

Getting “China Ready”. Challenging static and practice based configurations of the Chinese tourist

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Abstract

Lately, the Scandinavian tourism sector has identified the Chinese market as attractive, but difficultly accessible. As a consequence, initiatives have been undertaken in order to make Scandinavia ‘China ready’. In this article, we use an extensive literature review, an example of such an initiative and a range of interviews with practitioners engaged in Chinese-directed tourism in Denmark to demonstrate how the Chinese tourist is configured by different stakeholders in tourism. We discuss how culture is usually deployed in making sense of tourists and show how mostly quantitative methods are used, often in combination with cultural notions of difference, to represent the tourist Other, in this case the Chinese tourist. We show how two opposing configurations of the Chinese tourists emerges. Where one is static and based on cultural difference, the other takes a practice-based perspective, seeing the Chinese tourist as ‘just another customer’. The article points to a third affinity based approach, which enables us to see beyond perceived differences and to focus on meeting grounds where local qualities and characteristics are developed to suit a Chinese market. This abstains from reducing people into stale and stereotypical representations and takes an important step towards getting truly ‘China ready’.

Keywords

China; tourism; culture; configuration; affinity

We in the West have an odd way of looking eastward. It is odd because it is at the very latest a late-19th century way of seeing. The Asia in our minds resembles a disassembled machine. It is long on data (the lowest form of knowledge) and short, very short, on understanding (the highest form of knowledge).
(P. Smith, 2010)

Introduction

Chinese outbound tourism is currently experiencing tremendous growth, globally as well as in Europe. As a consequence of this growth, the Scandinavian tourism sector has identified the Chinese market as an attractive, but also difficultly accessible future market. In public discourse and the media, where the Chinese tourism market has received sizeable attention, this difficulty for Scandinavia to ‘connect with’ the Chinese market is most often explained as rooted in language barriers and cultural differences. As a consequence of these felt barriers in catering to the Chinese market, a number of initiatives has been undertaken in order to make Scandinavia ‘China ready’. In this article, we use an extensive literature review, an example of such an initiative and a range of interviews with tourism stakeholders engaged in Chinese-directed tourism in Denmark to demonstrate how the Chinese tourist is configured by different stakeholders in tourism. To do so, we start out with discussing how culture is usually deployed in representing tourists and destinations. We also show how mostly quantitative methods are used, often in combination with cultural notions of difference, to represent the tourist Other, in this case the Chinese tourist. After introducing our own methodology and data collection process, we turn to the analytical part in which we draw on collected data from what we identify as three prominent stakeholder groups involved in developing tourism for Chinese tourists: tourism researchers, public destination management organizations (DMOs), and tourism practitioners.

In our first analysis, we introduce and discuss the current literature on Chinese outbound tourism, which show how primarily quantitative data impacts our abilities to see beyond the confines of numbers and difference. Through the literature review, we also display how a heavy focus is put on ‘China’ (and all that is Chinese and different) rather than on ‘getting ready’. This approach is subsequently pursued into a tourism development program entitled Chinavia used to exemplify how initiatives led by Scandinavian DMOs often rest on a specific set of assumptions about Chinese tourists. In the case of Chinavia, we see how Chinese directed tourism has been primarily concerned with, 1) gathering data about Chinese tourists and 2) has focused extensively on the Chinese tourist as *different*. As seen in the above quote, this approach to the “Eastern Other” offers some quite restricted possibilities of engaging with or understanding, in this case, the Chinese tourist, since, as we argue, initial data is often collected on the basis of assumptions and hypotheses, which may in turn be based on prejudice and/or the objects of research that seem most obvious, which in many cases are the cultural differences.

As opposed to these two examples of how China readiness is addressed in Scandinavia by conceptualising the Chinese tourist as radically different and generating data through not very context sensitive representations, we offer a third example, namely that of the practitioner. Drawing on interviews with practitioners, we show how these do not conceptualise or engage with the Chinese tourist as Chinese, but rather as customers. Cultural differences seem to play a less important role and catering directly to them is considered as a way to accommodate, rather than necessities based on actual needs. Also, many practitioners seem to be more concerned with the way of travel (group versus independent travelers), than with the nationality of the traveler. Drawing on these two ways of engaging with the Chinese tourists—one as radically different and one as practice-based, we show that the challenge to attract Chinese tourists is perceived quite differently in tourism research, by DMOs and with practitioners. We argue that static representations of otherness and a ‘culturally bare’ practice-oriented approach could be replaced with a stronger empirical and analytical focus on affinities rather than strangeness in the work of developing destinations to become ‘China ready’.

