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CASE STUDIES OF THE EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE VISITORS TO THREE TOURIST ATTRACTIONS IN VICTORIA AUSTRALIA

Abstract

Outbound travel by Chinese residents is growing rapidly and it is predicted that Chinese visitors will become the largest inbound source market to Europe and Australia, possibly in less than a decade. The Chinese government tightly controls outbound travel via a number of mechanisms such as limiting travel to selected destinations through its Approved Destination Status (ADS) scheme, predetermining tour itineraries and requiring travellers to be under the control of their tour guides for virtually their entire overseas experience.

This paper draws on cultural mediation theory to deconstruct the Chinese visitor experience at three specific tourism attractions in the state of Victoria: Sovereign Hill (a recreated historic site located in a rural area), Phillip Island (a nature-based destination) and Royal Botanic Gardens (an urban-based non-commercial attraction).

A review of tour guiding and cultural mediation literature suggests that a visitor's experience is facilitated (or inhibited) in at least three ways: through the provision of *physical access* to places and spaces, through cognitive/affective access or *understanding/appreciation* via the provision of information and interpretation, and through the provision of social access, e.g. opportunities for *encounters* with locals and others. The experiences of visitors from other cultures can be expected to be richer and more memorable to the extent that all three types of access are possible. These three dimensions are used as lenses through which to examine how the visitor's experience is facilitated or inhibited at each of the three attractions in this research.

Data collected from multiple sources are used to provide an in-depth analysis of the visitor experience at these three sites. Content analysis was undertaken on open-ended responses collected in a questionnaire-based visitor survey and in interviews with visitors and tour guides, focusing in particular on 'memorable experiences' as a construct. Together with data collected from on-site observations, conclusions were drawn about the visitor's experience at each of the three sites as well as their collective experience.

Overall, the Chinese visitor's spatial and temporal experience is not a particularly good one. Visitors report the most memorable things at the three attractions as mainly related to the cognitive and affective dimensions of the experience and, where the opportunities presented themselves, the encounters with locals. The findings suggest that attention be given not only to providing physical access to spaces and places, but also access to opportunities for understanding, appreciation and interaction. This largely falls on the shoulders of the Chinese speaking tour guides, who serve as the main point of contact between the destination and their Chinese clients. While improvement to itineraries and written communication are important, the findings suggest that for this market, the focus should be on the tour guides who play the key role in facilitating the experiences of Chinese visitors at tourism attractions.

INTRODUCTION

Outbound travel by Chinese residents has grown rapidly in recent years and it is predicted that Chinese visitors will surpass the USA and Japan to become the largest inbound source market to Europe (China National Tourism Administration [CNTA], 2006, cited in Tourism Australia [TA], 2006) and the largest potential growth market for Australia (Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources [DITR], 2005). In 2005, there were 284,943 Chinese visitors to Australia, an increase of 13 per cent from the previous year. It is predicted that arrivals from China to Australia will continue

to increase with an average growth rate of more than 16 per cent in the next ten years (DITR, 2007).

The policy of the Chinese government is to organise, plan and control the development of Chinese outbound travel (CNTA, 2001). Control is achieved through a number of mechanisms such as limiting travel to approved destinations. Australia and New Zealand were the first western destinations to be granted the Approved Destination Status (ADS) by the Chinese Government in 1999. Since then around 14,000 ADS groups have travelled to Australia. ADS travel by Chinese visitors has thus become an important market segment of Australia's tourism industry (DITR, 2007).

As the governmental policies for outbound travel become more flexible, China had approved 132 ADS destinations with 86 operational by January 2007 (TA, 2007b). Initially, only residents of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong were allowed to travel to Australia under the ADS scheme but from the second half of 2006, residents from all over China can travel to Australia (TA 2006). Under the ADS scheme, Chinese holidaymakers must join an ADS group tour if they wish to visit Australia. ADS group tours are fully inclusive, accompanied by a tour leader or guide from China. Typical are the 12-day Australia and New Zealand tour and the 8-day Australia tour popular among Chinese consumers in the last Chinese New Year holiday.

