Chinese donkey friends in Tibet: evidence from the cyberspace community

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide insights into Chinese backpacking tourism in Tibet. Chinese backpackers, referred to as “donkey friends” in China, are distinctively Generation Y born in the 80s and 90s. They grew up at a time when China shifted political power to Deng Xiaoping’s explorations with capitalism and greater openness. Aided in part by the diffusion of the Internet and web-based donkey friend associations, backpacking flourished in China. Through a virtual ethnography of a leading Internet travel forum, it has been found that Tibet appeals to Chinese backpackers mainly because of its natural environment. Backpackers in Tibet emphasize the “donkey friend” spirit and self-actualization as an important part of their trip. There is a gap between supply and demand for donkey friend travel in Tibet, particularly in terms of accommodation facilities. Attention should also be paid to managing the relationship between the local community and backpackers.
INTRODUCTION

Backpacking represents a particular travel style of budget accommodation, longer holidays, itinerary flexibility, meeting with other travellers and involvement in participatory activities (Loker-Murphy, 1997; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Pearce & Foster, 2007). Backpacking has also been described as involving practices of freedom, adventure, self-transformation and rites of passage (Ong & du Cros, 2012). In a Western context, backpacking tourism has been an important topic that received substantial attention from both academic as well as practitioners and interest in this area is still growing (Binder, Richards, & Wilson, 2004; Iaquinto, 2012; Teo & Leong, 2006; Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, 2002). After initial preoccupation with backpacking tourism in Western countries, attention has expanded to include such travels in developing economies and fast-expanding urban spaces in Asia. Cohen (2004) once called for widening the scope of the emerging backpacking markets from non-western countries, and taking into account the historical and social contexts in which backpacking takes place. Such studies “would enable us to formulate a comparative framework relating the crucial experiences of the youths in their different countries of origin” (Cohen, 2004, p. 56).

In China, backpacking is becoming more popular and research on backpacking is increasing. The literature on Chinese backpacking encompasses a wide range of areas from Chinese backpacking in postcolonial spaces of Macau (Ong & du Cros, 2012); the role of the internet in the rise of the backpacking community (Lim, 2009; Zhang, 2008); cultural preservation issues raised from backpacking travel in Tibet (Shepherd, 2008); the development of a scale to measure backpackers’ personal development (Chen, Bao, & Huang, 2013a); and segmentation of backpackers by travel motivations (Chen, Bao, & Huang, 2013b).
As a subgroup of global backpackers, Chinese backpackers appear to share common characteristics of global backpackers, for example, budget travel and the desire for self-development, but they also have characteristics that make them somewhat distinct. For example, Chinese backpackers have been found to frequently engage in cultural and adventure tourism by decentralized, independent but interconnected websites (Lim, 2009; Ong & du Cros, 2012). Moreover, a seemingly more cultural driven phrase “donkey friends” has been widely used to denote Chinese backpackers. In Mandarin, “donkey” sounds similar to the word “travel” and the way that backpackers carry huge haversacks has been described as being much like donkeys carrying goods (Lim, 2009). The term “donkey friends” is used in this paper to refer to Chinese backpackers.

Chinese outbound tourism still remains a tightly regulated phenomenon. Since very few countries grant individual visas to Chinese tourists, it is very hard for Chinese to travel independently and (most donkey friends still travel within China. Even though there is no official record of the top backpacking destinations in China; Tibet seems to be at or near the top of donkey friends’ list. Researchers have acknowledged the great increase in tourism in Tibet and its potential to continue in the future (e.g. Su & Wall, 2009). Nonetheless, a review of studies shows while interests in backpacking in China are growing, there is a scarcity of research. Very little is known about backpacking in Tibet. Thus this paper seeks to provide insights into backpacking tourism in Tibet by Chinese donkey friends. First, a background to the research and a review of relevant literature on Chinese backpacking are presented. With the literature gap identified, the discursive spaces of the Tibet section of a key Chinese backpacking forum on cyberspace are analysed. This approach builds on the burgeoning interest in ethnographies of the Internet in social science research (Jang, Terry, & Le, 2013; McKenzie, 2012; Steinmetz, 2012) and the popularity of travel forums among donkey friends.
(Shepherd, 2008; Zhang, 2008). The findings are discussed in the context of previous studies and theories and the paper concludes with implications and directions for further research.

BACKGROUND

Policy and Social Changes

China’s domestic tourism did not develop until a couple of decades ago. Previously, the tourism industry was stifled due to social unrest and political restrictions. The communist regime under Mao Zedong restricted freedom of travel by Chinese Nationals (Shepherd, 2008). In the 1970s, control over the movement of residents began to erode and economic development radically transformed economic production and altered social relationships (Lin, Cai, & Li, 2003). Travel for both pleasure and for economic necessity is closely connected with this break down of the state’s control of space and institutional limits to citizens’ ability to move (Sofield & Li, 1998).

