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CHINESE TOURISM IN THAILAND: EXPERIENCES AND SATISFACTION

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Tourism research in Thailand is unbalanced, since it largely focuses on western travellers and pays very little attention to Asian tourists, especially mainland Chinese tourists, whose numbers and value are rising year-on-year. The connections between China and Thailand are many-stranded and more than a thousand years old. However, there is very little understanding of what kind of experience Chinese tourists would like to receive and whether they enjoy their visits. This paper reports on a quantitative survey of 250 Chinese tourists in Thailand which investigated the kinds of experience that they received and the degree to which they were satisfied with them. It was found that most travellers, although they no longer are subject to 'zero-dollar tourism,' nevertheless face constant appeals to buy often unwanted products and must accept very low levels of service. Satisfaction levels are, consequently, varied.

Tourism, China, Thailand, customer satisfaction, zero-dollar

INTRODUCTION

Sino-Thai links are more than a thousand years old but private travel for purposes of tourism is less than a decade old. Chinese citizens have come late to the tourism experience and, as a result, many of the conventions that define the industry have been constructed without their input. The number of Chinese tourists coming to Thailand is increasing enormously and the value of that trade is also becoming significant. Previously, the tourists were brought to Thailand on zero-dollar schemes which meant they paid only a nominal sum for the trip and were subject to numerous enforced retail opportunities. Even though that style of tourism has fallen out of repute, the tourists still have few opportunities to structure or determine their own tourism experience, which is not likely to make them enjoy their experience. This research used qualitative and quantitative interviewing to investigate the nature of Chinese tourism in Thailand and what implications flow from that experience.

The next section outlines the background of tourism in Thailand, which is followed by explanation of the methodology used in the project and then the results of the survey. A discussion of the results and their implications completes the paper, along with the list of references.

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The Tourism Industry in Thailand

Tourism is an industry of enormous importance to Thailand and is according to some measures the second largest industry in the country. While Thailand has a number of obvious competitive advantages in terms of climate and natural scenery, these are not always brought to their maximum potential because of weaknesses in the labour market, lack of knowledge as to how to treat tourists and what kinds of service tourists require. Low levels of training are combined with foreign ownership of many leading tourist facilities to overseas interests means that profits do not remain in Thailand for reinvestment. Nevertheless, the number of tourist arrivals has increased, according to Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) figures, has risen from 81,340 in 1960 to 11,737,413 arrivals in 2004 (including overseas Thais). The value of tourist expenditure has risen during the same period from 196 million baht (approximately US$4.9 million) to 384,360 million baht (approximately US$9,609 million). Several problems have had to be overcome in recent years, including the outbreaks of avian influenza and SARS, the 1997 economic crisis and the tsunami disaster of 2004 (Zhang, 2005). These have all led to reductions in tourist numbers but, especially in the case of the tsunami, resolute remedial work by the TAT has helped to diminish the problems caused (Walsh and Walailak, 2006).

The majority of tourists arrive via Bangkok and they then travel in Bangkok and to the North of Thailand for nature and cultural sightseeing or else to southern Thailand for beach-based holidays. In some cases, tourists will travel directly to the international airports at Chiang Mai in the north and Phuket in the south. However, large numbers of Malaysian travellers cross the land border and pursue activities which are not well recorded or understood. Table 1 shows the most recent figures on number of arrivals in Thailand.

Tourism in Thailand is promoted both domestically and internationally by the TAT, which is funded by government and includes, in addition to its promotional duties, the requirement to conduct research and provide input into overall marketing strategy. Overall marketing strategy has led to the creation of a number of public sector and public-private partnership tertiary education programs aiming to provide training for Thais in areas such as cuisine and massage which can be used overseas to earn revenue. Support from the Ministry of Labour assists the many thousands of Thais working overseas to continue their career and negotiate any difficulties. The government has also amended some regulations to promote health and well-being tourism among some of the wealthier parts of the world. However, promotion in China has focused on fairly basic portrayals of the main attractions in Thailand: food, beach activities and cultural institutions, which is part of a generally undifferentiated strategy aimed at encouraging international travel.