In Australia, the spatial and temporal travel patterns of Chinese visitors are tightly controlled by predetermined tour itineraries and by the guides who manage and lead the tours. Chinese tourists are required to be in the presence of and/or under the control of their guides for virtually their entire visit (DITR, 2001). On the one hand, the relative inexperience of these travellers arguably makes them receptive to this highly mediated type of travel experience. On the other hand, they pay a high price for what is often their first, and conceivably their only, overseas trip, suggesting they may well have high expectations of their experience and in particular their tour guides. Thus, Chinese ADS group tours present an unusual opportunity and indeed a heavy responsibility for guides, to ensure that their services enhance rather than inhibit a quality tourist experience (Weiler & Yu, 2006).

China is the third largest inbound market for the state of Victoria. For the year ending September 2006, Victoria received 143,000 Chinese visitors, a 19% increase over the previous year (Tourism Victoria, 2006). Typically, however, they spend only one or two nights in the state. This study sought to describe the Victoria tourism experience of Chinese visitors, including what visitors think, feel, say and do in response to their experiences; to identify areas and sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; to explore visitor expectations and aspirations and the implications for product enhancement; and to identify opportunities for product development and marketing. The current paper leaves aside the results relating to expectation, aspiration and satisfaction and focuses on the findings relating to the Chinese visitor *experience*. Specifically, the aims of this paper are to draw on cultural mediation theory to deconstruct the Chinese visitor experience at three specific tourism attractions in the state of Victoria: Sovereign Hill (a recreated historic site located in a rural area), Phillip Island (a nature-based destination) and Royal Botanic Gardens (an urban-based non-commercial attraction). Data collected from multiple sources provide the basis upon which to provide an in-depth analysis of the visitor experience at these three sites.

LITERATURE AND PREVIOUS FINDINGS REGARDING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Experience has long been seen as central to the tourism product. Recently, tourism researchers and practitioners have expressed a renewed enthusiasm and need for research on the visitor experience, in order to enhance visitor satisfaction and destination sustainability (Vitterso *et al.*, 2000). One avenue for facilitating a better understanding of the tourist experience, particularly that of tourists visiting attractions in an unfamiliar or 'foreign' cultural context as part of an organised tour under the control of a tour guide, is through the lens of the cultural mediation literature.

According to Cohen (1985), the mediating function of a tour guide includes two components: social mediation and cultural brokerage. Social mediation involves acting as a go-between, linking visitors to the local population and to tourist sites and facilities, and making the host environment non-threatening for the tourist. Cultural brokerage, as suggested by Cohen (1985), mainly involves helping tourists connect with the host culture on an intellectual (cognitive and affective) level.

A number of other published studies (Schmidt, 1979; Holloway, 1981; Pearce, 1982; Pearce, 1984; Cohen, 1985; Hughes, 1991; Pond, 1993; Gurung *et al.*, 1997; Bras, 2000; Ap & Wong, 2001; Smith, 2001; Yu *et al.*, 2001) have acknowledged and specified the nature and importance of the mediating role of tour guides.

A review of this tour guiding and cultural mediation literature suggests that a visitor's experience is facilitated (or inhibited) in at least three ways: through the provision of *physical access* to places and spaces, through cognitive/affective access or *understanding/appreciation* via the provision of information and interpretation, and through the provision of social access, e.g. opportunities for *encounters* with locals and others. The experiences of visitors from other cultures can be expected to be richer and more memorable to the extent that all three types of access are possible. Each of these is explained more fully below.

Physical access to and within a tourism attraction is facilitated or inhibited in ways such as pricing, the location and spatial layout of the attraction and provision of off-site and on-site navigation (through websites, tourist information centres, signs, maps and other navigational aids and by offering on-site guided tours and activities). Temporal limits are imposed by the attraction's opening and closing hours and the days and seasons of operation, and also self-imposed by the limited time that visitors and groups allocate to spend at the attraction. In the case of visitors such as overseas Chinese tourists to Australia who travel as part of an organised tour and rely on language translation, spatial and temporal access can be further restricted by the availability and willingness of tour operators and/or guides to take visitors to and spend time at attractions and by the lack of availability of information and services in foreign languages (Weiler & Yu, 2006).