The Chinese government also introduced long public holidays to encourage travel. In the 1990s, the ‘Golden Weeks’ were launched, resulting in three week-long public holiday periods a year (October 1 National Day, May 1 Labour Day and the Lunar New Year Spring Festival). These long holidays have resulted in a “revolution in Chinese leisure” (Nyíri, 2011), which manifest in a number of ways ranging from lifestyles and consumption styles to worldviews. It is now common to hear slogans in Mandarin encouraging travel such as “work hard and play hard” and “spend all your money on the road” (Zhang, 2008).

Finally, the emergence of backpacking in China can be considered a response to a rapidly changing society (Lim, 2009; Ong & du Cros, 2012). The tremendous transformation that has accompanied the shift from a planned economy to a market oriented economy system, has included rapid and significant sociocultural changes. Chinese Generation Y grew up during
the rise of capitalism and the retreat of socialism, as political power shifted from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s (Halliday, 1980; Smith, 1993; Wang, 2003). Deng Xiaoping’s reform programs since the late 1970s put China on the path towards a market economy and greater openness. Moreover, the post-Mao one-child policy has resulted in those born in the late 80s and 90s in urban China growing up as the only child in the family, receiving all attention and love from their parents and grandparents, but at the same time relatively isolated from their peers (Short & Fengying, 1998). Young people in China, like their counterparts in the West, feel uncertainty about the fast changing society; consequently, feelings of confusion, anxiety and doubts about themselves and the future arise (Chen et al., 2013b).

Moreover, China’s tremendous changes have resulted in a “trust crisis” (mainly from the imperfect legal system) as well as a sense of isolation and deficient socialization among the younger generation (Rosen, 2009; Wang, 2003). Under such circumstances, the demand for self-cognition (knowing oneself better and testing oneself), self-improvement (improving personal skills and developing personal capacity), and social interaction have been growing in the society, especially among Chinese youth (Chen et al., 2013b; Lim, 2009). Backpacking may offer one avenue for meeting the need for social interaction, in-depth travel experience and self-cognition (Chen et al., 2013b). *The Tibet Fascination*

Portrayed in popular media and in school textbooks as a beautiful, mountainous, cold, harsh and primitive environment where religious people live, Tibet was once a place of isolation, harmony and peace (Mercille, 2005). Beginning in 1951, it was assaulted by Maoist attempts to destroy its cultural and spiritual uniqueness (Snellgrove & Richardson, 1968). The opening up of Tibet to Chinese tourists was triggered by the establishment of a direct rail link between Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. With onward rail
connections from Xining to major cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou, Tibet is now a “practical reality” for millions of Chinese (Lim, 2009).

Now Tibet is confronted with large numbers of tourists, mostly backpackers (Adams, 1996). Because of the size of Tibet, the region’s few urban centres and the rudimentary road system, tourist arrivals have been mostly limited to the Lhasa region. In the Tibetan quarter of Lhasa, a growing number of small hotels and cafes that once catered for foreign backpackers are now hosting donkey friends. For donkey friends, Tibet and Tibetans, which were considered dirty, superstitious and dangerous by some, are now regarded as exotic, spiritual, authentic and mystical (Lim, 2009).

Cyberspace Backpacking Community

The rapid growth of China’s tourism has occurred in conjunction with the expansion of Internet use in China. The emergence of the Chinese backpacking community cannot be separated from the proliferation of travel websites and forums. Those born post 80s and 90s, who mainly constitute travellers known as “donkey friends”, have been characterised by their extensive use of the Internet (Rosen, 2009). The strong state control over the public media has also spurred Chinese citizens to rely more on the Internet for information as well as for the formation of social groupings (Damm & Thomas, 2006; Giese, 2004; Hughes & Wacker, 2003).

Donkey friend tourism would not be the phenomenon it is today if not for the prevalence of the Internet. Bulletin boards and community forums have become places where donkey friends initiate trips, post trip stories and socialize (Lim, 2009; Zhang, 2008). Donkey friends write travelogues recording their itineraries and sharing their personal feelings, sensational stories, memorable moments and sometimes their descriptions of team members.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a review of relevant literature in Chinese Generation Y, who mainly constitute Chinese backpackers; travel motivations, particularly of Chinese Generation Y; and the role of the Internet for this market segment. This review of the literature establishes the conceptual background to the study and the rationale for its focus, both of which are revisited in the discussion of the findings.

Chinese Generation Y and Donkey Friends

In contrast to the dominant characterization of backpackers as mainly young and non-institutionalized drifters based on Western studies (Loker-Murphy, 1997; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995), donkey friends represent a case from a group of highly-educated, largely urban-based, upwardly mobile young people who are among the chief beneficiaries of China’s recent socio-economic development (Lim, 2009). Chinese generation Y and particularly the generation born in the 80s and 90s make up the majority of those who travel as Chinese backpacking tourists.

As the first generation of sedentary “coach potatoes”, typified as being addicted to online games, American fast food and Hollywood movies (Rosen, 2009), Chinese Generation Y are said to have fuelled the spread of middle-class aspirations and consumption patterns (Wang, 2005). This generation has also been considered to possess a materialistic and self-centred “me-culture”. It is common to find them under attack from media and academia for being rebellious, cynical, pragmatic, self-centred and equality-obsessed (Rosen, 2009; Sabet, 2011; Sima & Pugsley, 2010).

