

Chinese Outbound Tourism a Way of Ordering

Chinese outbound tourism is not a market-driven, random activity argues the SHTM's Dr Tony Tse in a recently published research paper. Propelled by the influence of general beliefs, politics, law, government agencies and pressure groups, it cannot be understood as a product of individual motivation through a lens of market segmentation. Rather, it is a carefully shaped "way of ordering" for both Chinese tourists themselves and the world into which they reach. This, notes Dr Tse, is why "a hitherto non-travelling culture suddenly became a travelling culture".

The Limits of Individual Motivation and Market Segmentation

Efforts to understand how tourism works are traditionally surrounded by questions of why people travel and how that travel affects society. In such schemas, individuals are motivated to travel by both intrinsic rewards and the need to escape. Dr Tse explains that the rewards include the "feelings of mastery and renewal, ego-enhancement and prestige" that people gain from travel, and their desire for more varied social interactions. Travellers may also be motivated "to escape daily chores and feel refreshed" or to put "personal troubles, difficulties and failures" behind them.

Tourism is also predominantly understood in terms of different tourist segments. For instance, people's experiences can be explained in terms of the different phases of travel, from the initial anticipation of planning a trip through to the actual journey and the experience at the destination itself, and finally the return journey. Another way of explaining tourism is to identify the various groups that represent "managerially relevant market segments", which can be differentiated according to family composition, education, socio-economic status and travel behaviour.

The problem with these ways of understanding tourism, argues Dr Tse, is that they are either psychological or socio-psychological, and cannot "adequately explain complex and multi-faceted travel behaviour." In particular, most explanations of tourism have been developed in the West,

yet the significant cultural differences between Western and Chinese societies mean that "a more culture sensitive approach" should be adopted in the study of Chinese outbound tourism.

Tourism as a Form of Social Ordering

Dr Tse proposes that tourism should also be understood in terms of the "complex interactions of people, networks, organisations, systems, regulations, politics, and many other objects". In China, political factors interact "to create outbound tourism as a new way of ordering the country and the world". Those factors include the Chinese government's household registration system, which was intended to prevent the social instability from mass migration to the cities. Although the economic reforms of the past 30 years have reduced the control imposed by the government, restrictions on travel remained in place until relatively recently.

Outbound tourism has also been influenced by the government's Approved Destination Status (ADS) scheme, which specifies the countries and regions to which Chinese people can travel. By January 2010, 139 countries had been approved under the ADS scheme. The National Tourism Administration also introduced a set of administrative measures that set a quota for the number of outbound tourists from each of China's provinces, regions and municipalities. These measures, argues Dr Tse, create a "social order in the interaction of many heterogeneous items including people, tourists, regulations, visas, travel agencies, airlines, attractions, and money".

The Uses of Outbound Tourism

Given this social ordering, outbound Chinese tourism should not be understood merely as comprising leisure and travel. Dr Tse points out that there is also "an element of relationship building and diplomacy" in the government's stance. Encouragement to travel between nations is suggestive of positive political relationships, as can be seen in the way that the Chinese government has recently managed outbound travel to the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions and Southeast Asia.

Tourism to these regions has been encouraged as a way of supporting their economies, with Chinese tourists representing the single most important market for Hong Kong and Macao. With the devastation of the travel industry in Southeast Asia following the 2004 tsunami, China “partnered with a number of travel agencies to help tourism recover”, thus adding to its ‘soft’ diplomatic power.

China, Dr Tse reminds his readers, is one of only a few countries in the world that has “articulated an outbound tourism policy”. The government has gradually relaxed its view of tourism, from the original condemnation of a “bourgeois” activity to the current recognition of it as “a pillar industry”. The gradual development of policies over the past 20 years reflects the government’s uncertainty over how Chinese people would respond to the opportunity to travel overseas, how they would be welcomed and how tourism would affect the balance of trade. The government’s approach has become increasingly positive and it now sees its role as that of “an oversight body which prohibits malpractice in the travel industry and channels international tourist flows to ‘appropriate’ destinations”.

Dr Tse uses the example of China’s relations with Taiwan to illustrate how tourism can be regarded as a form of “nation-state ordering”. The course of tourism development between the two countries reflects the recent political movement towards increased contact and cooperation, following several decades of hostility. Although China’s earlier conciliatory gestures were rejected, Taiwan’s change of government in 2008 prompted more active communication on tourism and travel, with a subsequent rapid increase in tourist numbers. China’s outbound tourism to Taiwan is thus “an object of nation-state ordering”.

The final type of ordering that Dr Tse identifies is of Chinese tourists themselves. In 2006, a steering committee published a list of “bad habits of mainland tourists at home and abroad” and launched a campaign to “heighten awareness and correct some embarrassing habits”. The Chinese government thus recognises that its tourists play an ambassadorial role abroad and orders Chinese tourists “not just in terms of where they can visit, but also how they should behave”.

Balancing Market Forces and Socialist Values

Dr Tse’s conception of China’s outbound tourism as a way of ordering explains how a “travelling culture” has been created in China, even though capitalistic tourism is “incongruent with the sort of socialist values still prevalent in China”. The measures by which the Chinese government has managed the development of tourism have been designed to “counter-balance free-market forces” to ensure that tourism develops in precisely the right socialistic direction.

Practitioners will find Dr Tse’s approach particularly useful for understanding the dynamics of China’s outbound tourism. They should be mindful, as his overview suggests, that it is a carefully ordered social phenomenon that has not been allowed to “happen haphazardly or purely under the influence of market forces”. Knowledge of how that ordering is achieved will be vitally important as China sends ever large numbers of tourists out into the world.

Points to Note

- A culturally relevant understanding of Chinese outbound tourism should not merely focus on individual motivation and market segmentation.
- Beliefs, politics and laws have shaped the development of Chinese tourism.
- Policies control population movement, permissible destinations, diplomatic relations and tourist practices.
- This social ordering has allowed Chinese outbound tourism to flourish.

Tse, Tony. (2011). “China’s Outbound Tourism as a Way of Ordering”, *China Tourism Research*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 490-505.