Cognitive and affective access, i.e. services aimed at facilitating *understanding and appreciation*, depend largely on the use of written and verbal communication for conveying the site's information and significance. Non-English speaking visitors who are part of organised tour groups largely rely on bilingual guides for this (Yu *et al*., 2001). Both the selection of appropriate content and its delivery in culturally-relevant ways can enhance opportunities for visitor understanding and appreciation. With adequate resources, this can be via written materials and on-site signage, but for attractions that cater for multiple language groups, this is often not achievable. Thus, it falls to local tour guides and interpreters at these attractions to use communication techniques and approaches in order to facilitate not only understanding but meaningful and memorable experiences (Moscardo, 1999; Ham, 2006).

Finally, *encounters* with staff working at tourism attractions, with locals and with other visitors are an important part of the tourist experience that, especially for non-English speakers, needs to be facilitated (Schmidt 1979; Holloway 1981; Pearce 1982a; Hughes 1991; Smith 2001). Bilingual guides can broker or inhibit such encounters by providing visitors with opportunities to interact and engage with people in hands-on and sensory experiences. Communication and participation through music, dance, tasting local food, listening to local stories and viewing presentations/demonstrations by locals provide opportunities for visitors to engage with attraction staff as well as members of the host culture (Pastorelli, 2003; Moscardo *et al.*, 2004).

These three dimensions, then, provide lenses with which to examine how the visitor's experience is facilitated or inhibited at each of the three attractions in this research.

RESEARCH APPROACH, SAMPLING AND METHODS

The current paper draws on the open-ended responses collected in both the questionnaire-based visitor survey and in the interviews with visitors and tour guides, as well as the on-site observations that were undertaken. We focused in particular on 'memorable experiences' as a construct (rather than visitor satisfaction), based on its usefulness in previous studies as a vehicle for eliciting the underlying dimensions and factors that contribute to quality experiences (Chan & Baum, 2004).

For the visitor survey and visitor interviews, the sample population consisted of Mainland Chinese visitors on pre-booked tours. The total number of Chinese visitor arrivals to Victoria in 2004 was 116,000. A questionnaire-based survey was administered in hotels and international departure gate lounges at Melbourne airport, using a systematic random sampling process, yielding 401 completed responses.

The visitor interviews were conducted mainly in airport departure lounges and the tour guides were interviewed at a place that was convenient to them. In both cases, sampling was purposive and opportunistic. A total of 27 visitors and 7 tour guides were interviewed.

Observations were conducted at several tourism attractions in Victoria again guided by the outcome of theoretical saturation. An observation-recording sheet was used to record data including basic trip and group information, activities participated in, sites visited at the place and visitors' verbal and non-verbal behaviours. For example, researchers recorded the questions respondents asked, their photo-taking behaviour, and their interactions with locals. In total, 37 unobtrusive observations were conducted at eight attractions and 8 participant observations at 7 attractions.

The remainder of this paper draws on the findings from these multiple data sources at three key attractions. The observational data used here are those that relate to the visitors' spatial and temporal behaviour at each of the three attractions, the activities they did and did not undertake at each attraction, the tour guide's efforts especially with respect to providing understanding and appreciation and facilitating encounters, and the visitors' responses to these opportunities. The key questions from the visitor survey used here asked visitors "What did you like best about your visit and why?" and "What did you like least about your visit and why?" In the visitor interviews, in addition to these questions visitors were asked "What made your experience memorable and why?", "What happened that made the trip particularly good?" and "What did or did not happen that made the trip disappointing?" Finally, the interviews with the tour guides provided another perspective to some of the visitor data, particularly regarding the access that they endeavour to provide for visitors at each of the three attractions.

Content analysis was undertaken on the visitors' free responses to open-ended questions, the interview notes, the transcripts from the visitor and tour guide interviews, and the observation field notes. Responses were grouped into categories based on common themes, and it was at this stage that the three dimensions of *physical access*, *visitor understanding/appreciation* and *encounters with others* emerged.