No comparative studies between Chinese backpackers and Western backpackers have been identified, however, studies on Chinese backpackers suggest that donkey friends demonstrate
some “Chinese” characteristics (e.g. Lim, 2009; Ong du Cros, 2012, Chen et al., 2013b). Firstly, donkey friend travel is a predominately web-based phenomenon and particular linguistic as well as behavioural codes are used in this community (Lim, 2009, Ong du Cros, 2012). Secondly, Chen et al. (2013b) found that donkey friends’ travel motivations, especially social interaction and self-actualization are similar to those identified in previous Western studies. Thirdly, according to Shepherd (2008), the experience of donkey friends travelling in Tibet is different from the idealized experience of Western travellers, who are promised both complete differences and the means of identifying with this differentiated subject. Specifically, Western backpackers may want to experience the “difference”, fantasize about being like locals and engage in local activities, while donkey friends have no intention to be involved in local community. The characteristics of Chinese backpackers will be discussed in the following sections.

While studies focused on different geographic locations reveal commonalities and differences in backpacking, it is the cultural and national specificities that make backpacking a diverse experience. Ong and du Cros (2012) found that socialization between donkey friends is gender biased, which is shaped by Confucian ideology commonly interpreted as Chinese traditions. Male and female backpackers are expected to fulfil their gender roles.

**Travel Motivations of Donkey Friends**

Backpackers’ travel motivation includes what makes backpackers travel and what makes people choose backpacking as a way of travel (Chen et al., 2013b). Chen et al. (2013b) identified four factors in Chinese backpackers’ travel motivation dimensions: social interaction, self-actualization, destination experience and escape and relaxation. These dimensions are discussed as the basis for travel motivations of Chinese Generation Y.
many ways, travel motivations, especially social interaction and self-actualization, are similar to those identified in Western studies (Loker-Murphy, 1997; Maoz, 2007; Ross, 1997).

Firstly, among the travelling motivations identified by Chen et al. (2013b), social interaction is also reflected in Ong and du Cros (2012)’s observation of donkey friends’ online interactions. Most donkey friends have been found having tendencies towards self-expression and identity exhibition as well as seeking socializations (Ong & du Cros, 2010). Specifically, donkey friends reaffirm and acknowledge each other’s sense of adventure and backpacking style. In other cases, donkey friends seek new friends directly, initiating new trips and calling for travel mates. Backpacking serves as an outlet for socialization and close friendships, sometimes even romances (Chen et al., 2013b; Ong & du Cros, 2012).

Secondly, self-actualization, as identified by Chen et al. (2013b), is considered a critical component in previous studies on backpacking (e.g. Chen et al., 2013a), and particularly studies on backpacking in Tibet/China (e.g. Kolås, 2004; Lim, 2009; Shepherd, 2008). Without convenient transportation and comfortable hotels, donkey friends expect to deal with Tibet’s backward development, the rudimentary road system and the imperfect infrastructure. In Shepherd (2008)’s interviews with donkey friends travelling to Tibet, one claimed to “have learned about the real social situation” and “improved her capabilities” from backpacking. On the other hand, Lim (2009) and Kolås (2004) explained backpackers’ fascination with Tibet in terms of the relationship between self and nature. Urban young Chinese, mostly Han majority, visit Tibet to cultivate the ‘I’ in their identity, engaging in the paradoxical process of ‘finding themselves’ among strangers by literally finding themselves through travel (Shepherd, 2008).

Thirdly, destination experience, especially experiencing local culture, is no doubt a critical component in backpacking. Ong and du Cros (2012) found that Macau, with its Portuguese
and Catholic heritage, is gazed upon as a cultural other by donkey friends. Similarly, Tibetan culture and society may make Tibet an exotic destination. A Chinese travel writer explained why urban people wanted to go to Tibet:

‘superstitious’ was a derogatory word to describe people 30 years ago, now it mostly likely means so-called diversity of culture, which attracts people from all over China. Why? Because they all think, dream, dress, eat, play in the same way, so seeing differences is cool … (personal communication cited in Shepherd, 2008, p. 262).

Now most tourists to Tibet put viewing religious elements like temples, Lamas, and worshiping rites on their must-see list.

Finally, the dimension escape and relaxation has been discussed as a travelling motivation of donkey friends in Tibet. For example, Kolås (2004) argued that donkey friends think of Tibet as a place not to confirm their superiority, but to find what they have lost or for something they have never experienced, which is called a “nostalgia rejuvenation”. The environment of Tibet makes it a good place for urban Chinese to escape from daily routine and relax. Tibet is viewed as a “real spiritual palace” and Tibetans are considered “real people” who know mystical and magical things (Shepherd, 2008). A donkey friend from Shepherd’s (2008) interview claimed that he went to Tibet to see these people in their own place and to experience nature because he considered Tibet to be a cleaner place than where he lives.