Configuring the Chinese tourist

How does one come to perceive and engage with those who we see as being different from us? In the context of tourism, this question is relevant not only in regard to the encounters which take place between hosts and guests (Smith, 1989), but also in relation to how tourism as a business and product is developed and marketed. What we have chosen to call the configuration of the Other following the work of Said, 1979 is intrinsically linked to how we seek to attract them to a specific city, region or country by developing and marketing them as attractive destinations. On a smaller scale, it is also connected to the wish of the tourism company to strike an attractive balance between strangeness and familiarity in order to best reach customers, which are per definition from 'out of town'. In the present case, the Other encompasses 'the Chinese tourist', which we will further describe is under substantial interest and scrutiny in tourism management and research. We argue that the configuration of the Chinese tourist herein generally takes place through two interrelated approaches, one of *culture* and one of *research*. In the following, this double-sided configuration is elaborated upon as are our theoretical considerations as to how and why such approaches must be if not avoided, then at least supported by other types of configurations.

Configuring the Chinese tourist through culture

Until very recently, management-oriented tourism research as well as tourism management have been dominated by a predominantly static conceptualization of culture. A dominant understanding of culture easily found in tourism research, management and marketing is that of culture as *difference*. This is not so strange, as one could say that a very essential part of travelling is the search for strangeness, exotic experiences, otherness or even encountering "the Other" (Cohen, 1972). This understanding of other cultures as implicitly different is well founded in anthropological tradition, where anthropologists would venture to distant and exotic places. An important task was to map out the entire world in different cultures. With an overall objective of distinguishing "us" from "them", an essentialist agenda of difference is reproduced in tourism. Its view of culture is supported and reproduced by countless tourism brochures, travel books, and other materials promoting tourist destinations. In this process, differences in culture are not only conceptualised as disparate in time as well as in space, but also as static and incommensurable.

As a challenge to seeing the tourist other as strictly different from 'us', we introduce a competing notion of culture in this article, that of culture as *practice*. This concept does not aim at negating or dismissing the idea of culture as difference, as it is as first noted inherent to tourism. It does however work against a static understanding of how cultural differences may be grasped and managed in real tourism situations, in this case in seeking to configure the Chinese tourist. As shown through the different examples presented in greater depth below, the implicit understanding of culture as difference recurs in both research and tourism development, where culture is reduced to a number of collective and mutually exclusive entities and addressed as an identifiable and manageable entity of static and incommensurable Otherness.

In this article, we suggest taking a more dynamic approach to culture, seeing the tourism encounter not as potentially problematic encounters—or even clashes (Smith, 1989) - between homogenous and incommensurable cultures but rather as dynamic platforms in which differences are not played out, but rather created, contested, evened out and bridged in relational practices. Through such an approach, we wish to encourage the investigation and reflection of how culture works in the tourism encounter, what constructs and changes it and how it is negotiated and put to use to face

challenges in tourism. We do so, as we believe that an understanding of cultural practices and complexities are important and necessary skills in managing tourism but also, in a broader sense, in improving cultural relations and communication between Asia and Europe.

Configuring the Chinese tourist through research

Following the idea of the incoming tourist as Other or culturally different, marketers and managers have often resorted to quantitative data collection and to segmentation in order to cluster and manage its potential customers. As we shall later see, this has been no exception in the case of Chinese incoming tourists. Such an exercise consists in dividing and labelling tourists according to pre-existing categories, typically revolved around age, gender, nationality, income, schooling, motivation etc. Only slowly has management oriented tourism research begun to resort to other research tools than those strictly quantitative but as shown in more detail in the literature review below, much of the (little) qualitative research existing in the field has been analysed, somewhat instrumentally, through methods that involves, segmenting, clustering or in other ways that aims to make qualitative data measurable.

Drawing on insight from the work of Law (1994, 2004) and Mol (1999, 2002) and the larger body of work of Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law & Hassard, 1999), we argue in this paper how methods deployed to research and investigate tourist demographics and motivations are not 'innocent', but are active partakers in constructing tourists and tourism realities (Ren, 2011) in certain ways rather than others. As we argue in this article, the ways in which we develop our categories and carry out segmentation based on tourist representations are often based on a priori notions about what to research and the categories by which to do so. However, as Law warns us, we must not see representations, i.e. the direct description, as ever becoming one-to-one with the things they seek or claim to represent (Law, 2004). Although claiming status as "*institutions of authority*" (Law, 2004, p. 89) and as literal depictions of reality, representations are never direct, but always mediated.

The process of representing through segmentation, for instance, is seen as an outcome of a specific way of creating and distributing knowledge about Chinese tourists. In segment-based representation for instance, they become graspable through a reduction in which they 'are' their age, gender, educational background or nationality. Following Woolgar (1990), we see the mediated outcomes of researching, categorising and subsequently representing and engaging with the Chinese tourist as an act of *configuration*, which "*occurs in a context where knowledge and expertise about users [or in this case, the Chinese tourist, eds.] is socially distributed.*" (p. 59). In that sense, methods and the configurations which they produce are highly performative as they shape reality and our understanding of it. In the case of researching the Chinese tourist, the configuration of the Chinese tourists takes place through a process of validation in which (mostly) quantifiable tools are deployed as mediators.

