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A Review and Evaluation of China's Quality Assurance System for Tour Guiding

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of China's tour guiding quality assurance system as an instrument for sustainable tourism. It notes the importance of China's 131,000 tour guides for inbound, outbound and domestic tourism. China's tour guiding quality assurance and regulatory mechanisms are then reviewed, including qualification examination, licensing, professional certification, training, awards for excellence, professional associations, and codes of conduct.

Structurally, China's comprehensive and comparatively regulated system may be recommendable to other countries, particularly its certification and licensing systems. However, the findings suggest that tour guide quality assurance in China may be constrained by an over-reliance on government and the absence of industry-driven mechanisms for some elements such as monitoring, enforcement, and rewarding excellence. Most importantly, the focus of China's quality assurance system is on a limited number of tour guiding roles and tends to overlook those most critical to harnessing the guide as a vehicle for sustainable tourism. Key future development areas could extend recognition and reward for the guide's performance as a role model, advocate, mentor, interpreter, cultural broker and environmental monitor.

Keywords: tour guide; quality assurance; sustainability; accreditation; China

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing recognition by both the tourism industry and researchers of the important roles played by the tour guide (Ap & Wong, 2001; Weiler & Yu 2007; Yu, Weiler, & Ham, 2002) and the performance of these roles (Huang, Hsu, & Chan, 2010;

Zhang & Chow 2004). In a destination such as China, where a large proportion of both domestic and international visitors use the services of tour guides, guides play a pivotal role in delivering a satisfying experience while meeting the demands of tourism destinations and operators as well as protecting the natural and cultural resources upon which the experience depends (Huang et al., 2010; Weiler & Ham, 2002; Yu & Weiler, 2006). The capacity of tour guides to deliver a quality service and experience is not only essential for business success, but is also critical to both the sustainability of the wider tourism industry of which they are a part and the resources upon which the experiences are built (Ham & Weiler, 2002).

Particularly since the reforms initiated by the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1979, tourism has been repositioned as a key sector of China's economy. Due in part to this repositioning, China has witnessed an unprecedented boom in tourism development in recent years. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) (2001), China will be the world's top tourist destination by 2020, receiving a total of 140 million international visitors annually. Given the cultural and language differences between the host population and most inbound tourists to China, international visitors are and will continue to be highly dependent on the services of tour guides.

By the same year, China is expected to rank as the fourth largest outbound tourist generating country, contributing 100 million visitors annually to the world travel market. It is customary for the Chinese to engage the services of a guide when travelling both within and outside China. Due to these traditional ways of travelling, language and

cultural differences, and the fact that, compared to the well-developed tourism markets in western countries, both the Chinese domestic and outbound tourist markets are less mature, Chinese tourists prefer guided group tours when arranging their holidays (Tisdell & Wen, 1991; Zhang, 1997). There are over 130,000 registered tour guides in China (CNTA, 2002).

Although we might expect a growing number of Chinese travellers to choose a more independent travel mode as the market matures, in the foreseeable future it is expected that a majority of Chinese travellers will continue to use package tours which include tour guiding as their core service. Similarly, most inbound travellers to China are highly reliant on tour guiding services due to language barriers and limited tourism infrastructure for non-Chinese speaking visitors. The guides' multiple roles as information brokers, controllers of site access and mediators of encounters with host communities, cultures and environments, puts them in a potentially very powerful position in relation to sustainable development, particularly in China. Any strategy that could encourage and ensure quality tour guiding is thus highly relevant for those with an interest in sustainable inbound, domestic and outbound Chinese tourism. Indeed, for any market that makes wide use of tour guides and where the guide can be harnessed to foster sustainable tourism, tour guiding quality assurance is arguably a high priority focus.

Well before the recent explosion of inbound tourism, China put its tour guiding quality assurance system at the centre of its tourism policy practices. Since the mid-80s,

the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) has been developing and refining a system of promoting, maintaining and regulating quality in the tour guiding sector. The sustained allocation of resources to this effort is due in part to the fact that, following the founding of the People's Republic of China, tourism has been treated by the government as part of foreign affairs (He, 1999). Accordingly, tour guides are assumed to play an important role as "folk ambassadors", contributing significantly to the Republic's foreign relations.

Notwithstanding this motive, the importance attributed to quality assurance for tour guiding by China's tourism authorities has led to the development of what may be the world's first comprehensive tour guiding quality assurance system, one that has never been described, or evaluated, for its contribution to sustainable tourism. A systematic and theory-based review and evaluation of the system is therefore both timely and valuable.

This paper examines China's tour guiding quality assurance system as a basis for its improvement and enhancement as well as for informing the use of such systems as an instrument for sustainable tourism. It (i) introduces the history, context and content of China's tour guiding quality assurance system to the international tourism academic community, (ii) evaluates China's tour guiding quality assurance system against quality assurance theory, and (iii) makes recommendations for research and practice that enhance tour guiding quality assurance management as a sustainable development tool.