Understanding Donkey Friends in Cyberspace

Recently, online platforms (blogs and forum posts) have been increasingly utilized in understanding tourist motivations, tourist decision making and destination experience in tourism studies (Bosangit, McCabe, & Hibbert, 2009; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Some studies have noted the usefulness of online platforms in studying backpackers in general (e.g.
Enoch & Grossman, 2010), and donkey friends in particular (Chen et al., 2013a; Lim, 2009; Ong & du Cros, 2012). Donkey friends have been found to depend on cyberspace interactions in backpacking forums to help plan activities, and foster community spirit and teamwork in real space, with a distinctive code of ethos and language (Lim, 2009; Ong & du Cros, 2012; Shepherd, 2008; Wah, 2009). By posting travelogues and reading those of others, donkey friends discover a new world in which they are no longer by themselves, but among a legion of people who share common ideas, values and goals. They are eager to find like-minded friends to exchange information and share experiences (Zhang, 2008). This online community of backpacking can be traced to the popular internet travel forums of the late 1990s. The Mill Forum of Sina.com is one example of a group of young people who discuss travel-related issues and exchanged information on the forum. It was in this particular forum that the various Chinese neologisms for backpacking and independent travel such as donkey friends first emerged (Lim, 2009).

The importance and uniqueness of Generation Y Chinese as a travel market segment, together with the burgeoning growth of donkey friends travel to Tibet, underpins the need for further research on this distinct market segment and phenomenon. Given their propensity to use and even dependence on the Internet as a decision-making tool and as part of the experience itself, there is both a need and an opportunity to explore this phenomenon through an analysis of online forums used by donkey friends. The present paper uses this opportunity to address the gap and to contribute to current Chinese backpacking literature through providing insights into Chinese backpacking tourism in Tibet.

**STUDY METHODS**

In the past decade, researchers have revealed the usefulness of tourism forums and online diaries as data sources. For example, tourism blogs and forums have been used as research
materials to understand tourists’ characteristics, motivations and preferences (Carson, 2008), to document their use as facilitators for tourists’ travel planning (Sharda & Ponnada, 2008) and to examine social media as a vehicle for human interactions (Thevenot, 2007). Furthermore, recent research on donkey friends shows that the Internet, through the development of Web 2.0, which supports social media networking platforms, provides opportunities to form cyber communities (Lim, 2009; Sparks & Pan, 2009). Given the extensive use of the Internet by Generation Y in China and the mutually constitutive nature of cyberspace interactions, the cyberspace seems to be a good platform for donkey friend tourism research (Hughes & Wacker, 2003; Ong & du Cros, 2012). This paper builds upon such endeavours and looks upon the tourism cyberspace forum as a representational space for observing experience, communications and interactions among donkey friends in Tibet.

To help probe the qualitative aspects of Chinese backpacking and practices of such a niche form of tourism, this study focused on the textual aspects of one such online forum. Such “distanced virtual ethnographic approach” (Morton, 2001) has been used by Ong and du Cros (2012) to study donkey friends in Macau. Moreover, Chinese have been argued to be articulate people who are likely to alter and censor (intentionally or unintentionally) their responses when they are conscious of being researched (Rosen, 2004, 2009). Thus, the advantage of using a distanced virtual ethnography approach lies in its ability to reveal insights that are less likely to be altered or biased as a result of researcher influence. Ethically, internet forums are public domains where research can be conducted without the need to request permission or access private or sensitive materials. This lack of disclosure may help facilitate the revelation of Chinese tourists, in this case Generation Y donkey friends, at their most candid state (Ong & du Cros, 2012).

However, not all Chinese travel forums are active and some are created by people with marketing interest rather than those who are genuine in sharing travel information. The Mill
*Forum* (Mofang) was chosen for this study, as it is a long established and pioneering travel forum. The *Mill Forum* was first set up in 2000 in Shenzhen by a group of travellers who were formerly active in the travel forum at Sina.com. It was set up by real tourists, not marketers, and there is a considerable amount of information sharing and interactions in the community. Other researchers have also mentioned or used this forum as an important cyber community for donkey friends (e.g. Lim, 2009; Ong & du Cros, 2012; Zhang, 2008). The forum has an active Tibet section where groups of regular backpackers discuss, initiate contact and share stories of their trips to Tibet.

One of the authors logged on and observed the interactions online five times a week from 1\textsuperscript{st} November 2013 to 1\textsuperscript{st} March 2014. The threads in the Tibet section were sorted by the latest reply. To help achieve saturation, data were collected over a period of five weeks until no new information emerged. 185 threads were used in this research. The texts articulated were copied, coded and annotated. Thematic analysis was used to analyse key themes within the data-set (Patton, 2005; Silverman, 2013). Instead of looking for frequencies or occurrences, the use of thematic analysis facilitated a focus on tracing and understanding the meanings social actors (in this case Generation Y donkey friends) inscribe to objects, ideas, events, encounters and interactions (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

