



A qualitative study on Chinese visitors in Grand Teton National Park

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Abstract Grand Teton (GTNP) and Yellowstone (YELL) National Parks are experiencing an increase in visitation of Chinese tourists over the last few years, but little is known about the expectations, behaviors, and actual experiences of these new visitors. Cultural differences and language barriers contribute to misunderstanding and confusion between park management and visitors, which may lead to regulation violations and conflicts. A better understanding of Chinese tourists' expectations and experiences is essential for better communication strategies to facilitate preservation of natural resources. To address this, we interviewed Chinese tourists traveling individually or on tour buses, and tour guides for Chinese tourists in GTNP in summer 2018. Three major themes emerged from our interviews: 1) Factors that influence Chinese tourists' decision-making process, among those the most significant ones are the reputation of YELL and different information sources in China; 2) Dominant expectations among Chinese tourists and the role these expectations are playing in tourists' satisfaction; and, 3) Chinese tourists' actual experience that may be different from those of domestic travelers. Recommendations for park management are provided based on the findings.

Introduction

Like most units of the National Park Service (NPS), Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) is witnessing a rapid increase in visitation over recent years (National Park Service, 2017). This includes not only general increases in visitation, but also changes in the types of visitors. For instance, according to a recent study in Yellowstone National Park (YELL), 34% of all international visitors (17% of all visitors) are Chinese (National Park Service, 2017). Closely adjacent to YELL, GTNP is likely to have similar changes in visitor use. Previous research shows that international visitors may have different experiences with resources in national parks as compared to western travelers (Miller et al., 2018). This emerging population of Chinese park visitors likely have distinctive beliefs and values and have different perceptions towards the ideas of wildlife, environment, and nature

preservation as compared to domestic visitors. Studies show that the most extreme cultural differences in values and behavioral norms are between Asian and Western cultures (Samovar and Porter, 1991). In the context of visitor use management, these cultural differences may lead to misunderstanding and confusion, which can result in regulation violations and in conflicts. Aside from value differences, language barriers also increase the difficulty in cross-cultural communication and management.

Although some research has explored Chinese visitors to the U.S. in general, Chinese visitors' decision-making process, visitation behaviors, and actual experience in U.S. national parks, including GTNP, is poorly understood. To our knowledge, no research has specifically investigated Chinese tourist experiences and expectations in GTNP. The purpose of this research is to better understand Chinese visitors' decision-making processes, expectations, and expe-

periences to help better protect park resources while providing quality experiences for this unique population. Informed by our research, managers can better reach Chinese tourists prior to their visit to GTNP, convey managerial and environmental information to them during their visit, and help Chinese tourists reach a higher satisfaction level with their visit.

Methods

Research questions

Our research tackles the following three major questions:

1. Decision making process: How are Chinese visitors discovering GTNP? What information sources are they using, and when are they using them? What experiences and aspects are influencing their decisions?
2. Expectations: What are Chinese visitors' expectations when visiting GTNP? What is their previous experience with travel to nature-based destinations, outdoor recreation, and travel to the U.S.?
3. Experiences: What kind of experiences are they having in GTNP? What is different from their expectations, and how does that affect them? How are they sharing these experiences with others both on their trip back home?

Populations

Anecdotally, one of the most unique characteristics of Chinese visitors is that a large proportion of them travel in groups on tour buses, whereas U.S. travelers to national parks are more often in their own vehicles. To get a better understanding of both groups, we intercepted two populations: Chinese tourists and tour guides. Chinese tourists can be further divided into two sub-groups: individual travelers and those traveling on tour buses.

Screening question

Chinese visitors are not easy to identify, as there are many second-generation American Chinese visiting GTNP. However, cultural values and behavioral

norms of these second generation American Chinese are likely more similar to domestic visitors and were thus excluded from our interviews. We used a screening question to separate different populations, which is whether or not the visitors have Chinese nationality or are from regions of Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Macau. We did not apply this screening criteria to tour guides, since the tour guides leading Chinese tourists in GTNP are living in the U.S. and have U.S. nationality.

