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Jun Wen
Edith Cowan University

Mao-Ying Wu

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How special is special interest tourism – and how special are special interest tourists? A perspective article in a Chinese context

Jun Wen ^a and Mao-Ying Wu^b

^aSchool of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia; ^bSchool of Management, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

Special interest tourism has emerged as a valuable niche market for tourism destinations in the past decade. However, tourism scholars have generally struggled to answer McKercher and Chan's [2005. How special is special interest tourism? *Journal of Travel Research*, 44(1), 21–31] question, 'How special is special interest tourism?' Such ambiguity extends to the related enquiry, 'How special are special interest tourists?', in attempting to define special interest tourists. This perspective research letter discusses these questions in terms of Chinese outbound tourism. Based upon the reflection of previous research, the authors' thoughts and ongoing research in this area, knowledge gaps are identified and research directions for scholars who are also interested special interest tourism are offered.

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Overview of special interest tourism/tourists

McKercher and Chan (2005) claimed, 'The special interest tourism market is thought to be very special' (p. 21). Yet the question 'How special is special interest tourism?' remains hotly debated among tourism scholars, with little consensus in sight. Over the past decade, special interest tourism has established itself as a valuable niche market for multiproduct destinations and a core activity for single-product destinations (Ma et al., 2020; McKercher & Chan, 2005). This form of tourism caters to the needs of specific markets by focusing on diverse experiences and activities that fall outside the realm of general interest tourism (Soleimani et al., 2019). The emerging market of special interest tourism also helps to distinguish niche products offered in particular destinations, enabling destinations to compete more successfully (Wen, Meng, et al., 2019). An accurate understanding of special interest tourism is therefore crucial for predicting, and profiting from, emerging market trends from an academic and practical perspective.

Trauer (2006) was the first to conceptualize special interest tourism. The notion came with the caveat that it would be difficult – if not impossible – to define the term (as with tourism in general) in a manner acceptable to scholars across all tourism disciplines and methodologies. Just as tourism has been operationalized in seemingly countless ways, special interest tourism carries its own bevy of definitions; for example, it has been defined as the provision of customized leisure and recreational experiences driven by individuals' and groups' unique interests (Derrett, 2001). This conceptualization acknowledges the need, in a postmodern consumer culture, to provide increasingly more customized tourism experiences (Soleimani et al., 2019).

CONTACT Mao-Ying Wu  maoying.wu@gmail.com

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McKercher and Chan (2005) suggested examining the relationship between tourists' actions and trip purposes to understand the 'specificity' of special interest tourism. Trauer (2006) similarly pointed out that special interest tourism experiences should be situated within the consumer's overall life context to be most impactful; these experiences are also intended to be life-enhancing. Weiler and Hall (1992) emphasized geography as a tourism component, such that certain interests can be pursued within particular regions or destinations. From a marketing standpoint, special interest tourism has been derived from the generic marketing term *niche markets*, which consist of small market segments that other firms in an industry often ignore (Kotler et al., 1998). Therefore, the interdisciplinary nature of special interest tourism encompasses the overall environment, tourist demand system, tourism industry supply system, and news media (Trauer, 2006).

Although special interest tourism has been operationalized in various ways within the tourism literature, several scholars have assessed the topic in terms of tourist motivation. The desire to indulge a leisure-based interest or develop a new interest in a particular destination is essential in defining special interest tourism (Jin & Sparks, 2017). As such, a growing number of studies have explored special interest tourists' motivations and behaviours. Findings have shown that tourists often travel to destinations for specific purposes, such as cultural tourism (Stebbins, 1996), food tourism (Kim, Park, et al., 2019), and film tourism (Kim, Kim, et al., 2019). They also visit unique or emerging tourism destinations such as Israel (Wen, Huang, et al., 2019) and Cuba (Ying et al., 2018).

A review of studies on special interest tourism indicates that the definition of 'special interest tourists' is continuing to evolve. These tourists initially represented serious leisure participants with highly specific interests. Yet numerous commercial products have been developed throughout the past decade to attract novice tourists to casual leisure activities. The scope of special interest tourism has thus shifted from targeted leisure pursuits and ongoing involvement to more casual, situational participation (Trauer, 2006). Taking cultural tourism as an example, McKercher (2002) identified five types of cultural tourists (i.e. *casual cultural tourists*, *incidental cultural tourists*, *purposeful cultural tourists*, *serendipitous cultural tourists*, and *sightseeing cultural tourists*). Among these five categories, only *purposeful cultural tourists*, who were initially motivated to visit cultural sites and who had deep cultural experiences while travelling, would be considered 'serious' leisure participants; even so, the other segments are equally important to the sustainable development of cultural tourism.

Therefore, as shown by the cultural tourism example above, the intricacies of special interest tourism raise a noteworthy issue: is it possible to answer the question 'How special is special interest tourism?' simply using the aforementioned definitions? If not, then researchers will likely encounter difficulty tackling a more pointed question: 'How special are special interest tourists?' A targeted approach may be helpful in resolving these problems, namely by seeking to understand special interest tourism and tourists within a particular setting (e.g. a specific market segment) by paying close attention to travellers' culture, background, history, religion, and other factors. Based on the author's research experience, examining individual markets can provide valuable practical insights for academics and practitioners.

