

Chinese Traditional Culture In The Eyes Of Inbound Tourists: A Summary Of Chinese Researches

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Abstract: Chinese traditional culture is a historical heritage left by people in the past. It not only exists in the form of objects such as the classic literature and cultural objects, but also continues in the form of subjects such as the national way of thinking, values, ethics, code of conduct, customs and so on. To know how foreigners perceive Chinese traditional culture is an important mission which may lead to implications on expanding overseas tourism market. Surveys conducted by Chinese scholars show that travel guides, friends and relatives' recommendation, travel agents, and the Internet were the main ways to obtain Chinese tourism information in the earlier days. But today, internet has become the most important channel, followed by radio and television, recommendations from friends and relatives. Generally, in the eyes of foreigners, the Great Wall, the Terra Cotta Warriors, chopsticks, Traditional Chinese Medicine, abacus, Taishan, hot pot, the Monkey King, etc., are the most typical Chinese cultural symbols. Both studies on foreign citizens and China's inbound tourists show that Chinese traditional culture is a great attraction to the vast majority of foreign people, and can arouse a strong willingness to visit China. Chinese traditional culture has impacts on both the travel decision and travel behavior of inbound tourists and is facilitating in forming positive impression, travel experience and guest satisfaction.

1. Introduction

In the eyes of Chinese scholars (Guanhua Gu, 1996; Sikao Zhang, 2013), Chinese traditional culture can be defined as "the 'living' ancient Chinese culture formed, accumulated and handed down under specific natural environment, economic system, political structure and social ideology in the development of Chinese civilization for thousands of years, which has influenced contemporary culture to this day. It not only exists and continues in the form of objects such as the classic literature and cultural objects related to materialization, but also widely exist and continue in the form of subjects such as the national way of thinking, values, ethics, character characteristics, aesthetic interests, knowledge structure, code of conduct, customs and so on."

The most important characteristic of Chinese traditional culture lies in the history of its emergence and evolution. It is an outcome of constant scouring, accumulation, elimination, supplementation, enrichment and refinement of different times and environment. Chinese traditional culture is a formed product of time that will never be finalized. It is a historical heritage left by people in the past and will evolve and develop continuously in the present and future.

Not all the cultures that appear in Chinese history are seen as Chinese traditional culture, only those that have important value and have survival vitality can be titled as this. Chinese traditional culture is always in a process of continuous production, renewal, elimination and extinction.

Do foreigners have the same understanding of Chinese traditional culture? Or there are great differences? What's their attitude to it? And will this influence their willingness to visit China? Finding out the answers of such questions is quite necessary and of great importance.

2. Where do Inbound Tourists Get Their Knowledge on Chinese Culture?

Earlier studies on China's inbound tourists from Europe, the United States, Japan and other

developed countries found that travel guides, friends and relatives' recommendation, travel agents, and the Internet were the main ways to obtain Chinese tourism information, while mass media, such as TV, radio, newspapers and so on, did not account for a high proportion. For instance, in 2005, the three main channels of learning Chinese information for inbound tourists in Beijing, Xi'an, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Kunming and Guilin were relatives and friends, travel agents and the Internet (Junyi Li, Yafeng Ma, 2005). Similarly, in 2005, over 60% of Guangxi's inbound tourists chose travel guides as the source of tourism information of China, followed by relatives' recommendation, Internet and travel agents. People who chose newspapers, magazines, radio and television and other mass media were no more than 10%. European tourists entering Xi 'an also obtain travel information mainly through travel guides, travel agencies and relatives and friends, and the proportion of Internet, TV and radio media is not high (Yuan Yao, 2010). Surveys of inbound tourists in other cities, such as Beijing (Mengyang Sun, Xiaoyan Zhao, Furong Cao, 2009), Xi'an, Chengdu, Chongqing, Yunnan, Guizhou (Wujing, 2010) and Gansu (Xueqin Gao, Wangbing Liang, 2010) all support the above point. Wujing (2010) also studied the influence of different information channels on tourists, and found that although inbound tourists rely more on travel agencies for information, tourism agency has the least influence, whilst relative's recommendation is the most influential channel, followed by the Internet and mass media recommendation.

In 2011, Liya Wang conducted a survey in the United States, Germany, Russia, Japan and India, aiming to find out how ordinary people in the above countries obtain information related to Chinese culture. The results showed that, unlike inbound tourists to China, television was the number one channel to learn about China in their daily lives, followed by internet and newspapers. But Wang predicted that in the next five years, internet would likely grow to be the most important way of information. Results also said that internet was the most trusted medium by the public, and residents mainly used English search engines and Wikipedia to search information independently. Chinese search engines (such as Baidu) and China's main official English websites are little known and used by foreign people.

