Repositioning Australian cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences aimed at Chinese tourists

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ABSTRACT

The outbound Chinese holiday travel market has been dominated by package tourists, and to date their nature tourism experiences have been investigated, analysed and reported primarily with a Western gaze. This paper critically examines the findings of previous studies from both Chinese and English-language literature, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the values, perceptions and expectations that underpin what Chinese visitors consider a beautiful natural environment. Marrying this with an understanding of the constraints and opportunities of current and potential Chinese visitors to Australia provides fresh insights regarding appropriate strategies for delivering memorable nature-based experiences. These are presented in the form of a typology of nature-based experiences in urban environments that, if examined through a Chinese cultural lens, may help to diversify and deepen opportunities for memorable experiences for an increasingly heterogeneous Chinese market. To reposition cities in Australia and elsewhere as settings for memorable nature-based experiences for Chinese visitors, key contexts, requirements and components of each experience type are outlined. Implications are discussed for the current package tour market as well as the growing independent travel market which, although largely unresearched, appears to share some of the same values, perceptions, constraints, and expectations in terms of nature-based experiences.

Key words: Chinese tourists, Australia, cities, nature, memorable, experience, repositioning

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

The aims of this paper are to explore why it is important and how it is possible to reposition Australian cities for the inbound Chinese tourist market. It uses a critical review of the literature and an analysis of secondary data to inform a re-conceptualisation of cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences for this market. Nature-based tourism (NBT) makes up a significant component of the tourism industry in many countries, including Australia. By way of illustration, international nature-based visitors represent 66% of all international visitors to Australia, a proportion that has been increasing since 2011 (Tourism Research Australia, 2014a). International visitors consistently cite “Australia’s natural environment and wildlife” as their most memorable experience in Australia (Tourism Research Australia, 2014a). Moreover, it is often argued that NBT may be more beneficial than other types of tourism for regional and national economies, local communities and natural environments (Buckley, Cater, Linsheng, & Chen, 2008). In the case of Australia, NBT is often extolled for attracting international tourist spending as well as creating employment (Priskin, 2001; Weaver, Lawton, & Faulkner, 1999).

The concept of NBT is broad. While sometimes used synonymously with terms such as eco, sustainable, green, alternative and responsible tourism and at other times a contested term (Weaver et al., 1999; Weiler & Hall, 1992), for the purpose of this paper, NBT is defined as experiences that are dependent on or enhanced by nature (Valentine, 1992). This simple and self-explanatory definition allows for inclusion of a diversity of tourist experiences that range from nature as a backdrop (experiences in nature) to nature as an attraction (experiences about nature) as well as green tourism (experiences for nature). Examples include passive recreation such as scenic driving, boat and cruise-based tours, wildlife viewing both in-situ (in the wild) and ex-situ (e.g. in wildlife parks), adventure and physical activities in the outdoors, nature-based festivals and events, nature study tours, and various forms of pro-conservation or environmentally-responsible travel that may involve elements of volunteer, indigenous and heritage tourism (Laarman & Durst, 1987; Laarman & Gregersen, 1996; Linderberg, 1991; Mehmetoglu, 2007; Weaver et al., 1999; Wurzinger & Johansson, 2006). As such, NBT can take place not only in remote and rural areas but also in built-up, urban areas including at nature-based attractions such as zoos, aquariums and botanic gardens.

Repositioning Australian cities as nature-based tourism destinations for the Chinese market: why is this important?

It has been acknowledged for some time that the Chinese inbound market is critical to Australia. The Chinese market is now Australia’s fastest growing inbound market and largest contributor to international visitor spending (Tourism Research Australia, 2014b). By 2022-23, it is expected that the annual number of Chinese visitors will reach 1.4 million and Chinese visitors will inject between A$7 and A$9 billion each year to the Australian economy (Tourism Australia, 2011). Due to the significance and potential of the Chinese market, it is the subject of numerous strategic plans, marketing studies and reports by Tourism Australia as well as by state-level tourism organisations. For example, Tourism Australia launched the national China 2020 Strategic Plan to increase tourism business from China (Tourism Australia, 2011), and this was mirrored by a range of state-level tourism strategies aimed at delivering quality Australian experiences to this market (Destination NSW,
2014; Tourism Victoria, 2012), many in collaboration with Chinese partners and travel agents (South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013; Tourism Queensland, 2014). Academic research on the Chinese market in Australia has also been increasing, particularly in the past decade (Huang & Gross, 2010; Kwek & Lee, 2015; Pan, Scott, & Laws, 2006; Wang & Davidson, 2009; Wu & Pearce, 2014; Yu & Weiler, 2006).

The current Chinese tourist market in Australia, which is comprised mainly of middle-aged to mature-aged residents of tier one cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, is currently dominated by group package tours, although independent travel is expected to increase (Tourism Australia, 2014a; South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013; Tourism Victoria, 2013). Travel by Chinese inbound tourists is typically fast-paced and short-stay compared to other international visitors to Australia, with the average length of stay being 10 days (South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013; Tourism Victoria, 2013). During their visit to Australia, the typical Chinese tourist visits three cities concentrating their overnight stays in large capital and metropolitan cities including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and to a lesser extent the Gold Coast and Cairns (Tourism Australia, 2011, 2012; Sparks & Pan, 2009; South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013). As a result of a number of constraints to be discussed in more detail in a later section of this paper, group package travel is expected to continue to dominate inbound Chinese travel to Australia in the foreseeable future.