The scope of this study is limited to China's tour guide quality assurance system.

It is acknowledged that tourism is a complex system which often functions in a chaotic, non-linear, and non-deterministic way (McKercher, 1999) and, as such, many tourism problems and issues can only be explained in a much broader industry-wide context which includes all stakeholders and key players. Thus, while responses to a number of China's tourism industry problems have been to manage the quality of tour guiding, the roots of those problems may in some cases run deeper. This paper focuses on the management of tour guiding quality as one avenue for fostering sustainable tourism. Full discussion of the wider and more systemic factors that underpin China's approach to tourism development is beyond the scope of this paper, a point re-visited in the final section of this paper.

SUSTAINABILITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE AS APPLIED TO TOUR GUIDING

While national governments clearly have a role to play in fostering sustainable tourism development, to date, only a limited number of dedicated national sustainable tourism schemes or policies are in place. Examples include the national sustainable tourism strategy initiated by Visit Scotland and the Sustainable Tourism Partnership in the UK (Lane, 2009), and those in small island destinations like Malta and Calviá (Dodds, 2007). Furthermore, it is not uncommon to observe a mismatch between national government policy preferences and the actions of industry entrepreneurs and practitioners with regard to tourism sustainability (Dinica, 2006). Nevertheless, it is

believed that government is able to indirectly influence sustainable tourism through regulatory mechanisms such as land use, infrastructure planning and market instruments (Mycoo, 2006), including the regulation of tour guiding. While tour guiding and interpretation can prove to be critical activities to sustainable tourism, little research has been directed to the mechanisms used to regulate and control the quality of tour guiding and their implications for sustainable tourism.

Quality assurance has been a subject of interest in the hospitality and tourism industry and in tourism research for some time, with postgraduate level theses (Black, 2003; Issaverdis, 1998, 2001; Weeks, 1996), scholarly texts (Black & Crabtree, 2007; Callan, 1994; Williams & Buswell, 2003), and whole journals¹ devoted to the subject. That said, the vast majority of what has been researched and written about quality assurance focuses on service in the hospitality, hotel and airline industries and has limited relevance to tour guiding and to sustainable development. Moreover, an examination of quality assurance in a non-western context is rare.

Several researchers have touched on the issue of quality assurance in tour guiding (Ap & Wong, 2001; Gurung, Simmons, & Devlin, 1996; McGrath, 2007; Weeks, 1996; Weiler & Black, 2003; Yu, 2003), but generally these have simply pointed to the importance of quality assurance rather than how to achieve it. Of most relevance to this paper is the work of Black and Weiler (2005), who underpin their analysis by

¹ The *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality and Tourism* has been published since 2001, with two to four issues per year, although a great many articles published in the journal have very limited if any content that is specifically concerned with quality assurance.

first presenting a research basis for determining what constitutes “quality” in tour guiding. They then review a range of quality assurance and regulatory mechanisms that have the potential to enhance tour guide performance, including codes of conduct, professional associations, awards for excellence, training, professional certification, and licensing. Furthermore, Black and Weiler present a matrix for examining quality assurance mechanisms in relation to a number of characteristics or criteria, including whether the mechanism ...:

- ... *is compulsory or voluntary*. For example, codes of conduct are usually voluntary, simply because they are difficult to enforce, while training and licensing can be compulsory.
- ... *seeks to achieve minimum standards for guiding*. Professional associations aim to do this, for example, through self-regulation of members. Professional certification is sometimes used where there is a perceived need for more independent and more widespread recognition and adherence to minimum standards.
- ... *rewards excellence or “best practice”*. This is the function of awards for excellence, often promulgated by professional associations or government bodies. A range of qualifications and professional certification levels are other ways of recognising and rewarding excellence.
- ... *raises the awareness of the importance of quality guiding*. Codes of conduct, professional associations, awards for excellence, training, certification and

licensing all aim to increase the credibility and status of guiding among guides and the industry generally.

Examining the roles of tour guides has been one of the central themes in tour guide research, leading to a more sophisticated appreciation for these roles. Guides are now generally understood to perform roles that range from simply leading the way / pathfinding to providing information (Cohen, 1985), to acting as a mediator/experience broker (Cohen, 1985; Yu, Weiler, & Ham, 2002; Weiler & Ham, 2002), to being a role model/motivator/ interpreter who engages and inspires tourists not only to be more aware of their own impacts but to feel and to act based on this awareness, in order to contribute to cultural, social and ecological sustainability (Cohen, Ifergan, & Cohen, 2002; Fine & Speer, 1985; Ham & Weiler, 2002; Katz, 1985; Weiler & Davis, 1993).