Chinese people have, of course, been travelling to Thailand for centuries. However, since the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chinese authorities have sought to maintain strict controls over the borders of the country. The only people able to travel overseas legally were those who were well-connected and deemed to be doing so for legitimate state reasons. As China changed its travel policies after the Open Door policy of 1979, Chinese were permitted to travel overseas to designated countries in increasing numbers. The proportion of Chinese able to travel overseas has increased greatly as the regulations were relaxed and the number of people entering comfortable middle-class significantly increased. Private travel was officially permitted in 1997 and Chinese were allowed to travel to Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Macao and Hong Kong, within the framework of regulations. In the first year, there were 5.32 million outbound trips from China to these locations, which number increased to 28.85 million in 2004. The numbers increase annually and there seems to be no reason for them to stop rising for the foreseeable future as more and more Chinese receive the economic ability to make such journeys.

The number of approved countries that Chinese may visit has now risen to 76, although Southeast Asia remains the most popular destination. Reasons for this include congruence with the Chinese culture, proximity and cost and the presence of natural beauty, to which many Chinese tourists are said to be partial (Kim *et al*., 2005). In addition, a large number of travel companies has opened in the region with the specific purpose of boosting outbound Chinese tourism. Within China, 16,846 travel companies had opened and the great majority of these were intended to facilitate domestic travel (15,256 firms). In total, nearly one quarter of a million people are employed by these firms (248,900 people) and the total value of the trade conducted reached 41.9 billion RMB at the end of 2005 (approximately US$4.7 billion) (CNTA Announcement 76, 2006).

Table 1
Tourist Arrivals in Thailand, 1999 and 2004

	Number of Tourist Arrivals in the Year of 1999	Number of Tourist Arrivals in the Year of 2004
Malaysia	991,060	1,388,981
Japan	1,064,539	1,182,067
South Korea	338,039	909,789
China	775,626	779,070
Singapore	604,867	732,180
Hong Kong	429,944	656,941
United Kingdom	425,688	628,679
USA	417,860	557,098
Taiwan	557,629	556,341
Germany	375,345	438,238
Others	2,670,663	3,908,029
Total	8,651,260	11,737,413

Source: PTIF, p.187

Chinese tourists have in recent years been treated poorly, especially with respect to the notorious zero-dollar tourism practices. This meant essentially no or very low cost holidays for the tourists who were subsequently subjected to numerous tourist trap ‘retail opportunities’ and other indignities.

The tourists themselves were treated as if they were provincial, inexperienced and easily fooled; it is hardly surprising that a number of revolts were reported when tourists refused to continue with the itinerary established for them and demanded better service and food. In response to this and fearful of losing reputation in a lucrative future market, the TAT moved to create the Chinese Tourist Protection Association in 2005 (CTPA), having previously announced that zero-dollar tourism would be banned in 2000. It is difficult to identify exactly when and where zero-dollar tourism is taking place and many of the practices with which it is associated persist, as the research reported on in this paper indicates. Approximately 80 Thai tour agencies have joined the CTPA, especially those which specialize in the mainland China market and for this they are licensed to operate in the industry. The cost to join the CTPA is to lodge two million baht (approximately US$57,000) for a bond which will be held against the future good behaviour of the firm (Allison, 2005). Even so, it is not clear how successful this measure has been because a great deal of the trade is conducted in secrecy and, as this research demonstrated, there are some apparently illegal aspects to it. Throughout the course of the research, there have been persistent rumours of 'mafia' style organised crime behind some of the activities, with powerful but shadowy figures able to offer protection from the law when necessary. These kinds of rumours are quite common in Thailand and while, in some cases, they may be validated, in this case no definitive evidence has been provided.

METHODOLOGY

This project employed both qualitative and quantitative techniques so as to investigate most efficiently the opinions of Chinese tourists in Thailand. The initial program of qualitative research featured in-depth, face-to-face interviewing with key informants, including tour agents, tour guides and hoteliers. The plan was to try to understand the broad parameters of tourist experience and the physical details of trips so that a subsequent quantitative survey could be used to identify what the tourists thought about the issues identified during the interviewing. This was successfully achieved. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and this data then informed the creation of the questionnaire. This was translated into Chinese and retranslated independently to ensure precision. A pilot test of the quantitative survey was used to ensure comprehensibility of the questions, wording and question order issues. This led to some minor adjustments in the research instrument.