Configuring the Chinese tourist: a relational approach

Differentiating, categorising and segmenting Chinese tourists are useful and efficient ways to make sense out of a more complex and heterogeneous reality. However, as we have sought to show, they also impact the ways in which we make sense of and get involved with reality and in this present case, how the tourist Other is perceived and engaged with. In this article, we seek to pursue and illustrate these ideas further by means of three examples, in which the Chinese tourist

is represented and hence, made present as a specific ontological figure (what Mol (2002) terms as enacted into being). These examples are that of *tourism research*, that of a *tourism development scheme* and that of *tourism practitioners working with Chinese tourists*. Through a close and critical qualitative investigation of these examples, we show how the Chinese tourist is configured as homogenous and radically different.

As opposed to a 'segmentation-oriented' approach, we then seek to discuss how other methodologies and views upon culture as something other than mere differences may shed light on the complexity and multiple features of 'the Chinese tourist'. This challenges 'the Chinese tourist' as a taken for granted, a priori category and showing it rather as emerging and ever-changing through relational processes which connect different entities and activities of tourists, researchers and practitioners (Ren, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010). Hereby, we hope to show how characteristics or actions connected to the Chinese tourist are not innate or fixed, but are rather relationally constructed. As such, they emerge as the *effects*, rather than the pre-given basis, of social relations.

As we will illustrate and discuss further on, qualitative enquiries into how differences are produced and which differences come to matter in the practical field of working with and handling Chinese tourists may in fact be used to strengthen our interrogations into and our analytical understanding of how the other is constructed. As we show, it may also lead us from merely collecting data through the use of taken for granted categories and segmentation models to more dynamic, practice-sensitive methods of enquiry which do not only focus on extrapolating difference between Western tourism stakeholders and their Chinese market. Hence, by not taking culturally engrained differences or motivations as an 'obvious' starting point, theory and practice can be combined in productive ways, as we will later show.

Methodology

In this article, we make use of a qualitative approach in order to describe and discuss how the Chinese is configured by researchers, DMOs and practitioners. The research configurations are identified and discussed based on a review of existing literature on Chinese tourism to Europe. In order to show how Scandinavian DMOs conceptualise the Chinese tourist, we draw on material and own participation in Chinavia, a collaborative project on tourism research and development, while the views of practitioners are drawn from qualitative interviews. We will give a more in-depth account for the latter two in the following.

The case of Chinavia

"A must-win battle for Scandinavia". This quote about Chinese tourism was used as an introduction to the project of Chinavia along with others such as: "... [the] outbound travel market is growing exponentially while Europe's economy and consumption are stagnating." "middle class is on the rise"; "the travel industry's number one growth segment."; "rapid development and huge potential"; "European cities across the continent have seen an average of two digit annual growth rates"; "middle class is already larger than the entire US population"; "expected to overtake the US as the world's largest economy"; "average of 25 million first-time (...) travellers per year – or 70.000 every day.". Chinavia was developed as a Scandinavian cooperation project and managed by the DMO of Wonderful Copenhagen in cooperation with three Scandinavian project partners, Göteborg & co, Stockholm Visitors Board and Helsinki Tourism & Congress Bureau. According

to the project holders, the project was initiated as an answer to the huge potential witnessed by the above quotes:

“... the project was initiated in acknowledgement of the rapid growth in Chinese bed nights and huge potential of the travel industry’s number one growth segment, yet also as a consequence of the relatively small share of Chinese bed nights in Scandinavian cities as compared to other European city destinations.” (“Chinavia website,” n.d.).

Beginning in 2012, the project was managed according to a three-track project design involving a research track, a strategy track and a funding track. The purpose of the first track was to gain more knowledge about the Chinese tourists, and culminated with the delivery of a Research Package, including a total of five reports that sought to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the Chinese outbound travel market. This package was meant to probe a larger, strategic roll-out and to lay the groundwork for the Chinavia II project, which is currently running, with the aim of developing China-ready Scandinavian destinations. The primary data from the project used in this article are four of the five reports delivered as the result of the research track (more information on these reports will be provided in the analysis).

The idea for this article came as a consequence of the authors’ participation in a conference and workshop as part of the Chinavia II project. The way that the Chinese tourist was presented and configured at these events, combined with existing knowledge of literature on Chinese outbound tourism and previous work with Danish nation branding endeavours in China (Ren & Gyimóthy, 2013; Ren & Ooi, 2013), spawned a number of questions regarding the Chinese tourist as Other. These concerned how and in what ways our cultural perceptions of Chinese tourists and our representation of them through certain research methods contribute to configure the Chinese as something particular. Also, our questions revolved around how such ‘research driven’ configurations were related to those of practitioners. Because of this specific context, our own role as presenters and participants in the conference and workshop and thus in the Chinavia project also form a source of data, that must be taken into account when reading the article.