Black and Weiler also note that guides have a wide range of roles to play, such as information provider, mediator, and facilitator of site access, but also many others that are central to sustainable tourism such as environmental impact monitor, role model, cultural broker, and interpreter / educator or advocate for sustainable tourism. For example, guides can deliver minimal impact messages to their groups; they can actively monitor and manage what tourists say and do in order to minimise their social and environmental impact on host cultures and destinations; they can themselves be role models and contribute to enhancing sustainability by buying locally made goods and donating their time and money to local environmental causes. While quality assurance schemes can foster and reward such sustainable tourism practices, Black and Weiler

argue that many are better equipped to promote the more fundamental and core tour guiding roles (such as ethical practice, tour and group management, and tour content).

Black and Weiler's (2005) study provides a valuable framework, informed by both theory and practice, for describing and evaluating the tour guiding quality assurance system of a particular country or tourist destination. The present study uses this framework to examine China's tour guiding quality assurance system. It first describes each of the mechanisms in place in China, progressing from those judged by Black and Weiler to have the most to those with the least capacity for assuring quality tour guiding. The paper then evaluates the current and potential contribution of each mechanism to quality assurance as an instrument for sustainable tourism.

A number of primary and secondary data sources provided valuable data for this study. CNTA websites were searched and relevant policy documentations were downloaded. A critical text/discourse analysis was conducted on available policy documents with the support of other available discursive presentations. Critical discourse analysis is deemed an interdisciplinary research approach instead of a specific research method which includes both discursive and non-discursive practices to reconstruct/ interpret knowledge with the interplay of power, ideology, and other social and cultural contextual factors (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). A discourse, according to Fairclough (1995), refers to a way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective. As is accepted practice with discourse analysis, a critical and self-reflective approach was used. Furthermore, the first author is a former

employee of the Human Resources Department of CNTA and, from 1996 to 2003, was responsible for the national tour guiding qualification examination, tour guide training, and other policy issues regarding tour guides administration. His professional experience in this role provided a unique and invaluable perspective. In addition, a telephone interview with a key informant, the chief of the Education and Training Division of CNTA, was conducted and focused on areas where there was a lack of clarity in the data.

A DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION OF CHINA'S TOUR GUIDING QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Although tour guiding quality has been one of the major issues on CNTA's policy agendas and both CNTA and local tourism authorities have expended considerable effort regulating tour guiding practices and maintaining tour guiding quality, this has not been systematically documented and reported in the public domain. Since the early 1980s, China's policies on tour guiding have seen a gradual evolution and transition. The policy transition and periodical changes could well reflect the rapid change of Chinese society at large, or more specifically the development of the tourism industry. However, tour guiding remains a highly regulated profession in China.

Professional Certification, Licensing and Training of Tour Guides

Black and Weiler (2005) describe professional certification, licensing, and training as

relatively powerful mechanisms for ensuring quality tour guiding. China has a number of well-advanced initiatives in these areas which may well offer global models for harnessing tour guiding as an instrument to enhance sustainability. However, as will become evident in the following discussion, some of what has been possible in China may be less possible in democratic countries where governments have less capacity and/or inclination to control and regulate industry.

Tour Guide Qualification Examination

In 1987, the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) issued the *Provisional Measures on Tour Guides Administration*, starting its official regulation on tour guide quality assurance. Two years later, CNTA launched the National Tour Guide Qualification Examination (NTGQE) and established the tour guide licensing and registration system. Other milestones included the State Council promulgation of the *Administrative Regulations on Tour Guides* (1999) corroborating the tour guide licensing and registration system, and the CNTA's *Implementation Measures on Tour Guides Administration* (2001), which presented a score card monitoring system on tour guiding practice.

Since it was initiated in 1989, the National Tour Guide Qualification Examination (NTGQE) has evolved and necessarily devolved over the years. From 1989 to 2000, CNTA was the leading examination authority and assessment took the form of written exams and, to a lesser extent, the demonstration of practical guiding

skills. Since China is so large and with regions or provinces that have such a wide variety of tourism features and characteristics, the exam for *Basic Knowledge for Tour Guiding* was divided into two parts, one for general national-level tour guiding knowledge and the other for more specific local tour guiding knowledge. Exam questions for the national-level component were developed by CNTA and are the same across all 31 provinces/municipalities/autonomous regions. These cover such content as *policies and regulations, tour guiding* (basic skills and procedures), and a Chinese or a foreign language test (depending on the working language) with virtually no focus on sustainable tourism theory or principles. Questions that assess local-level knowledge are developed by provincial level tourism administrations (PLTAs) and are entirely focused on learning local attractions, features and anecdotes that can be incorporated into tour content.

