

A study of gender differences - the travel behaviour of Chinese international students studying in the UK

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SUMMARY

This research note provides some preliminary findings of a study examining the behaviour of male and female international students while they are travelling. It is based on information collected about the behaviour of Chinese international students during their holiday in the UK. This work is required because of the importance of international students to the tourism industry and the paucity of previous research about this population. The study focused on the intersection of three key social characteristics: gender (comparing male and female), age (young students) and ethnicity (Chinese) has produced some interesting preliminary conclusions.

Keywords:

tourist behaviour; gendered differences; Chinese international students; UK

INTRODUCTION

'Gender' is a culturally and socially constructed concept (Rose 1993) that encompasses the ideologies of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and identifies individuals as either 'men' or 'women'. So, Pritchard (2001) argues that since tourism is a product of gendered societies, tourism processes are gendered in their construction, presentation and consumption. Most of the literature about tourism and gender has dealt with male and female differences within the host society (e.g. Ghodsee 2003; Kern 2002). In contrast, it has been claimed that gender differences in tourist behaviour have been neglected by researchers (Carr 1999; Guerrier and Adib 2004).

The international student segment is both an important social and cultural phenomenon, and it is also a large and growing segment of the travel and tourism market. But it continues to be ignored by most of the travel industry (Juneke 2004). Chinese people are one of most rapidly growing groups of international students in many western countries. For instance, in 2003 the number of Mainland Chinese students in British universities jumped from 17,700 to 32,000, and six years ago it was just 2,500 (August 2004). Therefore, this paper studies the behaviour of male and female Chinese international students while they are travelling in the UK.

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THE NEED TO STUDY GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN TOURIST BEHAVIOUR

To date, tourism gender research has largely focused on the economic analysis and gender relations which characterise the industry (Pritchard and Morgan 2000; Koc 2002). Indeed, France (1995: 385) notes the employment of women in the tourist industry is 'one of the few extensively researched aspects of gender studies within tourism'. Work has also been conducted on the potential influence that the gender relations and roles of tourists have on those of host populations (Taylor 2001; Brennan 2001; Marshall 2001; Moore, Cushman and Simmons 1994).

In contrast, it has been claimed that gender differences in tourist behaviour have been neglected by researchers (Kinnaird and Hall 1996; Carr 1999; Guerrier and Adib 2004). Kinnaird and Hall (1996: 97) provide some confirmation of this statement as, they suggest, 'the gendered nature of tourists, the tourist experience and the tourist's structural role is but poorly researched and understood'. In addition, they claim that 'little research has focused specifically on distinguishing between the motivations of male and female tourists'. Although, France (1995: 385) suggested a decade ago that 'gendered approaches to tourists...[are] an area that could benefit from further research', ten years later Guerrier and Adib (2004) observe that, 'gender construction within the tourism and leisure industry [remains] under-researched, especially in tourist behaviour'

However, this does not mean gender has been completely ignored. Exceptions to this situation do exist. For example, Ford (1991) and Gibson (1996) have suggested that the holiday motivations of young men and women are different. Carr (1997, 1999) observed gendered difference in the behaviour of tourists during their holiday experience. But he found that despite there being different genders of young tourists in the environment of a beach-oriented destination, they tended to have similar behaviour during their holiday. Hudson (2000) found significant differences between men and women when he researched the constraints on skiing participation for potential skiers.

Despite the recognition of gender differences and the fact that most studies of tourist behaviour ask the respondent's gender, Norris and Wall (1994) claim that researchers have generally failed to analyse and present

gendered data in a meaningful way. It has been suggested that 'gendered patterns of travel and tourist wants are of direct interest to the tourist industry' (Kinnaird and Hall 1996: 97). Consequently, this apparent lack of research may have adverse economic implications for the tourist industry, if it prevents a clear understanding of the motivations, expectations and behaviour of male and female tourists.

THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT: A CASE OF NEGLECT

Because students seem to have more time to travel during school recesses, such as spring and semester breaks (Sung and Hsu 1996; Hsu and Sung 1997; Carr 2003), they may contribute to the growing tourism market (Shanka 2000; Frost and Shanka 2002). Additionally, international students do not have close by homes to visit, also they may realise that visiting various parts of the host country could aid their understanding of that country's culture and appreciation of its people (Sung and Hsu 1996).