Qualitative interviews with practitioners

For the study, 10 explorative, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with representatives of tourism practitioners in Denmark were conducted. The companies included three, four and five star hotels in Copenhagen, as 83% of the Chinese bed nights in Denmark are in Copenhagen (Wonderful Copenhagen 2011) and since Chinese tourists generally prefer to stay in three to five star hotels (Xie & Miao, 2009, p. 239; Becken, 2003, p. 2). They also included attractions in Copenhagen and Odense since these are the main destinations for attractions for Chinese tourists, who often take one day trips to Odense (Visit Denmark interview; Scandinavian Tourist Board 2012). Also, one flight carrier was included because of their main role in making Denmark an accessible destination for Chinese tourists as well as an incoming bureau who takes in Chinese groups, because of their potential insight into the Chinese market. The interviews were between half an hour and one hour long and primarily conducted face to face in the offices of each organisation, in order to create the most comfortable situation for the interviewee. The interviews were recorded and the recordings underwent a process of simultaneous translation and transcription, with elements of meaning being condensed, as passages that were found to be irrelevant were left out.

The interviews were conducted prior to the initiation of the Chinavia project, which means that the practitioners' configurations of the Chinese tourist were unaffected by perspectives they may since have achieved from the project. This distinction between what we might term as 'theory' and 'practice' becomes clear in the following analysis, in which we see research and DMO projects as rooted in 'culture and difference' and the work of practitioners in 'business as usual'.

Research configurations of the Chinese tourist

Put bluntly, existing literature on Chinese outbound tourism can be summarized as studies that segment Chinese tourists based on demographic characteristics (Paños 2009 in Andreu, Claver, & Quer, 2013a; Andreu et al., 2013a; Andreu, Claver, & Quer, 2013b; Becken, 2003; Corigliano, 2011; Guo, Seongseop Kim, & Timothy, 2007; Kim, Guo, & Agrusa, 2005; Latham, 2011; e.g. M. Li & Cai, 2009; Ryan & Mo, 2002); focus on travel motivations and group package tourists (Andreu et al., 2013a, 2013b; Becken, 2003; Cai, Lehto, & O'leary, 2001; Chow & Murphy, 2008; Corigliano, 2011; Guo et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2005; Latham, 2011; M. Li & Cai, 2009; X. R. Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011; Mok & Defranco, 2000; Pan & Laws, 2003; Ryan & Mo, 2002; Sparks & Pan, 2009; Wang, 2008; Yu & Weiler, 2001; Yun & Joppe, 2011; Zhao, 2006); and use either retrospective quantitative data or qualitative data, which, through different means, aim to place the tourists into segments or clusters, or in other ways try to simplify the qualitative perspectives into measurable data. An example of the latter (X. R. Li et al., 2011), who in their study of 11 focus groups, ask the interviewees about specific criteria for choosing certain things, instead of asking them openly about their expectations, which is what they really wanted information on, arguing that "*'service expectation' might be too abstract for participants to talk about*" (X. R. Li et al., 2011, p. 744). One could argue, however, that it seems more likely that the answers would be too abstract to fit into the clustering approach chosen for the study, than for the participants to talk about.

Segmentation based on demographic characteristics rarely acts as the main focus of the publication, but is instead often used to establish the group that the study is focusing on—in this case the Chinese tourist. However these characteristics turn out to be extremely broad—25–40 years old, urban, middleclass, well educated, and rarely contribute much to an actual understanding of the Chinese tourist. On the contrary, one could argue, it often illustrates the absurdity in treating Chinese tourists as one group with certain characteristics. With their focus on travel motivations, researchers often aim to gain a deeper understanding of the Chinese tourist, beyond the broad generalizations of the demographic characteristics. However, there is still a tendency to only investigate group package tourists or to treat the Chinese tourists as one homogenous group, despite the fact that close to half of the Chinese tourists who travel to destinations outside Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, do it as independent travellers.

There can be many reasons for this choice of focus. Practical explanations could be that (1) it is easier to collect data on group package tourists because they are more easily assessable through tour operators etc. (2) treating the Chinese tourists as one group makes it possible to collect data on the motivations of tourists who have not yet left home, making it more assessable for researchers based in Asia. Yet, the fact that these approaches are as dominating as they are is problematic. Existing research has shown that Chinese tourists are in fact not homogenous and that there are vast differences in travel motivations depending on whether you are for example a group package tourist or an independent traveller (Prayag, Disegna, Cohen, & Yan, 2013). Finally, the fact that Chinese tourists are not a homogeneous group makes the lack of in-depth qualitative studies even

more evident, since such in-depth perspectives can often help provide the understanding needed to make sense of the existing data.