When the number of qualified personnel who passed the NTGQE failed to meet the demand for tour guides due to the rapid development of China's tourism in 1990s, some provincial level tourism administrations began organising a local level tour guide qualification examination. This eventually became common practice at local levels. Thus by the end of the 1990s, a two-track (national and local) tour guide qualification examination system was in operation.

In China, an individual must pass the tour guide qualification examination and register with tourism authorities for a license to practice.² However, as a mechanism for

² Those who practice tour guiding without a license are often referred as “black tour guides”, a synonym for illegal tour guides.

quality assurance, the adequacy of both the NTGQE and the local level tour guide qualification examination needs to be judged in part by the content of the examination. As such, it falls short of meeting its potential, as it has never been informed by research or theory. The selection of subjects in the NTGQE is influenced largely by CNTA policy-makers' view of tour guides' roles, which is based more on political ideology than on what visitors want or what research has identified as guiding practice that fosters sustainable tourism. With tour guides held up as "folk ambassadors" and playing an important role in China's foreign affairs (He, 1999), emphasis tends to be skewed towards a sound political standpoint and knowledge of the country's national policies and regulations. Other content such as *tour guiding* covers just the basic procedural knowledge a guide must master to lead a group tour, with very little reference to ensuring guides have the skills to engage and enthuse visitors, and motivate them to be more sustainable in their travel behaviours.

The NTGQE can also be criticised for over-emphasising knowledge rather than practical skills. Ironically, the tourism industry has witnessed numerous cases where experienced guides have failed the exam and had to apply for a temporary license to guide a tour group, whilst fresh university graduates obtained the qualification easily but had difficulty leading a tour group (Yang, 2009).

In 2001, following another wave of restructuring of central government agencies and their functions, CNTA further decentralised some of its administrative functions including the tour guide qualification examination. Under the new system, different

provinces have developed different exams tailored to their own industry needs. As a result, exam content and the selection criteria are no longer standardised across the provinces and, as a result, local qualification certificate holders can only work in the province where they get their certificates. Many PLTAs use this to prevent tour guides from working across provinces or regions, motivated by local protectionism rather than by a desire to promote quality guiding or sustainability.

In effect, China's examination *structure* has great potential as a quality assurance mechanism; however, decentralisation of the examination system has weakened its usefulness for fostering sustainable tourism. Moreover, its *content* is not informed by tour guiding quality theory as per the full range of tour guiding roles identified by Black and Weiler (2005) and others (Ap & Wong, 2001; Yu et al., 2002), nor by sustainable tourism policy or research. Even if there were a national sustainable tourism strategy in China, which there is not, the current decentralised system would make it difficult for the national strategy to be translated into tour guiding practices. Thus, it falls short in ensuring quality tour guiding.

Tour Guide Licensing

Tour guide licensing in China is separate from the qualification examination process, although the latter is closely related to licensing and serves as the preparation stage for it. Tour guides in China must secure a license before they can work legally in the profession, and it has considerable potential as a mechanism for quality assurance.

According to the *Administrative Regulations on Tour Guides*, individuals who have obtained a tour guide qualification certificate can apply for a tour guide license to provincial level tourism administrations after registering themselves with a tour guiding services company or signing an employment contract with a travel agency. This binding of an employment contract with a travel agency, however, is only a legal requirement, as many do not pay a base salary or a bonus to their guides. Instead, as a common industry practice, the tour guide pays their affiliated travel agency a certain amount of money for each group to which they are assigned to provide a tour guiding service. This money is usually referred as a 'head-fee' in the industry's jargon. Rather than earning a salary or wage, it is assumed that the tour guide will earn her/his income by shopping commissions and tips, which is quite generous from some tour groups, enough to cover the head-fee and still earn a good living. A travel agency treats such assigning of a tour group to a tour guide as a benevolent act to her/him. Thus, the relationship between the tour guide and the travel agency resembles a business-to-business transaction rather than that of an employment contract between an employer and an employee.

Tour guides must wear a license certificate when conducting any tour guiding activities. Since 2002, different colours are used to depict the professional classification level of the guide. The new model license certificates integrates intelligence card (IC) technology, with a metal SIM card storing digital information about the license holder including name, gender, ethnicity, education level, working language, date of birth, home address, personal identification number, license number, and tour guide

qualification certificate number.

Even more powerful than the licensing system as such is the power of government authorities to regulate the behaviour of licensees and even to suspend licenses. With the application of the IC card licensing system, CNTA and local tourism administrations are able to implement a demerit system resembling driving license regulation. If a tour guide's accumulated demerit points exceed 10 points in a year, the license is suspended. Different types of misconduct or unethical behaviour incur demerit points ranging from 2 to 10, depending on the seriousness of an infringement. For example, smoking or eating while interpreting may be punished by a deduction of two points; enticing or arranging tourists to be involved in pornography, gambling, and drug consumption may induce a 10-point penalty from tourism authorities. On-the-spot inspections are made regularly by inspectors employed by different levels of tourism authorities to enforce the demerit policies.

