Chinese recreational vehicle tourists in Australia

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Note: This report only presents part of the research findings. For further information about
this research project as well as collaboration and broader issues about emerging tourist
markets, please contact Professor Philip Pearce at philip.pearce@jcu.edu.au

This report is specially made to share with stakeholders in the community. If you think
some of your colleagues, partners and friends are interested in reading this report,
please feel free to pass it to them.
**To whom is this research project relevant?**

Before going into the detail of the research project, we would like to suggest that the following personnel and organizations might find the work of interest to components of their mission.

1. Destination marketing organizations and their facilitating partners in government that are interested in the emerging Chinese market (as well as other similar markets)
2. Drive tourism interest groups, such as the caravan and camping association, especially those with a concern for planning a sustainable regional Australia
3. Vehicle renting companies and the transport/main roads departments
4. Small businesses in the regional areas (because independent travelers are their key international market)

Figure 1 suggests the potential implications for this research project.
Background of the research

The world’s most populous country is becoming affluent. In 2012, China generated 82 million outbound tourists, which represents an annual increase of 16.7%. Further, the number is expected to keep growing (China Tourism Academy, 2013). Australia is one of the popular long haul travel destinations for the Chinese. **In the past year, Australia attracted 630,000 Chinese tourists, accounting for 10.2% of its international market, only New Zealand provided more international tourists to Australia.**

While the group tour is still popular among Chinese overseas tourists, we have seen the growth of independent Chinese travellers. According to an extensive survey conducted by Tourism Research Australia (2012), **the independent Chinese outbound travellers** tend to be more experienced travellers from the coastal cities in China. They are well-educated, relatively young and consist of a large proportion of experience seekers and self-challengers. They are one of the most economically and socially profitable markets for a lot of destinations.

In addition to the growth of independent tourists, the influence of social media and its role in shaping Chinese tourist behaviour is notable as well. The Chinese market, especially the independent travel market, is technology savvy. Their travel decision making is strongly influenced by the online interactions with previous pioneer travellers from China. They enjoy posting rich and detailed travel blogs of their tours on a daily basis, with intensive communication with other online community members.

Chinese tourists, especially the independent tourists, enjoy the distinctive experiences Australia offers. One of these experiences is driving in Australia, especially doing an RV tour.

Research aims

This research project seeks to understand: 1) who are these Chinese RV tourists? 2) Why they come to Australia to undertake an RV trip? 3) Where do they travel in Australia? And 4) How we can enhance their RV experiences in Australia, to create a safe and enjoyable journey for Chinese tourists?
Research methods

Considering independent Chinese tourists’ enthusiasm in sharing their experiences by writing blogs, and the early stage of this driving phenomenon, a blog based analysis was adopted for this project. Two of the most popular Chinese blogs sites, Qyer.com and Sina.com, were selected. In all, 37 rich blogs posted by the opinion leaders were analysed. These Chinese travel blogs were widely reviewed. The most popular one has been reviewed on 185,938 occasions.

Research findings

To enhance our understanding of Chinese RV markets, a comparison with the mature and more familiar Australian RV markets (e.g. grey nomads) was undertaken.

1). An analysis of the temporal distribution of Chinese RV experience blogs suggests an increasing popularity of RV tour among Chinese RV tourists. More than 2/3 of the blogs were posted in 2012.

2). Their overall RV experience in Australia. Generally, the Chinese tourists embraced a predominantly positive attitude towards both the trip and the safety concerns. They were very impressed with what Australia offers for their road trips. Some of them stated,

“The biggest advantage of RVing is that you can always make the best things happen. You can choose to stay at the seaside, listening to the waves and counting the stars. You can also stay in a winery, welcoming the first piece of the sunshine in the morning. RVing is consistent with Australian’s national personality – free and unconstrained. If you would like to experience Australian lifestyle, RV trip is what you must do (I’m not charging for advertising fees!!)”

“Australia is a country born for road trips. Its national parks, caravan parks, free and good road networks, and friendly people, makes our trip very pleasant and memorable.”

“We did our first overseas self-drive tour in New Zealand, which was very enjoyable. When we visited Australia, we were braver and tried a motorhome drive. The motorhome is quite big, but the Australian road situations are very good. We did not have any troubles during the RV trip.”
“My husband would like to use one word to describe our road trip - ‘flow’.”

“… The most important thing is a good mentality. Obey the rules, don’t be in a rush. With the skills we practiced in Beijing, it is a piece of cake driving in Australia. Besides, Australian drivers are very friendly and always obey the rules. … Australia is country really suitable for road trips.”

