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Conceptualizing and measuring service quality: towards consistency and clarity in its application to travel agencies in China

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Abstract:	<p>This paper assembles research published in Chinese-language journals and the more mainstream English-language journals to present a critical review of the literature on service quality of travel agencies in China. A brief background to travel agencies in China and a bibliometric analysis of the literature is followed by a thematic analysis of conceptual papers. Combining this with a critical analysis of empirical studies allows for identification of theoretical and practical issues, notably the ambiguity and inconsistency that is pervasive in the conceptualization, operationalization and measurement of service quality. Recommendations for future research regarding service quality of Chinese travel agencies are provided.</p>

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3 **Conceptualizing and Measuring Service Quality: towards Consistency and Clarity in its**
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5 **Application to Travel Agencies in China**
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11 **ABSTRACT**
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14 This paper assembles research published in Chinese-language journals and the more
15 mainstream English-language journals to present a critical review of the literature on service
16 quality of travel agencies in China. A brief background to travel agencies in China and a
17 bibliometric analysis of the literature is followed by a thematic analysis of conceptual papers.
18 Combining this with a critical analysis of empirical studies allows for identification of
19 theoretical and practical issues, notably the ambiguity and inconsistency that is pervasive in
20 the conceptualization, operationalization and measurement of service quality.
21 Recommendations for future research regarding service quality of Chinese travel agencies are
22 provided.
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35 **Key words:** China, travel agencies/tour operators, service quality, critique
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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese tourism market is expanding dramatically and is attracting considerable attention from a business and research perspective. Unlike many western countries, however, a large proportion of these travellers, especially outbound tourists, use tour operators/travel agencies, making an understanding of service quality as it applies to Chinese travel agencies of paramount importance (Zhang, 2004; Tan, 2005; Chang, Wang, Guo, Su, & Yen, 2007).

Although the terms “travel agency” and “tour operator” refer to different kinds of businesses in Western societies, these terms have the same meaning in the Chinese context and tend to be used interchangeably. In this paper, the term “travel agency” is used to refer to outbound and domestic tour operators or travel agencies based in Mainland China, Hong Kong or Taiwan offering services including package tours, accommodation, flight booking and other travel-related services. Despite the differences in their economies and decades of political separation, the racial, cultural, and linguistic similarities among Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan are still strong (Wang, Hsieh, & Chen, 2002; Wang, Hsieh, Yeh, & Tsai, 2004). It also appears that travel agencies in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have developed, and are managed, in similar ways, with Mainland China following in Taiwan’s footsteps in its approach to outbound travel (Chang et al., 2007). For these reasons, studies conducted in Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as in Mainland China are included in this paper.

According to the latest statistics from the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA, 2014), there are more than 25,000 travel agencies in China. The large number of competitors and Chinese consumers’ sensitivity to price changes push travel agencies to compete mainly on price rather than service differentiation (Zhang & Murphy, 2009). This price minimisation strategy has led to cost-cutting business practices such as lowering service standards as well as unethical business practices such as forced commission shopping (King, Dwyer, &

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3 Prideaux, 2006; Prideaux, Hobson, King, & Dwyer, 2006), which in turn have contributed to
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5 complaints regarding poor service quality (Jin, 1991; Mao, 2011).
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8 It can be argued that Chinese tourism authorities need to monitor and assess the quality of
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10 service provided by Chinese travel agencies, and that Chinese travel agencies need to
11
12 improve service quality to retain customers and sustain their businesses in the long term.
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14 Both goals require clarification about what constitutes service quality and how it should be
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16 best measured. However, from the fierce debate on the conceptualization and measurement of
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18 service quality in marketing literature, it is evident that defining and measuring latent
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20 constructs such as service quality is not easy. Moreover, the distinguishing characteristics of
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22 tourism products/services, Chinese culture and the expected growth in this market make it
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24 particularly timely and relevant to critically examine the body of literature on service quality
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26 of Chinese travel agency, with the aim of achieving consistency and clarity in how service
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28 quality is conceptualized and measured.
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33 This paper draws on an inventory of publications on service quality of Chinese travel
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35 agencies and critically reviews their usefulness in evaluating Chinese travel agencies. Four
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37 steps in this process are reported: 1) identification of relevant academic papers, 2)
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39 bibliometric analysis of all relevant papers, 3) thematic analysis of conceptual papers and 4)
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41 critical analysis of empirical studies. Finally, a research agenda to address shortfalls in
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43 literature is provided.
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48 *Travel agencies in China*