The adoption of IC card technology and the demerit system represent a well designed and centralised quality assurance effort on the government side. While it is definitely beneficial to the industry to have these policy measures in operation, implementing such policies is not inexpensive. Administrative costs for maintaining the IC card databases and on-the-spot inspections could be high. Some local tourism authorities, with a limited budget, may not be capable of implementing these policies. But, such a policy instrument could be a useful vehicle for sustainable tourism in the future. The current demerit system does not regulate guides' environmental behaviour,

except for minor misconduct or unethical behaviours like smoking and littering.

However, new behavioural codes towards sustainable tourism could be easily installed into and enforced using the existing system.

In parallel to the demerit system, annual auditing is also exercised to review the yearly performance of the tour guide, the number of demerit points accrued, any administrative penalty decisions that have been made, and to consider visitor feedback. The results of the auditing can be a *Pass*, a *Delayed Pass*, or a *Fail to Pass*. Those who receive a *Delayed Pass* must take additional training, mostly at their own expense, and improve their guiding skills in order to regain their status as a working tour guide. The licensing system in China clearly plays a powerful role in enforcing certain tour guiding standards. However, the emphasis tends to be on compliance regarding legal, ethical and customer service roles of the guide with little or no effort to curb tour guiding practices that threaten sustainability.

Certification: The Tour Guide Classification System

Unlike most western countries where professional certification is undertaken by professional organisations or associations, in China, the government plays an important role in the professional certification of workers in many vocational areas. The tour guide classification system is the closest that China comes to having a professional guide certification program. Criteria and assessment procedures for tour guide classification are driven by the CNTA who, in 2005, promulgated the *Administrative Measures on*

Tour Guide Classification. This classification system has four levels for the tour guide profession: elementary, intermediate, high, and supreme. After passing the qualification examination, an individual is treated as an elementary tour guide and can only be promoted one level at a time through evaluation and assessment organised by the tourism authorities. Written examinations must be taken in order to progress to a higher level, and for the supreme level tour guides, a thesis examination with an oral defence is required. Rather than be required to perform the roles of a guide at a higher level and therefore enhance their capacity to contribute to sustainable tourism, they are examined for their understanding of thematic knowledge in religion, architecture, food culture, martial arts, Chinese medicine, Chinese language and literature, and tour guiding script writing.

The evidence suggests, however, that the vast majority of guides are not motivated to seek progression through the levels of classification. In 2002 CNTA conducted a nation-wide survey on tour guides and found that among the 131,904 working tour guides all over the country, 95.2% of them were tour guides at the elementary level, 3.8% were at the intermediate level, 0.92% were at the high level, and less than 0.02% were at the supreme level (CNTA, 2002). This may be because the levels are unrelated to remuneration and there is little or no incentive to upgrade their professional level. In summary, while such a system could well be potent in theory, the tour guide classification scheme remains inadequate without an effective recognition / remuneration system in place. On the other hand, without aligning it with sustainability

indicators or outcomes (Ko, 2005; UNWTO, 2004), the system's possible contribution to sustainable tourism has been further reined in. Nevertheless, the system has the potential to serve as a platform for the government to advocate, reward and even regulate sustainable tourism practices by guides, but does not have the foundations needed to achieve this.

Tour Guide Training

Tour guide training is the element of China's tour guiding system that is perhaps the least exploited and presents the greatest potential for quality assurance. From an institutional perspective, there are tour guide training organisations throughout the country. CNTA has a dedicated division of education and training which regards tour guide training as one of its most prominent responsibilities. At provincial and city levels, most tourism administrations have an industry training centre affiliated with them. These training centres play a major role in many kinds of local tour guide training programs. Many universities with tourism programs also receive contracted tour guide training from local tourism authorities or organise independent training courses, mostly targeting pre-qualification examination training. A number of private profit-making training schools also undertake pre-qualification examination training as their core business.

Tour guide training is usually delivered at three levels. At the top level, CNTA formulates training policies and plans; CNTA seldom organises training sessions

directly for tour guides. However, in addition to making relevant training policies, it does organise training sessions in relation to tour guiding training, for instance, ‘training the trainers’ programs targeting major regional tour guide trainers, or training sessions familiarising local tour guide examination officers with new policies. Most of the tour guide training activities are undertaken by training centres affiliated with provincial or city level tourism administrations. These training activities include pre-qualification examination training and annual auditing training. The annual auditing training is compulsory for all working tour guides. As a component of the tour guide auditing system, tour guides are required to undertake off-the-job training, and accumulate no less than 56 hours p.a.. The training content comprises political ideology and professional ethics, updates on policies and regulations, tour guiding business knowledge and skills. At the company level, CNTA strongly advocates that all tourism enterprises which employ tour guides run on-the-job training and low-season training for tour guides.