Returning to the quote that opened this article, what our review of research on Chinese outbound tourism illustrates is that the research so far has provided a lot of data on Chinese tourists, but in terms of understanding, the research still seems to be in its infancy. Based on existing research we have a lot of retrospective knowledge about the general motivations and demographics of the Chinese tourist if we accept that such a character exists. But, in terms of more detailed knowledge, for example relating to the Chinese tourists coming to specific destinations in Europe or on independent tourists specifically, we know very little. More important yet, what we do know is based on raw data rather than understanding, something which is problematic when dealing with a market under rapid expansion, development and change, where static retrospective data can quickly become irrelevant.

As we shall see in the following, the deployed research methods and the more tacit assumptions on the feasibility and usefulness in categorising tourists according to nationality or other vastly reductionist criteria also impact how tourism is developed as it can be traced into concrete projects and initiatives launched to get a bite of the attractive Chinese market. In the following example, we will use the Scandinavian and EU-funded research and development project Chinavia to illustrate how leading Scandinavian DMOs were influenced in their work by the research methods described in the above as well as the notion of culture as difference retrieved in public and media discourse.

Replicating research configurations in tourism development. The case of Chinavia

The primary data to be analysed in the following will be the reports published to conclude the Chinavia project. However, we also identify the origin and undertaking of the Chinavia project itself as a significant aspect in understanding and pointing out how the participating DMOs configure the Chinese tourist. As mentioned earlier on, a primary factor for launching the Chinavia project is a huge perceived growth and potential of the Chinese market. Such a potential would explain increased awareness of a certain market, as well as increased marketing or other activities toward that market. What it does not explain, however, is the focus on the Chinese as *one*, as a stable and delimited category.

As an explanation for the Chinavia project, its websites states that: "*The purpose of Chinavia is to get more knowledge on the Chinese market. Who are the Chinese, what are their demands and where should Scandinavia put its effort in order to get a larger share of the Chinese market*" ("Chinavia website," n.d.). This explanatory project text, the project reports that we address in more detail in the following but also the discourse surrounding the project expressed a need for better understanding the Chinese. The need seems to come from a tacit or sometimes explicit notion that the Chinese are not like us, that they are *radically different*. It is assumed that they are different because they are not Western, different because they come from another culture, different because they are Chinese.

Aside from the origin of the Chinavia project, this notion is also explicit in the repeated and pronounced attention within the daily press and among some tourism actors to what could be considered minor differences or issues when dealing with Chinese tourists, such as their demand for hotel amenities, a water cooker in the hotel room or Chinese breakfast in the hotel buffet. The

emphasis on such minor differences became clear to the authors of this article in our participation in a conference and workshop as part of the Chinavia project. Here, participants often returned to cultural differences, culminating with a local actor asking a Chinese student present at the conference to stand up and tell what a Chinese person would feel about certain things, assuming that this one person could speak on the behalf of all Chinese tourists. While this focus on difference is not clearly present in the reports that we will analyse in the following, we see it as a very important context to take into account when analysing the DMOs configurations of Chinese tourists, as it seems as if cultural difference to the DMOs form an important, yet often tacit departure point for configuring the Chinese tourist.

The Chinavia reports

The main contribution of the first part of the Chinavia project was five reports meant to reach “... a deeper insight into the Chinese travel market, the preferences of the modern Chinese travellers and the performance of our destinations in serving them.”(Chinavia, Report 1, 2013, p. 3). These reports consist of a review of existing knowledge and research on Chinese outbound tourism; a best practice survey of marketing activities of European cities towards the Chinese market; a Chinese visitor survey, profiling the Chinese tourist in Scandinavia and identifying main travel motivations and experiences of the Chinese tourists; a statistical benchmark analysis of Chinese market growth potential to the European and specifically Scandinavian tourism industry; and finally, an investigation of the Scandinavian online presence in China. These five reports account for the results of the first part of the Chinavia project. The knowledge they contain is used as the basis for the second part of the Chinavia project, which includes product development, but they are also presented to tourism practitioners and made public to other people with interest in the growing incoming Chinese tourism market. The report on the mapping of the Chinese internet landscape is focused on the Scandinavian presence in Chinese media rather than on the Chinese tourist, and is therefore not included in the following. The other four reports will form the basis for the following analysis.

The review of existing knowledge and research on Chinese outbound tourism(Chinavia, Report 1, 2013) presents a condensed version of the rather broad results found in literature on Chinese outbound tourism: Chinese tourism is growing, there is great potential and they are primarily group tourists; in terms of European tourism, there is a visa challenge as well as challenges related to language and service, or lack thereof; Chinese tourists are shoppers and mobile netizens, with all that this entails. Such a review is a very natural way to initiate an investigation into an unknown topic. The side effect of this practice, however, might be that methods, results, perspectives or constructions existing in the literature are transferred or emulated by, in this case, the DMO. This would not be much of an issue if the existing knowledge was a reflective representation of different ways of investigating and configuring the Chinese tourist. However, as we have argued, since quantitative methods prevail in representing the Chinese tourists in the literature, this results in homogeneous perspectives, which are subsequently replicated or recreated by the DMOs.