Generally, Chinese people enjoy being surrounded by natural landscapes, which are said to provide aesthetic experience and moral enlightenment for Chinese tourists (Lin, 1939; Xu, Cui, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2013). Chinese visitors rate “viewing natural landscapes” as one of the experiences they would most like to have when visiting Australia (Hughes, Wang, & Shu, 2013; Packer, Ritchie, & Ballantyne, 2011), suggesting the strong appeal of Australia’s natural environments to the Chinese market and the value Chinese tourists place on NBT. However, in addition to the spatial and temporal limitations of current Chinese holiday travel to Australia already mentioned, there is a need to better understand the distinctive “Chinese tourist gaze” with respect to nature-based travel expectations, perceptions and behaviours (Buckley et al., 2008; Li, 2008).

To sustain long-term development of Chinese inbound tourism, this paper places the visitor experience as central to positioning or repositioning destinations, whether entire countries, regions, cities or specific attractions. Scholars have noted that as the science of marketing has evolved, experience has become a dominant marketing tool (Schmitt, 1999; Williams, 2006). Experiential marketing recognises that consumer interest is not restricted to purely functional benefits, but to the consumption of a total experience, which in turn positively affects emotion and consequently behavioural intention (Leighton, 2007; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). In this so-called experience economy, Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggest that memorable experiences are key to competitiveness. In this paper, a memorable experience is defined as an experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010).

In their application of experiential marketing to tourism destination development, Tung and Ritchie (2011) highlight the importance of memorable experiences. Others have noted that positive memorable experiences play an important role in tourists’ information seeking and decision-making (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Raju & Reilly, 1980). A successful destination brand needs to convey the promise of a positive memorable travel experience that is distinctively associated with that destination (Blain, 2005; Cary, 2004; Kim, Guo, & Agrusa, 2005; Kozak, 2001; Lehto, O’Leary, & Morrison, 2004; Ritchie, Crouch, & Ritchie, 2003; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). As with NBT generally, however,
what constitutes a memorable nature-based experience is contested. Researchers have reported that memorability comes from positive affect, feelings and emotions, and pleasure/hedonism (Bruner, 1991; Larsen & Jenssen, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Wirtz et al., 2003). Other contributors to memorable experiences include surprise, novelty, local culture/distinctiveness and quality/outstandingness (Curtin, 2010; Kim et al., 2010; Morgan, 2006; Reder, Donavos, & Erickson, 2002) as well as involvement and engagement (Curtin, 2010; Kim, Hallah, & Kim, 2012).

Little is known about the quality of Chinese tourists’ experiences in Australia. That said, there is general consensus that nature-based experiences are a key driver for Chinese to visit Australia (Tourism Research Australia, 2014a). Tourism Research Australia’s International Visitor Survey is a highly credible source on this point, as it has been surveying international visitors to Australia for decades (including in Mandarin since 2004), in order to benchmark and track visitor expectations and experiences. However, it is important to unpack what Chinese tourists precisely mean by, and what they expect or seek in, NBT experiences. For example, Chinese visitors have been found to be motivated by Australia’s beautiful natural environment (Tourism Australia, 2011, 2012; Sparks & Pan, 2009; Huang & Gross, 2010), its unique natural attractions (Li & Carr, 2004), its natural landscapes (Packer et al., 2011), and the opportunity to see Australian wildlife such as kangaroos and koalas (Huang & Gross, 2010; Li & Carr, 2004).

On the other hand, when asked about exactly what they expect or perceive as “a world class beauty and natural environment”, only 10% of potential Chinese visitors associate this with remote coastal environments, only 8% with wide-open inland/outback environments and only 4% with wilderness/mountain environments (Tourism Australia, 2014b). This seems to suggest that, to Chinese tourists, nature-based experiences are not limited to or even sought in wilderness settings, “natural areas” and “natural environments” as defined by Westerners. As Xu, Cui, Sofield and Li (2014) note, wilderness, which is an important concept in Western nature conservation that is distanced from the nature-human relationship, holds much less value in Chinese culture. Instead, to most Chinese, nature conservation, rather than requiring the separation of humans from nature, views humans in nature as a harmonious relationship. Moreover, experiencing nature does not mean having to endure hardships but rather realizing an idyllic experience in nature (Xu et al., 2014). Chinese tourists generally want nature-based experiences with easy access and a comfortable level of activity rather than arduous physical exercise, and prefer friendly companionship in their nature experiences rather than roaming alone in remote wilderness (Xu et al., 2013). This then suggests that a focus on urban and near-urban NBT experiences for Chinese international tourists is culturally relevant and arguably long overdue.