International students represent a potentially viable segment of international travel (Frost and Shanka 2002). The changing demographics of international travel would indicate that students represent a growing proportion of international travellers. It has been pointed out that measurement of this segment is difficult (Bywater 1993). The segment's importance is often masked by other consideration such as students travelling in groups or with family (Carr 2003). There is also a perception of students representing the less profitable market associated with working holiday, backpacking, youth hostels, and in general low budget travel.

The growth in the study of international tourism demand parallels that of the growth in demand itself with 80 studies over the past three decades (Crouch 1994). International student travel however has not captured any significant attention over the period. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that student travel to international destinations is a significant market segment. Chadee and Cutler (1996), Sung and Hsu (1996), Hsu and Sung (1997), and Frost and Shanka (1998) reiterate that despite the substantial size of the international student segment of the international travel industry, little is known about the characteristics of this portion of the industry.

Furthermore, most of the available research on international students travel is from Australia and the USA. For example, Frost and Shanka (1998), Musca and Shanka (2002) and Junek (2006; see this issue) reiterate that the uniqueness of the international student market has significant marketing implications for travel and tourism marketers in Australia. This study takes Mainland Chinese students as its focus for three reasons. Firstly, most of the available research on tourist behaviour is concerned with western tourists within the context of western culture (Urry 2002; Meethan 2001) and Mainland Chinese international students may have a different culture from western tourists. Secondly, in 2003, the number of Chinese outbound tourists reached over 20 million, surpassing the outbound travel flows from Japan in that year. In the first 7 months of 2004, the number of Chinese outbound tourists has already reached 15,990,000 (Liu 2004). This presents strong and clear evidence about the strength of the Chinese outbound tourism market. By 2004 most countries in European Union had signed an agreement with China to simultaneously open up their countries for potential Chinese visitors. Britain signed this agreement in early 2005. However, according to the statistic for 2002, despite a 39% increase in the number of Chinese tourists (up from 41,000 to 58,000) coming to the UK, the income from them dropped from 82m to 79m (BTA 2002). Therefore an understanding of the travel behaviour of Mainland Chinese international students could provide useful knowledge about this potentially important segment. Finally, Mainland Chinese international students are the second largest group of overseas students in the UK (after those students from the European Union), and they are the group that is increasing most rapidly (Bird and Owen 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This research employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In order to meet the requirements of sound research, and to minimise personal or methodological biases, various triangulation methods were implemented in the research design. A two-stage research strategy was operated.

In the first stage, a questionnaire survey was adopted to identify the travel behaviour of the Mainland Chinese international students when they were studying in the UK.

All the questions were adapted from similar research. Consequently, the author felt that the continued use of similar questions for this research would allow comparisons to be made across the studies. The survey was conducted between June and August 2002. A non-random sampling method was adopted and 371 questionnaires were received from all over the UK. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program was used to analyse the collected data. Statistically significant differences between the different genders were analysed by using a combination of chi-square and Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) statistics.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were adopted to gain a deeper understanding on the gendered differences of the travel behaviour of the students. During October and November 2002, 30 Mainland Chinese international students who were taking their Masters degrees in Derby, London and Leeds were approached to take part in semi-structured face-to-face interviews (10 of each). In early 2003, 10 interviewees, doing their postgraduate degrees in tourism related subjects formed a focus interview group to discuss the research results from the survey and semi-structured interviews. The research transcripts then were put through a content analysis and semiotic analysis. In this research note, however, only selective quantitative findings are presented, supported by a few quotes to elicit some conclusions made on the basis of quantitative survey.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

In the context of the existing research on both tourist and leisure tourist behaviour which evidence the gendered differences, it is unclear whether these differences can be applied specifically to the international student population. Consequently, the aim of this section is to assess any differences of the travel behaviour between the male and female international students during their stay in the UK.

Motives for travelling

Table 1 below shows that no significant difference was found between any of the potential motivation of the male and female Chinese international students questioned in the survey. Similarly, in his study of young tourists, Carr (1999) found most young tourists are similarly motivated, irrespective of their gender.

The lack of significant differences between the young men and women, in terms of their reasons for taking a holiday, may also be related to the suggestion that outside of the tourist environment, young men and women are becoming increasingly motivated by similar stimuli (Wilkinson 1994).