Results of the Case Studies

Case Study A: The Visitor Experience at Sovereign Hill

A heritage theme park known as Sovereign Hill is the first of three case studies examined here. Operated by Sovereign Hill Museums Association, it is one of Australia's major tourist attractions in Australia. Located 110 km northwest of Melbourne, the created 1850s goldfields township with its costumed and highly skilled interpretive staff, entertaining street theatre and engaging underground mine tours attracts almost half a million visitors a year. Employing 210 full time staff,

Sovereign Hill is known for its commitment to authentically depicting life on the goldfields from a number of perspectives, including the life of the estimated 9000 gold-diggers and miners who came in search of gold from southern China. The relevance of these latter stories is one of the reasons why Chinese tour wholesalers include Sovereign Hill in the very limited Victorian itinerary of inbound Chinese tour groups. Based on the interviews with both the visitors and the tour guides, generally speaking, most Chinese visitors like Sovereign Hill.

Physical access

The trip from Melbourne's CBD to Sovereign Hill takes at least 90 minutes one-way by coach, which many visitors in both the visitor survey and the interviews describe as "too long". Largely as a result of the very short time that these visitors spend in the state, Chinese group tour visits to Sovereign Hill are often less than two hours compared to the half-day or full-day visit that is typical of Australians and other overseas visitors, prompting more than one visitor to say "the hour we spent at Sovereign Hill was too short compared to the time we spent on the road". For example, a typical group of 29 Chinese visitors were observed visiting Sovereign Hill between 11 am and 1 pm. They visited the Main Street, the Underground Mine, the Gold Panning area and the Gold Museum. However, other Chinese tour groups were observed experiencing only two or three of these four areas, and visits to some or all of these areas are very rushed. A number of Chinese visitors who were interviewed described their visit to Sovereign Hill as too short. They regret not having enough time to take photos and many visitors wanted to spend more time panning for gold (see below).

These four areas represent only a small subset of a much larger attraction and potential experience, and so the visitor is able to get only a very constrained spatial and temporal experience compared to other visitors to Sovereign Hill. Because the site has virtually no visitor navigational aids (for reasons of preserving a sense of authenticity) and because the visitors for the most part cannot speak or understand English, these visitors are completely dependent on where the Chinese-speaking local guide takes them and what s/he tells them. On the positive side, all groups are provided with trained Chinese-speaking local guides who do orient and provide visitors with a look at selected areas of the attraction and the experiences it offers.

Visitor understanding and appreciation

Sovereign Hill employs up to 12 casual Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking tour guides to cater for the ethnic Chinese visitors from China and Southeast Asian countries. A typical Chinese group tour is escorted by one of the Chinese-speaking tour guides who delivers commentary at the various sites. In the Underground Mine, visitors view a Chinese-language movie about the Gold Rush including the experience of Chinese gold-diggers. Several interviewees described this movie as "very good".

The Chinese-speaking tour guide provides a largely factual presentation about gold-mining and life on the goldfields. Depending on the guide, the commentary can be enlivened by stories and interesting anecdotes. As one interviewee recalled, "The Gold Mine theme park reflects the life of miners in the past. The guiding service provided by the Chinese guide is good." During the research study, groups were observed listening attentively to the guide's commentary (based on observations of their body language such as their eye contact, the circle they formed around the guide, the way they followed the direction given by the guide) and taking photos to record what they considered memorable, including the Main Street, the gold panning area and the Gold Museum.

Several group members who were interviewed said that they did not know much about Sovereign Hill before coming to Australia. They were impressed by how well the historical heritage is maintained and how authentic the life of the past is portrayed to visitors. One visitor said that the movie about the life of the two Chinese brothers during the Gold Rush period left a deep impression of the life of Chinese miners of that time.

Encounters with others

Sovereign Hill is not a real town, so there are no local residents. However, the attraction projects a feeling of a 'living museum' experience through setting, props, costumes and role-play by staff, visiting students and volunteers. Visitors were observed taking photos of the school children who dress up in 1850s style clothing and attend school on-site as part of their own interpretive educational experience.