The remainder of this paper uses this Chinese gaze of memorable NBT experiences to undertake a critical review of literature that, together with secondary data analysis, explores how to reposition Australian cities in particular as settings for memorable nature-based experiences for Chinese tourists. Relevant Chinese-language and mainstream English-language literature were assimilated and analysed to gain a clearer and deeper understanding of what Chinese consider to be a beautiful natural environment and a memorable nature-based experience. This includes an exploration of the values and perceptions that underpin the Chinese view of nature and NBT. Together with an examination of inbound Chinese visitors’ constraints and actual nature-based experiences in Australia, these insights are used to develop a typology of urban nature-based experiences and a set of repositioning strategies to promote and deliver memorable experiences for the Chinese market.
Methods

To address if and how it is possible to provide memorable nature-based experiences for Chinese tourists in Australian cities, academic literature and grey literature including government reports and industry sources were used. Firstly, a search of Chinese-language journals and English-language journals was undertaken using major databases (see Table 1). To identify academic sources, one of the authors searched all titles and abstracts using relevant terms including “China”, “Chinese”, “Australia”, “nature-based tourism”, “ecotourism” and “city” and, using the major Chinese academic database (China Academic Journal Networking Publishing Database), the Chinese-equivalents of these terms. Nature-based tourism itself is a Western construct that does not translate easily into Chinese and thus a wide range of key words related to nature-based tourism were used, for example, nature, ecotourism, wildlife, zoos etc. This use of multiple key words related to NBT helped to identify relevant Chinese publications.

Secondly, for government documents, the websites of Tourism Australia, Tourism Research Australia and all Australian state-level tourism organisations were searched for documents related to China (see Table 1). The websites of Chinese tourism authorities including China National Tourism Administration (CNTA) and Chinese Tourism Academy were also searched.

Table 1: Databases and websites sourced

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<td>English language academic databases:</td>
<td>EBSCOhost ProQuest LeisureTourism Emerald Google scholar</td>
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<td>Chinese government sources:</td>
<td>China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), <a href="http://www.cnta.gov.cn">www.cnta.gov.cn</a> China Tourism Academy (CTA), <a href="http://www.ctaweb.org">www.ctaweb.org</a></td>
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After importing all documents to a database, abstracts of journal articles and the tables of contents of government documents were then read to eliminate irrelevant sources, i.e. those that did not centre on NBT experiences for the Chinese tourist market. A number of publications such as papers on wildlife management and environment science were deleted, for example papers on strategic planning for city zoos and animal welfare. The remaining 83 documents included 9 Chinese journal articles, 36 English journal articles and 38 Australian government reports. As the level of methodological sophistication of the majority of these studies did not allow for a formal meta-analysis, a qualitative thematic analysis was undertaken. Driven by the overarching theme of providing memorable nature-based experiences for Chinese tourists in Australian cities, analysis of these studies and documents revealed two interrelated themes: Chinese values, perceptions and expectations with respect to nature, and constraints and opportunities in NBT for Chinese visiting Australia.

Finally, an examination of secondary sources was undertaken to better understand the opportunities and constraints of Chinese visitors with respect to current nature-based experiences on package tours to Australia, in other words, the current “position” of Australian cities in providing memorable nature-based experiences to this market. Published itineraries are regarded as contractual arrangements with clients (Wong & McKercher, 2012), and thus serve as a reliable data source to understand the actual amount of time spent and the types of NBT experiences typical Chinese visitors might currently have while visiting Australian cities. The search for itineraries initially started with five major outbound Chinese tour operators, as it has been argued that the major tour operators monopolise a significant market share of outbound tourism and their itineraries are largely interchangeable (Chang, Wang, Guo, Su, & Yen, 2007; Zhang, Yan, & Li, 2009); a content analysis of the collected itineraries confirmed this lack of variability. Thus it is can be argued that the itineraries of these five major tour operators are largely representative of the opportunities of this market for NBT experiences. All itineraries of package tours to Australia from the five tour operators were collected and analysed with respect to the length of tours, places visited and how time was allocated to NBT experiences (see Appendix 1 for a sample itinerary).

Results and Discussion

Chinese values and perceptions and their implications for NBT experiences

Since 1978, China has experienced a rapid and unprecedented process of urbanisation, which has turned Chinese cities into large, busy and crowded places consisting of concrete skyscrapers and commuters (Zhang & Shunfeng, 2003). Undisturbed areas and unspoilt places that feature quality natural environments have become a luxury to most Chinese (Zhang, 2006). As a result, Chinese researchers have identified a number of elements such as air quality, water quality, good climate and weather, vegetation density and cleanliness/being pollution free as important for Chinese domestic and international tourists (Li, 2011; Zhu & Yao, 2008; Zheng & Yan, 2013). Simple experiences in nature including breathing fresh air and seeing unpolluted water (rivers, lakes and beaches) are valued by Chinese tourists (Sun & Gong, 2008; Gao, Zhang, & Zhuang, 2009). In essence, Chinese seek “naturalness” in tourist destinations, which can encompass aspects of a host population’s daily life such as
open areas of parks and gardens, blue skies and unpolluted air, as well as the accessibility of freshly harvested and high quality organic produce (South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013).