Table 1
GENDER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS' HOLIDAY MOTIVATION

| Motivation | Kolmogorov-Smirnov Results |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Visit new places | 0.040 |
| Meet people | 0.070 |
| Relax | 0.120 |
| Enhance family relationships | 0.030 |
| Companionship of people their own age | 0.020 |
| Get away from home | 0.090 |

At the 0.05% level tabulated $D = 0.160$

The 30 interviewees also agreed with the survey result that increasingly there is no difference in the holiday motivation of both male and female among the Chinese students. Some of them provided their opinions, which summarised the reasons behind their similarities.

'I'm the only one child in my family. Though I am a girl, I had the best treatment from both parents and grandparents. I travel in my spare time when I am in the UK because I want to meet people from different countries and understand other cultures. I think most of Chinese students in the UK have similar motivation regardless of their genders.' (CIS27— a female student)

'Since China adopted its 'one child policy', boys and girls are treated more equally than before, especially in urban areas. Because we grow up in similar environments, it can be expected that we have gradually evolved similar motivation in our lifestyles. That's the reason that I am not surprised about your result from the survey.' (CIS13— a male student)

Information search behaviour

Of the all female Chinese international students questioned in the survey - 78% claimed to have organised their holiday by themselves. In comparison, 89% of the male Chinese international students from this sample stated they had done the same. This represents no significant difference. Chi-square tests were also conducted to assess the nature of the differences between the genders, in terms of the type of information sources used to find out about their destinations. These tests suggest that there is no significant difference between the male and female students questioned in the survey. The following quotations were from the students with regard to their information search behaviour.

'I don't think Chinese students use travel guidebooks too often. Partly because there is lack of proper travelling guidebooks in China and, partly because Chinese people think that if you know too much about the destination to which you will travel, then you will lose your curiosity about the destination. For me, my sources of travel information are always from my friends and the Internet.' (CIS06 — a male student)

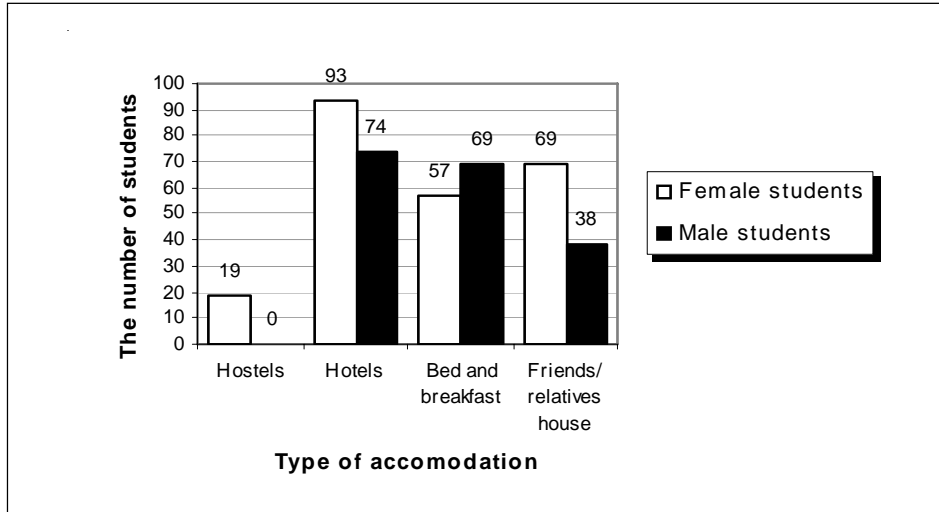
'I have been to many countries in Europe. But I don't think that I have read a lot of guidebooks about them. Instead, I have a lot of discussions about my ideas with my Chinese friends. I got a lot of practical first hand information from them. Sometimes, I even got maps of the city or the Metro from them.' (CIS15 — a female student)

Therefore, the above two results support the claim by Wilkinson (1994) that although gendered differences may still exist in behaviour, as a whole the young population is becoming increasingly homogenous, particularly when it comes down to the use of the contemporary information technology.

Accommodation choice

Four main types of accommodation were utilised by the students surveyed. These were hotels, friends/relatives' house, bed and breakfast, and hostels. In terms of accommodation, there is a significant gender difference ($x = 6.898$).