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50 The growth of the Chinese economy has led to a rapid increase in domestic and international
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52 travel and China is now one of the world's most important emerging tourism markets. Harrill,
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54 Uysal, Burnett, and Zhan (2010) attempted to empirically estimate the size of the Chinese
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56 outbound travel market using a demand-based approach: the current Chinese (mainland)
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3 outbound travel market is reported to comprise approximately 22 million residents. Most
4 Chinese travellers, especially outbound travellers, use travel agencies (Tan, 2005). For
5 example, approximately 60% of Chinese tourists visited Australia under package tours
6 organized by Chinese travel agencies (South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013). In 2014,
7 travel agencies in China serviced more than 1.4 million foreign inbound tourists to China and
8 more than 12.8 million domestic tourists (CNTA, 2014).
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16 Chinese outbound tourism first started under the Approved Destination Status Scheme, which
17 allows Chinese to travel to overseas destinations only as part of package tours organized by
18 authorized travel agencies (South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013). Even though the
19 Chinese government has eased restrictions on foreign travel, many Chinese continue to opt
20 for travel on package tours due to the perceived risks, financial constraints and inconvenience
21 of independent travel (Wang et al., 2002). In addition, as inexperienced travellers, Chinese
22 tend to rely on travel agencies for information, and booking services for flight and
23 accommodation as well as semi-package tour services tailored for the emerging independent
24 tourist market are popular among Chinese (Tourism Australia, 2014; Wang et al., 2002).
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38 The history of the travel agency sector in China dates back to 1923, when the Bank of China
39 set up a small department in its Shanghai headquarters to handle travel related business. In
40 1927, China's first travel agency – the China Travel Service – was formally launched (Qian,
41 2003). The travel business in China was at first a monopoly, in which the *China Travel*
42 *Service* and the *China International Travel Service* dominated the market, handling inbound
43 foreign package tours as well as overseas Chinese package tours (Beijing Tourism
44 Administration, 1998; Zhang, 2004). Since 1988, however, the number of travel agencies has
45 increased rapidly, resulting in fierce competition and in many cases an overextension of
46 company resources. As a result, Chinese travel agencies were reported to suffer from lagging
47 market demand, increasing financial debt, and increasing customer complaints (Qian, 2003).
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3 CNTA has undertaken a number of legal and administrative measures to regulate the travel
4 agency market. For example, the licensing of travel agencies started in 1993 and the *Travel*
5 *Agency Management Regulations Act* was implemented in 1996. A service quality
6 supervision network involving CNTA and local tourism administrations has also been set up
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8 (Beijing Tourism Administration, 1998).
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15 Today more than 20,000 travel agencies are operating in China and the big travel agencies
16 monopolize the majority of market share (Zhang, 2004, CNTA, 2012). Even though CNTA
17 has played a positive role in bringing order to the market and satisfaction with Chinese travel
18 agencies has been increasing (Qian, 2003), the Chinese travel industry is still widely
19 criticized as a chaotic market dominated by intractable price wars (Chang et al., 2007; Chen,
20 Mak, & Guo, 2011). Competition has been so fierce that zero-fare or commission-only tours
21 have become commonplace. In commission-only tours, tourists are offered group package
22 tours (GPTs) at strikingly low prices, but as a result tourists spend a large amount of time
23 being taken from one shop to another, as travel agencies and tour guides depend on the
24 commissions from shopping for income (Chen et al., 2011; Zhang, Heung, & Yan, 2009).
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37 *Service quality*

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40 Although service quality has been studied frequently in marketing and consumer behaviour
41 (e.g. Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Gilmore & McMullan, 2009), it was not examined in the
42 context of Chinese travel agencies until the early 1990s. Group package tours (GPTs) seem to
43 be the most popular service of Chinese travel agencies and considerable scholarly attention
44 has been paid to GPTs (Chen, Mak, & Li, 2013; Liu & Wu, 2006; Wang, Hsieh, Chou, & Lin,
45 2007; Zhang & Zhang, 2007). Some researchers have specifically examined the services
46 provided by tour guides (Chen, Xu, & Guo, 2011; Wang & Ma, 2007; Wu, 2010; Xie & Li,
47 2007). Widely-used research instruments from the marketing literature such as SERVQUAL
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(e.g. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; 1988) have also been used to examine the service quality of Chinese travel agencies (Chen & Han, 2012; Zhou & Adrian, 2009). However, there is no consensus in the Chinese travel agency, tourism or even the broad marketing literature on how service quality should be conceptualized, operationalized or measured. To get a clear overview of literature the scope of conceptualization and measurement issues in the literature, identify possible causes of the confusion and offer feasible directions for future research, English-language and Chinese-language journal publications are reviewed and analyzed. This approach aims to foster cross-fertilization and enhance clarity and consistency in measuring service quality of travel agencies in China.

METHODS *Methods*

Searching the literature

Publications before 1990 are few because, as noted earlier, the travel agency industry in China was largely a monopoly prior to the late 1980s (Qian, 2003). As a result, major journal databases in Chinese-language and English-language were used to search the post-1990 literature.

The China Academic Journal Networking Publishing Database is one of the most powerful engines to search Chinese-language journals ~~as it includes 96% of key Chinese language journals~~ (CNKI, 2013). ~~In China, key journals are defined as those demonstrating quality as measured by scholarly recognition, with key journals having more citations and greater circulation than non-key journals (Dai & Cai, 2008).~~ In the system of China Academic Journal Networking Publishing Database, databases for difference research areas can be selected. Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI), which is the only option for social

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3 science research, was used to undertake a comprehensive search of the literature on the topic
4 of service quality of travel agencies/tour operators. CSSCI covers more than 2,700 Chinese
5 journals, providing an efficient and comprehensive tool to obtain information on Chinese
6 social science research (Su, Han & Han, 2001). Furthermore, the search engine has the option
7 to limit the results to key journals. The indexing of Chinese key journals is generally based
8 on Bradford's Law of Scattering, which suggests that for any subject area, the top third
9 represents the journals that are the most frequently cited in the literature that are, therefore,
10 likely to be of interest to researchers in that discipline (Bradford, 1985). Chinese key journals
11 represent a number of journals primarily selected based on quality and impacts. As Dai and
12 Cai (2008) note, Chinese key journals are mostly cited and more recognized by Chinese
13 scholars. Likewise, publications on key journals are usually used to evaluate academic
14 achievement, PhD confirmation and completion as well as academic promotions (Shao &
15 Shen, 2011). Thus, the present study focuses on key journals for quality control. There are
16 seven evaluation systems for key journal indexing and the key journal index by Chinese
17 Social Science Academy is usually used for general social science research including tourism.
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20 database was searched with the combination of key words "lv xing she (travel
21 agency/tour operator)" and "fu wu zhi liang (service quality)" in Chinese, from 01/01/1990 to
22 31/12/2013. 177 Chinese publications emerged
23 (<http://epub.cnki.net/KNS/brief/result.aspx?dbprefix=CJFQ>).