Interview process

We developed two separate semi-structured interview guides targeted at these two populations (individual travelers and those on tour buses). We conducted face-to-face interviews in GTNP from June 15th, 2018 to August 15th, 2018. The interception areas were around Colter Bay Visitor Center and public areas in Jackson Lake Lodge. These locations were chosen in collaboration with park staff because they are two of the most popular destinations for Chinese visitors. Upon interviewees' permission, we recorded the conversation for subsequent transcription and data analysis.

Data Analysis process

All 58 interviews with Chinese tourists, including 34 individual travelers and 24 traveling on tour busses, and 11 interviews with tour guides were conducted in, transcribed, and initially coded in Chinese, since Chinese is the primary language visitors and tour guides use and feel comfortable with. Additionally, some meanings may be lost during the translation process due to linguistic differences between the two languages.

Data analysis was completed in five steps: 1) Preliminary coding, 2) Development of two sets of codebooks for tourists and tour guides, 3) Coding all interviews, and 4) Coding reliability testing, 5) Analysis with Dedoose. In step one, three researchers cross-coded seven randomly selected interviews with tourists and three with tour guides. In step two, two sets of codebooks were developed separately based on a discussion of the preliminary coding results. In

Table 1: Demographic Information of tourists

Interviewee Types	Tourists: 58	Tour guides: 11
Gender	Female:49	Female: 0
	Male: 30	Male: 11
Ways of traveling	Individual travelers: 34	N/A
	Travelers on tour buses:24	
Age	18-24: 14	30-34: 3
	25-34: 18	35-39: 1
	35-44: 19	40-44:1
	45-54: 14	45-49:1
	55-64: 8	50-54:3
	>65: 3	55-59:1
Education level	High school or less: 11;	High school or less: 1;
	College level: 32;	College level: 10
	Master’s degree: 20;	
	Ph.D. degree: 8	

Table 1. Demographic Information of tourists

step three, researchers coded all 58 interviews with tourists and the other 11 with tour guides using the codebooks, each researcher responsible for approximately 23 interviews. When new themes emerged that were not originally included in the codebook, they marked these new codes and discussed among the group before they arrived at a consensus on whether or not to include the new codes or to modify existing codes. In step four, researchers randomly cross-coded some of the interviews to ensure inter-coder reliability. Finally, after all 69 interviews were coded, in step five, data were analyzed using the software Dedoose, an online platform for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research with text, photos, audio, videos, and spreadsheet data, etc. (Dedoose Version 8.1.8). With the help of Dedoose, researchers read excerpts marked with different codes to facilitate identification of key findings.

Preliminary results

Table 1 shows the demographic information of our 69 interviewees. Please note that some interviews involve more than one interviewee, since occasionally more than one person from a certain group joined the conversation. Some interviewees refused to give their demographic information.

Decision-making process

Reasons for learning about and choosing GTNP

1) Reputation of YELL/Close distance between GTNP and YELL

The dominant reason Chinese tourists choose to visit GTNP is not its own popularity, but its close distance to YELL. Among all 58 tourists, either traveling individually or on tour busses, 28 of them mentioned

that the main reason for choosing GTNP is that they wanted to visit YELL. Many of the individual travelers mentioned that they accidentally learned about GTNP during their online research for YELL, e.g. when they were going over travel blogs or reading other online articles, they found out that GTNP is always recommended by past travelers due to its close distance to YELL, and decided to add GTNP to their travel plan. For those traveling on tour busses, they stated that their main destination is YELL, and GTNP is included in the tour. Most of them chose to travel with tour groups because of the convenience it provided (e.g. to save time and energy by not conducting research by themselves), and they did not do in-depth research prior to this visit. Many of our interviewees used the word that they only “*stopped by*” or “*dropped by*” GTNP during their visit to YELL, and YELL is their main destination.

