

Perceptions Ahead of Environmental Practice in Chinese Hotels

The ways in which Chinese hotel managers answer questions about environmental practice could be affected by “impression management”, according to the SHTM’s Professor Kaye Chon. In a co-authored article published recently, Professor Chon and his collaborators analyse the responses of hotel managers from environmental hotspots in China and find room to develop a more refined notion of good environmental practice.

Corporate Responsibility for the Environment

The concept of corporate social responsibility is closely aligned with environmental protection. Yet the researchers note that the intent to adhere systematically to an ethical framework of “alternate social and environmentally friendly practices” has been relatively subdued in China until recently. This, they point out, is problematic because the country is highly susceptible to environmental risk given its large population and rapid economic growth.

The government is very much aware of this situation and has introduced “better-implemented environmental regulations” over the last five years, linking them to sustainability and “increasing competitiveness”. The advent of “the green hotel concept” in the Chinese mainland during the late 1990s eventually led to the China National Tourism Administration implementing a nationwide “Green Hotel” standard in 2005. Yet even though such measures have enhanced the significance of environmental management, the researchers point to enduring criticism of the “hotel industry’s over-consumption of energy and water and of poor waste management practices”. A truly integrated practice of sustainable development incorporating ecological, social, cultural, political and technological elements has yet to emerge.

To what extent have sustainable practices been put to

work in the Chinese hotel industry? The researchers mention that the internationally high levels of government ownership or control of hotels in China, and the relatively low levels of privately owned chain hotels, has meant that government regulations have had a significant effect. However, the number of hotels claiming to have environmentally friendly practices is substantially larger than the number in which specific practices are in place.

An Environmentally Troublesome Setting

This is hardly a sustainable situation, especially with increased levels of corporatisation and decentralisation in government-controlled hotels and the resultant “poorly defined patterns of authority”. The researchers thus sought to determine “the degree to which environmentally aware practices are being adopted” at hotels in locations experiencing environmental problems. The target locations had to be both tourist destinations and close to polluted lakes, which would increase the “external pressures for the adoption of environmental good practices as a partial expression of corporate social responsibility”.

The locations chosen all suffered from what the researchers describe as “serve forms of water pollution”. They surveyed 121 hotel managers, including 28 in Beijing close by Huairou Lake and Miyun Reservoir, 29 in Kunming close to Lake Dianchi, 32 in Shuzhou near Lake Tai and 32 in Wixu again near Lake Tai. The environmental problems ranged from excess nutrients causing algal blooms to high toxin levels, and the researchers understandably posited that the hoteliers would be well aware of “the need to adopt appropriate policies”.

Using a questionnaire that emphasised specific “environmental measures rather than overall strategic

issues”, the researchers gathered important information on “perceptions of government enforcement of regulations and green practices in hotels”.

Perceptions Outstrip Practice

The most immediately significant finding is that the hotel managers considered an insistence on energy-saving light bulbs and the use of card-control systems to turn off lighting and air-conditioning in empty guest rooms was an adequate energy saving policy. They also perceived the benefit of staff training to reduce energy use, and thus costs. This focus on cost savings is a common justification for environmental policies, but the managers also perceived the importance of local governments enforcing energy saving and anti-pollution measures.

However, the researchers also mention that the responses to questions about “practices that caused potential pollution” were more positive than expected. In other words, even though their hotels were in environmentally threatened locations, the managers were not always worried about worsening the situation.

There was an overall slight agreement with the proposition that business could be harmed by pollution of the local environment, but the managers thought that staff turnover and poor regional promotion had a marginally greater impact on their businesses. They were nevertheless more aware of local environmental issues than, for instance, hoteliers in Hong Kong, largely because their locations made those issues difficult to avoid. Yet the researchers also note that there was a degree of scepticism about environmental issues in general, although this in turn was moderated to an extent by the belief that solutions could ultimately be found through “human ingenuity”.

Impression Management

As the managers were not entirely consistent in their responses, the researchers note that “the closer the data were examined, the more difficult it became to interpret” them. Yet two confounding patterns were apparent: one in which the questions measured “real attitudes” and a second in which the respondents’ personalities were at

play, infusing the answers with scepticism, optimism and pessimism.

The results, caution the researchers, reflect “perceptions, which may not be actual practices”. Given the social and administrative pressures within the Chinese hotel industry, “impression management”, or the desire to offer socially and politically acceptable answers, “may be a key in understanding Chinese managers’ sensitivities”.

Good Practice for the Future

Still, this impression management could not mask an obvious enthusiasm for energy saving measures “where cost advantages are perceived”. The researchers thus suggest a “two-pronged approach to the generation of good practice”, combining energy saving initiatives and “a public policy that envisages penalties for poor practice”.

As concerns over environmental degradation in China begin to impinge “on the consciousness of management and possibly consumers to levels not previously experienced”, the researchers conclude that the “collective sensitivities that exist within Chinese culture” are likely to enhance responses to the ever-more pressing issues of environment protection.

Points to Note

- China’s rapid development is creating significant environmental problems.
- Hotel managers are aware of the situation, but not always active in combating it.
- Impression management could explain why perceptions and practice diverge.
- A focus on energy-saving measures and penalties for poor practice will promote active environmental management in Chinese hotels.

Gu, Huimin, Ryan, Chris and Chon, Kaye (2009). Managerial responsibility, environmental practice, and response sets in a sample of Chinese hotel managers. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, Vol. 5, pp. 140-157.