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46 Another search without limiting the results to key journals uncovered 856 publications. To
47 gain a comprehensive overview of the non-key journals, 10% (86) of the non-key journals
48 were randomly sampled and one of the authors read the 86 papers. Many of the articles were
49 repetitive of each other and there was a lack of rigorous procedure for most of the empirical
50 studies. As Wang and Weldon (2006) argue, Chinese-language journals overall suffer from
51 low quality and lack of recognition by the international academic community. Thus, for
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3 quality control, the analysis was limited to the 177 publications identified in the key (quality)
4 Chinese-language journals.
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8 Four major databases were searched for English-language literature: EBSCOhost, ProQuest,
9 LeisureTourism and Emerald. The terms “tour operator”, “travel agency”, “China OR
10 Chinese” and “service quality” were used to search the keywords, title and abstract in
11 different combinations. As a result, 27 publications emerged. The same procedures were used
12 with Google Scholar to identify any literature that might have been missed from the four
13 major databases and 7 new items emerged. Finally, 34 English-language articles were added
14 to the database.
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23 24 25 Creating the database

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27 After the completion of the procedures described above, 211 publications (34 in English and
28 177 in Chinese) formed the dataset and these publications were imported into Endnote. After
29 viewing the titles and abstracts of the 211 records, duplicates and irrelevant publications were
30 removed, for example, papers with key words “service quality” and/or “travel agencies”, but
31 focused on the roles of travel agencies in regional tourism development. Some short
32 interviews and short notes (all from Chinese-language literature) were also removed, however,
33 for the reasons given earlier, studies conducted in Taiwan and Hong Kong travel agencies
34 were retained. Moreover, four English-language journal publications that were not focused on
35 China-based travel agencies (i.e. conducted in New Zealand or Canada) were removed. As a
36 result, 131 publications (24 in English and 107 in Chinese) were retained for further analysis.
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49 50 51 Analyzing the literature

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53 Three steps were taken in analyzing the papers in the dataset: 1) bibliometric analysis, 2)
54 thematic analysis and 3) critical analysis. The analysis started with a descriptive approach by
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3 means of bibliometric analysis, as this study is partly an exploratory investigation on
4 characteristics of the publications in the dataset. Bibliometric analysis has become an
5 increasingly useful tool in tourism studies (Hall, 2011). Bibliometric analysis can be used to
6 capture the growth of a stream of studies as an area of knowledge (Cheng, Li, Petrick, &
7 O'Leary, 2011; Coles, Hall, & Duval, 2006), show the contribution of individuals, publishing
8 outlets and institutions to the literature (Sheldon, 1990; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007), and provide
9 an evaluation of research performance (Law & Chon, 2007; Page, 2003). Following
10 bibliometric analysis, thematic analysis of conceptual papers was conducted to facilitate an
11 understanding of key themes and content. Finally, a critical analysis of all empirical studies
12 was undertaken with respect to identify current issues in conceptualizing and measuring
13 service quality in the context of Chinese travel agencies and to help provide guidelines for
14 future research.
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30 Even though the search for journal articles obtained a comprehensive list of peer-reviewed
31 publications for analysis, limitations of the methods should be considered. Firstly, books,
32 book chapters, theses and conference proceedings are not included in the dataset. Secondly,
33 as indicated previously, a large number of non-key journals emerged and publications in this
34 category were eliminated from analysis. Thirdly, the four databases and Google Scholar
35 covered most of the major English-language journals, but are less comprehensive with
36 respect to non-English literature and non-journal publications.
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50 **RESULTS OF BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS**

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52 A bibliometric analysis of the 131 publications in the dataset was conducted. Results
53 regarding the year of publication, distribution of publication sources, coverage of research
54 regions and research methodologies are presented in the following subsections.
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Trends over Time

The first English-language paper with the key words “travel agency” and “service quality” was published in 1993 (Cai & Woods, 1993). In the early 1990s, the number of foreign tourists flowing into China was exploding as a result of the opening-up policy. Cai and Woods (1993) discussed service failures of Chinese tour guides when servicing foreign tourists in China. The first Chinese-language publication (Jin, 1991) analysed tourists’ complaints received by CNTA in 1990. Problems included tour guides’ inappropriate manner of tip collection, commission-based shopping and poor quality of souvenirs. The frequency of publication over time is shown in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Referring to Figure 1, the volume of literature has generally been increasing since 1999, despite fewer publications in 2001 and 2002. This increase may be explained by two policy changes in 1999: the introduction of golden week holidays and the Approved Destination Status Scheme, under which Chinese can travel to overseas destinations on GPTs. The annual number of publications has been maintained at approximately 10 since 2005. This period coincides with the growth of academic study and university-based research in tourism within and outside China (Zhang, 2003).

Distribution of Publication Sources

Out of the 107 Chinese-language journal articles, the top four journals with the largest publication numbers are *Tourism Tribune* (28), followed by *Chinese Business & Trade* (10), *Market Modernization Journal* (7) and *Commercial Research* (7). The English-language

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3 literature recorded 24 journal articles, with 7 articles published in *Tourism Management*, 3 in
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5 *Service Industries Journal*, 3 in *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* and 1 in each of the
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7 other journals. Most authors of English-language publications are based in Taiwan or Hong
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9 Kong, while authors of Chinese-language publications are spread over Mainland China.
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11 12 13 14 15 16 *Coverage of Research Regions*

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18 The Chinese-language studies were conducted in different parts of China, with most studies
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20 focusing on the metropolitan areas such as Guangzhou, Beijing or Shanghai (Lin, 1996; Liu,
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22 1999; Wang, Wen, & Jiang, 2001). Most of the English-language studies were conducted in
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24 Taiwan (Chen & Kao, 2010; Chang, 2009; Wang, Hsieh, & Huan, 2000) and Hong Kong
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26 (Lam & Zhang, 1999; Wong & Kwan, 2001). Despite the large number of travel agencies and
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28 the large tourism market in Mainland China, very few English-language publications have
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30 focused on Mainland China. Since the Chinese-language literature is difficult for
31
32 international researchers to access, there has been very limited cross-fertilisation between
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34 Chinese and Western scholars. Cooperation between Chinese and Western scholars could
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36 help introduce Chinese research and researchers to the world, sharing insights, and building
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38 research capacity.
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47 *Research Methodologies*