In addition to the reason that YELL is the main destination for most Chinese visitors, some other interesting findings are:

1. Although all the interviews took place in popular places within GTNP, many interviewees' initial reaction towards the interviewer's question related to this park is to asking whether the questions are YELL-targeted or GTNP-targeted. For example, when the interviewer used relatively vague wordings such as “*How do you feel about the service quality inside this park?*”, many interviewees instantly answered “*Do you mean YELL?*” This reveals that YELL was a more salient reason for Chinese tourists' visit compared to GTNP.
2. Some interviewees were also confused about the actual location and existence of GTNP. For example, our No. 60 interviewee (a traveler on a tour bus) mentioned that he/she originally thought GTNP was part of YELL when he/she first read the travel plan from the tour company. Not until he/she arrived at the park did this interviewee realize that they are two separate parks.

2) Other reasons

Some other popular reasons why Chinese tourists learned about GTNP are recommendations by other

family members or friends living in U.S., or people they knew who have visited YELL and GTNP before and advertisements via different channels, including websites, social media platforms, etc.

Information sources

The most popular information sources among Chinese visitors were search engines in China such as Baidu (mentioned by 29 interviewees); travel blogs on different websites (27), such as Mafengwo and Qiongyou; recommendations by others (17) and by tour companies (15 traveling on tour buses); and the official website of GTNP. Among all 58 Chinese tourists, 17 mentioned that they had visited the official website of GTNP to some extent. However, one main reason they utilized the official website was to book hotels and lodges within GTNP or YELL. Many of them argued that the information on the official website was not specific enough and only contained very general information. Some argued that they were in need of more specific information such as hiking recommendations for groups of people with different needs, such as families with small kids or with elderly people, or travel groups with a very short stay of a few hours. Thirteen others mentioned that they knew about the existence of the official website of GTNP, however, they did not utilize the website because it was either hard to access from China or because of language barriers. Eight mentioned that they did not use the website because they either could not load the web pages or it was too slow to load. One interviewee specifically mentioned that he/she worked in a foreign company in China and thus had the opportunity to use a VPN to access the official website of GTNP.

Previous research shows that search engines serve as the number one information source for U.S. families for vacation planning (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), and the top five most popular social media websites with travel-related content are tripadvisor.com, virtualtourist.com, igougo.com, mytravelguide.com, and yelp.com (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). None of these appeared in our 69 interviews. The information sources among Chinese and domestic tourists are drastically different.

Table 2: Information Sources of the interviewees

Information Sources	Number of tourists	Details
Popular Chinese Search Engines	29	E.g. Baidu
Travel Blogs	27	Most popular: Mafengwo, Qiongyou
Recommendation by Others	17	Others include family members or friends living currently in the U.S. or by past visitors
Official Website of GRTE	17	In addition, 13 knew about the website but had access issues or language barriers; 8 could not load the website in China or website too slow to be loaded
Tour Companies	15	15 out of 24 traveling on tour buses

Table 2. Information Sources of the interviewees

Expectations

1) Specific expectations of sites and activities

Among all 69 interviewees, 47 mentioned concrete things they were expecting to see within GTNP. The most popular ones were “*the mountains covered by snow*”, “*Teton*”, “*wildlife*”, “*the lakes (without a specific name)*”, or “*Jenny Lake*” and “*Jackson Lake*” (with a specific name). Besides places and species of animals, 42 gave specific activities in which they were willing to participate. The most popular activities were photo-taking, walking around, and camping (if they had more time). Among the 11 tour guides, most of them mentioned that most popular activity Chinese tourists were willing to participate in was photo-taking, given their limited time. Most tour groups were spending less than half day, with times ranging as little as less than 30 minutes to as much as approximately half a day. This is inclusive of the time tourists spent visiting the town of Jackson and taking the cable car at Teton Village. The relatively short time indicated that there is a lot of potential for activities Chinese tourists could participate in if they could spend more time within GTNP.

