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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to obtain a mental picture of the United States as a travel destination in the collective mind of Chinese travelers, and compare image perceptions of different groups of past and potential U.S. travelers. Preliminary findings of this study highlighted that, overall, Chinese outbound tourists' perception of America is highly urban, featuring advanced economic development, open and democratic system, high technology, and big cities. Further, the four groups of respondents reported somewhat different perceptions of the U.S., which may correspond to their different travel experiences, and different levels of familiarity with the U.S.

Keywords: *destination image, China outbound tourism, United States, travel horizon.*

INTRODUCTION

Chinese outbound travel has been growing very fast in the recent years. In 2008, Mainland Chinese citizens made nearly 46 million outbound trips (MesseBerlin, 2009), and it has become the largest outbound travel source market in Asia. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that by 2020 there will be approximately 100 million outbound Chinese outbound tourists, making China one of the largest source of outbound travel in the world (WorldTourismOrganization, 2003). While traditionally Chinese outbound travel highly concentrated within Asia (Dai, 2008), a growing number of Chinese tourists have become more interested in and comfortable with long-haul intra-regional travel.

As the world's top destination in terms of international tourism receipts, the United States is among the last Western countries obtaining the Approved Destination Status (ADS) and joining in the competition for Chinese outbound tourists. Even before the ADS was signed, "China is already a rich source for inbound U. S.— a source that grows exponentially with the ability to maximize marketing and promotion to an affluent population that has both the means and desire to travel" (Sheatsley, Li, & Harrill, 2009, p. 11). Nevertheless, marketing America to Chinese tourists can still be a huge challenge, due to substantial differences in culture, economy, and ideology between the two countries. To overcome these obstacles, arguably the first step American marketers need to take is to better understand how Chinese tourists perceive the United States as a travel destination. In the destination branding literature, such "perception about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory" (Cai, 2002, p. 723) is considered as part of tourists' destination brand knowledge (Li, Petrick, & Zhou, 2008). Partly building on Anderson's (1983) original Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) theory, the idea of

brand knowledge assumes that people's knowledge about brands is somewhat akin to a large "associative network" consisting of numerous nodes (i.e., pieces of brand information) and links (i.e., the strength of association between nodes)(Cai, 2002; Keller, 1993). In essence, "building a brand image amounts to identifying the most relevant associations and strengthening their linkages to the brand" (Cai, 2002, p. 723).

From a different perspective, Echtner and Ritchie (1991; 1993) proposed a three-dimensional framework of tourism destination image which incorporates three mutually overlapping continuums: (1) attribute-holistic continuum, i.e., destination image comprises both perceptions of individual destination attributes and the holistic impression; (2) functional-psychological, i.e., each image component contains directly observable and abstract characteristics; and (3) common-unique, i.e., destination image contains traits and features common to all destinations as well as unique to very few destinations. Collectively, the image characteristics, features, and attributes described in Echtner and Ritchie (1991; 1993)'s model may all be considered as different "brand nodes" and "brand associations" of tourists' brand knowledge.

This paper focuses on Chinese tourists' image of the United States as a travel destination. In addition to identifying major features and components of the America travel brand, the authors also attempt to examine the links and associations among these images. Further, this study attempts to explore image differences among customer groups with different levels of travel experiences.

METHODS

The present paper reports findings from the final phase of a two-year, multi-phase study on the Mainland Chinese outbound travel market. In this phase, a marketing research company was hired to conduct face-to-face interviews with 1,600 citizens of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, three tier-I cities of China (Arlt, 2006). Respondents were recruited (with minor incentive) mainly through networking/referral, follow-up survey with participants in the previous stage of this study, and intercepts of potential participants in upper-class neighborhoods, premium shopping malls, etc. Following previous studies (CTC, 2007; Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010), this study targeted four types of past or potential Chinese long-haul outbound travelers (i.e., Chinese citizens who have traveled outside of Asia or plan to do so in the near future). Specifically, the sample included: 400 respondents who had been to the U.S. for leisure purposes in the past 3 years; 400 who had traveled outside of Asia (but not the U.S.) in the past 3 years; 400 who had traveled within Asia in the past 3 years and were interested in traveling outside of Asia in the next 2 years; and 400 who had not traveled outside of China in the past 3 years but were interested in traveling outside of Asia in the next 2 years.