Generally speaking, however, for the non-English speaking Chinese visitors opportunities to engage with staff and locals about life during the Gold Rush or even present-day rural Australia are limited. The short time that these visitors spend on-site further inhibits such opportunities. They miss out on most of the demonstrations and street theatre that provide opportunities for interaction and engagement by other visitors. The only hands-on experience that is provided in Chinese, panning for gold in the creek, was clearly the highlight of the visit for many of the Chinese tourists, as evidenced by the many mentions of this experience in both the visitor survey and the interviews. Visitors were observed looking very excited when they found gold in the pan, and several commented that they would like to have spent more time doing this.

Case Study B: The Visitor Experience at Phillip Island

Located about 140 km south of Melbourne, this icon nature-based tourist destination, much like the visitor numbers at Sovereign Hill, attracts some 500,000 visitors a year. Although there is a range of recreational experiences on the island, the main activity of Chinese tourists is to visit the Penguin Parade, a commercial tourist attraction managed by Phillip Island Nature Park. In addition to a large outdoor grandstand providing viewing access to the little penguins coming ashore at sunset to feed their offspring in their nests, the Penguin Parade site includes walking tracks (largely on boardwalks above the penguin nests and paths), a visitor interpretive centre and a gift shop. The experience can be pleasant on a balmy summer evening, but the site can be cold, wet and/or windy and, depending on the time of the year, there can be several hundred or as few as twenty penguins. As a result, the experience can vary widely. Perhaps partly because of the high expectations that are created in marketing this destination, the experience does not always live up to its reputation.

Physical access

The time on the road to Phillip Island is even longer than to Sovereign Hill. Depending on whether the coach stops for sightseeing or dinner or both, the one-way trip can take up to two hours. All Chinese group tours arrive at the Penguin Parade in the evening, as the main purpose of the visit is to view the penguins. This means that visitors return at night, in the dark, sometimes not arriving back at their hotels until the early hours of the following morning.

A typical Chinese tour group of 28 was observed at Phillip Island between 8:45 pm and 9:45 pm. The group watched penguins return to their nests, watched a documentary film, and visited the information centre including the gift shop. The group sat on the viewing stand to wait and watch penguins returning from the ocean. Many visitors are happy with this experience: "We felt so delighted when seeing hundreds of penguins returning to the seashore in teams with a team leader walking in front of the team. This is the brand product of Victoria". However, another group reported disappointment: "Our stay at Phillip Island was too short. It is a pity that we did not have time to see the documentary film about penguins. We saw only 20 penguins at Phillip Island".

Like Sovereign Hill, some interviewees found that the time and quality of the travelling experience overshadows the experience at the attraction: "Too much time on the bus, too few penguins." However, unlike Sovereign Hill, the time spent at Phillip Island Penguin Parade is about the same as what many other visitors spend there, so they have enough time to see the whole site. Navigation is non-problematic due to the elevated boardwalk which effectively limits and guides movement about the site.

Visitor understanding and appreciation

During the time sitting and waiting in the grandstand, visitors can listen to commentary via several loudspeakers, in multiple languages including Chinese. Often, however, the outdoor conditions make the commentary very difficult to hear. With the exception of this portion of the experience, there is no oral communication in Chinese by the attraction staff and no on-site Chinese-speaking guides provided. In contrast, Australians and others sufficiently fluent in English can, in addition to the visitor centre itself, learn from the many signs and exhibits on the walk to and from the grandstand. Notwithstanding these limitations, some of the Chinese interviewees demonstrated considerable understanding and even empathy for the species. "Penguins are well protected. It is very touching. It seems that penguins have souls. Parents go fishing and their children stay at home to wait for their parents coming homes. Penguins have a very strong sense of teamwork. They are very hard-working. Viewing penguins is a very pleasant experience. It is beyond my expectation."

Most Chinese-speaking tour guides who escort the Chinese tour groups on the coach to Phillip Island provide some commentary about the place on their way. Most, however, do not accompany their groups viewing the penguins and there is very little written information available in Chinese. A number of visitors asked questions of the interviewer about penguin behaviour, suggesting interest but a lack of opportunity for learning even the basic facts. A common response was disappointment at not being allowed to take photos of the penguins; it was clear that the visitors had no idea why.