3). Who are they? They are young middle class (majority of them are in their late 20s and 30s), independent travellers, and technology equipped. They travel across Australia for an average of 18.3 days. They spend considerable money in Australia (e.g. vehicle renting, comprehensive insurance, big 4 caravan parks, commercial activities, and quality Australian food). Based on the total expenses which 12 of the informants provided online, supplemented by the researchers’ online enquiries, the average daily expenditure ranged from 250-350 AUD. The highest expenditure was recorded by a core family who stayed 45 days in Australia (8 days self-driving, 21 days motorhome and the rest of the days in Sydney). They spent 40,625 AUD for the trip (903 AUD daily).
Table 1: Comparisons between Chinese RV tourists and mature RV markets – demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative items</th>
<th>Chinese RV travellers in Australia</th>
<th>Mature RV markets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core image</td>
<td>Young middle class, independent travellers, and technology equipped; Most of the informants were in their 20s and 30s.</td>
<td>Grey nomads, snowbirds and retirees travel with one’s partner independently or join a rally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel companion</td>
<td>Travelling with family (either a core family or extended family), with one’s partner, and with friends were popular. Travelling in an self-organized RV rally has also been seen</td>
<td>Mostly travel with one’s partner. Travel in an organized rally is more frequently seen in North America and sometimes seen in Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel style</td>
<td>Long distance, rather intensively at an average of 18.3 days (of the sample); A holiday range from 11 to 21 days was most common.</td>
<td>Long distance, and an extended period of time, normally more than 3 months or even up to several years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel seasonality</td>
<td>Mostly consistent with the Chinese holiday system, concentrating in the Chinese Golden weeks and school holidays (especially summer holidays in July and August).</td>
<td>Winter (in respective countries) is the most popular to travel. Mostly don’t travel during the peak time (Easter, Christmas, and school holidays)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RV vehicles ownership</td>
<td>Rent motorhome or campervans from well reputed companies (e.g. Maui, Britz, and Apollo in Australia). Most of them indicated that they bought comprehensive insurance.</td>
<td>Buying towable caravans is the most popular choice. Other choices include motorhomes, camper vans and converted buses. Mostly owned, rather than renting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic dependence</td>
<td>Not self-sufficient, “Blue ribbon” Interested in the most well-known caravan parks and their quality facilities (e.g. Big 4).</td>
<td>A large number of them are self-sufficient, and only need “basic” or “basic extras” services during their trip.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4). Why undertake an RV trip in Australia?

The reasons why Chinese travellers undertake an RV trip in Australia can be described in terms of push (internally motivated) and pull (destination features) factors.

**Pull factors:** Australia is considered as a good driving destination since Australians are perceived as friendly, there are great natural landscapes in Australia, there is the flexibility of the RV, the symbolic meaning of RVs as a prestigious novel activity is appreciated, and the value for money offered by RV tour is noted (for some people). All these features may have special meanings for Chinese tourists, and may vary among the individuals. The flexibility of RVs, a feature which has been widely emphasised in the research on the grey nomads and snowbirds, re-occurs with the Chinese travellers. Here, however, it has special features in terms of the control of food and time compared to the constraints of package group travel. Additionally, the flexibility is also linked to status. A gentleman from Shanghai travelled to Australia with his extended family commented, “The biggest advantage for a motorhome is saving the packing. Travelling with kids and parents, the packing and unpacking work will be a disaster, considering we are changing destinations frequently.” Flexibility, however, was interpreted differently by other informants. For those travelling with a partner, or with their friends, it was more connected to the spontaneous enjoyment, romance and the surprise value of seeing unexpected views, encountering others, staying in various places (e.g. beachside, national parks, winery farms, and caravan parks), and fully controlling their itinerary.

**Push factors:** An analysis of the push (the internal motives which prompt tourists to travel) factors suggests that novelty plays a big role in Chinese tourists’ RV decisions. For a high percentage of them, it was their first RV driving experience. One informant observed,

“I’m sure that 99.9% of Chinese have never seen a motorhome/campervan not to mention drive one. Thus, when we visit Australia, motorhome driving is definitely a novelty and an exciting way to have fun.”

Other push factors include escape from the daily life, relaxation, relationships, self-development, and ego-enhancement. In addition, two distinctive factors were their enthusiasm for Australia and a special interest in driving. Typical quotes include,

“My husband and I visited the eastern costal Australia two years ago. That eastern coast trip to the iconic sites seems like a claim to the world, ‘hey, I visited Australia’. Australia is such a large country. We dare not say that we know Australia from an intensive coastal trip.
Thus, we would like to invest more time and money in this amazing land. Here comes our 16 days’ Australian RV trip.”

“XX (her friend) is super fan of driving. Australia is the paradise for driving that you can never miss it. We were not satisfied driving domestically and were interested in driving overseas.”

5). Where do they go?

Chinese tourists, on general, are very impressed with the “Great 3” in Australia. These “Great 3” summarized by Chinese tourists are the Great Ocean Road, the Great Barrier Reef and the big rock (Uluru). Consistently, the most popular route among Chinese RV tourists is the Great Ocean Road. The next most popular route was the Pacific Coast Touring Route which connects Sydney and Brisbane. The Great Green Way in North QLD is gaining in popularity among Chinese drive tourists. Table 2 highlights more differences among Chinese RV tourists and the mature RV market.