It is interesting to note that some visitors mentioned that they were fascinated by photos by professional photographers posted on the official website or other information sources prior to their visit, and were thus left with the impression that GTNP was full of animals roaming around; the mountains with Jackson

Lake appeared to be more amazing in those photos than what they actually saw. When they found out that they could not view as many animals inside GTNP as expected, and when some tourists did not have the luck to see the mountains during ideal weather with a clear sky, they ended up dissatisfied or disappointed.

2) Non-specific expectations of things and activities

Conversely, many tourists mentioned that they did not have a specific expectation for GTNP prior to their visit, or they simply gave answers related to YELL instead of to GTNP, such as hot springs or thermal springs. Some mentioned that beautiful scenery had exceeded their expectations because they did not have a clear expectation, and they were overall very satisfied with their visit.

3) Expectation of places to visit

When further asked about specific names of places they would love to visit within GTNP, only 16 among all tourists gave specific names of places, 31 others mentioned that they were only “*walking around*”, “*stopping at places that I found beautiful and making after-the-fact decisions to visit those places*”, or simply “*taking the tour together with the tour group and following the group*”. When the tourists traveling on buses were further asked to answer which places they were going to visit, most answered that they did not know where they were heading to. Some indi-

vidual travelers mentioned the need for official recommendations on routes within GTNP. They stated that route recommendations on the official website or shown on maps or brochures at visitor centers would be very helpful. The reaction from both groups of visitors indicated that a clearer official recommendation on the official website or distributed at visitor centers is needed.

Among those who gave specific names of places they would like to visit, the most popular places for individual travelers were: Jenny Lake (including the boat tour across Jenny Lake), Jackson Lake, and places where they could get a view of the Tetons.

The 11 tour guides mentioned that their main destinations were: Colter Bay (many tour groups stopped here to buy entrance tickets to GTNP due to the commercial license agreement, meanwhile visitors had the opportunity to use the restrooms beside Colter Bay visitor center and take a quick tour alongside Colter Bay shore); Jackson Lake Lodge (many tour groups stopped to allow travelers to have lunch and visitors were also recommended to use the restroom, as they were told restrooms at other places were pretty rustic and thus they should avoid using them if possible); Teton point turnout (to get a general view of the Tetons given limited time); and Glacier Point turnout.

Chinese tourists' experience

Chinese tourists were asked four specific questions regarding their actual experience, and the questions were related to their attitudes towards the rustic restrooms, safe distances for viewing wildlife, food quality inside GTNP, and their perception of safety within this park.

1) Attitudes towards rustic restrooms

Most Chinese tourists were accepting of the rustic restrooms. For those who were not as supportive, many showed a change in attitude when told that parks could not build a wastewater system to support modern restrooms because of environmental issues. Some mentioned that it would be helpful if more signs were added outside the restrooms explaining the

rationale for the environmentally-friendly restrooms. Many also mentioned that it would be helpful if squat toilets were used for cleanliness. Some argued that they accepted restrooms like these as long as there was proper maintenance.

2) Safe distances for viewing wildlife

The perception of safe viewing distances for wildlife of Chinese tourists was different from that of their U.S. peers. Many Chinese interviewees mentioned not knowing the safe viewing distances and many perceived herbivores as not at all aggressive animals and thus a safe distance was not needed. Some interesting quotes from our interviewees include: *"I hope I can be as close to a bear as possible, even close enough that I can use the bear spray on it"*; *"Do bears actually attack people?"*, etc. This is possibly due to different management practices for wildlife in parks and zoos in China. For instance, wildlife that may attack people are usually separated from people by fences or other barriers. Some interviewees mentioned that they could not understand safety distance education in English, or the measurements in feet or yards were confusing.

3) Food quality

Most Chinese tourists were not satisfied with the food quality within GTNP. However, many argued that although dissatisfied, their main reason to visit GTNP was not for food, thus, they accepted what was provided. Some did state a desire for more Chinese food or more authentic Chinese food within GTNP. Overall, visitors found the quality of food unsatisfying but acceptable, and the price was reasonable.