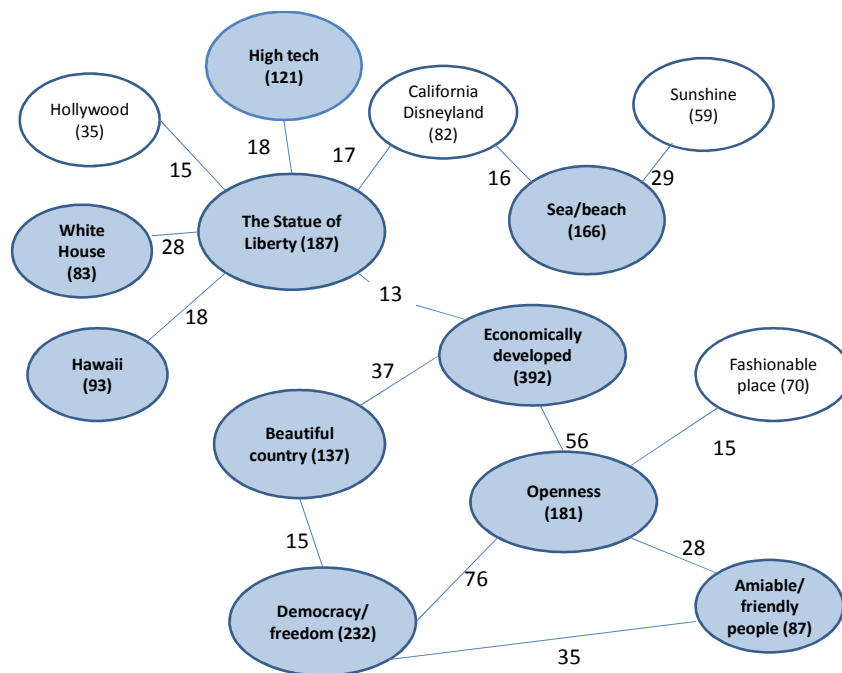
Due to a lack of understanding of Chinese respondents' perception of the United States as a travel destination, as well as potential paradigmatic mismatch when applying Western theories/instruments to Asian contexts (Iwasaki, Nishino, Onda, & Bowling, 2007), the authors decided to take an unstructured approach, and asked respondents three open-ended questions adapted from Echtner and Ritchie(1991). The answers were professionally coded and translated into English. Three perceptual maps were then developed based on answers to these three questions, respectively labeled "stereotypical", "affective", and "uniqueness" images (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). In these maps, individual image items serve as nodes of the network, and the frequency one image item being mentioned may reflect its saliency in respondents' collective mind. Because respondents were

allowed to provide up to three answers to each question, the number of co-occurrences of two images (i.e., when one respondent mentioned both images in his/her three answers to the same image question) may illustrate the strength of associations/linkages between this pair of images. Finally, proportions of respondents in each of the four groups who mentioned a particular image were compared using Chi-square tests.

FINDINGS

Perceptual map of the U.S. stereotypical image (Figure 1) depicts 10 most frequent images represented by blue bubbles, with frequencies in parentheses. The link between a pair of images corresponds to the number of co-occurrences of the two images, with the cut-off co-occurrence frequency of 15. All links with more than 15 co-occurrences connected to the 10 most frequent images are represented on the diagram, even if the other image does not belong to the “top ten” (e.g., Sea/beach and Sunshine pair of images). “Economically developed” and “democracy/freedom” are two most frequently mentioned image items. Overall, it seems there are two “camps” of stereotypical image items in respondents’ mind, one being the abstract idea of America being “economically developed,” “open”, and “democratic”, while the other one centering around the icon of the country — the Statue of Liberty.