As a mechanism for quality assurance, training has great potential, but as with some of the other initiatives in China, much of the training is not informed by research and theory regarding the roles of a tour guide vis-a-vis sustainable tourism. Also, in comparison to other aspects of tour guiding, it is largely unregulated by the Chinese government. It is an area where much more could be done to achieve quality assurance and particularly to harness tour guides as role models and advocates for sustainable tourism.

Awards for Excellence for Tour Guides

China's continuous commitment to professionalism in tour guiding has resulted in a series of industry awards that recognises tour guides' contribution to the development of the tourism industry and encourages tour guides to constantly improve their service skills. At the national level, CNTA organises a country-wide industry award system for nominating 'nationally excellent tour guides' and 'national model tour guides'. Three criteria are applied to examine the candidate's suitability of the final nomination: first, the candidate must demonstrate socialist ideology and working ethics of tour guides; second, the candidate must have strong tour guiding service skills and proficiency; third, the candidate must have outstanding tour guiding performance level and achievements (CNTA 2006a). No mention is made of the guide's practices in relation to sustainability.

The recognition level of 'national model tour guides' is higher than that of 'nationally excellent tour guides', with only a small number of candidates being granted the former. In order to be nominated as a 'national model tour guide', the candidate must also have made a special outstanding contribution, usually in the form of a heroic or an extraordinary selfless action. In addition to public and formal recognition, in some cases monetary incentives and prizes are given.

It is evident that the government treats tour guides as the "face" representing the image of the industry and even of the country, in its cause of striving for a form of

socialism with Chinese characteristics. Socialist ideology and political correctness overwhelm other selection criteria in the existing awards-for-excellence schemes. Although such highly politicised tour guiding policies are rare, they are by no means unique to China. Dahles (2002), in examining tour guiding policies of the Indonesian government under Suharto's New Order regime, also revealed that Indonesian tour guides were harnessed by policies and state politics to extol highly politicised state ideologies.

On some occasions CNTA identifies model figures from the working tour guide population. In 2006, a young tour guide from the New Heaven and Earth Travel Agency in Xiangtian City of Hunan Province, Ms. Wen Huazhi, was nominated as a national model tour guide for having acted bravely in saving lives of the tourists she was guiding at a severe transportation accident. She suffered a high-level amputation of her left leg due to the delay of medical treatment in the accident (CNTA 2006b). Recently, a tour guide from China Travel Service, Mr. Wang Xinkang, was conferred the title of 'national model tour guide' for his courage and self-sacrifice in assisting the police to successfully resolve a hostage crisis involving ten Australian tourists in Xian, China. These cases highlight the Chinese style of heroism among the working class which can trace its roots to the 1960s when a People's Liberation Army soldier Lei Feng was exalted as the national moral and cultural icon. The political motive in these is self-evident. Alternatively, while it is unlikely to happen in China's current political context, awards-for-excellence schemes could be utilised to advocate sustainable tourism

principles and practices, should the government recognise such a need in its policy agenda. Indeed, tourism in China today is viewed in government policy agendas to be able to play multiple roles including economic, social, political, and environmental ones (Huang, 2010). The Chinese government is also becoming more committed to sustainability in most of its policy arenas.

At local levels, provincial and city level tourism administrations take the same actions as those taken by CNTA to make awards to tour guides in their respective jurisdictions. More often, local level tourism administrations organise different sorts of tour guide tournaments or competitions. Tour guides who win such competitions are awarded titles (e.g., ‘Shanghai Best Tour Guide in 2006’) which are recognised in the industry.

While on the surface awards for excellence appear to serve an important role as a quality assurance mechanism in China, their scope is fairly narrow. That is, because of the sometimes negative image of tour guides reflected in the media and the prevalence of unethical practices mentioned earlier, tourism administrations tend to allocate more weight on tour guides’ social responsibility and working ethics in these award programs. This practice then tends to overlook those tour guides who demonstrate excellence in the performance of many of the other tour guiding roles outlined by Black and Weiler, particularly roles that may be more directly associated with sustainable tourism but are not necessarily viewed as politically correct or mainstream. The absence of a market-oriented and research-based award of excellence system which includes customer

feedback and non-political performance-based evaluation as part of the criteria for judging excellence also limits the potential of this mechanism to achieve quality assurance.