Table 2: Comparisons between Chinese RV tourists and mature RV markets – travel routes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative items</th>
<th>Chinese RV travellers in Australia</th>
<th>Mature RV markets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core characteristics</td>
<td>Mostly one-way trip, and intensive driving in limited time</td>
<td>Mostly slow trip over an extended period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel route style</td>
<td>Mostly an “open jaw” style (fly in and fly out at different capital cities) and a “full loop” style (around a capital city, e.g. Darwin and Perth), to avoid returning driving</td>
<td>Mostly a mix of full loop and base camp style. Tend to stay in a region longer and use a caravan park as their base to see sites around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical destinations</td>
<td>Mostly interested in visiting well-known natural landscapes; Also enjoy the rural towns that present very different lifestyles</td>
<td>Mostly cross states and territories, All levels of sites and destinations, not necessary well-known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing factors</td>
<td>Their travel companion, travel experience in Australia, and travel interest strongly influenced their travel routes choice and pace of travel</td>
<td>Studies in this area have not been conducted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6). How can we make their trip safe and enjoyable?

In addition to the information presented above, this research project also explores the safety concerns Chinese tourists have when they drive an unfamiliar vehicle in an unfamiliar country. Eighteen successful coping mechanisms to improve safe driving were identified across the trip stages, and included pre-trip preparation, vehicle familiarization and specific driving behavior practices (daylight driving, explicit attempts not to speed; careful choice of routes bearing in mind vehicle type, modest kilometers driven per day). A fuller itemization of these practices can be made available to interested parties. These coping techniques are not only relevant to a safe trip, but also contribute to an enjoyable trip. The implications of enhancing these safe practices also assist the well-being of Australians using the same highways.

Implications of this research project

- **Drive tourism products development for the emerging market.** The results of this part of the study can be applied beyond the RV travellers to the larger drive tourism markets, especially those from any non-western country, with a moderate mastery of the language and different driving systems in their home base. For example, findings from this study can be used to develop and promote the Great Green Way, which is a third tier driving routes undertaken by current Chinese drive market. Drive itinerary design that suits this market, as well as the supportive system (e.g. information center, tourism applications, signs, and emergency service) will be the highlights.

- There are further developments here for good **policy guidance** and practical guidance to the **vehicle renting industry and the transport department.** The safety concerns raised by Chinese tourists and their coping techniques during all stages of travel are highly relevant. Strategies of greater assurance can be adopted by the renting companies. For example, establishing the company as a supportive and friendly provider at all stages of the trip. As another example, providing video and GPS in the tourists’ native language will be welcomed.

- **Implications to the accommodation industry, particularly caravan parks and family run small businesses.** Chinese independent tourists, as well the drive tourists, enjoy the different accommodation experiences offered in Australia. Standard hotel rooms are not
their preferences. This study offers implications for how these businesses can approach this emerging market.

- More broadly and beyond the local regional interests, this study is relevant to other drive tourism destinations, e.g. North America, Europe, and New Zealand, which are also endeavoring to attract more tourists from the emerging markets, including China.

**Future research and community service**

We are keen to expand this project in the near future. Three directions are underway.

- Firstly, an examination of the larger market - Chinese drive tourists in Australia - various features will be explored. Emphasis will be on how to create a safe and pleasant experience for this emerging market.
- Secondly, assessment of how to design a successful route will be carried out. Emphasis will be on how regional Australia, particularly the Great Green Way in tropical north QLD, can be prepared and capture a bigger share of the Chinese drive markets. Supportive funding and co-work on this project between ourselves as University researchers other and key parties would be a desired goal for the future work.
- A further issue concerns Chinese drive tourists’ impacts on the Australian communities and their reflections of their Australia trips, which offer implications for destination management.

To better service the community we are living with and working with, we are also happy to communicate our research and help the local community benefit from the rising Chinese market as well as other emerging markets.

We are keen to work with organizations in Townsville to run a tourism workshop to enhance local community’s awareness of Chinese market and get them better prepared. If you are interested in supporting this community activity, please don’t hesitate to contact us.

**The research team**

**Dr. Philip Pearce** is the Foundation Professor of Tourism in James Cook University. Philip is also known as the first Professor of Tourism in Australia. He has been widely involved in
research and consulting work in both Australia and other parts of the world, especially the US and Asia (Singapore, Thailand, and China).

**Dr Mao-Ying Wu** has recently completed a PhD at James Cook University and brings a detailed knowledge of Chinese tourists and culture to the study of tourism developments in Australia. She is currently working as research officer in the School of Business.

In addition to the two researchers involved in this RV research project, JCU tourism has 6 more senior and junior researchers interested in different aspects of the emerging inbound tourism markets.

For the current research project, four publications focusing on different aspects of Chinese RV tourists’ experience in Australia have been prepared. Interest in any aspects of this research project, including collaboration and broader issues about emerging tourist markets, please contact Professor Philip Pearce at philip.pearce@jcu.edu.au