The interviewer was fluent in English, Thai and Chinese and was able to facilitate both personal interviews and the survey interviews. A convenience sample of 250 Chinese tourists in Bangkok was drawn and interviews took place during the low season, which coincides with the rainy season in Thailand. Since it was discovered that tourists had a very hectic schedule, it was found necessary to interview them on coaches, while eating breakfast and other occasions on it was possible to obtain access to them. Tour guides provided invaluable assistance in providing access to the tourists. Most tourists were taking part in inclusive package holidays with a two-centre, five day itinerary with various optional activities that made sure they had few moments of spare time. It was found that the best time to interview them was during the breakfast period prior to their daily transfer from the hotel by coach. This short window of approximately 40 minutes per day achieved better results than alternative methods tried, which included approaching tourists at destination points such as theme parks and cultural attractions. Many of the interviewees had little experience in answering questionnaires and required assistance in completing the questionnaires. A significant number had difficulty in reading the Chinese language questionnaire. Careful checking of questionnaires by the researchers was necessary to ensure that high quality data was collected. Researchers themselves were trained and experience tour guides who were equally able to communicate in Chinese and Thai and worked under the supervision of one of the authors. Owing to the assistance provided to the respondents in completing the questionnaire and the penetration rate of groups of tourists approached, there is no reason to suspect that any non-response bias entered into the data.

Questionnaires were subsequently passed through a data entry process and analysed using SPSS by means of a variety of standard statistical analyses. This paper reports on the results of this survey. Comments obtained during the qualitative research or else written on the questionnaire as a free text answer are interspersed within the quantitative findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The total sample analysed amounted to 250 individuals, who completed questionnaires during their stay in Thailand. Most commonly, tourists were travelling to Thailand for three or four nights in Bangkok and two in Pattaya and the cost of their trip was low (averaging US$200 equivalent). The only way that tour guides can make profits on these very thin margins is to require guides to make commissions from the guests while they are in-country. In fact, guides start their tours with minus wages because of initial investments that are required of them. This system is reminiscent of the previous zero-dollar tourism era and it provides guides with powerful incentives to reduce the satisfaction level of tourists. Tour itineraries currently are fixed contractually and juxtapose trips to the Grand Palace, floating market, elephant rides and so forth with forced retail activities, often in comparatively remote locations where even convenience products are market up extensively. It is common for tourists to end up paying far more than the basic cost for their holiday if they take advantage of the numerous options provided and encouraged.

Slightly more than half the sample were men (52.7%) and they were more likely to be travelling in the company of colleagues. The works-based overseas trip remains a feature of much East Asian tourism which now rarely occurs with western travellers coming to Thailand. In total, 38.2% of tourists reported travelling as part of a work group. Women were more likely to be travelling with friends and this, overall, was the case for 20.9% of all respondents, which is a similar figure for those travelling with spouses. Just 10.2% of respondents reported travelling alone and 9.8% as part of a family group. It is clearly important to structure activities and sightseeing opportunities for people likely to be tourists, who are generally in their twenties to forties and without the presence of children in most cases. This again contrasts with western tourists, who tend more commonly to have children accompanying them at the middle and upper ends of the tourism experience.

Tourists came from a wide range of cities and regions within China, revealing the degree to which the middle class of the country is now represented nationally and the need to disseminate information much more widely than before. Guangzhou was the home of 10.9% of visitors, 9.2% came from Beijing and 8.8% from Shanghai. The remainder came from a wide range of places, including Kunming, Suzhou, Jilin, Nanjing, Dalian and Xian. Travellers coming from regions which were not the big three cities (i.e. Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai) were significantly more likely to be travelling as part of a work group (chi square = 0.000**), while the remaining respondents were distributed more or less evenly over the remaining categories. Clearly, there are dialect issues related to the provision of information and guides resulting from this diverse spread, while understanding that different ports of origin may be providing different segments within the overall market will also assist in structuring tourist packages.