Professional Associations for Tour Guides

Although tour guiding has been a recognised profession since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the formation of tour guide associations in China is a recent phenomenon. This is mainly due to the nature of China as a socialist country, where industry associations are more rigidly under government control and therefore their contribution to maintaining and promoting quality assurance are very much determined by government policy and direction. For example, the China Tourism Association (CTA) has a close relationship with CNTA, functioning in many ways as an internal department of CNTA. Under a shared personnel arrangement, the chairperson of CNTA normally acts as chairperson or honorary chairperson of CTA, while CNTA officials are frequently transferred to employment at different branches in CTA. Moreover, CTA shares the same office building with CNTA and actively assists CNTA to implement its major policies. In this regard, CTA is more like a semi-government organisation than an independent industry member-based and self-organised association.

Currently, there are only a few tour guide associations in China, most of which are city-based associations and affiliated with city tourism bureaus. They take on tasks such as organising pre-qualification examination training, annual auditing training,

license registration and issuance, tour guide competitions, and so on. In this sense, they do play a role in quality assurance, though again, their direct contribution to sustainable tourism development is limited.

While most tour guide associations are established under the influence of local tourism bureaus, a few tour guide associations are founded by local tour guides with less governmental interference and thus more closely resemble tour guide associations in western countries. Such associations do not undertake government-entrusted works but provide more services to its members such as free training seminars, information sharing sessions, and online member forums. These associations appear to stand alone and resemble their western counterparts in status, except that they are much less powerful in influencing industry policies and initiating or implementing certification programs. For most of the local tourism bureau-directed associations, their contributions to quality assurance are somewhat ad hoc, narrowly focused, and generally not membership-driven, but instead follow the lead of local tourism administrations. Unlike their counterparts in western countries, they do little in the way of self-regulation of the tour guiding industry, with quality assurance and regulation left largely in the hands of government. While sustainable tourism practices may in time be embraced by these associations, the government still seems able to limit their efficacy.

Codes of Conduct as a Mechanism for Tour Guiding Quality Assurance

Codes of conduct are considered by Black and Weiler to be the weakest form of quality

assurance because of their voluntary nature. However, in China the national standard entitled *Tour Guide Service Quality (GB/T 15971-1995)*, comprises a formalised set of behaviour and performance standards that goes well beyond a “voluntary code of conduct” as outlined by Black and Weiler (2005). Drafted by the General Office of China International Travel Service (CITS), CNTA’s national standard is an important advocacy effort that seeks to ensure tour guiding service quality and provide the foundation for China’s more formal quality assurance mechanism. On the one hand, it is highly prescriptive and widely adhered to; on the other hand, it is primarily focused on tour guiding procedures with respect to customer service and falls short of addressing some of the social, cultural and environmental responsibilities of a guide as outlined in the literature. Thus, while potentially potent, this particular mechanism plays a limited role in fostering the sustainable development of tourism in China.

It should also be noted that CNTA puts much effort into fostering tour guides’ ethical behaviours. This is mainly due to considerable media exposure of the unethical behaviours of some tour guides and industry malpractice in relation to tour guiding, such as coercion of visitors to shop in particular retail outlets and to engage in tipping, and other illegal and unethical behaviours. As a result, in 2001 CNTA added professional ethics as a theme in China’s compulsory tour guide training program, which is outlined in greater detail (CNTA, 2001). Some provinces prepare training and learning materials aimed at aiding in the implementation and uptake of ethical practices. This initiative has been sustained over the years and professional ethics continues to be

high on the agenda of China's tourism authorities at all levels. In terms of sustainable tourism, stressing the ethics of tour guides is indeed a way to contribute to sustaining the tourism industry economically and socially. However, codes of ethics for tour guides addressing environmental sustainability are still yet to be included.

In summary, China's quality assurance practices, particularly with respect to tour guide classification, certification, and licensing, provides many valuable insights that could inform such practices elsewhere. This is not to say that all trained, certified and licensed Chinese tour guides are exemplary, but rather that having a widespread, enforceable quality assurance system increases the capacity of the industry to enhance tour guiding quality and maintain high standards of practice. Where the system falls short is its lack of focus on the harnessing of tour guiding quality assurance as an instrument for sustainable tourism.

CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the various elements of China's quality assurance system for tour guiding in relation to both specific tour guiding roles and possible utility in fostering sustainable tourism in the country reveals its strengths and weaknesses as a system. An obvious strength is that there is a quality assurance system for tour guiding at all, and the compulsory nature of many elements of the system. Putting aside issues of regulation and enforcement, China's national standard for tour guiding practice, its

examination process, and its licensing and registration process are all legal requirements to practice as a tour guide. These in turn lay the groundwork for enforcing minimum tour guiding standards across the industry. These processes, along with China's national award system for excellent and model tour guides, contribute to the credibility of tour guiding in China and appreciation for its importance. The awards for excellence and the tour guide classification system also, in theory, reward excellence.