First, the authors worked on ‘discovering themes’ (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This was done by following patterns of meanings that formed during the time of observation and reading and re-reading field notes. The postings were read and re-read until the meaning emerged. Second, a process of ‘winnowing themes to a manageable few’ was conducted to identify which themes are important for this research, as Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest. Third, the selected themes were recorded in a codebook. The authors then worked on a hierarchy of themes and reflected on the ways in which these build into or construct concepts and theories.
The limitations of the sampling and methods need to be acknowledged. Even though theoretical saturation was achieved at the time of research, there is no evidence that the data is representative of the broad Chinese backpacking community in Tibet beyond the sampling period. In particular, tourism supply and government policies change over time, and these can have an impact on the tourist experience. Replication of the study and the addition of other data sources and methods are discussed more fully in the conclusion of the paper.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

From thematic and discursive analysis of the texts articulated by the forum participants, five themes emerged: travel motivations of donkey friends, the appeal of Tibet’s exotic environment and culture, the donkey friends’ travel experience, the gap between demand and supply, and building and maintaining community. These five themes are discussed in the following sections and illustrated with excerpts from forum entries, and in some cases with links to previous studies and relevant theories. Those postings and the comments are as they appear on the travel forum site. Pseudonym names in capital letters (e.g. A, B, C, D…) instead of actual online usernames are used

*Travel Motivations*

The literature has identified a range of backpacker travel motivations (e.g. Loker-Murphy, 1997) including *donkey friends’ travel motivations* (Chen et al., 2013b). Among four travel motivation dimensions in Chen et al.’s (2013b) study, two (self-actualization and destination experience) are well reflected in forum entries. First, many forum entries show donkey friends’ *desire for self-cognition and self-improvement*. Tibet has been pictured as a clean and primitive place where people can find out “the real me”. Forum participants also appear to believe that the experience of working out things in a group and socializing with other donkey friends can contribute to self-improvement. What A writes is a good example:
A: “find an excuse to travel, to experience nature and find out the real me. Being away from home feels so real and the pictures from the trip prove you did exist and had the ‘adventure’!” (October 2010)

A’s reference to “proving you exist” and “finding out the real me” are good examples of donkey friends’ desire for self-cognition. Some donkey friends even describe Tibet as a place that can “clean the soul”. There are also forum entries expressing donkey friends’ expectations to “develop oneself”, mostly in terms of capability and skill, which are sub-dimensions of Chen et al.’s (2013a) backpackers’ personal development scale. In addition, “being a real donkey friend” and the “donkey friend spirit” are mentioned frequently. Typical “donkey friend” attributes include toughness, frugality, and a sense of fellowship (Zhang, 2008); they carry only as much as they need, have dinner together after the trip, choose to walk instead of taking a bus for a few stops and try to find the best bargains (e.g. restaurants, hostels). This donkey friend spirit seems to be discussed by forum participants to show donkey friends’ desire for self-improvement, particularly in terms of capabilities to resolve problems, communicate and intensifying self-discipline and self-control, as discussed in Chen et al. (2013a)

Second, some of what Chen et al. (2013b) identified under motivations relating to the donkey friends destination experience was reflected in forum entries. Specifically, understanding a destination’s culture, history and society is mentioned frequently. However, forum participants generally do not seem to be interested in communicating with the locals or experiencing the local way of life. The natural environment of Tibet and Tibetan attractions are the most frequently cited reasons for travelling to Tibet. For example, B writes: “I always wanted to go to Tibet, to experience nature and enjoy the clean environment…” (June, 2011). Some forum participants express their desire to see some scenic spots such as the Potala Palace in Lhasa. However, very few forum entries mention Tibetan culture or experiencing
the local way of life. Donkey friends’ relatively superficial expectations are different to the idealized view of travel that previous studies report as being prevalent among Western backpackers, who prefer to look “local” and engage in local activities (Muzaini, 2006). There is no evidence in the online forum that donkey friends want to transcend their positions as observing subjects and enter a backstage of a more authentic zone of Tibetan culture. Shepherd (2008) reported similar findings from interviewing donkey friends in Tibet: one donkey friend said “I’m not Tibetan. How could I look like them?” Another boy laughed “I don’t understand anything they say! … Why would I want to?”

Finally, very few forum entries discussed social interaction as well as escape and relaxation as travel motivations; rather, these two aspects are described more as incidental experiences. For example, some donkey friends post group photos with introductions of people in the photos and how they met each other during the trip. It seems that even though social interaction as well as escape and relaxation are not stated motivations for travelling to Tibet, they are part of the donkey friends’ experience, as will be discussed later in the paper.

*Exotic Tibetan Environment and Culture*

Even though Tibet is a part of China, there is strong evidence in the travel forum threads that donkey friends perceive Tibet as an exotic destination. As Shepherd (2008) noted, Tibet appeals to backpackers because of the experiential differences from their normative experience, both in terms of physical terms and social life. It seems that these urban residents come to Tibet not to confirm their superiority, or cultivate already existing social ties, but to experience something they do not have. Indeed, the uniqueness of Tibet helps shape donkey friends’ experience. Specifically, forum entries describe the environment and some cultural events/customs.
First, online forum participants appreciate Tibet for its natural and primitive environment, which contrasts with metropolises where donkey friends usually reside. C writes the following displaying some photos:

The weather was nice and the view was stunning: blue and clear sky; clouds looked like pearls and seemed reachable. [picture of sky] We even saw wild Tibetan cattle!!! [picture of cattle] From the size and hair we could tell they were wild and even the locals were excited! (posted by C, October 2010).