Nearly two thirds of all respondents reported that this was their first overseas trip (63.9%) and, of those who had travelled before, 61.4% reported that this was their first trip to Thailand. Consequently, of the overall sample, only 15.6% of all respondents had visited Thailand previously. As the qualitative research had suggested, most of the respondents had little experience of overseas travel and had, therefore, little information against which to judge the holiday in Thailand. Overall, TAT figures show that just under half of all tourists (49.6%) were taking their visit to Thailand when they arrived according to the most recent statistics (2004). Chinese tourists have less experience than the tourists coming to Thailand from most other countries. A number of complaints made by the respondents reflected this lack of experience and the ways in which it is reported some travel agents treated their Chinese customers reflected a measure of disdain based on this lack of experience.

Most respondents reported that they had received some information about Thailand prior to arriving in the Kingdom, although the most common provider of information (86.3%) was the travel agent; 61.1% had received information from newspaper or magazine advertisements and 57.5% from television advertisements. In all of these cases, it was apparent that the amount and quality of information received was very limited and general in nature. As a result, tourists were very reliant on tour guides once they had arrived in Thailand. Research revealed that there were three groups of tour guides, who had different levels of ability, legality and ethnicity. The first group are Thai tour guides, who carry official Silver tour guide cards. These guides are usually the best trained and do their best to guide the customers as best they can, although they mostly do not have fixed salaries but most work on commission only, because of the competitiveness of the market. Chinese tour guides, from Hainan island mostly, accompany groups from the mainland. These guides generally enter Thailand on three month tourist visas before leaving and re-entering and they work without official permission. These guides seem to care little for the reputation of their country and work to maximize their revenue from the tourists. The third group of guides comes mostly from the north of Thailand and they are from families which have migrated from China since the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Many are from Kuomintang families and maintain knowledge of Chinese dialects. This group also has a reputation for not caring about the tourists and instead members aim to maximize their revenue from the tourists. This group works with Taiwanese tourists as well as mainland Chinese. As tourist groups gain experience and, to some extent can pass it on to future travellers, they tend to buy less from the retail premises they are taken to and so the commission that guides can receive diminishes. Consequently, guides have to discover new ways to encourage tourists to give them money, which means that the relationship between guides and tourists has reduced in trust. The shops that tourists are taken to sell leather goods (snakes and stingray skins), bird's nests, jewellery and snake products (cosmetics and pharmaceuticals). According to the contract with the tour company, guides must ensure a minimum sale from the tourists or else be fined – some guides reported that they would buy products personally to avoid the fine.

Being forced to visit retail premises was one of the main complaints of the tourists. More than 90% reported that they would like to sample Thai food, cultural items and beaches but their ability to do this was very limited. These items are all promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Tourists generally had little interest in visiting other parts of Thailand, perhaps because they had little if any information about those other areas or their attractions. Optional tours are provided, including sex shows of different sorts, which are quite popular. However, the willingness and ability of tourists to pay mean that the margins on which the tour guides operate are still thin even for these trips.

A second area of complaint concerned hotels. Most tour groups were obliged to change their accommodation every night, even when they were staying more than one day in Bangkok. This meant they were always rushed in moving and packing and could not wash their clothes conveniently. Further, the hotels themselves seem to have been selected purely on the basis of price, since they were mostly remote from the city centre and hence travelling time was long, while the quality of the accommodation was often low. The food is of poor quality and the extras previously provided (e.g. wet towels, welcome flowers and drinks etc.) have all been stopped. Tourists do not enjoy the hotel experience and feel disrespected.

Satisfaction with the holiday overall was approached through asking respondents about four aspects of satisfaction: a simple overall measure and satisfaction with the component services of accommodation, travel company service and value for money. The results are displayed in Table 2.

There were no significant differences in terms of gender, although those traveling with friends or colleagues showed significantly less satisfaction with the travel service company than those in other categories (chi square = 0.015*). Further analysis indicated that satisfaction was quite strongly influenced by the component parts that respondents were interested in or would have been interested in experiencing. For example, those who were not interested in Thai food were significantly less likely to be satisfied overall than others (chi square = 0.007**), as too were those not interested in shopping (chi square = 0.024*) and those not interested in Thai massage and spa (chi square = 0.001**). The same pattern was true of those interested or not interested in night life (chi square = 0.008**). These results suggest that respondents felt a lot of emphasis was placed upon Thai food, shopping and massage and spa activities. They also show that, while comparatively few people were prepared to state that they were actively dissatisfied with the holiday that they were receiving, they were also quite reluctant to praise it. It may be that the true levels of satisfaction (which, in any case, are likely to change somewhat after the holiday is completed and is viewed retrospectively) are a little lower than is reported here because guides were never far away and there may have been a fear that expressing dissatisfaction will lead to possible withdrawal of privileges or services, no matter how good or bad they may be.