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49 Although a large amount of Chinese language literature has been identified, a majority of this
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51 body of literature consists of descriptive, conceptual thought-pieces or commentary, mainly
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53 reporting service quality problems and proposing solutions. Of the 107 records in Chinese, 71
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55 are short conceptual research notes. Only 36 report empirical research, most of which used a
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3 quantitative survey. Out of the 24 English-language journal articles, one paper did not specify
4 its method (Cai & Woods, 1993). Of the remaining 23 empirical studies, 12 used quantitative
5 surveys, 5 used qualitative methods and 6 used mixed methods.
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10 11 12 13 **RESULTS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF SERVICE QUALITY RESEARCH IN** 14 **CHINESE TRAVEL AGENCIES** 15 16

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18 A thematic analysis of the literature was used to reveal the progress of research over time.
19 The literature was manually categorised into conceptual and empirical studies. This paper's
20 discussions on the progress of research focuses on geographic location, methods and subject
21 matter extracted mainly from the Chinese conceptual papers, as there were no conceptual
22 (non-empirical) papers published in the English-language journals. The geographic location
23 and methods of both conceptual and empirical publications are summarized in Table 1.
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36 As Table 1 shows, all 71 conceptual papers focusing on Mainland China have been published
37 in Chinese. In contrast, of the 60 empirical papers, 24 are in English and 36 are in Chinese.
38 All of the Chinese-language empirical studies were conducted in Mainland China. 10 of the
39 English-language empirical studies were conducted in Taiwan, 6 in Mainland China, 3 in
40 Hong Kong and 4 in multiple countries/regions.
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48 Most (37) of the Chinese-language and the English-language empirical research used some
49 type of quantitative survey, mainly self-completion cross-sectional surveys (e.g. Heung &
50 Zhu, 2005; Hudson, Hudson, & Miller, 2004; Lam & Zhang, 1999; Mak, Wong, & Chang,
51 2010; Pao, Wu, & Pan, 2010; Zhou & Adrian, 2009; Tao, Shu Tian, & Card, 2007). Some
52 researchers used instruments from marketing studies, for example, the SERVQUAL
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3 instrument (e.g. Chen & Han, 2012; Zhou & Adrian, 2009; Tao et al., 2007). Other
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5 researchers developed their own measurements (Lv, 2008; Xie & Li, 2007).
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8 Nearly all (9) of the 11 studies that used mixed methods combined interviews and surveys
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10 (e.g. Lin, Lee, & Chen, 2009b; Wang et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2000; Wang, Ma, Hsu, Jao, &
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12 Lin, 2013; Wong & Kwan, 2001). For example, Wang et al. (2007), Wang et al. (2000),
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14 Wang et al. (2013) conducted interviews and surveys to develop measurements for service
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16 quality of GPTs following Churchill (1979)'s approach.
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20 Qualitative approaches were used in 11 studies (e.g. Chang, 2009; Hu & Wall, 2013; Mak et
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22 al., 2011), most of which involved in-depth interviews with travel agency employees and/or
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24 government officials. Apart from that, some researchers observed tourists during trips. For
25
26 example, to examine Taiwanese tourists' perceived service quality of GPTs, Chang (2009)
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28 observed participants of a GPT to Italy and conducted semi-structured interviews with 23
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30 tour participants after the tour.
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34 A review of the study methods and geographic locations identifies gaps in this body of
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36 research. Firstly, in terms of geographic locations and number of publications, the studies
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38 focusing on Mainland China have the largest number, followed by Taiwan. However, most
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40 of the papers of Chinese-language publications are conceptual, with a relatively small number
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42 of empirical studies. Moreover, there are only a small number of cross-national studies (N =
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44 2). In terms of study methods, quantitative methods dominate the empirical studies. Even
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46 though generalizations to the broader population may be possible in quantitative studies, the
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48 sampling methods used often limit such endeavours, a point that will be returned to later.
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50 Qualitative studies, in contrast, may not have generalizable findings, but may reveal more in-
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52 depth findings.
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3 In terms of subject matter, analysis revealed two broad themes from the Chinese-language
4 conceptual papers. The themes, content and sources are summarized in Table 2.
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11 Referring to Table 2, the two broad themes are problems associated with service quality of
12 travel agencies and suggestions to improve service quality of travel agencies. A review of the
13 literature identified some repetition among the conceptual papers in terms of problem
14 identification and suggested solutions. These papers are usually very short, being one or two
15 pages long, some even a few paragraphs. Very little evidence is provided to support the
16 arguments and considering the significance and seriousness of problems related to service
17 quality, very few implications for both theory and practice are given.
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31 **RESULTS: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES**