Figure 1
Stereotypical Image of the U.S.



Perceptual map of the U.S. affective image depicts 11 most frequent images. “Happy” and “exciting” were found as the most common mood associated with traveling to the United States. The uniqueness image, seems to be the most complicated perceptual map of the three. The results show NYC, Hawaii, San Francisco, and Washington DC, among others, are the best-

known American destinations. More importantly, the associations between destinations (such as San Francisco and NYC, and Hawaii and NYC) could have important implications for itinerary design. Limited by space, these two perceptual maps could not be included in the present paper.

Finally, the comparisons among groups (Tables 1-3) also reveal some interesting patterns. For instance, a larger number of respondents among the more sophisticated travel groups (“USA” group and “Outside Asia” group) associated the United States with “Amiable/friendly people”, “relaxation”, “Grand Canyon”, “Golden Gate Bridge,” while the less experienced groups (“Within Asia” group and “Potential” group) were more likely to associate American with being “economically developed,” “beautiful/scenic,” and with destinations such as Hawaii, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

Table 1
Stereotypical Image of the U.S. held by the Four Groups of Chinese Travelers

| Stereotypical images | Total Freq | USA | Outside Asia | Within Asia | Potential | Chi-Square | p-value |
|--------------------------------|------------|-----|--------------|-------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Economically developed country | 362 | 79 | 68 | 117 | 98 | 22.959 | 0.001 |
| Democracy/freedom | 232 | 69 | 74 | 46 | 43 | 15.043 | 0.002 |
| The Statue of Liberty | 187 | 44 | 45 | 47 | 51 | 0.696 | 0.874 |
| Openness | 181 | 50 | 61 | 39 | 31 | 12.777 | 0.005 |
| Sea/beach | 166 | 37 | 30 | 51 | 48 | 7.662 | 0.054 |
| Beautiful/scenic country | 137 | 20 | 25 | 39 | 53 | 21.162 | 0.000 |
| High technology | 121 | 27 | 27 | 37 | 30 | 2.387 | 0.496 |
| Hawaii | 93 | 17 | 17 | 24 | 35 | 9.898 | 0.019 |
| Amiable/friendly people | 87 | 28 | 32 | 11 | 16 | 14.234 | 0.003 |
| White House | 83 | 17 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 1.055 | 0.788 |

Table 2
Affective Image of the U.S. held by the Four Groups of Chinese Travelers

| Affective images | Total Freq | USA | Outside Asia | Within Asia | Potential | Chi-Square | p-value |
|--------------------------|------------|-----|--------------|-------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Happiness/delight | 1190 | 298 | 300 | 283 | 309 | 4.578 | 0.205 |
| Excitement | 721 | 190 | 179 | 191 | 161 | 5.885 | 0.117 |
| Relaxation | 265 | 94 | 81 | 61 | 29 | 43.467 | 0.000 |
| Enjoy life/enjoy holiday | 192 | 48 | 50 | 63 | 31 | 12.263 | 0.007 |
| Novelty | 135 | 38 | 43 | 31 | 24 | 6.108 | 0.106 |
| Democracy/freedom | 112 | 25 | 29 | 30 | 28 | 0.538 | 0.911 |
| Amiable/friendly people | 107 | 30 | 25 | 27 | 25 | 0.671 | 0.880 |
| Comfort | 85 | 25 | 12 | 16 | 32 | 12.064 | 0.007 |
| A place I hope to visit | 76 | 12 | 24 | 24 | 16 | 8.933 | 0.177 |
| Tension | 69 | 8 | 18 | 20 | 23 | 7.679 | 0.053 |
| Openness | 53 | 14 | 20 | 14 | 5 | 8.957 | 0.030 |