What C posted is similar to the findings of Shepherd’s (2008) interview with some donkey friends, who considered Tibet to be a cleaner place, not yet modern, still traditional (personal interview, June 2007 cited in Shepherd, 2008). Some donkey friends also post pictures of buildings, streets and Tibetans with descriptions. A donkey friend D describes the “Tibetan style” with a picture of the street:

This looks so Tibetan, not like what I’ve seen in Guangzhou at all. What a relaxing world! Walking through streets in Lhasa, I saw Tibetans chatting with each other, having afternoon tea, even snoozing (posted by D, October 2010).

D’s surprise and excitement are likely to come from the difference between the relaxing lifestyle of Tibet and the high-paced modern life of industrialized and modern cities like Guangzhou. Following this, there were many forum entries describing the “differences”, from natural environment to lifestyles.

Second, to many donkey friends who are nearly all ethnic Han, the unique culture (i.e. Tibetan and Buddhism culture) appears to make Tibet an exotic and primitive place and Tibetans “real people” to them. While some donkey friends describe witnessing Tibetan events such as worshipping Buddha, Tibetan group dancing and Lamas’ ceremonies, other
donkey friends report visiting sites of events of cultural or historic significance. With some background knowledge, at least some donkey friends seem to be able to gain a level of empathy with the people, events or Tibetan customs. One forum entry is particularly illustrative. Drawing upon the images, E writes about her experience in the site for celestial burial (a traditional Tibetan funeral practice in which the body of a dead person is exposed to the open air to be eaten by vultures):

*I saw many of the stones covered by clothes, then I realized we were at the site of celestial burial. This is serious and somehow terrifying... [pictures of stones covered by clothes] we were all touched and I even left my jacket there... this is something we can only see in Tibet (posted by E, August 2010).*

Even though E did not have a chance to witness the celestial burial, what she saw seems to have impressed her. Her feelings (e.g. terrifying) are not only from what she saw, but also from the stories behind the scenes. This indicates that E knows something about Tibetan culture and customs, at least about celestial burial and it shaped her experience. Moreover, E’s act of leaving her jacket seems to be an indication of behaviour to facilitate a deeper cultural immersion. However, very few forum entries describe donkey friends’ participation in local activities. Instead, most descriptions are written from an outsider’s perspective, recounting relatively superficial encounters with the local culture or host populations and with no active engagement or participation.

*The Donkey Friend Experience*

There is a large number of forum entries sharing the *donkey friend experience* and describing specific incidents. The three categories of discussion include 1) travelling to and travelling in Tibet, 2) finding meals and accommodation and 3) dealing with emergencies.
First, because of the rudimentary road system and weather conditions, backpackers are not able to travel in a typical “donkey friend” way (e.g. cycling or walking). Forum entries show that taking a train seems to be the most popular way to get into Tibet. However, donkey friends do not seem to be proud of this way of travelling. For example, a backpacker A describes her train ride to Lhasa as “too comfortable” and “not donkey friend like at all”. After getting into Tibet, donkey friends seem to prefer exploring remote and primitive areas. Since there are no buses or walking paths, it appears most donkey friends rent a car or self-drive. F wrote about the car his group rented:

*We did not want to spend big money to show off, instead, we wanted to find a car of good price and quality, suitable for driving in mountainous areas to have the ultimate experience ... (posted by F, 28 October, 2011).*

Zhu (2007) also found that Chinese backpackers tend to use relatively luxurious transport such as self-drive and a rented car. In the case of backpacking in Tibet, the choice of luxurious transportation is almost always due to lack of choice and thus donkey friends do not seem to consider this as contrary to the “donkey friend spirit”. Instead, they describe renting a car as necessary and contributing to a positive experience.

Second, forum entries discuss accommodation and meals in Tibet. Many donkey friends appear to carry tents and solid food, however, since the trip usually lasts only a few days and tents do not always last on windy and cold nights, forum participants often report eating in restaurants and staying in hostels. Many appear to view local food and socializing with others as important elements of the experience. Many photos of local restaurants, hostels and food, usually with descriptions and suggestions appeared in the forum. Most hostels and restaurants in Tibet are private owned family businesses. Donkey friends appear to be open to these options and to be guided by price. G’s experience is a good example:
Having seen four hostels, we found a good deal – only RMB20 per night! After negotiating with the owner, we cut the price to RMB15! This is what I like about backpacking, getting the best of the worst! (posted by G, 10 May, 2012).

It is impossible to reproduce all the forum entries on accommodation; however, most of the descriptions are similar: hunting, bargaining and feelings of accomplishment. Moreover, some donkey friends consider this experience helpful in improving communication skills and learning about the real social situation. As for meals and drinks, donkey friends seem to value having authentic food in local restaurants. Forum entries describe local food such as barley wine and Zang cake (a Tibetan specialty food made from a variety of local grains). Many donkey friends post pictures of food and restaurants, usually with the locations of the restaurant as well as descriptions and recommendations of food.