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33 Based on the foregoing overview of the literature, it is possible to critique this body of
34 literature from conceptual, measurement and field method perspectives. This section draws
35 on the body of empirical research published in English (N = 24) and in Chinese (N = 36). The
36 critique seeks to reveal conceptual and practical issues from previous studies, leading to
37 implications for how the academy and industry may better approach issues relating to service
38 quality of Chinese travel agencies.
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48 Before the critique, it is useful to present an overview of characteristics of empirical studies
49 regarding conceptual issues (measurement and dimensionality of service quality) and
50 practical issues (sampling methods). Table 3 provides such a summary. Due to space limits,
51 not all studies are included in Table 3; rather, examples from each category are provided.
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6 *Conceptual and Measurement Issues in Research on Service Quality of Chinese Travel*
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8 *Agencies*
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11 In marketing research, there is no universal conceptualization of service quality and the same
12 is true of tourism research. Years of marketing research have recorded several well-
13 established measures of service quality. Among them, SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al.,
14 1985, 1988), which is a 22-item scale measuring service quality as the discrepancy between
15 perceived performance and expectations, has been extensively used. Despite its popularity,
16 SERVQUAL has been criticized for the relevance of expectation as its basis (e.g. Cronin &
17 Taylor, 1994) and the applicability of SERVQUAL in terms of dimensionality (e.g. Cronin &
18 Taylor, 1992). Many tourism and hospitality researchers (e.g. Ayeh & Chen, 2013; Bo, Yi, &
19 Li, 2007; Chang, 2009; Lam & Zhang, 1999; Johns, Avcı, & Karatepe, 2004; Zhou & Adrian,
20 2009; Tao et al., 2007; Xu, 2012; Zhou, 2007 ; Xie & Li, 2007) have used SERVQUAL to
21 examine service quality of travel agencies in China.
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36 Other conceptualizations, evaluations and measurements of service quality include (i)
37 importance-performance analysis, which presents the relative importance of various attributes
38 and the performance on a two-dimensional grid (Martilla & James, 1977), (ii) SERVPERF,
39 which measures performance only (Cronin & Taylor, 1994), and (iii) some combination
40 scales that multiply SERVQUAL by importance. These measurements have been adopted to
41 measure service quality of Chinese travel agencies in at least one study (e.g. Ayeh & Chen,
42 2011; He & Song, 2009; Zhang & Chow, 2004). Interestingly, Hudson et al. (2004) identified
43 no statistical differences between these methods (i.e. SERVQUAL and IPA) in measuring
44 service quality of travel agencies. With this backdrop of how service quality has been
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3 measured, the different measurements/conceptualizations of service quality are evaluated and
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5 major sources of confusion are discussed in the following paragraphs.
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8 *The role of expectations.* At the heart of the problem of conceptualizing service quality is the
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10 role of expectations. In a broad sense, many conceptualizations and measurements of service
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12 quality have expectation at their centre, for example, Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988) and
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14 Grönroos (1984) who operationalized service quality in terms of meeting or exceeding a
15
16 consumer's expectation. However, what expectation actually refers to and whether
17
18 expectation is needed remains questionable. Firstly, it is evident in the literature on service
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20 quality of Chinese travel agencies that expectation has not always been clearly defined.
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22 Researchers have proposed two standards of expectation. One standard in satisfaction
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24 literature represents expectations as predictions of future events (e.g. Miller, 1977). The other
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26 standard refers to desired or ideal expectations and this is generally what has been used in the
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28 service quality literature (e.g. Parasuraman et al., 1985, 1988). However, participants were
29
30 not provided a clear definition of expectation in some studies (Zhou & Adrian, 2009), thus,
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32 the validity and reliability of findings may be reduced, as participants may have interpreted
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34 expectation either as "predictions" or as "ideal standards".
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40 Secondly, whether expectation is needed in measuring service quality is still open to debate.
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42 Some researchers suggest using a simple performance-based measure (e.g. Baker &
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44 Crompton, 2000; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Teas, 1993; Zeithaml &
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46 Berry, 1993). When studying service quality of Chinese travel agencies, researchers have
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48 used a performance-only measure (e.g. Lv, 2008; Zhu, Cole, & Card, 2008) as well as the
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50 expectation-minus-performance measure (e.g. Lam & Zhang, 1999; Zhou, 2007). Although
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52 whether the need for expectation continues to be debated, there is some agreement that the
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54 purpose of the study influences the choice of which measure to use. According to
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56 Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1995), the performance-only operationalization is more
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3 appropriate if the primary purpose is to explain the variances in dependent constructs, for
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5 example, the relationship between satisfaction/repurchase intention/word of mouth and
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7 service quality. On the other hand, the perception-minus-expectation difference measure may
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9 be more appropriate if the primary purpose is to diagnose service shortfalls.
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12 *Number and content of dimensions.* It seems that researchers agree on the multi-dimensional
13
14 nature of service quality, however, the number and content of these dimensions remain open
15
16 to debate. For example, adopting SERVQUAL, Lam and Zhang (1999) proposed five
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18 dimensions of service quality: responsiveness and assurance, reliability, empathy, resources
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20 and corporate image and tangibility. Bo et al. (2007) reported seven dimensions: physical
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22 evidence, reception service, fair service, site seeing, itinerary, tour guiding, complaint
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24 handling and follow-up service, while Chang (2009) examined five dimensions of
25
26 SERVQUAL in a GPT context and found that tangibility does not show significance.
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28 Although agreement on the dimensionality of service quality of travel agencies has not been
29
30 reached, tourism researchers seem to acknowledge that the applicability of generic models
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32 such as SERVQUAL to measure service quality of travel agencies, which is generally a
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34 highly complex service encounter, is questionable. Consequently, selective adoption or even
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36 drastic changes to the scale are needed. As Wang et al. (2007) note, SERVQUAL does not
37
38 cover all entities of GPTs and is not appropriate for long and continuing services. Likewise,
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40 results from studies on Chinese travel agencies (e.g. Chang 2009, Lam & Zhang, 1999, &
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42 Ayeh & Chen, 2011) revealed different dimensions from the original SERVQUAL scale.
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49 *Value and culture.* Edward and Gustavsson (1988) define service quality in terms of a given
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51 culture, that is, the customer's frame of reference is formed by a specific culture. Following
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53 this line of logic, cultural factors play an important role in influencing perceived service
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55 quality. Empirical evidence supports this argument and different preferences have been found
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57 between Chinese and Western consumers (Mattila, 1999). However, only one study (Zhu et
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2
3 al., 2008) has examined the association between an individual's cultural tendencies and
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5 perceived service quality of a Chinese travel agency. Chinese cultural values such as
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7 Confucius thoughts can be used as or at least form part of the basis when studying service
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9 quality of Chinese travel agencies. When Western instruments such as SERVQUAL and IPA
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11 are used in the Chinese context, very few attempts to incorporate Chinese cultural values
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13 have been identified. Arguably, Western findings should not be applied to the Chinese
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15 context due to the cultural differences between Chinese and Western customers. Indeed,
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17 findings from studies conducted in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China may not be
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19 entirely generalizable to the ethnic Chinese travelling population. Even though Hong Kong,
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21 Taiwan and Mainland China share similar cultural roots and as previously mentioned, the
22
23 approach to tourism development in Mainland China seems to be largely modelled on
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25 Taiwan's approach, knowing the preferences and characteristics of one population does not
26
27 negate the value of researching the nuances of another ethnic Chinese population. Indeed,
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29 from comparing perceived GPT service quality between seniors in Taiwan and in Mainland
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31 China, Wang et al. (2013) found more differences than similarities. Not many cross-national
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33 studies like this have been done and more comparative studies are needed.
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39 *Subjectivity issue.* In marketing research, researchers seem to agree on the use of subjective
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41 quality and humanistic quality as "perceived quality", as all service quality is perceived
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43 subjectively by people. Therefore, defining the ideal standard and determining the target
44
45 population to articulate this standard needs careful consideration. Most marketing research
46
47 has been customer oriented and the same is true for studies on Chinese travel agencies. These
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49 studies measure the selected samples' perceived service quality of travel agencies, thus, the
50
51 results may only represent the subjective perceptions of the samples selected. Issues of
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53 sampling bias exist as some of the studies used convenience sampling (See Table 3).
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55 Moreover, the sample sizes in most studies are relatively small compared to the large number
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3 of Chinese tourists. Even though large sample sizes do not guarantee representativeness,
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5 sample sizes that are too small may fail to represent elements of the target population. For
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7 example, studying outbound Chinese tourists' perceived GPT service quality may need
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9 tourists going to different countries, as the choice of destination may affect evaluations of
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11 desired activities and services. In addition, a task for Chinese travel agency managers may be
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13 less about communicating the findings, but more about training frontline employees to listen
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15 to and understand their customers. This is challenging because there may be differences
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17 regarding "quality service" between customers and employees.
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25 *Practical issues in Research in Service Quality of Chinese Travel Agencies*