Table 3
Uniqueness Image of the U.S. held by the Four Groups of Chinese Travelers

| Cities, states, landmarks images | Total Freq | USA | Outside Asia | Within Asia | Potential | Chi-Square | p-value |
|----------------------------------|------------|-----|--------------|-------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| New York | 577 | 122 | 159 | 139 | 157 | 9.788 | 0.020 |
| Hawaii | 431 | 96 | 104 | 116 | 116 | 3.465 | 0.325 |
| San-Francisco | 369 | 82 | 101 | 96 | 90 | 2.828 | 0.419 |
| Washington | 352 | 72 | 94 | 97 | 89 | 5.449 | 0.142 |
| Los Angeles | 242 | 47 | 53 | 50 | 92 | 26.115 | 0.000 |
| The Statue of Liberty | 215 | 54 | 44 | 81 | 36 | 24.776 | 0.000 |
| Disneyland CA | 190 | 58 | 52 | 41 | 39 | 5.853 | 0.119 |
| Las Vegas | 176 | 46 | 42 | 48 | 40 | 1.021 | 0.796 |
| Grand Canyon | 173 | 54 | 53 | 37 | 29 | 11.737 | 0.008 |
| White House | 161 | 43 | 34 | 51 | 33 | 5.932 | 0.115 |
| Chicago | 115 | 15 | 21 | 26 | 53 | 31.658 | 0.000 |
| California | 103 | 30 | 24 | 18 | 31 | 4.514 | 0.211 |
| Hollywood | 95 | 28 | 30 | 22 | 15 | 6.121 | 0.106 |
| Chinatown | 82 | 25 | 13 | 22 | 22 | 4.165 | 0.244 |
| Universal Studio of Hollywood | 78 | 24 | 20 | 24 | 10 | 7.062 | 0.070 |
| Philadelphia | 74 | 13 | 11 | 30 | 20 | 12.525 | 0.006 |
| Yellowstone | 74 | 24 | 12 | 20 | 18 | 4.251 | 0.236 |
| Houston | 73 | 9 | 21 | 16 | 27 | 10.033 | 0.018 |
| Ocean World/Busch Gardens | 56 | 21 | 14 | 12 | 9 | 5.774 | 0.123 |
| Sea/beach | 51 | 16 | 20 | 11 | 4 | 11.565 | 0.009 |
| Golden Gate Bridge | 50 | 27 | 12 | 10 | 1 | 28.821 | 0.000 |

Findings reported above represent only the first step of the analysis. The authors plan to further explore the image patterns via multiple analytical techniques for triangulation purpose. These include factor analyses on the image frequency matrices (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, & Morrison, 2009), correspondence analysis, as well as placing image elements along Echtner and Ritchie(1993)'s three pairs of axes.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study attempts to obtain a mental picture of the United States as a travel destination in the collective mind of Chinese travelers, as well as compare image perceptions of different groups of past and potential U.S. travelers. The unstructured, qualitative data revealed a variety of characteristics and attributes of the American travel brand. The perceptual maps hence developed provided a useful visual representation of the image data.

Preliminary findings of this study have highlighted that, overall, Chinese outbound tourists' perception of America is highly urban, featuring advanced economic development, open and democratic system, high technology, and big cities. Most American destinations and attractions Chinese tourists can think of are located in the east and west coasts (with Las Vegas and Grand Canyon as notable exceptions). In contrast, much of the country's leisure, cultural,

and natural attractions have not been fully recognized by Chinese tourists yet. Further, the four groups of respondents reported somewhat different perceptions of the U.S., which may correspond to their different travel experiences, as well as different levels of familiarity with the U.S. Understanding and comparing the four groups' perception of the U.S. may help American destinations and tourism practitioners access the huge Chinese outbound travel market. Ultimately, it is hoped that findings from this study may help American destinations gain a competitive edge for securing this burgeoning market.

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