Two of the reports focus on European destinations. The European market study (Chinavia, Report 5, 2013) is a statistical benchmark analysis showing the Chinese market growth potential to the European and specifically Scandinavian tourism industry. The report does not contribute much to the understanding of Chinese tourists, but seems more like an argument for destinations and practitioners to focus on the Chinese market. The best practice survey of marketing activities of European cities towards the Chinese market (Chinavia, Report 4, 2013) is based on a quantitative

questionnaire responded by 13 DMOs from European cities. The success of a city in this survey is based on its marketing activities aimed at the Chinese market and the time of commencing these activities. A successful city being one that has as many marketing activities towards the Chinese market as possible and that has preferably had these activities running for as long as possible. The quality of the activity or the basis that this activity was founded on is not considered.

In terms of reaching “... a deeper insight into the Chinese travel market, the preferences of the modern Chinese travelers...” (Chinavia, Report 1, 2013, p. 3) this leaves us with the final report, which is a survey of 678 Chinese tourists in three different Scandinavian cities. Although the methodology section of the report regards the data collection method as interviews, the data collections show that it is rather a quantitative survey, “The survey was conducted on the basis of printed questionnaires, which the respondents in most cases were able to fill out themselves once given a brief instruction.” “The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions, 3 of which were completely open-ended.” (Chinavia, Report 2, 2013, p. 19).

Taking the methods chosen for the study into account, the broad demographic characteristics found in existing research are unsurprisingly replicated as the answer to the question of who the Chinese tourists visiting Scandinavia is. A distinction is made between the independent tourist and the group tourist. It is reported that the older Chinese travellers tend to travel in groups and that independent travellers generally have higher incomes and are more educated than group travellers. In addition, three characteristics of independent tourists vs. group tourists in terms of activities at the destination are also mentioned “... the activities listed also induce the observation of a more thematic distribution between activities typically related to the traditional Chinese tour group traveller and the predicted trends of a more exploratory and independent Chinese traveller.” (Chinavia, Report 2, 2013, p. 53). These differences being that independent travellers are more inclined to go beyond the known and challenge their palate and that independent travellers shop for local products. However, the distinction between independent and group tourists is largely ignored in significant parts of the survey where the Chinese tourist is, again, considered a homogeneous group. Thus, results similar to those found in the existing literature are also replicated in the second and third part of the report: The main bulk of Chinese tourists are group tourists, are 1st timers to Scandinavia, are often touring several countries, are big shoppers, have short stays of 0-2 nights and go for major tourist attractions. This is followed by similar broad data that accounts for the planning behaviour of the homogeneous Chinese tourist.

In the analysis of motivations and expectations it becomes clear that the difference between group tourists and independent tourists is perceived as something important, but that the methods used for the survey provides data that connect motivations and experiences of the travellers to them being either group travellers or independent travellers. Previously in the report it was mentioned that a relatively large portion of tourists going to Copenhagen (82%) travel as group tourists compared to Helsinki (50%) and Stockholm (39%) (Chinavia, Report 2, 2013, p. 6). To compensate for the lack of clear data on the motivations and experiences of the group tourists vs. those of independents, Copenhagen is chosen to represent the group tourists in the on-going analysis, when compared to the other two cities “Keeping in mind, however, the considerably larger share of tour groupers among Copenhagen respondents, it is interesting to compare the scatter plot of Copenhagen to that of the other two cities.” (Chinavia, Report 2, 2013, p. 78). This practice indicates that the DMOs conducting the research has realized that Chinese tourists at least has to be divided into group travellers and independent travellers in order to provide results that fairly depict the Chinese traveller. However, since this realization has evidently emerged

in the analysis process, the methods deployed to investigate the Chinese tourists does not allow results that address Chinese tourists as two separate groups, which in this case necessitates the questionable practice of letting Copenhagen represent group package tourists. This practice illustrates how the methods chosen to study the Chinese tourists have developed out of the way of reaching nuanced results.

The final part of the report accounts for the answers to the three open-ended questions, which is the only qualitative aspects in the Chinavia I project. The respondents are asked to write down their motivation for travelling to Scandinavia, as well as their best and worst experience in Scandinavia. This analysis provides insights from the respondents, which go beyond generic characteristics. Interesting examples of motivations include: Experiencing local customs, traditions, culture, people. Another interesting result of this part of the analysis is a comparison of the ideal Scandinavian experience and the actual Scandinavian experience. It is reported that the ideal experiences include an experience of Scandinavian cities as green, clean and relaxed, an opportunity to escape a busy everyday life and indulge in the serenity and tranquillity of Scandinavia to ease the mind and lastly an educational journey to broaden the mind by exploring local history, tradition and society. Meanwhile, the actual experience is explained as inconvenient due lack of Chinese information and service, not as clean and green as expected and providing an inadequate service level (Chinavia, Report 2, 2013, p. 85).