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27 Beyond the conceptualization and measurement issues highlighted in the previous section,
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29 there are a number of practical issues that are apparent in the execution of field-based
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31 research on service quality.
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35 *What are the "valid" scale items?* The notable inconsistencies in the measurements are the
36
37 number and content of the scale items. Typically, a study started with a large number of items
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39 from previous literature and/or interviews with experts and managers. Most researchers,
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41 however, initially reduced the number of items in the pre-test stage to achieve a parsimonious
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43 framework and to minimize redundancy; a trade-off thus occurs between exhaustiveness and
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45 practicality. According to Oliver (1977), survey length restrictions and the inability to
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47 achieve a representative sample, particularly in the pre-test stages of survey construction, are
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49 likely to cause researchers to overlook critical elements of the construct. Likewise, some
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51 critical elements of travel agencies' service quality can be overlooked. For example, Wang et
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53 al. (2007) developed an instrument to measure GPT service quality; however, scenic spots
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55 and restaurants, which are important components of the travel experience, were eliminated in
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3 the early stage. Wang et al. (2007) themselves note that questions on scenic spots and
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5 restaurants could be included in future studies.
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8 *What is an appropriate response format?* A review of studies identifies inconsistencies in
9
10 survey response formats. Firstly, some researchers (e.g. Zhang & Chow, 2004; Ayeh & Chen,
11
12 2013) used level of importance, while other researchers (e.g. Zhu et al., 2007; Lam & Zhang,
13
14 1999) used level of agreement. Secondly, whether the concept of service quality is
15
16 unidirectional or bidirectional remains unclear. Some researchers (e.g. Lv, 2008; Ayeh &
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18 Chen, 2013) measured service quality bi-directionally by using a scale anchored with
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20 “unimportant/not important at all” to “very/extremely important”. Other researchers (e.g.
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22 Zhang & Chow, 2004), however, used a unidirectional measure of importance as labelled
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24 “least important” to “very important”. Little psychometric reasoning has been given for this
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26 decision. According to Ekinci & Riley (2001), provided that the concept of importance
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28 reflects the “level” or “strength”, rather than evaluations of goodness or badness of the
29
30 service attribute, the unidirectional scale seems to make more sense than the bi-directional
31
32 one. Nonetheless, the bi-directional scale with modified wordings may be useful when
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34 measuring relative importance. Thirdly, response label formats (e.g. seven point rating scales,
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36 five-point scales) also vary among surveys. Researchers have used five-point, seven-point
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38 and nine-point rating scales.
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45 *What constitutes a sound sampling method and an adequate sample size?* Despite the large
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47 number of travel agencies in China, most empirical research in both Chinese-language
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49 journals and English-language journals were limited to a small number of businesses, mainly
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51 the major ones with large market share in the region (Zhou & Adrian, 2009). Most
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53 quantitative studies used convenience sampling, surveying customers of one or a few travel
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55 agencies. The sample size ranged from 150 (Sheng, 1999) to 708 (Huang, Hsu, & Chan,
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57 2010). Most of the English-language studies using mixed methods (i.e. interviews and
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3 surveys) also used convenience sampling (Lin, Lee, & Chen, 2009a; Wang et al., 2007; Wang
4 et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2013). Purposive sampling is usually used in qualitative studies that
5 used interviews (e.g. Hu & Wall, 2013; Mak et al., 2011), and observational studies (e.g.
6 Bowie & Chang, 2005; Chang, 2009) used purposive sampling with small sample sizes.
7 While qualitative studies deliver depth over breadth, it is important to point out that the
8 purposive sampling approach limits the generalizability of the findings, as participants are
9 recruited based on researchers' subjective selection criteria. Although researchers are
10 generally aware that convenience sampling and small sample sizes limit the generalizability
11 of the results (Babbie, 2013), it seems that probability sampling techniques are seldom
12 implemented due to the large number of travel agencies in China and lack of resources.
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26 *Cross sectional or longitudinal study?* To understand, explain and predict tourist behaviour,
27 marketing academics and practitioners ask questions about customers' future behaviours.
28 However, in recent years, marketing researchers have become increasingly concerned about
29 the systematic method error due to the use of a single source and/or data collected at one
30 point in time (Rindfleisch, Malter, & Ganesan, 2008). Cross-sectional research is widely
31 viewed as being prone to common method variance bias and thus incapable of causal (as
32 opposed to relational) insights. In the case of service quality of travel agencies, asking
33 participants to rate perceived service quality as an independent (or predictor) variable at the
34 same time as asking participants to rate the likelihood of dependent (or outcome) variables
35 such as behavioural intention may compromise the objective assessment of causality between
36 these constructs. This rising concern about the validity of cross-sectional research is an
37 important issue because this method represents most studies on Chinese travel agencies.
38 Longitudinal surveys are often recommended as a solution because temporal separation
39 reduces the cognitive accessibility of responses to predictors collected at an earlier time,
40 which in turn reduces the likelihood that these earlier responses will influence subsequent
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3 responses to outcome variables (Hawk & Aldag, 1990; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). However,
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5 it is important to recognise that common method variance is a by-product of the research
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7 process as a whole, which includes measurement procedures, the choice of participants, and
8
9 the study context (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Clark, 2002). As Podsakoff and colleagues (2003) note,
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11 the risk of these influences can be reduced by various survey design strategies, many of
12
13 which can be employed in a cross-sectional survey. To maximise the validity of both cross-
14
15 sectional and longitudinal research, service quality researchers need to employ a combination
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17 of strong theory and careful design.
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21 *Relationship among variables.* The relationships between service quality and outcome
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23 variables such as satisfaction, customer intention and other behaviour variables are well
24
25 documented in marketing research as well as in broad tourism and hospitality studies (e.g.
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27 Baker & Crompton, 2000; Taylor & Baker, 1994; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996).
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29 Previous research shows some attempts have been made in examining both the factors
30
31 influencing perceived service quality of Chinese travel agencies (e.g. Mak et al., 2011) and
32
33 the consequences of service quality (e.g. Sheng, 1999; Xie & Li, 2007; Bo et al., 2007).
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35 However, these need to be considered in light of the previous discussion about assuming
36
37 causality based on cross-sectional research. Acknowledging the limitations, many factors
38
39 have been found to influence service quality of Chinese travel agencies. These include
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41 external (industry) factors, for example, unhealthy business practices of outbound travel and
42
43 immaturity of the Chinese tourism market (Mak et al., 2011), consumer factors such as
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45 tourist participation in service delivery (Kelley, Donnelly, & Skinner, 1990) and internal
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47 (individual business) factors, for example, human resource issues and service quality
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49 assurance systems (Mak et al., 2011). Outcome variables have included satisfaction (e.g.
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51 Bowie & Chang, 2005; Sheng, 1999) and behavioural intention (e.g. Xie & Li, 2007). The
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53 issue of whether different attributes of a service have differentiating qualities linking to
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3 service evaluations and future consumer behaviours has also surfaced. This can be complex
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5 research as a travel agency delivers services with third parties via GPTs, where services such
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7 as tour guiding involve extended service encounters along a poorly aligned supply chain. The
8
9 lack of universal definition and dimensions of service quality makes it particularly difficult
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11 for managers to set service standards and achieve long-term goals.
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14 15 **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