Encounters with others

After the penguins arrive, visitors have the opportunity to return to the visitor centre via the boardwalks at their leisure, observing and even following individual penguins. For English-speaking visitors, there are many roving staff and other visitors with whom they can engage. For visitors who speak only Chinese, there is limited opportunity to interact with others and no facilitation of the experience. There is virtually no support to help visitors engage with the environment, the staff or other visitors. Occasionally, however, the Chinese visitors made their own opportunities. Observations of some groups of Chinese visitors revealed that some kept count of the number of penguins they saw. Several group members followed penguins along the elevated boardwalks to their burrows. Two female visitors talked to the penguins, clearly seeking a closer encounter with the animals.

Case Study C: The Visitor Experience at the Royal Botanic Gardens

The Royal Botanic Gardens is located in the central business district of Melbourne. The Gardens encompass an area of 363 hectares and have over 10,000 species and 50,000 individual plants. Many of these plants are irreplaceable, endangered or even extinct in the wild (Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, 2007). The Gardens attract over 70,000 visitors per year.

Unlike the previous two case studies, this experience involves almost no travel time from the tourists' place of accommodation. The experience is also quite different from the other two in that this is not a commercial tourist attraction – there is no admission fee and the experience for Chinese visitors is much less scripted by the attraction. Many locals frequent the Gardens for exercise, family time, or just rest and relaxation.

Physical access

A typical group of 20 Chinese visitors was observed at the Royal Botanic Gardens for thirty minutes. They visited Lower Yarra River Habitat (black swans & eels), Ornamental Lake and the Central Lawn. The tour guide allowed time for taking photos and using the restrooms, and then suggested that the group lie down on the lawn to enjoy the fresh air and tranquillity of the Garden for ten minutes. The group members either sat or lay on the grass. Finally, they took a lakeside stroll and left the Garden. While the visit included only a small part of the Gardens, the visitors enjoyed considerable freedom to 'use' the space and time at the Gardens as they chose. On the

other hand, they were not given tools to help them navigate the site so were necessarily restricted by this.

Visitor understanding and appreciation

Some visitors observed and learned about the vegetation and natural environment of the Gardens. "The Royal Botanic Gardens have a variety of plants and are very unique" said one interviewee. Another remarked on "the different types of plants and beautiful swans" and another on "the quality of the forest environment". However, with no botanic information or interpretation (written or verbal) in Chinese, cognitive access was very limited. On the other hand, for one of the groups observed, the tour guide talked to the group about Australian lifestyles, leisure activities, families and the welfare system. Generally, however, the visitor experience is more affective than cognitive, and both are almost entirely dependent on the tour guide, the group and the events of the day. For example, several interviewees commented that Australian families "look very happy" and "relaxed" and this is what prompted the guide's talk about Australian lifestyles. Others remarked on the conscientiousness and law-abiding nature of Australians, again leading to some commentary by the guide.

Encounters with others

One tour guide told the visitors that they needed to seek permission from the locals if they wanted to take photos of them, and in particular they needed to get permission from parents if they wanted to take photos with children. Another guide remarked in his interview that Chinese visitors need to be taught how to interact in ways that are respectful of the local culture.

Generally, however, the Gardens provided a much better opportunity than the other two attractions for encounters with locals. For example, on one tour, group members were observed interacting with some locals and took pictures with two little girls after getting permission from their mum. The girls' mum then chatted with the visitors about the age of her children. The visitors were clearly very pleased about this experience. The interviews with tour guides revealed that visitors very much enjoy the opportunities that the Gardens offer to meet and interact with local people.