4) Safety within GTNP

Most Chinese tourists stated that park managers did a good job in keeping GTNP safe and they perceived GTNP as a safe place. Most Chinese tourists perceived safety as tourists' own responsibility within the park, yet the potential for a better education of taking your own responsibility for your own safety still exists. Some tourists were still confused: *"who (park or tourists themselves) was responsible for accidents that could possibly happen inside the park?"*. Additionally, 11 out of 58 tourists mentioned the need to

add more road signs for safety reasons, and many others mentioned the limited access to the Internet and telephone signal within the park might create safety issues. Visitors might not be able to contact the rest of their traveling group under unsafe circumstances, and might also be separated with their family and friends when using multiple cars and get lost within the park.

Practical implications for park management

Based on our analyses, we arrived at the following initial implications for park management. Most of these call for better communication and instructions in the Chinese language and in Chinese visitors' information and cultural environment. Chinese visitors' experiences may be improved with the following:

1. The dominant popularity of YELL indicated the need for park managers of GTNP to coordinate communication strategies together with YELL.
2. Many Chinese tourists utilized the official websites of U.S. national parks. If park managers aim to better reach out to and communicate with Chinese tourists prior to their visit, more specific information such as recommendations for places to visit as well as Chinese translations regarding park regulations on official websites (if not the whole website) will be helpful.
3. Many Chinese tourists utilize popular Chinese websites and/or Chinese social media for trip planning, and many mentioned language barriers when trying to read articles on official websites. It will be helpful to develop official websites/social media platforms in Chinese on Chinese platforms. Chinese tourists could better learn about place recommendations as well as regulations prior to their visit to GTNP. This could lead to better trip planning and more informed visitors. Better explanation of the environmentally-friendly but rustic restrooms inside the park will also be helpful.
4. Different distances between people and wildlife that is proper in China may bring about certain risks in the U.S. This indicates the need for more strategic communication on wildlife safety in Chinese and in metric systems. This could include

better safety education information in brochures or booklets distributed at park entrances or at visitor centers, or better communication and education for tour companies and tour guides to emphasize safety distance. Additionally, simply translating messaging from English into Chinese may not be sufficient to influence Chinese visitors' behaviors as they hold different beliefs, norms, and attitudes relative to U.S. visitors (as cited in Miller et al., 2018, p. 183).

5. Chinese visitors' experiences may be improved by having more Chinese food options, and more authentic types of Chinese food.

Conclusions

The initial results for the qualitative study on Chinese tourists in GTNP include three broad themes. Regarding Chinese tourists' decision-making process, the most popular reasons they knew about and chose to visit GTNP is the reputation of YELL. Regarding information sources, they had difficulties accessing official website of GTNP in China and were utilizing many Chinese websites and social media platforms to obtain travel information. With regard to their expectations, many tourists were highly satisfied because of a lack of clear expectation prior to their visit, while others were not as satisfied because of overly stunning photos on official websites. In the realm of tourists' actual experiences, some concrete recommendation were made in four specific areas: attitudes towards rustic restrooms, safe distances to view wildlife, food quality, and safety inside the park. Readers should also note that these are only the initial results of our study. More comprehensive analysis is underway.

Future work

Although our study provides useful insights to managers in GTNP for this unique group of visitors, this study also has some limitations. First of all, the population we intercepted were staying for relatively a short period of time and thus reluctant to stop and talk for an extended period (> 35 minutes). Future research could target travelers who are willing to par-

ticipate in advance and conduct either face-to-face or telephone interviews, which will allow them to talk longer and elaborate more on their experiences. Similarly, the interview guide we used covered a broad range of research questions, which results in relatively superficial answers to each question within a limited time frame. Future research can focus on some of the questions that are worth more in-depth interviews.

Moreover, all 69 of our interviews were conducted in summer 2018 around Colter Bay Visitor Center and Jackson Lake Lodge. Interviews in the future can be conducted in more places that we identify as relatively popular destinations for Chinese travelers within GTNP, or in different seasons for comparison. It will also be interesting to interview tourists prior to, during, and after their visit to see if their attitudes, satisfaction, or certain values change because of this visit.

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