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17 Examining the Chinese-language and English-language literature enhances the capacity to
18
19 identify strengths and gaps, to foster cross-fertilization, and to highlight implications and
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21 directions for future research. Implications and directions are discussed as follows.
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25 *Scale Construction.* Despite that many researchers have used instruments from Western
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27 marketing studies, efforts to develop instruments for travel agency services in the broad
28
29 Chinese context (e.g. Wang et al., 2007) seem to be particularly appropriate for consideration
30
31 for use in future studies. The differences in patterns of behaviours associated with a particular
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33 culture (Bowie & Chang, 2005; Mattila, 1999), in this case the Chinese culture, suggest that
34
35 Chinese tourists might require a particular service orientation. For example, given Chinese
36
37 tourists' shopping culture and quality problems associated with commission-based shopping
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39 and/or optional tours (Chen et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2009), items relating to these activities
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41 have been included in measures of GPT service quality (Bo et al., 2007; Bo & Zhang, 2005;
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43 Li, 2010; Mak et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2007; Zhang & Zhang, 2007). With further testing
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45 and standardization, scales developed to measure service quality of Chinese travel agencies,
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47 or even specific services of Chinese travel agencies (e.g. GPT, tour guiding) could be of
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49 value to researchers in progressing a more generalizable body of knowledge.
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55 *Service/product specific measurement.* While researchers agree on the multi-dimensional
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57 nature of travel agencies' service quality, agreement on the number and content of these
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3 dimensions has not been reached. The use of generic models forces researchers to drastically
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5 alter the items to apply in specific contexts (Babakus & Boller, 1992; Babakus & Mangold,
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7 1992; Gilmore & McMullan, 2009; McAlexander, Kaldenberg, & Koenig, 1994). The
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9 services Chinese travel agencies offer can vary widely. The evaluation criteria for booking
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11 services may be different from that for GPT services. Researchers need to consider the nature
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13 of the service encounter when choosing measurements and there is a need to develop and use
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15 service-specific measures. Moreover, specialized tours such as study tours, cultural tours or
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17 shopping tours may need customised measurements.
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21 *Timing of measurement.* Researchers need to consider the complete service process (Gilmore
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23 & McMullan, 2009), that is, all stages of the service experience including the pre, during and
24
25 post service experience. In evaluating a service sector such as a GPT, considerations should
26
27 be given to the complexity of processes including accommodation, restaurant and tour
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29 guiding services, each of which has multiple points of interaction and a range of experiences
30
31 from minimal to high contact between tourists, tour guides and other service staff. Thus, it
32
33 may not be realistic to assess perceptions of service quality of a GPT with a single instrument
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35 at a single point in time. Longitudinal studies, which could be used to collect data on
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37 consumers' purchasing behaviours instead of behavioural intentions, are recommended if
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39 research time and resources permit.
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44 *Modelling of service quality and other variables.* More modelling of service quality and other
45
46 variables is needed to understand and predict consumer behaviour. Future research could
47
48 include third parties, for example, hotels, restaurants and airlines. The reason behind this
49
50 proposal is that some outbound travel services cannot be directly controlled by China-based
51
52 travel agencies, but are still important to tourists' perceptions and experiences of the trip
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54 (Wang et al., 2000). Focused research on shopping and tour guides could also be conducted.
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3 Such studies could be the basis for developing a cooperative relationship between travel
4 agencies and their business partners toward improving the overall service quality.
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8 *Comparative studies.* Commonality across broad ethnic Chinese populations does not mean
9 that variation between populations can be ignored. More comparative studies among Chinese
10 consumers are needed. Examining the differences between subpopulations where attention is
11 on understanding consumers' perception and by inference, their geographical, sociological
12 and situational factors could move the industry further toward achieving quality outcomes.
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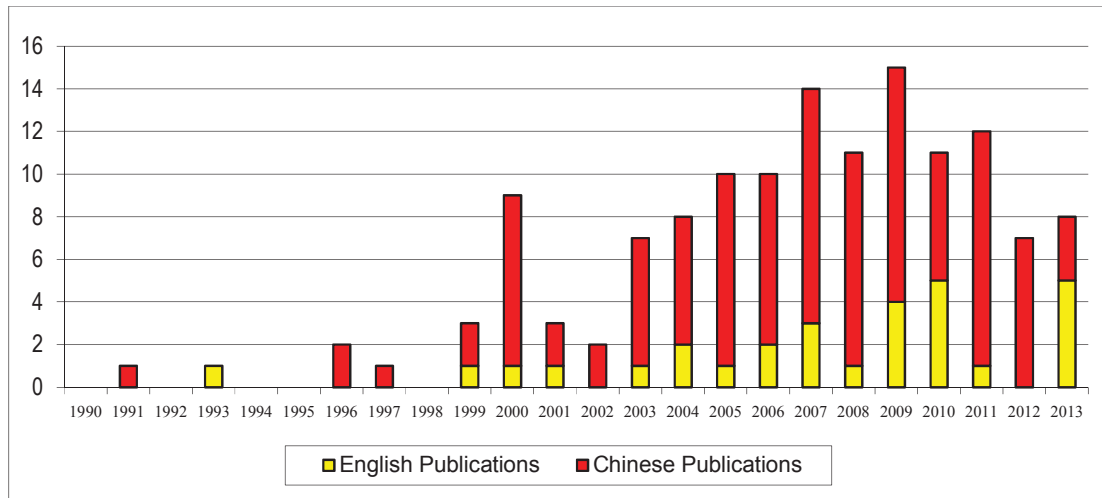
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Figure 1. Frequency of publications on service quality of Chinese travel agencies over time