Even though these qualitative perspectives are underrepresented compared to the quantitative perspectives in the reports and relatively shallow compared to other qualitative studies, they add an important nuanced perspective on the motivations of the Chinese travellers. This addition of a few qualitative perspectives to the motivations of the Chinese tourists illustrate how such ways of representing and understanding the tourist adds to and alters the idea of the Chinese tourist in general. Such insight might change or nuance the way in which the Chinese tourist is configured by the DMO who argue that they try to get in-depth knowledge of them. What we see in the qualitative approaches is that affinities and differences in perception are pointed out in a way that might not be generalizable, but instead is very concrete and usable. This further illustrates the importance of supplementing generalizable quantitative data with in-depth qualitative perspectives. We will discuss this relation as well as a more affinity based approach further in our final discussion.

The Chinese challenge: a practitioner perspective

As previously mentioned, the interviews with practitioners who have engaged with Chinese tourists took place in 2012 before the launch of the Chinavia project. Hence, we may presume that the views brought forward by the interviewed practitioners are not affected by the project, but rather stem from a practical engagement with Chinese tourists. By looking at how the practitioners understand the Chinese tourists, we are able to provide another view of how the Chinese tourist can be represented, configured and engaged with, which diverts from that offered by research and DMOs. As we will now see, the practise based approach takes its departure not in nationality or cultural difference, but instead in 'business as usual', focussing on accommodating ever changing customer needs. While this configuration challenges the researcher/DMO configuration, the 'business as usual' approach also creates limitations in engaging with the Chinese tourist, which we will deal with in the final section of the paper.

Unlike researchers and the DMOs, nationality and cultural difference are rarely the points of departure in dealing with different types of tourists for practitioners, as becomes clear in the

interviews. This was witnessed by how quickly conversations with the practitioners most often turned from being about Chinese tourists to aspects such as group tourists more generally or travel career. When asked, practitioners describe the Chinese not as part of a specific segment based on their nationality or culture, but rather as part of the group tourism segment or the segment of tourists who are early in their travel career. The following statements from three different hotel representatives illustrate this. According to the first representative *“There are also a lot of Japanese in the summer, but we don’t distinguish between whether it is a group from Asia or from the Middle East. That is the same for us.”* The second representative provides an example of the ‘travel carrier’ perspective: *“... in the beginning it’s mainly about getting out and getting notches in the belt: “How many countries have I seen? I need to see the most popular places that I have heard about – Paris, Rome and so on.”* As noted by the last representative this perception impacts the way the Chinese are met in the hotel: *“We treat all our tourists similarly, we don’t do specific things because we have a Japanese group, a Chinese group or a Russian group.”*

Challenges related to cultural differences, such as the language barrier and the need for Chinese food at the destination, which are often pointed out as a crucial aspect of the tourism encounter in the literature (Becken, 2003; Kau & Lim, 2005; X. R. Li et al., 2011; Ryan & Mo, 2002; Wang, 2008), are acknowledged by the practitioners. Yet, contrary to the literature these are not seen as major challenges. Rather, they are seen as things which can easily be accommodated: *“... we can make Chinese breakfast if they want it and have it in the buffet (...) but they [The tour operators] have not asked for that, they [The Chinese tourists] would like to try Nordic food when they are here...”* as one hotel representative puts it. An airline carrier backs up this understanding in the following quote *“... it is not all Chinese people who like meatballs and mashed potatoes, they like to have their noodles. But these are small things and not big challenges.”* Lastly, a hotel representative tones down the language barrier: *“Obviously there is the language challenge, but they typically have a guide, who speaks English, so that is not a problem.”*

While the starting point for Chinavia and much academic literature was to pinpoint the differences of the Chinese Other, these examples illustrate that most practitioners do not perceive cultural difference as a barrier. Some even contest it as a matter of fact. Some perceive the Chinese tourist as “easy to satisfy” while others point to how in time, the Chinese tourists will become like other travelers and how this will diminish or erase eventual differences or difficulties. As noted by an attraction representative:

“... I think that, at some point, the Chinese will also figure out how to go to Europe by themselves – that they don’t want to be a part of a travel group. They will also, like we have done in Denmark, find out how to travel on their own and then they will be like every other tourist group.”

