someone with the language skills, but at 'least having common phrases written down and translations was often very helpful'. The Regional Tourism Operator (3) also stressed the importance of having menus and signs in Chinese as it is viewed as 'making an effort'. In contrast, Accommodation Operator (2) remarked that it is important to remember 'manaakitanga', which allows us to share some of our experiences and a unique New Zealand approach as well as being able to be good hosts to our international visitors.

Accommodation Operator (1) commented that since providing Chinese translations on their website, they have seen a slight increase in the Chinese visitor market, albeit only a 1 - 2 per cent increase, they are seeing a rise in this market share, and are equally aware of providing visitors with a Kiwi experience. They went on to state that word of mouth recommendations were important as well as referrals from familiarisation visits through Tourism New Zealand or the local regional tourism office. They also felt that it was important to provide features such as complimentary Wi-Fi.

The three Accommodation Operators also commented that they observed a contrast between the younger and older Chinese visitors. The younger visitors were looking for a 'Kiwi experience' – everything from the food offered to the attractions visited, as well as the accommodation. The Regional Tourism Operator stated that many of the older visitors were likely to be seasoned travellers and that New Zealand is often their third or fourth overseas

visit. However, for the younger generation this may be their first visit overseas and therefore they want to be able to experience a different culture. The Regional Tourism Operator also suggested that accommodation operators should be proactive in being able to provide 'little touches, such as having packets of noodles and green tea in the rooms' and also to consider 'what they may be able to discount, as they are likely to be asked'. They also confirmed that the younger generation were more adventurous with wanting a Kiwi experience, however, most visitors liked to have an 'Asian option for breakfast and in fact many Western visitors were not afraid to try it if it was available on the buffet!' In summary, all respondents were of the view that shopping and food experiences were important for many of their visitors, with purchases from merino wool, to honey and milk powder as essential items, as well as wanting to taste New Zealand lamb.

The Regional Tourism Operator highlighted that Chinese visitors were very conscious of brands, whether in relation to accommodation, food or fashion, and that Dunedin would benefit from having a renowned 5-star hotel. Nonetheless, they were satisfied to stay at Scenic hotels, as they are a 'kiwi' brand.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As the Chinese outbound leisure traveller market continues to develop from Mainland China, it is important that New Zealand accommodation operators understand the changing needs and wants of this market segment and thus take the necessary actions in being able to offer suitable accommodation. Although a high percentage of Chinese visitors travel as part of a tour group and therefore do not necessarily make their own accommodation selection, their views must still be taken into consideration. There are a growing number of younger Chinese visitors travelling independently and selecting their own accommodation. As the respondents stated, many of the younger generation were travelling on their own either for leisure or on their honeymoons and made their accommodation selections based on their own research. They were also keen in gaining a 'Kiwi experience'.

The need for clean, comfortable, safe and secure rooms were ranked as important to the market, which corroborates the previous findings that safety and security were crucial factors in their accommodation selection decision (Knutson, 1988; Tsai, Yeung & Yim, 2011; Lockyer, 2002). Interestingly, there are changes in the importance of accommodation attributes, such as food and beverage not rating as highly, whereas in previous studies these ratings were identified as more important (Poon & Low, 2005). Safety and security were not only highlighted but there was genuine concern that there was often overcrowding in rooms with little understanding of the potential consequences. Staff friendliness was also ranked highly, which evidences the expectation of a people-orientated service. A key area for change for accommodation providers is the increasing need for access to free Wi-Fi. Albayrak and Caber (2015) found that an improvement in accommodation attributes increased the level of customer satisfaction. The availability of in-room technology amenities is on the rise and evolving rapidly. New Zealand accommodation providers need to embrace the change to ensure they differentiate themselves in a competitive market. In-room technologies help accommodation providers to improve the tangible guest experience (Melán-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016). Cobanoglu, Berezina, Kasavan and Erdem (2011) found that such technology provisions can influence a guest's overall satisfaction and future behaviours, such as revisit intention. Heo and Hyun (2015) found Wi-Fi as the most useful hotel amenity.

The concept of 'manaakitanga', loosely translated as 'hospitality', was also raised and plays a key role in Maori society and inspires the New Zealand visitor experience, summing up the act of welcoming and sharing (Ryan, 1997, Zygadlo, McIntosh, Matunga, Fairweather, & Simmons, 2003). Manaakitanga is one of three key values central to the New Zealand-Aotearoa Government Tourism Strategy 2018-2021 where manaakitanga "implies a reciprocal responsibility upon a host and an invitation to a visitor to experience the very best we have to offer" (Tourism New Zealand, 2017, p. 5). This reciprocity of hospitality and respect from one individual or group to another is based

on the values of 'mana' (prestige), which is reflected in culture, language and continuous efforts to be generous hosts. Therefore, accommodation providers need to ensure that they are welcoming to their visitors; this can be demonstrated through simple phrases in both languages and being open to the diversity across cultures. The concept of manaakitanga can be likened to 'guanxi' and the importance of being culturally sensitive, which is also about the cultivation of long-term personal relationships or 'special relationships' based on mutual benefits and interests (Howell & Shaw, 2001). Cultural experiences for tourists are viewed as personal understandings of their surroundings and that of the host community (McIntosh, Zygadlo, & Matunga, 2004) and most travellers want an authentic experience (Cohen, 2004) although these may be limited by the accommodation on offer within New Zealand.

One of the challenges to accommodation providers in New Zealand is continuing to understand how customers perceive the product or service attributes and their perceived importance to customers, and to welcome travellers with the warmth and reciprocity that is part of the Kiwi culture. This should be a key component of an accommodation provider's strategy to ensure they keep abreast of the changing needs and preferences of travellers. Future research can target more New Zealand destinations and draw comparisons across a wider variety of accommodation providers, products and service attributes.

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