DISCUSSION AND PRODUCT/MARKETING RECOMMENDATIONS

Visitors report the most memorable things at the three attractions as mainly related to the cognitive and affective dimensions of the experience and, where the opportunities presented themselves, the encounters with locals. Many of these 'successes' should be considered for inclusion in future marketing by the state tourism authority, ADS tour operators and the tourism attractions themselves. For example, the Chinese visitors felt that their experience at Sovereign Hill was memorable because it broadened their views, contributed to self-growth and impacted their awareness and appreciation of life on the goldfields. The observation data suggest that the hands-on participation of panning for gold and the interaction with school children were important elements of the experience. Interviewees at the Penguin Parade refer to their close encounters with the penguins as memorable because of the novelty of the experience, and the observation data suggest that the experience was enhanced when a feeling of empathy for the penguins was invoked. Chinese visitors to the Royal Botanic Gardens report their chance to interact with locals and observe their life styles as memorable, and the visitor observations confirm that engaging with locals contributed to further cognitive and affective outcomes.

The findings also reveal many ways in which the experience at each of the three attractions could be improved. In the case of Sovereign Hill, clearly there is a need to extend Chinese visitors' duration of stay for at least another hour in order to extend the access that visitors have to the full range of experiences. In addition, the time on the coach could be better utilised by providing guided commentary in Chinese, or by showing a video or providing a Chinese language brochure that familiarizes Chinese visitors with the Sovereign Hill site and the stories it aims to tell. In addition to extending visitors' cognitive and affective access through pre- and post-visit

interpretation, there are many opportunities for stops enroute that could be used to provide opportunities to interact with locals.

The Chinese visitors' experience with Phillip Island could be improved through employment of Chinese-speaking tour guides on site with appropriate knowledge and interpretive skills. Like the trip to Sovereign Hill, the time on the coach could also be used to enhance the visitor's orientation to and experience of Phillip Island.

Chinese visitors to the Royal Botanic Gardens require Chinese-language signs, brochures and/or on-site interpretation to enable them to navigate around the Gardens, and to help them take advantage of both the natural and cultural learning opportunities of the Gardens.

Overall, the Chinese visitor's spatial and temporal experience is not a particularly good one, as captured by one interviewee: "The itinerary is too rushed and tiring. Too much time is spent on the way to the attractions but the time spent at the attractions is too short." In addition to more time at the attractions, consideration should be given at all three attractions to providing more Chinese language navigational and informational signs and/or pamphlets, more culturally-relevant interpretation to enhance the opportunities for visitor understanding and appreciation, and more hands-on, sensory and interactive experiences for Chinese visitors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

With respect to avenues for further research, the focus of this study was on the visitor experience in the State of Victoria and the data were collected from visitors while travelling in Victoria, thus pre-trip expectations or post-trip reflections could not be measured. A study encompassing other stages of the travel experience would provide a more holistic view of Chinese visitors' experiences, as would research on visits by Chinese visitors to other destinations.

Data were not collected from non-visitors, and it is acknowledged that experiences sought by this population may be completely different to those who have travelled to Australia. Although there is no systematic bias in the way the population was sampled, whether the respondents in the study are representative of the wider visiting population from China remains unknown, and further research needs to be undertaken in the country of origin to answer this question. Research on new target markets in China require a similar research approach.

The experiences of Chinese visitors can be expected to be richer and more memorable to the extent that attention is given not only to providing physical access to spaces and places, but also access to opportunities for understanding, appreciation and interaction. This largely falls on the shoulders of the Chinese speaking tour guides, who serve as the main point of contact between the destination and their Chinese clients. With aspects of physical access, tour guides may influence where tourists go, what they see and what aspects of the host culture they are exposed to and which is kept away from them. Tour guides are expected to provide an insight into the local life without intruding on the private life of the local people. The interpretation function of tour guiding enables tour guides to convey the significance of the visited place and help visitors make intellectual and emotional connections with the visited place to enhance their understanding (Weiler *et al.*, 1992; Pond, 1993; Bras, 2000; Ap & Wong, 2001; Smith, 2001; Yu *et al.*, 2001). Tour guides can also mediate encounters between tourists and the tourist sites, between tour group members, and between tourists and various tourism players such as tour operators and hotels (Schmidt, 1979; Holloway, 1981; Pearce, 1982; Hughes, 1991; Smith, 2001). In conclusion, while improvement to itineraries and written communication are important, the greatest focus should perhaps be on the tour guides who play the key role in facilitating the experiences of Chinese visitors at tourism attractions.

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