Finally, many forum entries describe donkey friends dealing with emergencies, generally due to the weather, high altitude and road conditions of Tibet. Most stories conclude with advice on how to prevent such incidents but also their feelings of accomplishment. Teamwork is also emphasized. F discussed a car breakdown experience with H:

F: ... the road conditions got worse and we had to drive across a river. The car was making a really big noise. I was so worried and nervous. Unfortunately, the last car from our group got stuck in the river. [picture of a car stuck in a river] ...it took about four hours to solve this problem. Thank god we had a good team! (October 2010).

H: wow, such unforgettable experience... you guys are the real donkey friends! (October 2010)
J: Thanks, I really value how we stayed together and got through this as a team. This really improved my capabilities. Now I usually stay calm when there are emergencies (October 2010)

The conversation between H and J provides a good example of a forum discussion on emergencies. Emergencies are unfortunate and unexpected. However, despite negative feelings and emotions during emergencies, donkey friends feel a sense of accomplishment afterwards. Donkey friends believe that such experiences represent the “donkey friend spirit” and contribute to self-improvement, which refers to improving personal skills and developing personal capacity (Chen et al., 2013b). However, the large number of emergencies described on this travel forum may suggest potential risks and safety issues of backpacking in Tibet.

**Supply and Demand: Infrastructure and Facilities**

The importance of infrastructure and facilities has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Boers & Cottrell, 2007; Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007, 2008) and this is also a theme that is evident in the travel forum threads analysed in the present study. Even though backpacking is a form of budget tourism and backpackers do not expect personalized services or luxury hotels, the road conditions, hotels and restaurants are likely to influence their experience. Since the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006, tourism in Tibet has created many issues concerning regional economic development, environmental protection and preservation of culture. There appears to be a large gap between tourism demand and supply, in terms of service quality, tourism planning and management of experience and capability (Su & Wall, 2009). For example, in a thread about a backpacking trip to Tibet, the issue of infrastructure and facilities surfaced. The discussion between L and M is reproduced below:
L: I’d been warned about the lack of accommodation in Tibet before the trip. On the train, we heard from a tour leader that the hotels in the Lhasa region were sold out. It turned out that even hostels were full... we ended up sleeping in tents...

M: Your experience reminds me of the hostel I stayed in. After hours of searching, we ended up staying in a hostel with no in-room toilets, water or electricity. Five of us shared a bucket of water [picture of a bucket]. But it was interesting that we went out and looked for water and daily supplies. I feel backpacking helped me to learn more practical things (October 2010).

The conversation shows the lack of accommodation providers and facilities in Tibet. Even though donkey friends’ experience may be influenced by the low quality or lack of facilities, they seem to be prepared and had strategies to deal with it. Reasons may be that donkey friends may know about the conditions in Tibet before their trip or they may not have high expectations due to the low price. The forum postings also suggest that many donkey friends enjoy working things out together and consider this part of the backpacking experience. However, there were instances of disputes between locals and donkey friends posted on the travel forum site. There were many forum entries describing locals trying to take advantage of donkey friends, and even a few stories about how donkey friends were stopped from entering some areas by locals. One post by N is an example:

When we were driving through a remote area, a Tibetan stopped our car and asked for “protection fee for the grassland”. We did not do any harm to the grassland and it is unreasonable to charge us for entering the area. This is not a zoo!!(posted by N, November 2010).

As “hosts”, Tibetans may have a sense of ownership of the environment. Tibetans may consider stopping tourists from entering as a way of protecting Tibet and showing this
ownership. Locals may charge or at least try to charge donkey friends some money before entrance is permitted, similar to what N describes. This is consistent with social exchange theory, which acknowledges the two-way flow of resources that occurs between actors such as hosts (locals) and guests (backpackers and other tourists) (Beeton, 2006). Social exchange theory posits that maximizing benefits and rewards motivate the exchange relationship (Ap, 1992; Gui, 2000). In the “exchange”, a donkey friend may be seeking leisure and simply to gaze upon Tibet, Tibetans and their culture. While this may be rewarding and beneficial to backpackers, locals may not see many benefits for themselves, especially those who are not employed in tourism related businesses. Some locals may even perceive consequences as negative (e.g. disturbing their daily life). Thus the exchange relation is perceived unbalanced and the actor may seek to withdraw from future exchanges or end the exchange (Emerson, 1976), that is, some locals try to stop donkey friends from entering the area. As forum entries describe, some seek to obtain financial benefits (i.e. charging donkey friends money). Donkey friends are largely urban based and due to the differences in incomes between Tibetans and donkey friends, some Tibetans may see this as balancing the exchange (Adams, 1965).

*Maintaining and Building Community*

The final theme that was found in the travel forum threads was that of maintaining and building community. First, while most donkey friends participating in the forum demonstrate tendencies towards self-expression and identity exhibition, they do this with an audience in mind and some appear to be constantly seeking peer-affirmation. It is very common to see donkey friends reaffirming each other’s sense of adventure and backpacking style when responding to postings of those who ‘triumphantly’ returned (Ong & du Cros, 2012; Zhang, 2008).
Many forum entries share traveling stories, with pictures, descriptions and some backpacking tips such as what medicines to bring. Donkey friends also share their itineraries with others, including very detailed plans/advice for daily activities, transportation, hostels, restaurants and the budget for the whole trip. While compliments are not explicitly sought, they are usually bestowed. Most of the responses to threads showed compliments are affirmation. For example, O writes ‘very detailed information. This reaffirms my plan to go to Tibet’ (December 2010). Other comments include ‘a trip of dreams, I will definitely do the same thing’ and ‘what a good team and very nice pictures!’