Table 2
Measures of Overall Satisfaction

	Very satisfied	Quite satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Quite dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know/no opinion
Overall satisfaction	9.8	60.4	26.1	2.0	0.4	1.2
Accommodation	8.5	51.0	31.6	4.5	2.8	1.6
Travel company service	13.3	55.4	24.5	4.8	0.8	1.2
Value for money	4.5	41.6	39.6	6.9	2.4	4.9

Source: Original research

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

One of the original motivations for this research was to consider how the experience of touring in Thailand is being designed for Chinese visitors. The rather unfortunate answer to this is that it appears almost no thought is being given to it at all. The tourists are simply bused between the Grand Palace and Pattaya via various retail opportunities and limited from any other activity they might like to consider. The experiences chosen seem to have received little attention or reflection. The increased competitiveness of the market, with more guides and companies having entered, together with the comparatively low economic power of the tourists, means that profitability is very limited. This in turn leads to lower levels of trust and the loss of reputation for the Thai tourism industry as a whole – the tourists form opinions which are not likely to be informed by whether the people they deal with are Thai or Chinese or anyone else.

A considerable amount of research is undertaken by or on behalf of the TAT and a smaller amount is available via academic scholars and private sector organisations concerning inbound tourism in Thailand. However, the majority of this research has been aimed at western visitors to the Kingdom and, while this is clearly important, it is arguably not the most important sector since western visitors are outnumbered by tourists from neighbouring countries and East Asian countries more generally. The largest group of tourists, for example, comes from Malaysia and is concentrated on the border region, it is believed, although very little reliable research exists about these visitors in terms of providing high quality services to tourists in ways which are profitable and reputable. The same is also true to some extent of Taiwanese, Japanese and Korean travellers, although in these cases home tour guides often accompany groups and have developed competencies and experience in providing what tourists require. Also, tourists from those countries have now acquired experience in overseas travel and are much more willing to travel independently without a tour guide and group. In these cases, tourists are generally able and willing to make their own decisions and arrangements for accommodation and activities and, hence, accept responsibility for the risk of their decisions themselves. This is not yet the case for most Chinese tourists, especially those travelling in work groups, who expect guidance from tour companies in making arrangements. The lack of language skills amongst most such tourists is likely to hinder evolution of experience among this sector for the short and medium term.

Closer supervision of the guide system and the ways in which tours are structured would also be beneficial in structuring the tourism experiences of Chinese travellers more satisfactorily. It was reported on a number of occasions that official regulations are being bent or even flouted by some operators.

Comparative studies would be useful in measuring the opinions and behaviour of Chinese tourists with respect to other tourists would be helpful, specifically in terms of designing products for the Chinese market and methods of marketing them effectively. Alliances with CNTA, for example, to enhance information exchange would seem to be a fruitful area to explore. It should also be borne in mind that tourism is a two-way business in the modern world. The opening of Xian as a tourist destination for travellers from Bangkok has also resulted, as this research has shown, in tourists travelling in the opposite direction. In such cases, it is evident that joint initiatives will be beneficial to all those concerned.

Zero dollar tourism has become a disreputable practice and, by word of mouth if not by official advertising, potential tourists now attempt to avoid it wherever possible. The window of opportunity for using it on a new market of unsuspecting tourists seems to be narrowing to just a few years, as information technology improvements enable people or their agents to obtain details about how it works much more rapidly than before. Although individuals may lack experience internationally, there are likely to be some group members who will have understanding and prior warning as to how the experience will proceed and what are the pitfalls to avoid. Chinese tourists included in this research tended to be voluble in voicing complaints when they realised that less than optimal value for money was being provided and everyone could tell when moving hotel every night was an inconvenience. It is probably not necessary, therefore, to introduce legislation to outlaw or administer the practice, although the TAT will surely wish to monitor the way that agents fulfill their duties.

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