Figure 1
GENDER DIFFERENCE ON ACCOMMODATION UTILISED



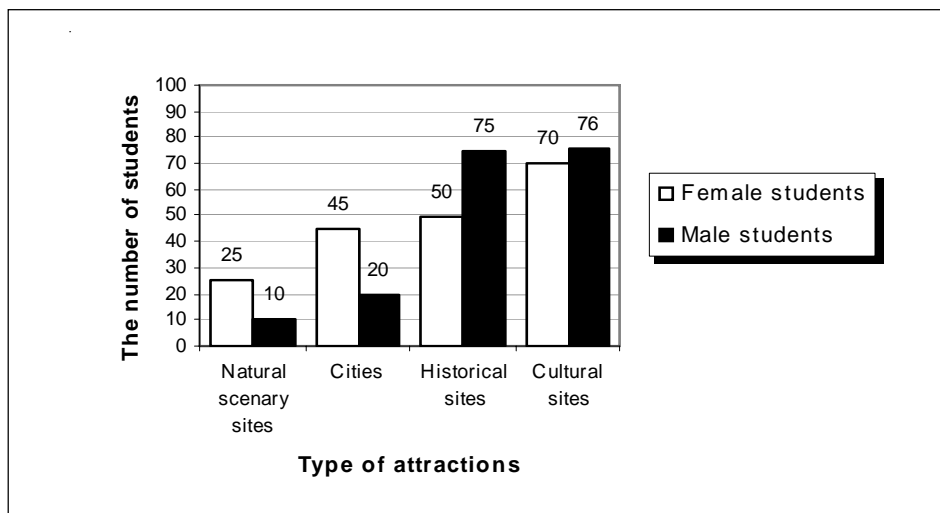
These differences are highlighted in Figure 1, which show that more male Chinese international students were staying in bed and breakfast accommodation than female ones (20% more). But female students, in turn, outnumber the men staying in hotels (25% more). This supports the suggestion by Wheatroft and Seekings (1995) that men prefer the cheaper accommodation offered by self-catering/B&B, whilst young women tend towards ‘superior’ accommodation. However, it is also worth noting that whilst 5% of the female Chinese international students were in hostels, the ultimate budget accommodation, none of the male students were using it.

Tourist attraction choices

Four different tourist attractions were surveyed for the research, namely: natural landscapes, cities, heritage and cultural sites. The research demonstrates (Figure 2) that there is a significant gender difference in terms of tourist attraction choices ($x = 6.980$).

Firstly, although in general the surveyed students showed a low interest in scenic images of nature, male students showed 60% lower interest than fellow female students. Secondly the female students showed more interest than male students in urban tourism activities.

Figure 2
GENDER DIFFERENCES ON TOURIST ATTRACTION CHOICES



Female students were more than twice as likely to choose to visit cities, when compared to their male counterparts. Thirdly, in terms of historic sites, male students were more interested than the female students (50% more).

Also, the interviewees admitted that there were also gender differences between internationally 'well-known British attractions' and 'well-known British attractions' within Britain. Female Chinese international students showed more interest in famous tourist attractions than the male students (for example Buckingham Palace, Windsor castle).

While male Chinese international students showed more interest in some historic/cultural sites which though they are famous in the UK they are not currently well known in China (such as Leeds Castle). Male students also showed a higher interest than females in old pubs (such as the 'Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem', Nottingham).

CONCLUSION

Within the context of the general holiday environments, this research has suggested that the behavior of the male and female Chinese international students was very similar in the pre-holiday phase in terms of their motivations and information search. On the other hand however, the phase of the actual holiday experiences in terms of accommodation choice and visited tourist attractions, both genders display fairly different behaviors. Examining the intersection of younger age and gender in the context of Chinese ethnicity, the results appeared to support the work of Carr (1997, 1999), which claims that young men and women tend to exhibit similar patterns of certain holiday behaviour aspects. Therefore, it can be argued that junctures of different social characteristics can provide further insights which go beyond the simplified dualistic approach comparing both genders regardless of their life stage, family status, class, ethnicity, etc.

The suggestion from the interviewees was that the 'one-child policy' has had a significant influence on gender issues in China. This was because in most cities, parents raised their child in the same way irrespective of its gender; therefore most children have similar behaviour. This result appears to agree with Wilkinson (1994) who claims that young women and men are now becoming more and more behaviourally indistin-

guishable, as the young, urban/global generations are (getting) born. At the same time, however, the cultural influence of Chinese ethnicity and gender may still represent intangible, cultural barriers in terms of choices and the actual behaviour in holiday spaces, such as accommodation, attractions, pubs and restaurants. The qualitative phase of this study deals with these issues but that goes beyond the scope of this research note.

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