There are two weaknesses to the system. The first is that, by the very fact that it is compulsory and is government- rather than self-regulated, the system relies on adequate resources for monitoring and enforcement, a monumental and arguably impossible task. As a result, not only is there an element of illegal tour guiding in China, but not all guides who are licensed are necessarily equipped to deliver high quality guiding, particularly with respect to many of the roles associated with sustainable tourism such as environmental impact monitor, mediator and interpreter. Moreover, there is a tendency for government to audit and regulate roles and behaviours that are easily observable and enforceable, again at the expense of key tour guiding roles such as monitoring visitor behaviour and acting as a role model. This relates to the second weakness of the system: that its content is largely administratively and intuitively-driven. Thus, China's system both for achieving minimum standards and for rewarding excellence largely neglects a number of the tour guiding roles, especially those roles identified by Black and Weiler such as environmental protector, monitor and role model, social catalyst, cultural broker, and interpreter/educator – roles that relate very clearly

and directly to sustainable tourism – in favour of roles such as tour leading, managing the tour in time and space, managing the health and safety of the group, compliance with legal and ethical standards, and providing government endorsed information and basic customer service.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND FOR USING TOUR GUIDE QUALITY ASSURANCE TO FOSTER SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

As China continues to move toward becoming a centrally important player in the international tourism scene, knowledge generated in China will play an increasingly important part in the understanding and managing of tourism. This paper examines one component of China's growing proficiency in tourism management: its quality assurance system for tour guiding. The paper represents a research endeavour to review and evaluate the tour guiding quality assurance situation in China, from a global perspective and especially from a sustainable tourism perspective. By evaluating quality assurance initiatives in tour guiding based on this emerging market leader in world tourism, the study contributes to a richer understanding of tour guiding quality assurance and its contribution to sustainable tourism. Of course, as noted at the outset of this paper, tour guiding is but one of many elements to be considered in trying to tame the chaos of tourism and to foster its sustainability, and much more research is needed to inform other aspects of the tourism system in China.

This study is the first of its kind to systematically evaluate a suite of quality

assurance mechanisms, and thus provides a platform for replication elsewhere. Black and Weiler's (2005) evaluative framework provides a basis for categorising quality assurance mechanisms and for critiquing each against a set of criteria. This facilitates benchmarking and comparative analysis of quality assurance schemes, something advocated by many quality assurance researchers (Black & Crabtree, 2007; Issaverdis, 2001). However, there is a need for refinement of the criteria against which the quality assurance mechanisms are judged in alignment with localised political and sociocultural contexts. In particular, the largely qualitative approaches used in this paper would be strengthened by instruments and measures that facilitate objective evaluation of whether a particular mechanism is in fact achieving quality tour guiding practice and fostering sustainable tourism development.

There are also implications from this research for government and industry practice in China and elsewhere. As can be seen from the Chinese scenario, the government plays a significant role in regulating tour guiding practices and thus providing a variety of quality assurance mechanisms in tour guiding. However, a high level of government involvement does not necessarily generate quality in tour guiding. Any quality assurance system is embedded in political and social contexts which necessarily direct and limit its scope and emphasis. The political differences between China and western countries account for some of both the strengths and weaknesses of China's tour guiding quality assurance system. While quality assurance mechanisms in tour guiding in western contexts are mainly industry / market based or driven by

industry, in China, tour guiding quality assurance is mostly determined and influenced by government. As China moves closer towards being a market economy, it might be appropriate to adopt a more market-oriented approach for its quality assurance of tour guiding, especially in terms of professional associations, awards for excellence, and selection of subjects and content of its qualification examination. On the other hand, some highly government-involved features in China's tour guiding quality assurance system, for instance, the compulsory qualification examination, licensing, and training, have been beneficial to the industry and may serve as benchmarks for other countries. Most importantly, however, is the need to draw on the great wealth of knowledge that has been accumulated about sustainable tourism to better inform the content of China's tour guide training programs and examinations, criteria for licensing and awards, and focus for regulation and enforcement.

Like so many other aspects of tour guiding, quality assurance in tour guiding is an area in need of further research. Both Black and Weiler's (2005) study and the current paper are only indicative in directing attention to this research need. With regard to tour guiding issues in China, researchers could investigate more closely the various sub-themes of its quality assurance system, for example, tour guides' remuneration system, mechanisms driving unethical tour guiding practices, and factors determining tour guides' career advancement. Future research could also examine quality assurance systems for tour guiding in other countries, either independently or by adopting a comparative study approach to examine the issues in a cross-cultural or multinational

context. Finally, relationships between quality assurance and sustainable tourism outcomes are very much in need of research, for example, quantitative assessment of the causal links between guide competence and role performance and tourism and environmental sustainability.

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