In 2017, Yishu Teng and Yueming Yang surveyed 4,586 people from 15 countries in Europe, America, East and Central Asia and Africa through SSI to learn about their information channels of Chinese culture and willingness to visit China. Results showed that internet has become the most important channel to learn about Chinese culture (accounting for 50.6%), followed by radio and television, recommendations from friends and relatives. This result also confirmed Liya Wang's prediction about internet in 2011. The three main ways to have their first contact with Chinese culture for the people of the 15 countries are "a film and television work", "a commodity made in China" and "a Chinese person".

Of course, in addition to the above channels, foreign people can sometimes get in touch with Chinese culture through Confucius Institutes in their own countries and Chinese cultural activities held by people from all walks of life, such as cultural courses, art exhibitions, artistic performances, cultural forums, festivals, etc. The interpersonal communication network composed of overseas Chinese, overseas students, employees of multinational companies or institutions, artists and other people also plays a great role in facilitating the dissemination of Chinese culture abroad (Sikao Zhang, 2013).

3. What's Their General Perception of Chinese Culture?

Yan Liu (2007) surveyed China's inbound tourists from western countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, Spain, Germany, and Sweden, to find out what they see as the most representative symbols of Chinese culture. The 10 symbols they selected were the Great Wall, the Terra Cotta Warriors, the Forbidden City, chopsticks, Peking Opera, calligraphy, dragons, Chinese food, tai chi, and Confucius. Yueming Yang investigated the ordinary people in 15 foreign countries about their cognition of Chinese culture in 2018. They found that pictures describing Chinese cultural resources and Chinese life style, for example, the Traditional Chinese Medicine, abacus, the Silk Road, traditional Chinese clothing, Taishan, hot pot, and the Monkey King, etc. were the most recognized ones, while Chinese art forms, such as Dunhuang dance was less known.

In terms of tourist attractions, inbound tourists have a high awareness of the Great Wall, the Terracotta Warriors, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Potala Palace, the Gardens in Suzhou, the West Lake in Hangzhou and other tourist attractions reflecting Chinese traditional culture(Yongcheng Zi, 2005; Junyi Li, Yaofeng Ma, 2005). Visitors to Beijing also have some knowledge of Beijing time-honored brands, for example, large proportion of foreigners (over 60%) have heard of Quanjude Restaurant, and about 30% people have some knowledge of a traditional Chinese medicine brand, Tongrentang(Mengyang Sun, Xiaoyan Zhao, Furong Cao, 2009).

Not surprisingly, there are obvious cognitive differences between eastern and western tourists on Chinese culture. Yan Liu (2007) surveyed tourists from the East and the West, and found that there were obvious differences in the selection and ranking of symbolic Chinese cultural landscapes. Cultural symbols such as Confucius, dragon, Chinese knot and Cheongsam, which are more spiritual, are more valued by eastern tourists, while things as folk music, dragon dance and fireworks, which show more ethnic differences, are more valued by western tourists. All artistic symbols including Peking Opera, calligraphy, Chinese painting and folk music are paid more attention to by eastern tourists, while physical symbols are generally paid more attention by westerners.

What's more, there are distinctly different understandings of the connotations of Chinese cultural symbols between the eastern and western tourists. Take the Great Wall as an example, except for the consensus that it symbolizes China's long history and high level of architecture, the Great Wall in the eyes of Chinese tourists is the backbone of the national spirit, which not only embodies the diligence and wisdom of Chinese people, but also represents the determination to safeguard national unity and inviolability. However, in Westerners' perception, it simply symbolized China's great military power at that time. It was built to resist aggression, but in fact it played little role. The construction of the Great Wall cost a great deal of manpower and material resources, deprived the human rights of slaves, and separated China from the rest of the world.