Second, some donkey friends seek socialisation directly. Some appear to want to make new friends and build communities, but most of them seem to want to initiate new trips and recruit travelling companions. Generally, trip initiation includes detailed descriptions of the itinerary, the trip budget and information about donkey friends who have already committed to joining the trip. Most importantly, criteria for those who want to join the trip are listed. For example, P, in seeking someone to join a trip, writes: “seeking donkey friends joining our team to Tibet: prefer female who has outdoor and driving experience.” Similar to what P posts, forum entries show that the most common selection criteria are driving and outdoor experience. This finding is different from Ong and du Cros (2012)’s finding, which suggests that donkey friends’ networking and maintenance of community was shaped within Confucian-endorsed gender rules and roles, for example, females are usually asked to cook for the team, while males perform physical duties such as carrying goods. This difference may be due to the different study contexts (Tibet and Macau), since backpacking in Tibet is more physically demanding and donkey friends usually drive during the trip, thus division of duties is not gender biased.

CONCLUSION
Backpacking in Tibet is a recent phenomenon and few studies have been published in this area. Theoretically, the use of a thematic analysis of virtual distanced ethnographic data has been efficacious, and future studies can use this approach to investigate independent travel by Chinese Generation Y (and others) to other destinations such as Hong Kong or overseas countries. The findings suggest that donkey friend travel may have some unique characteristics including team work, the use of relatively luxurious transport and an emphasis placed on the “donkey spirit”. These characteristics may be attributed to social changes in China and certain features of Tibet. Future studies could delve into the “donkey spirit” as well as how current Chinese social changes may influence future donkey friend tourism. The differences between the natural environment of Tibet and the urban areas from which donkey friends originate made great impressions at least on some donkey friends. However, it was found that those donkey friends who participate in forum discussions about travel in Tibet engage in relatively superficial experiences with the host culture. Future studies could explore donkey friends’ travel patterns and make comparisons between donkey friends and Western backpackers. Moreover, this was a modest study conducted over a period of five weeks using one data source. Although there is no reason to conclude that the sampling frame is biased, further replications and expansion may be appropriate. Finally, follow up quantitative research may be appropriate. For example, destination marketers and backpacking service providers could use Chen et al’s (2013) personal development scale to understand donkey friends market and thus develop and improve their services and strategies.

Practically, the findings suggest that a few issues may warrant further attention. Firstly, the quality and quantity of infrastructure and facilities in Tibet may need to be improved, particularly accommodation. Clearly more hostels and budget hotels are needed. Basic facilities such as shower and toilet are also necessary. Even though no forum entries indicate accidents and injuries during the trip, the high altitude and rough environment of Tibet
suggest potential risks and safety issues in backpacking. Local governments may need to consider the provision of services for medical and other forms of emergency. For example, local government or tourism authorities could build an online system and encourage all donkey friends register their travel and contact details prior to departure. Updates to travel advice such as weather reports could also be made available either through emails or mobile phone messages. Furthermore, donkey friends could be asked to have health checks and make sure they are physically suitable to backpack in Tibet. Donkey friends are also be encouraged to consider the rough conditions in Tibet and arrange travel insurance and personal medications.

Secondly, as the natural, unique and fragile environment of Tibet is the key driver of the experience, it needs to be protected. Issues concerning Tibet’s environment protection and cultural preservations (Shepherd, 2008; Su & Wall, 2009) cannot be ignored. This not only calls for attention from the government and authorities, but also perhaps from the tourists themselves, as Moyle, Weiler and Croy (2013) suggested. From the government’s perspective, relevant laws and regulations may be needed. Some famous tourist attractions in China, such the Great Wall have state protection regulations (see Zhu, 2006). It is recommended that such regulation be used on Tibetan cultural sites and natural reserves.

Thirdly, host-guest relationships need to be managed. Local government and authorities need to monitor and control illegal money collection behaviour by local residents. While Tibetans need to be educated on the appropriate way of protecting Tibet, tourists’ behaviours may need to be managed via education and/or regulation. To establish healthy host-guest relationships, local government could host educational, recreational and cultural activities for donkey friends and local residents. Employment opportunities for locals could be provided through such activities. Moreover, consultation with the local community, especially during planning stages is recommended.
Finally, deeper experiences may need to be fostered both with respect to host-guest encounters and with the culture generally, this, however, comes with risks and potential costs, especially for the host population and destination generally. There is a need for careful planning and appropriate policy responses to ensure that any changes do not compromise the benefits of donkey friend travel for the tourists, the hosts and the environment. Consultation and engagement with locals is recommended. Providing benefits such as employment opportunities for locals is also necessary.

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