

# Souvenir Shopping Essential to Tourist Experience

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Domestic Chinese tourists place great emphasis on purchasing souvenirs, write the SHTM's Assistant Professor Mimi Li and a co-author, and they are particularly critical of substandard workmanship. In a recently published exploratory study the researchers show that the shopping attitudes and behaviour of tourists at two domestic attractions indicate an overall dissatisfaction with souvenir workmanship, price and uniqueness, which has implications for product development and marketing. The aim, they suggest, should be to improve souvenir offerings to enhance the overall tourist experience.

## The Significance of Souvenirs

Souvenir shopping is a major activity for tourists, because it offers a way of obtaining something tangible about an experience or place that would otherwise leave only impressions. Souvenirs, claim the researchers, allow tourists to "examine, feel and think about the joys derived from their travels". This is particularly true of outbound Chinese tourists, who consider shopping for souvenirs to be a crucial part of their experience. However, the researchers note that importance of souvenir shopping has yet to be explored on the domestic front in China.

Given that attractions "provide people with a unique environment in which shopping activities are simulated and encouraged", the researchers set out to examine the effectiveness of such efforts when expenditure on souvenirs is relatively low in international terms. They note that Chinese tourists spend only half the international norm on shopping during their travels, at just 30% of their total expenditure. This suggests that the supply of souvenirs in China could outstrip demand, which is obviously a worrying scenario.

## A Beijing Setting

Choosing two of the most popular domestic attractions for Chinese tourists, the researchers focused their investigation on the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace in Beijing.

These, they write, are "must see" attractions for domestic tourists, 200 of whom were asked to complete a questionnaire. Part one of the questionnaire asked about the tourists' overall satisfaction with their visits, and part two asked them to rate the importance of souvenir attributes. Part three asked them to rate their satisfaction with souvenir purchases according to 10 of the attributes. The final part of the questionnaire collected socio-demographic and travel behaviour information.

The overall objectives were to determine the criteria by which souvenirs were selected at the two attractions, the underlying factors that affected attitudes towards souvenir shopping, the relations between the socio-demographic characteristics of shoppers and attitudes toward and expenditure on souvenirs, and to assess the perceived quality of the souvenirs on offer.

A total of 135 valid responses were gathered from the two attractions, with the typical respondent aged between 16 and 44, a student or professional and with a monthly income of below US\$241. The researchers note that most respondents travelled in groups and usually travelled once or not at all in a year. The largest single group of respondents comprised Beijing locals, and only just over a quarter of all respondents actually purchased souvenirs.

## Considerations in Purchasing Souvenirs

Discussing their findings, the researchers argue that Chinese domestic tourists are most concerned about the "intangible features and connotations of souvenirs". The main reasons the respondents gave for considering a particular souvenir were its cultural expression, appropriateness as a gift, overall quality, appropriateness as a representation of the attraction and its workmanship. In terms of underlying factors, perceptions of collectability, display characteristics, the attributes of the store from which the souvenir was bought, value and functionality most influenced the respondents' attitudes towards souvenir shopping.

In more specific terms, the respondents were generally satisfied with the cultural expression of the souvenirs, their appropriateness as gifts, their overall quality and the extent to which they represented the attraction. Yet there were sufficient negative reactions to the cultural expression of the souvenirs on offer to suggest that the attractions should exert more effort to give each souvenir “greater cultural connotation”.

The memories of their trip that souvenirs evoked in the tourists were rated as good, with the researchers suggesting that this high standard be maintained. The souvenirs’ uniqueness and price, together with in-store service and shopping atmosphere were not satisfactory, but their importance was considered low, so “effort should not be overly concentrated on them”.

### Concerns to be Addressed

The workmanship of the souvenirs, in contrast, was considered to be important but the respondents were generally unhappy with it. The researchers observe that “only a very few higher-priced souvenir products had relatively higher levels of workmanship quality, which means that this area is of great concern”. This, they note, “sends an important message to the industry that resources should be directed to improving the workmanship of souvenirs”.

In concluding their discussion, the researchers argue that even though the study is exploratory, the various concerns, both major and minor, raised by the respondents should be of immediate interest to the two attractions. They also suggest a wider applicability to attractions both within and outside of China that are catering to Chinese visitors, but suggest further study is needed to offer a more in-depth understanding of the shopping attitudes and behaviour of Chinese tourists.

### Points to Note:

- Domestic Chinese tourists place great emphasis on purchasing souvenirs.
- Attitudes toward souvenir shopping are shaped by the collectability, display characteristics, value and functionality of the souvenirs, plus the attributes of the store.
- Souvenirs are selected based on their cultural expression, appropriateness as gifts and representations of the attraction, overall quality and workmanship.
- Yet not all of these aspects are considered satisfactory, and souvenir workmanship in particular must be improved.

Li, Mimi and Cai, Liping (2008). Souvenir Shopping Attitudes and Behavior among Chinese Domestic Tourists: An Exploratory Study. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 189-204.