4. Does Chinese Traditional Culture Have Impact on Inbound Tourists? How?

Chinese traditional culture can influence the interest, intention and motivation of inbound tourists. Both studies on foreign citizens and China's inbound tourists show that Chinese traditional culture is a great attraction to the vast majority of foreign people, and thus, can arouse a strong willingness to visit China among them. According to Yishu Teng's survey (2018), more than 70% of foreign respondents clearly expressed that they "like" or "very much like" Chinese culture, and their intention to visit China is "very high". Young students from Confucius Institutes in the United States and Thailand showed a strong desire to learn about Chinese material culture, such as Terracotta Warriors, tea, and Chinese food, and their attitude was also positive(Gengnian Wang, 2011). More than 90% of western tourists visited Guilin said they were "very interested" or "interested" in Chinese culture, person who was "not interested at all" accounts less than 1%. Chinese culture also aroused their strong desire to travel to China, with very few respondents saying that they had no strong desire to visit China (Yongcheng Zi, 2005).

For inbound tourists, the splendid Chinese traditional culture and rich cultural relics have long been the key motivation of visiting China. This is supported by surveys of inbound visitors over years: ethnic customs and religion are the most important motivations of Qinhai's inbound tourists(Jingyi Xiao, 2003); experiencing the ancient oriental civilization is the main aim of travelling China for foreigners visiting Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Guilin, and Kunming(Yaofeng Ma, 2004); 74% of western tourists in Guangxi are most interested in China's cultural relics and historical sites, followed by Chinese cuisine and folk customs; inbound tourists in Xi'an have great desire of experiencing the ancient culture, such as the long history, folk customs, Chinese cuisine and oriental art(Yanfeng Yang, Liu Xiao, Ying Ma, 2006; Yajuan Dong, Yafeng Ma, Xuemei Xie, 2009; Yuan Yao, 2010); the most expected scenic spots in Beijing are places with abundant historical relics(Mengyang Sun, Xiaoyan Zhao, Furong Cao, 2009); foreign tourists to Gansu Tibetan autonomous are largely to experience the different cultures(Xueqin Gao, Liangwang Bing, 2010).

Chinese traditional culture has impacts on both the travel decision and travel behavior of inbound tourists. Xueqin Gao (2010) found that “Cultural attractions account for 42% in the decision-making of inbound tourists. The greater the cultural distance between the host-guest countries, the greater the influence of cross-cultural factors on its tourism decision-making behavior”. Their affection of traditional Chinese culture can be directly reflected in their travel decisions and behavior. Tourists from the United States, France and other developed European countries prefer to choose famous historical and cultural cities of China, such as Chengde, Taiyuan, Datong, Luoyang, Xi'an, Chongqing, Lhasa, Yinchuan, etc. (Xiaodan Wu, Hailong Jin, 2007; Xu Li, Yaochen Qin, Xiaojun Ning, Lijun Zhang, 2014; Yuan Yao, 2010). “The traditional buildings and the stories behind these ancient buildings are of great interest to foreign visitors” (Qin Liu, 2010). Tea, handicrafts, local food, traditional clothing, and cultural and artistic works which have distinctive Chinese characteristics are most popular souvenirs among inbound tourists (Yongcheng Zi, 2005; Hongchen Ge, 2010). Chinese food and local flavors are the best choices for the stomach of most foreign tourists too (Yongcheng Zi, 2005).

Chinese traditional culture can facilitate positive impression, travel experience and guest satisfaction. For inbound tourists, one of their most striking impressions on China is its antiquity. They use words or phrases like “colorful”, “long history”, “dynamic”, “attractive” and “mysterious” to describe Chinese traditional culture (Yueming Yang, Yishu Teng, 2018). “What they saw and heard in China is very fresh and novel” (Yongcheng Zi, 2005). Their positive emotions and impressions during travel are often closely related to Chinese traditional culture. For example, foreign tourists in Fenghuang Ancient City showed more positive emotions when they talked about the ancient buildings, local food and products, and local history and culture (Jun Gao, Yaofeng Ma, Bihu Wu, 2010). Words or phrases on culture appeared very frequently in their travel comments, such as, “protect local culture”, “maintain ethnic feature”, “add more cultural elements”, and so on.

Chinese traditional culture contributes a lot to guest satisfaction of inbound tourists. European and American tourists give higher evaluation on historical sites and cultural landscapes (Qiufang Ma, Xinjun Yang, Junxiang Kang, 2006). Foreigners usually give very high remarks on Chinese cultural shows and products, such as Kun Opera, Shaolin Kung Fu Display, Chinese Shadow Puppetry, etc. The charm, knowledge, pleasure and tradition delivered by cultural products usually has obvious effect on raising guest satisfaction and repurchasing willingness (Nan Chen, Kai Bai, Genxiu Piao, 2008; Jianlian Wang, Degen Wang, Changxue Liu, 2010; Weiwei Zhang, Yehua, Du, Zhongjun Zhao, 2019).

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