In addition to this appreciation of a quality natural environment, the “Chinese gaze” includes at least five different expectations, perceptions and behaviours that differ from Western tourists. Firstly, as flagged earlier, Chinese seem to be more acceptable of human modifications of nature than most Westerners. To a large extent, Westerners including Australians have a common understanding that nature should not be modified by human interference and that for an area to be considered “nature”, its natural character should be retained, often by design and management (e.g. protected areas) (Buckley et al., 2008). However, Chinese tradition suggests a different approach to engaging and responding to nature, which lacks the modern Western taboo on human intervention and embraces aesthetics (Nyíri, 2007). In China, the aesthetic component may include human artefacts, art or calligraphy that have been deliberately built, carved or painted to enrich the visitor experience (Buckley et al., 2008).

China’s 4000-year-old cultural and philosophical perspective of “heritage as part of nature”, and therefore its modern-day perspective on NBT, is underpinned by Confucian/Taoist thought, the model of fengshui, and the Chinese search for harmony and a middle way (Buckley et al., 2008; Li 2008; Sofield & Li, 1998, 2007, 2011; Weller, 2006). These philosophies view humans as part of nature, sometimes expressed by the sentiment of consanguinity between people and nature (Shaner, 1989) and living in harmony with nature (Chan, 2001). Harmony is fundamental ideology and epistemology for Chinese, and harmony with nature is one of the key characteristics of Chinese culture (Fan, 2000). As part of this inseparability of humans and nature (Xu et al., 2014), Chinese view nature’s universal laws as something that humans should obey; they should not compete with nature but be consistent with it (Chang, 2008).

Secondly, under this philosophy, Chinese seem to consider human elements such as cultural attractions in natural surroundings not only as acceptable but as enhancing nature. The Chinese view of nature and tourism is largely informed by Chinese common knowledge, which includes shared knowledge of Chinese philosophies, history, religion and cultural heritage, thus resulting in a distinctive approach to tourism development in general and NBT in particular (Li, 2008). China has been shaped by its different dynasties as well as ethnic groups, with a robust literary tradition that also plays an important part in attracting tourists (Buckley et al., 2008; Liu, 1990). As Sofield and Li (1998) note, in China, powerful dynastic emperor-gods stand at the apex of religious and political hierarchy in which ancestral gods and animistic spirits reside in mountains, rivers, lakes and other natural features. Many Chinese iconic sites and idealised landscapes have cultural, religious and/or philosophical connotations.

Poetic, religion, ancient traditions, cultural values, and philosophical beliefs are critical components of the appreciation and interpretation of natural attractions (Buckley et al., 2008; Li, 2011; Packer, Ballantyne, & Hughes, 2014; Sun & Gong, 2008). The attractions of natural scenic spots are not only evaluated according to natural beauty per se, but also based on the tangible and intangible cultural heritage embodied in the landscape such as its connections with famous people, poetry, paintings, calligraphy etc. (Xu et al., 2013). Chinese tourists can spend several hours expounding on what they “see” in famous landscapes whereas Westerners often have difficulty moving beyond the visible (Xu et al., 2013). Sofield and Li
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-as already noted they seek nature that is

significant attention in China

Cui, Xu, & Wall, (2004; Zhong, Wu, & Xiao, 1998). In the case of China, there may be

distinctive cultural and situational factors behind this phenomenon. With rapid economic

growth, China has been prioritizing economic growth over environmental protection and, as a

result, environmental problems have become a major source of social concern for those

seeking better living standards (Harris, 2008; Packer et al., 2014). There is growing

awareness among Chinese that environmental deterioration is having hazardous effects on

their well-being (Chan, 2001), which has led to the perception of health benefits as important

“spin-off” benefits of travel and particularly nature-based travel.

Fourthly, the majority of Western discourse on NBT, which has focused on relatively small-

scale activity (Buckley, 2003; 2007; Weaver, 2001; Weaver & Lawton, 2007), does not seem to

be fully transferable to the Chinese context. Many of China’s protected areas receive

millions of visitors every year, a scale reached by only a few Western counterparts (Buckley et al.,

2008). Chen and Zhang (2003) agree that Chinese tourists engaging in NBT are happy, and

may even prefer, to travel in very large groups. This may be in part due to the sheer size of

the Chinese population, a small percent of which still represents a large number of tourists

compared to most other countries. Other reasons may be that their lack of travelling

experience, the relatively high level of perceived risk and the collectivist nature of the

population result in most Chinese choosing to travel in groups, especially to unfamiliar

destinations such as Australia (Hofstede, 1980; Wang, Hsi, & Huan, 2000).

Finally, Chinese seem to have different attitudes towards wildlife than Westerners. Compared

with Australian tourists, Chinese are more likely to report having a dislike or fear of animals

in the wild, are less likely to express concerns about the right treatment of animals, are less

likely to find beauty and meaning in wildlife-in-nature, and are less likely to want to see

animals in the wild (Packer et al., 2014). The basic tenet in the Chinese way of thinking is to

value humans but disrespect animals, which has been accepted for centuries (Zhang, 1999).