Peer Review Only

Table 1: Summary of geographic locations and study methods *

	Mainland China		Taiwan		Hong Kong		Multiple countries /regions	
	(English)	(Chinese)	(English)	(Chinese)	(English)	(Chinese)	(English)	(Chinese)
Descriptive / conceptual papers	0	71	0	0	0	0	0	0
Empirical studies (quantitative)	5	25	4	0	3	0	0	0
Empirical studies (mixed methods)	0	0	4	0	0	0	2	0
Empirical studies (qualitative methods)	1	6	2	0	0	0	2	0

* Among the 24 English-language publications, one study with no method identified (Cai & Woods, 1993) is not included in Table 1.

Table 2 Themes of Chinese-language publications

Theme	Content	Source
Problems associated with travel agencies' service quality	General problems: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a chaotic marketplace unqualified service staff poor service attitude commission-based shopping lack of differentiation in products and services 	Bo, 2000; Cai, 1997; Ge, 2000;; Huang, 2004; Jia, 2004; Li, 2000; Shen & Chen, 2004; Wang, Wen, & Jiang., 2001; Wang, 2011; Zhu, 2005, Zhang & Zhang, 2007;
	Problems associated with tour guides' service quality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> tour guides not being qualified poor service attitude forced shopping change of itinerary without tourists' approval 	Chen, 2005; He, Xiao, & Liu, 2010; Huang, 2009; Li, 2003; Liu, 2011; Pu & Su, 2005; Qi, 2011; Wu, 2007; Zhao, 2010; Zhu, 2007
	Tourist complaints: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> extra charge for optional tours misleading information too much time spent in shops 	Huang & Zhu, 2008; Jin, 1991; Xu & Zhu, 2003
Suggestions to improve service quality of travel agencies	Staff training and policy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> staff focusing on customers' needs prompt service recovery staff empowerment setting up service standards establishing service ethics calls for the government and authorities to regulate the travel agency market 	Huang & Zhu, 2008; Shen & Chen, 2004; Chen, 2005; Tan, 2005; Huang & Zhu, 2008; Zhu, 2007
	Given the fact that many services need to be delivered in cooperation with a third party, for example, hotels and airlines, it was suggested that travel agencies establish good relationships with such entities	Yu, 2000; Zhu, 2007

Table 3 Summary of Empirical Studies on Service Quality of Chinese Travel Agencies

Category	Data collection	Example of Study	Sampling	Measurement	Dimensionality/items of Service quality
Quantitative	Self-completion survey (cross-section)	Lam and Zhang (1999)	Convenience sampling	SERVQUAL	5 dimensions: responsiveness and assurance, reliability, empathy, resources and corporate image, and tangibility
		Zhu, Cole, and Card (2007)	Convenience sampling		3 dimensions: empathy, tangibles/reliability and responsiveness/assurance
		He and Song (2009)	Systematic sampling	SERVPERF	3 items: customization, reliability and overall performance
		Zhang and Chow (2004)	Convenience sampling	IPA	21 items: polite, able to solve problems etc.
Qualitative	Observation + Semi-structured interview	Huang, Hsu, and Chan (2009)	N/A	Other (mainly from previous literature)	2 dimensions: intrapersonal servability and interpersonal servability
		Chang (2009)	N/A	SERVQUAL	7 dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, communication, sociability
Mixed Methods	Interview + survey	Lin, Lee, and Chen (2009)	Purposive sampling	From previous literature	8 dimensions: pre-tour information, hotel, restaurant, scenic spot, shopping, optional tour, coach and driver, local guide
		Wang, Hsieh, Chou, and Lin (2007)	Convenience sampling	Scale development attempt	6 dimensions: hotel, transportation, shopping arrangement, optional tour, tour leader, local guide