

# research note

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## The role of ecotourism sites: Transforming Chinese tourists' behavior

### Abstract

*This study provides a timely update of some empirical findings of ecotourism experience in relation to Chinese tourists' post-trip behaviors. Based on a qualitative research approach through in-depth interview with 28 Chinese domestic tourists, the authors show that Chinese tourists explicitly or implicitly have adapted environmentally friendly lifestyles after their ecotourism travel, although the level of their improvement is equivocal. The study further reveals the factors in contributing to such environmentally friendly lifestyle changes for Chinese domestic tourists, including perceived health benefits, traditional Chinese value, the interplay between different tourists, tourist themselves and locals and the conflict of interest between tourists and environment. The findings offer important potential lines of future research.*

*Key words: ecotourism; domestic tourists; environmentally friendly; lifestyle; personal interest; China*

### Introduction and literature review

As the field of ecotourism matures, ecotourism has been investigated across many geographical areas, in particular the emerging ecotourism destinations in Asia (Lee, Lawton & Weaver, 2012; Wang, Heo, Yamada & Hwang, 2009). Following this trend, recent increasing number of studies in investigating ecotourism in China have brought new insights into the field, in that many researchers argue that there exists a number of differences between the West and that of China (Buckley, Cater, Linsheng & Chen, 2008). Some scholars contend that the potential impact of ecotourism experience on Chinese tourists would be rather different from their Western counterparts (Wen & Ximing, 2008). Further, recent news reported that Chinese tourists are more interested in sightseeing rather than promoting environmental conservation while visiting ecotourism sites (Xinhua News, 2011). These evidences, though not definitively, tend to suggest that there is a potential line of future research, i.e. would ecotourism experience have an impact on tourists' post trip lifestyle change? In line with this, a number of studies have reported that ecotourism experience would have an actual impact on tourists' further behavioral changes, especially its potential role in enhancing tourist environmental awareness (Cheng, Jin & Wong, 2013). However, there is clear lack of empirical research in investigating the tourists' post-trip lifestyle change after visiting ecotourism sites (Buckley, 2009). Thus, this study is aimed to

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report some empirical findings in understanding the factors influencing such potential environmentally friendly behavioral changes.

## Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of ecotourism sites and the factors behind that could potentially transform Chinese domestic tourists' behavior. Given that there is relatively little knowledge in the current literature, we employ a qualitative research approach through in-depth interviews. The researchers in this study are native Mainland Chinese. Informants were recruited from a purposive sample selected and the informants selected are from first-tier cities in China, namely Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou as tourists originated from those regions are the primary consumers in visiting ecotourism sites in China. All interviews were conducted one week after the informants visited pre-selected ecotourism sites. All the interviews were conducted in a professional manner. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted and written in Chinese. The interview guides and transcripts were prepared both in Chinese and English.

The researchers continued conducting the interviews for one month until theoretical saturation was reached. A total of 28 interviews were completed. The researcher followed the open coding method, read and reread the transcript line-by-line until categories of meaning emerged, and constant comparison was utilized to code the incidents and categories within and across the informants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Then the interpretations of the findings were expanded and refined by introducing extant literature. After several iterations, the outcomes were finalized as this process helps to reduce the researchers' bias and to ensure that the interpretations are the results of Chinese domestic tourists and the investigated phenomena.

## Results

Our findings show that Chinese tourists explicitly or implicitly had adapted environmentally friendly behaviors after their ecotourism travel, although the level of improvement is equivocal. A number of factors contributing to such environmentally friendly behavioral changes have emerged.

The informants has unanimously pointed out that the health elements associated with their ecotourism travel influenced their behaviors in terms of their perceived physical and psychological health benefits, as the informants explicitly expressed that the natural beauty makes them feel healthier and as such, they need to protect the environment. These perceived health benefits seem to be the most apparent factor in contributing to their environmentally friendly behavioral changes. Also, the informants have also expressed the traditional view of the harmony between nature and human being as an important factor influencing their behaviors, as they suggested that man and nature could not be separated and as such, they feel appreciative of the natural environment at ecotourism sites. As a result, these encouraged them to follow an environmentally friendly lifestyle.

The relationship between other tourists, tourists themselves and locals has also been identified by informants as an important factor in influencing their behaviors, although the impact might not be

long lasting. Regarding other tourists' behaviors, informants expressed that the behaviors of other tourists have an unavoidable impact on their behaviors and the impact seems strong, though implicitly. Interestingly, most of informants hinted that although they are aware of the potential harms of other tourists' behaviors on the natural environment or even they feel ashamed of such undesirable behaviors, they would not dare to stop or correct other tourists' behaviors, and as such, they tend to ignore them for the sake of their own benefits, such as avoiding unnecessary troubles. This is especially true for the older informants. Some of the informants further expressed that they might even follow others' undesirable behaviors in such situations, i.e. when their self-interest is in conflict with the interest of the environment. With regards to the locals, informants unanimously agree that locals, as being part of the community, show a sign of local commitment to environment and this might have a stronger impact on the tourists compared to those of other tourists.

More importantly, the informants also expressed that once their personal interests are in conflict with the ones of the environment, they tend to prioritize their behaviors in favor of their personal interests although they may be aware of the potential harms caused by their behaviors.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study provides a timely update of some empirical findings of ecotourism experience in relation to Chinese tourists' behaviors. These empirical findings, such as proper handling of the conflict between tourists' self-interest and that of the natural environment should be encouraged in other similar spots to increase the environmental awareness of Chinese tourists, and further encourage their environmentally friendly lifestyle changes.

Findings of this study show that health elements associated with ecotourism travel play important roles in Chinese tourists' post lifestyle changes. The perceived health benefits could potentially be a new field to be investigated in the field of ecotourism, as there is clear lack of empirical evidence in testifying the actual impacts of perceived health benefits in ecotourism studies.

One of the findings show that striking a balance of interests between tourists and that of ecotourism sites is essential in building up Chinese domestic tourists' environmental awareness and facilitating their consequent lifestyle changes as informants mentioned that once their personal interests are in conflict with the ones of the environment, they tend to prioritize their behaviors in favor of their personal interests. It will be advisable for ecotourism sites managers to understand the on-site behaviors of the Chinese tourists in order to design correspondent facilities to avoid or correct potential undesirable behaviors from the perspective of balancing interests.

Our findings further demonstrate the conflict-avoidance attitude of Chinese society as most of informants pointed out that although they are aware of the potential undesirable behaviors of other tourists' or even they feel ashamed of, they would not dare to stop or correct other tourists' behaviors. This, as noted by Xu, Ding and Packer (2008), could be possibly explained by the deeply rooted concepts of 'Interpersonal Practice of Zhongyong' (renyuan), 'Favour' (renqing) and 'Ethical Relationships' (renlun), which basically means remaining in a neutral position.

Although this study provides an initial understanding of the factors contributing to Chinese tourists' lifestyles changes after their visit to ecotourism sites, further research is encouraged to include more ecotourism sites with the same informants into a longitudinal study.

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