Based on the Chinese Differential Modes of Association, there are relative positions between
different species of animals, and people have different attitudes and take different action

towards animals in different positions (Cui, Xu, & Wall, 2012). For example, many Chinese

people think that pigs are lazy and dirty, cows are diligent, tigers are brave and turtles have

longevity. These images influence how people treat animals and how tourists interact with

wild animals.

**Constraints and opportunities for Chinese NBT experiences**

Most Chinese associate Australia with “world class beauty and natural environments”,

including “remarkable scenery to soak up and enjoy tropical islands and coastal environments”

(Tourism Australia, 2014b). That said, the literature analysis undertaken for the present paper

indicates that while Chinese want to experience natural environments that are different from

home and view picturesque natural landscapes (beaches, islands, mountains, grasslands,
country side), as already noted they seek nature that is easily accessible and expect some

level of human presence and modification (Tourism Australia, 2011).

Furthermore, Chinese travellers’ expectations and preferences for experiencing nature are

constrained by time, money and, for the vast majority who travel as part of the package tour
market, by the supply-chain system. Behind the short and fast-paced tour experience is a traditional Chinese tourism distribution system, with inbound tour operators, wholesalers and retail travel agents handling the majority of travel bookings (Tourism Australia, 2014a). The Chinese outbound and Australian inbound tour operators play critical roles in determining the Chinese package tourist experience. These suppliers collectively focus largely on volume, pricing their tours very low, and thus have low yield. Partly to maintain profit margins, most of the tour time is spent in cities that have major international airports (Zhang & Murphy, 2009; Wong & McKecher, 2012).

Chinese tourists seem to be accepting of this style of travel and the experiences it provides, with one notable exception. Researchers have found that a distinctive characteristic of the Chinese tour operator industry is that commissions from shopping are widely used to compensate for the low prices of tour packages (Dwyer, King, & Prideaux, 2004; King, Dwyer, & Prideaux, 2006; Pan, 2003). Unfortunately, Chinese tour operators’ reliance on shopping commissions for profit has had serious consequences for the tourist experience, as the number of attractions visited and the time spent at attractions on these commission-based tours are often reduced to an absolute minimum in order to increase the time spent on shopping (Wong & McKecher, 2012). The commission-driven practice has also resulted in Chinese tour operators in some cases giving preference to attractions that include commission-based shops and thus are more “profitable” places for them (Zhang & Murphy, 2009). This has been the subject of a strong backlash by Chinese tourists, resulting in additional state-based legislation as well as codes of business standards and ethics that now require travel contracts with specified minimum times that tourists can expect to spend at each attraction (China National Tourism Administration, 2013; Wong & McKecher, 2012; Australian Trade Commission, 2015). Notwithstanding the transparency and other improvements that such contracts may have introduced, the industry’s business practices and low-yield pricing approach continue to compromise opportunities for memorable nature-based experiences at destinations (Keating, 2009; King et al., 2006).

Government reports and academic research acknowledge positive feedback from Chinese visitors to many Australian nature-based experiences such as going to the beach, spending time in national parks or nature reserves, and visiting other nature-based attractions and environments (Li & Carr, 2004; Filep, Cao, Jiang, & DeLacy, 2013) including natural icons such as the Great Barrier Reef (Huang & Gross, 2010; Prideaux, Cave, Thompson, & Sibtain, 2012). The Chinese Satisfaction Survey (Tourism Research Australia, 2014b) reports high satisfaction scores for Australia’s natural environment, with 93% of visitors reporting having their expectations for nature-based experiences met (35%) or exceeded (58%). It thus seems likely that at least some of these experiences are memorable, although the research does not actually reveal what elements may have made them memorable.

Results of analysing the itineraries of five large tour providers and examination of a number of their 7 to 11 day tours confirmed the findings of previous studies and government reports that in most cases very little or no time was spent outside of major urban areas (Tourism Australia, 2011, 2012; South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013). Exceptions included a day on Green Island (part of the Great Barrier Reef off Cairns), some time on the Great Ocean Road outside Melbourne (typically half a day), a drive to the Blue Mountains outside Sydney (typically half a day), a visit to Sovereign Hill (a few hours at this goldrush theme park located in regional Victoria and an hour’s drive from Melbourne), or an evening visit to Phillip Island (about an hour’s drive from Melbourne, to view the little penguins). No trips included all of these, of course; most included no more than two of these, so the typical 7 to 11 day tour by any one Chinese tourist is spent almost entirely in major urban centres such as
Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast (See Appendix 1). The analysis also confirmed that the time Chinese tourists spend at each attraction within these cities is very short.

Importantly and of particular relevance to the present paper, previous literature has not reported the nature experiences of Chinese tourists in these cities and how these might contribute to memorability. An analysis of these NBT experiences revealed two types: experiences of nature as a backdrop (experiences in nature) and experiences of nature as the attraction (experiences about nature).