This displays a radically different way of configuring the Chinese tourist, in which nationality and culture are subsumed or even replaced by an identity as consumer or guest. Implicitly (although probably inadvertently) Chinese culture and cultural identity are addressed not as stable entities as in the case of literature and DMOs, but rather as being in constant flux. This corresponds with the idea, as noted by Ren & Ooi (2013):

“... identities are never unified and are increasingly fragmented and fractured; they are never singular but variously constructed across different intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. [...] They] are constantly in the process of change and transformation. Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the

process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we come from' but 'what we will become' or 'how we want to be represented' (p. 133)

Throughout the interviews, we are given examples of how the practitioners in their practise relate to just that; the process of becoming. Although some of the representatives mention different cultural issues when dealing with Chinese tourists, these issues are only perceived in a few cases as unique to Chinese tourists, as exemplified here: *"In the hotel business we are used to flight crews where there are a lot of cultural issues and hierarchies and so on. (...) the hotel industry should be ready for everyone."* Many of the representatives also argue that the cultural issues related to Chinese tourists in particular are very limited. As noted by an Airline Carrier representative, *"They know that they are travelling under certain conditions, that they are no longer in China and it is not everyone who speaks Chinese and that it is not a good idea to spit on the marble floor in the National Museum, they know this."*

This practise based configuration of the Chinese tourist as a costumer goes to show how literature and development projects might be overstating the importance of certain attributes, in this case cultural difference and nationality, simply because they are the point of departure for a research project in which differences are the most striking—and most easily researched—characteristics. However, at the same time, the practitioners also illustrate why nuanced research into these spheres is necessary, since their 'business as usual' approach is to a large extent lacking the understanding necessary to engage with new markets and customer groups in a culturally sensitive way.

An example of this is found in a conversation with a hotel representative, lamenting how Chinese tourists never complain during their stay: *"If they complain, then they wait until after their stay and then it is too late, which is a shame because we would like to help them, but that is their mentality"*. Another hotelier backs up this concern: *"... one of the negative things – we never get any complaints or hear anything from them. But I don't believe that not at least one person has gotten a room that he or she does not like or something like that."* This problem of 'no complaints' could be grounded in the need to save face (Mok & Defranco, 2000), but by seeing past culture, the managerial possibilities to deal with it are restricted. In their attempt to treat all tourists similarly they may miss important signals or ways to accommodate needs and behaviour which may be culturally related. In their wait for the Chinese tourist to become 'just like any other traveller' they may miss out on opportunities for growth. More importantly, ignoring differences that may actually be present is just as big of an issue as overstating them. In the last section, we will discuss the opposing configurations of the Chinese tourist, which we have introduced so far, and discuss how to strike a balance between them.

Concluding remarks

As shown, the different stakeholders in developing and managing Chinese tourism in Scandinavia work according to two very different configurations of the Chinese tourist. As we have shown, both configurations allow them to engage with this new and important tourist in different ways, which have positive as well as negative impacts.

In the research configuration, which has also been taken in by DMOs, the Chinese tourist is represented as a nationally and culturally rooted category, using research methods that bring forth and reproduce differences rather than exploring and challenging them. While this allows researchers and developers to discern a new homogenous tourist figure, it also neglects how Chinese tourists

are far from homogenous and far from stable. Tourists are not their culture or nationality and do not (only) act 'according' to it. Reversely, in the practice oriented configuration, the point of departure is not differences, but rather to service and provide for a customer. While this approach creates a more dynamic configuration, it also reduces the tourist to just another customer, hereby omitting or neglecting important cultural aspects.

So the question remains how to strike a balance between seeing the Chinese tourist as radically different and as 'just another customer'? How may we make other analytical cuts into—or around, difference? How do we develop categories which are manageable yet dynamic enough to reflect change and heterogeneity? In this last section, we would like to suggest an affinity approach which makes use of other cultural categories, which are rooted in in-depth empirical work and do not already assume categories such as 'Chinese' or 'just another customer'. While allowing us to categorise—and hence to manage—this substantial tourism market, such affinity based categories abstain from (re)producing stereotypical representations.

In an interview, a practitioner described how the famous writer H.C. Andersen is attracting Chinese tourists to Denmark, rather than the destination itself: "*H. C. Andersen is more famous than Denmark. If you ask a Chinese person where Denmark is, they have no idea, but if you ask them whether they know H.C. Andersen they will say "yes!" and start telling one of the stories.*". Other interviewees point to a unique culture and more intangible things which interest and attract a Chinese public to Denmark. As proposed by the airline carrier representative examples of this are: "*cleanliness, fresh air and logistics*". Also heritage, authenticity and welfare are affinities, where Scandinavian society and a Chinese market could find communalities from where to meet and exchange. By working to collect empirical examples of such affinities and analytically addressing how to categorise and later to operationalise them, we are able to see beyond perceived differences and instead focus on meeting grounds where local qualities and characteristics are developed to suit a Chinese market. For future research, we therefore encourage a stronger focus on what people say, do or aspire to in their travelling and how affinities that comply to this can be developed at the destinations, rather than what they 'are'. This abstains from reducing people into stale and stereotypical representations and takes an important step towards getting truly 'China ready'.

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