Special interest tourism/tourists in a Chinese context

This research letter takes China's tourism market as an example to situate special interest tourism and tourists. China's outbound tourism market and tourist behaviour have been popularized in the recent literature for several reasons. The first involves the size and spending power of this consumer group; China is the world's second largest travel and tourism economy, and the global tourism industry considers this country a prime strategic market with great growth potential (Bo, 2019). Second, Chinese tourists are distinct from Western and Japanese travellers (Wu & Pearce, 2014). China's collectivist and Confucian-oriented culture heavily influences Chinese outbound tourists' behaviour (e.g. destination choices, activity participation, souvenir shopping, and trip sharing) (Xu et al., 2008). Third, the national culture continues to change (Li, 2016). Hsu and Huang (2016) emphasized that generational

transitions have led modern Chinese values to trend toward individualism. China's well-educated and tech-savvy young generation are time-poor but experience-hungry (Jin & Sparks, 2017); they demonstrate strong enthusiasm for independent travel and unique experiences, many of which fall under special interest tourism (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

These evolving and heterogenous market features are directly linked to the increasing number of Chinese outbound special interest tourists. For example, some Chinese are curious about conventionally unpopular destinations. Examples include Israel, an area that has experienced border wars (Wen & Huang, 2019), and the tense land of North Korea (Li et al., 2018). Such research corroborates Weiler and Hall's (1992) focus on the geographical component of special interest tourism. In addition to selecting uncommon destinations, many Chinese travellers are interested in seeking adventure through novel life experiences (Wen et al., 2019). They may partake in activities that are prohibited at home but tolerated overseas, such as cannabis tourism in Amsterdam (Wen et al., 2018; Wen & Meng, 2020) and commercial sex tourism (Ying & Wen, 2019). These tourism segments also represent niche markets, which are comparatively overlooked versus conventional tourists who may be more concerned with legality, social acceptance, risks and constraints, and personal norms. Further, some Chinese tourists have begun travelling overseas to pursue unique hobbies such as cigar tourism in Cuba (Ying et al., 2018), wine tourism (Gu & Huang, 2019), and recreational vehicle tourism (Wu & Pearce, 2014). Tourism marketers have even begun catering to these and other emerging segments by offering itineraries tailored to consumers' lifestyles. For instance, cigar aficionados can now visit countries that produce premium hand-rolled cigars to enjoy authentic experiences. Overall, Chinese outbound tourists are apparently capitalizing on opportunities to indulge their interests legally through travel.

A review of the limited literature has revealed that Chinese special interest tourists' travel plans are shaped by greater disposable income, accessibility to travel-related information and visas, and an evolving culture that blends traditional Confucian principles with Western individualism. Some key cultural motivations driving participation in special interest tourism include the following: knowing the outside world; broadening one's horizons, which corresponds to Chinese individuals' general respect for knowledge; experiencing relaxation and excitement, thus reflecting the importance of indulgence and living in the moment in modern Chinese culture; escaping the mundane, especially within China's highly competitive environment; enhancing one's social status, which is important given the focus on ostentation in modern China; and appreciating family togetherness, conveying traditional Chinese norms around being family-oriented and devoted to one's children (e.g. Hsu & Huang, 2016; Ying & Wen, 2019).

Conclusion and future research directions

The above examples offer a mere snapshot of China's market for special interest tourism; much more research remains to be done – in China and other regions – to unearth the true breadth and depth of this type of tourism. The literature on special interest tourism suggests that academics and industry practitioners will continue to explore just how *special* special interest tourism is and how *special* special interest tourists are by defining exactly what makes this segment 'special.' Other lenses, such as trip quality and quantity, travel purposes, and the economic and behavioural effects of special interest tourism, can be applied to understand special interest tourism and tourist behaviours more broadly. This research letter provides an overview of the Chinese market to illustrate the inherent complexities of special interest tourism as a branch of hospitality and of special interest tourists as a consumer group to encourage relevant research on this emerging and important market. The rapid growth of Chinese outbound tourism and these travellers' engagement in special interest tourism also offers implications for destinations seeking to attract this travel segment, such as by partnering with other emerging markets for service provision (e.g. Brazil, Russia, India, or South Africa). Particular attention must be paid to culture when dealing with new markets, as cultural norms tend to inform individuals' consumption patterns (Hsu & Huang, 2016).

Scholars should consider investigating this subsector of tourism through individual markets. Intensive, case-focused methods would promote a richer understanding of special interest tourism to inform marketing endeavours. Practitioners could then tap into various target markets to fulfil groups' unique desires. Importantly, though, the sometimes-illicit nature of special interest tourism calls for clear boundaries. Inarguably unethical activities involving vulnerable populations, such as child sex tourism, must be firmly discouraged. Although the tourism industry is booming, safety needs to be prioritized over profit; careful limits should be set to prevent inadvertent or intentional human harm.

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ORCID

Jun Wen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1110-824X>

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