With regard to the former (nature as backdrop), typical experiences were coach-based city site-seeing with short stop-offs for strolls and/or photo-taking at scenic points of interest. Itineraries suggest as little as 5 minutes but more typically 20 to 30 minutes at each stop (e.g. to visit Kangaroo Point or Southbank in Brisbane; to view the Opera House on Sydney Harbour). Most itineraries specify only a handful of stops over the 7- to 11-day tour, although there may well be more on the actual tour. More time appears to be allocated to scenic stops that incorporate eating or shopping, e.g. Darling Harbour in Sydney.

With respect to the latter (nature as attraction), experiences vary from as little as 15 to 30 minutes at a range of botanic gardens (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Cairns), and 30 minutes at city-based zoos and aquariums (Sydney) to 60 minutes at iconic beaches (Surfers Paradise, Bondi Beach). Also notable are attractions in suburban or peri-urban areas such as farms and wildlife parks (e.g. Paradise Farm, Tropical Fruit Farm, Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary) all of which were less than 60-minute visits, but all of which included shopping. Most itineraries included multiple nature-based attractions.

Little can be deduced from these itineraries about the quality and memorability of Chinese tourists’ nature-based experiences in cities and no study has examined this to date. For example, it is not known whether these experiences contribute to positive affect, feelings and emotions (Bruner, 1991; Larsen & Jenssen, 2004; Kim et al., 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Wirtz et al., 2003), whether they have elements of surprise, novelty, local culture/distinctiveness and quality/outstandingness (Curtin, 2010; Kim et al., 2010; Morgan, 2006; Reder, Donavos, & Erickson, 2002) and whether they involve or engage visitors (Curtin, 2010; Kim et al., 2012). One would hope that the tour operators utilize some of these elements known to enhance memorability, but the short time at scenic stops and nature-based attractions probably compromises opportunities for most of these to be rich, deep and meaningful experiences. The breadth of experience is also limited, suggesting that there is merit in presenting a suite of strategies for diversifying and deepening the experiences made available to Chinese visitors in cities and thus repositioning cities as places for memorable NBT experiences.

**Implications**

Clearly, inbound Chinese tourists want memorable NBT experiences. However, our examination of package tour itineraries suggests that suppliers (wholesalers, operators, and travel agents) have a limited perspective on the breadth and depth of NBT experiences that are possible in Australian cities. Many Chinese tourists themselves express a willingness and even a preference for nature experiences that are near-urban and urban-based, rather than experiences in remote, outback or wilderness environments (Tourism Australia, 2014b). The review of literature and secondary data for this paper suggests that to reposition Australian
cities as destinations for memorable NBT experiences, a typology of experiences utilizing a range of repositioning strategies aimed at various players in the Chinese tourism distribution system is needed, with consideration of both the heterogeneity and the constraints of the Chinese market.

According to Crompton (2009), repositioning is a deliberate set of actions designed to change an existing position, which in this study refers to the image of Australian cities held in the minds of Chinese tour operators. Psychological repositioning requires changing beliefs about the outcomes which emanate from visiting the destination, so they better align with the desired position; in other words, changing tour operators and potential visitors’ perceptions of cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences. Competitive repositioning can be used to alter beliefs about what a destination’s competitors do, e.g. other Australian cities, other non-urban destinations within Australia and perhaps overseas destinations. Associative repositioning is achieved by aligning with attractions and products that already possess the desired position and acquiring some of this position from the association. Finally, real repositioning involves developing new or changing existing products or services so they better align with the desired position, in this case Australian cities as settings for memorable experiences in nature. The typology of potentially memorable city-based experiences in nature for the Chinese market as shown in Figure 1 may contribute to all of these but mainly focuses on psychological repositioning: changing perceptions of what cities have to offer in the way of memorable NBT experiences.

Referring to Figure 1, nature-based experiences in cities can be experiences in nature (nature as backdrop), experiences about nature (nature as the attraction) and/or experiences for nature (green tourism). There are experiences currently on offer that fall into these categories, however, presenting these as part of a conceptual framework helps to draw attention to gaps and opportunities to develop experiential components that can supplement or improve on current offerings. The following paragraphs discuss the typology in a general way as well as provide illustrations of its applicability to Chinese visitors to Australia.
Figure 1 Typology of Potentially Memorable City-based Experiences in Nature for the Chinese Market

<table>
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<th>A</th>
<th>NATURE AS BACKDROP</th>
<th>= experiences in nature</th>
<th>mainly passive</th>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>ATTRACTIONS-BASED</td>
<td>= experiences about nature</td>
<td>passive or active</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>GREEN-FOCUSED</td>
<td>= experiences for nature</td>
<td>mainly active</td>
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*low yield, high volume  
*high yield, low volume

### Experiences with nature as backdrop

**Requirements:**
- Environment that is perceived as high quality by the market, including air, water, climate, vegetation density, cleanliness

**Experiential components:**
- Breathing fresh air AND
- Viewing water (beaches, lakes, rivers) AND
- Viewing built heritage
- Coach-based, cruise-based or self-drive
- Local festival/event

### Nature-based experiences at attractions such as zoos, botanic gardens and city parks

**Requirements:**
- As in A, plus
- One or more nature-based attractions

**Experiential components:**
- As in A, plus
- Interpretive experiences AND/OR
- Low-level physical activities and group-oriented experiences AND/OR
- Wildlife-based experiences

### Environmentally responsible nature-based tourist experiences

**Requirements:**
- As in B, plus
- Green-label accommodation, restaurants and transportation

**Experiential components:**
- Experiences that engage with local community in a positive way AND/OR
- Activities that foster support and protection of heritage AND/OR
- Activities that are pro-conservation - toward wildlife, nature and environment
Firstly, experiences in nature can use nature as a backdrop, for example, organised scenic city tours. This approach is currently popular with inbound Chinese tour operators in Australia because it is generally high volume, low cost and relatively easy, with stops typically at places such as scenic outlooks, beaches and public parks that involve no extra costs for operators. This is what Li (2011) describes as “no-attraction tourism”, and if these experiences fulfil the expectations of Chinese tourists for good air quality, water quality, weather, vegetation density and cleanliness (Li, 2011; Zhu & Yao, 2008; Zheng & Yan, 2013), then they should help create positive memories. These can be further enhanced by the opportunity to see water (rivers, lakes and beach) (Sun & Gong, 2008; Gao, Zhang, & Zhuang, 2009) and heritage buildings and to hear heritage stories (Li, 2011; Sun & Gong, 2008), the latter of which are largely absent from Australian itineraries. Chinese visitors typically want to see and hear the cultural, historical and religious elements of what they are seeing. As noted in Box A of Figure 1, opportunities such as cruise and boat-based touring, self-drive options and experiencing a local festival or event in a natural setting are also experiences that could add novelty, local cultural content, and engagement, thus contributing to memorable experiences.

Secondly, experiences about nature (Box B) centre on nature-based attractions in cities such as zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens and city parks, some of which are experienced by Chinese tourists to Australia (Zhu & Yao, 2008). In fact, zoos could be the ideal places for Chinese to see animals, since Chinese report a dislike for seeing animals in the wild (Packer et al., 2014), however, there seems to be very limited engagement with Australia’s many high quality city-based zoos. These nature-based attractions need to be able to meet the expectations of Chinese visitors highlighted in Box A (quality air, water, vegetation, etc.) but need to go beyond this if they are to be truly experiences about nature. Experiential components might include interpretive activities or presentations about nature and heritage (Ma, Su, & Han, 2008) via guides (for package tours) and possibly mobile applications/on-site interpretation signs in Chinese. Again, Chinese visitors want to hear the culture, history and religious connotations of these attractions, yet the focus needs to be on affective engagement and involvement rather than cognitive learning. Low-level physical activities and group-oriented programs such as walking, cycling, golfing as well as water-based activities such as rowing, paddling, surfing, diving and fishing (Tourism Australia, 2014b) are also likely to appeal to many Chinese based on their health benefits and could well enhance memorability. All of this, of course, requires that operators incorporate attractions (many of which have entry fees) into their tours and allow more time to be spent at these attractions, so that visitors can engage in nature-based activities while there, as opposed to just shopping.

Thirdly, experiences for nature such as ecotourism may be a possibility for some segments of the Chinese inbound market. Green-city tourism, or environmentally responsible tourism that includes green-label accommodation, restaurants and transportation could be promoted among Chinese tourists (Sun & Gong, 2008). Green-focused tourism (Box C) requires that all the elements outlined in the previous experiences need to be present, e.g. high quality natural environments, the opportunity to affectively and physically engage, and heritage and cultural content. These experiences however go a step further in fostering support and protection of heritage and the natural environment, for example, they may include active engagement with community or conservation-based projects. As such, they require a greater commitment (time and probably money) from the visitor. As such, green-focused tourism tends to be higher yield but lower volume, it would not be for the majority of the current Chinese market.
It is worth reiterating here that a typology of experiences is appropriate. The Chinese market is far too heterogeneous to be accommodated by a one-size-fits-all approach to nature-based tourism and to urban-based NBT.

As the foregoing discussion illustrates, different levels of attention and effort are needed in each of the three categories to reposition cities as settings for nature-based experiences for the Chinese market. The first two require mainly *psychological repositioning*, i.e. changing tour operators’ and tourists’ perceptions of cities as settings for memorable nature-based experiences. In Box A, increasing the opportunities for spending time in nature as a backdrop may be all that is needed to reposition the image of Australian cities as places to experience nature, although there is scope for some value-adding, particularly around waterscapes and heritage content. As for Box B, experiences *about nature*, Australian cities could capitalise far more on their nature-based attractions. In many cases, this requires that tour operators include entrance fees and other costs such as recreational equipment hire into their tours. There could be some *associative repositioning* occurring here, i.e. aligning Chinese tours with attractions and products that are already perceived as nature-based experiences. Finally, Australian cities are doing very little in providing experience *for nature*. In this case, *real repositioning* (developing new or changing existing products or services so they better align with positioning Australian cities as settings for memorable experiences in nature) is needed here. More market research to underpin product (experience) development would be required to ensure they lead to memorable NBT experiences for the Chinese market.

**Conclusions**

This paper draws primarily on academic and grey literature about the Chinese holiday travel market to Australia, and is meant to provoke thoughts and actions for delivering memorable nature-based experiences in cities targeting mainly the group package tour market but also independent Chinese travellers. The discussion points out the distinctive Chinese gaze towards NBT and outlines constraints and opportunities for Chinese NBT experiences. That said, only a limited amount of Chinese literature was found to inform what Chinese tourists expect and want of their nature-based travel experiences, and there is much to be gained by more research being undertaken by Chinese scholars through a Chinese cultural lens. We know that the Chinese perspective is to treat the human/nature landscape as contiguous, and this needs to continue to be acknowledged and embraced by product developers, marketers and researchers. This paper adds further clarity, breadth and depth to what constitutes a nature-based tourism experience for segments of the Chinese market, particularly in urban settings. It also presents strategies that potentially can be used by any urban tourism destination seeking to attract the Chinese market and deliver memorable NBT experiences.

All tourists seek, and arguably deserve, memorable experiences. In the case of the current Chinese package tourist market, the expectation of a nature-based experience in Australia is strong, and this needs attention regardless of the low-yield high-volume nature of this market. Tourists who choose a tour based largely on its low price still expect and deserve to have a memorable experience, thus it is important to market and deliver these tours in ways that foster positive feelings and pleasure, and where possible to include elements such as surprise, novelty, local culture/distinctiveness and involvement/engagement to enhance memorability.

Realistically, the itineraries of Chinese package tours to Australia are short, fast-paced and spatially limited, with much time spent in Australian cities, thus providing memorable nature-
based experience in cities may be a solution to the disconnect between what Chinese tourists want and expect from their tours and what they get on most tours. The dominant travel mode of package travel on tight timelines and tight budgets may eventually shift as new markets gain momentum. Until such time, Australian cities would do well to position themselves as destinations for memorable nature-based experiences and use this position as a distinctive strategy to attract and satisfy Chinese visitors.

Less is known about the travel patterns of the newly emerging independent travel market. Although the travel modes of package tourists and independent tourists differ, they appear to share many of the same constraints, motivations, expectations and perceptions of Australia in relation to nature-based experiences (Tourism Australia, 2014a). Limited research suggests that current Chinese independent travellers may differ from their counterparts in terms of expenditure and preferred activities (South Australian Tourism Commission, 2013). It seems that independent Chinese travellers are more likely to be looking for experiences about nature and for nature (Boxes B and C in Figure 1) rather than being satisfied with experiences in nature (Box A). For this market, it will be important to introduce choice and free time, access to reliable travel information (Li, 2011), and infrastructure that is easily accessible and easy to pay for (Zheng & Yan, 2013). It might be important to include Chinese-language on-site interpretation, although for many, mobile applications might be more appropriate. Some of these observations may also be applicable to the burgeoning Chinese visiting friends and relatives market and the business travel market, but research is needed to determine this.

It may be tempting to conclude from Figure 1 that the development and marketing of individual NBT experiences is the key to sustaining and growing the Chinese tourist market. What Figure 1 does not convey, however, is that the sum of any visitor’s travel experience, and therefore its memorability, is greater than its parts. While one individual NBT experience either in a city or elsewhere may be more memorable than another, the overall memorability of the experience, i.e. an experience positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred, stands on what is collectively delivered. It is thus important not to neglect the fundamentals of the tour product (value-for-money, length, timing, transportation, accommodation, food, customer service, etc.) including addressing current problems associated with commission-based tours. It is equally important not to abandon what is currently “right” about the product being delivered. Regarding the latter, many Chinese tourists are highly satisfied with their nature-based experiences outside cities and, where time and budgets permit, these should continue. However, these seem too few and too short in relation to the total length of the tour, and so by supplementing these with high quality NBT experiences in cities where Chinese package tourists spend most of their time, memorability can be further enhanced.
References


### Appendix 1 Sample Itinerary of a Chinese Package Tour to Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Attraction</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>China – Sydney</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Royal Botanic Garden</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs Macquarie’s Chair</td>
<td>5-10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hyde Park</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>St Mary’s Cathedral</td>
<td>10 – 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Darling Harbour Cruise</td>
<td>1.5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bondi Beach</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 3</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Blue Mountains</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 4</td>
<td>Sydney – Melbourne</td>
<td>St Patrick Cathedral</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Captain Cook’s Cottage</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flinders Station</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Braunschweig</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Royal Botanic Garden</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 5</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Great Ocean Road</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 6</td>
<td>Melbourne – Cairns</td>
<td>Rainforest</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 7</td>
<td>Cairns</td>
<td>Green Island</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 8</td>
<td>Cairns – Brisbane – Gold Coast</td>
<td>Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mt Coot-tha Botanic Gardens</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Surfers Paradise</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 9</td>
<td>Gold Coast – Brisbane</td>
<td>Movie World</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paradise Farm</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 10</td>
<td>Brisbane – China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- Appendix 1 shows a translated copy, original itinerary was sourced from http://www.cits.cn/outboundgroup/04001460479.html
- N/A: not available