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A comparative study of the job perceptions of hospitality and tourism staff in China

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the job perceptions of hotel staff and tour guides. It aims to discover more about their skills, attitudes and career plans, and gain comparative insights that will help to develop human resources within these areas of work. The findings reveal that both hospitality and tourism sector in China are faced with a shortage of human resources with an appropriate level of education and of suitably high quality. Oral communication is identified the most important skill identified as a need, followed by professional and ethical standards as well as team work and leadership qualities. Ideas vary considerably with respect to the relative importance of skills within the two work areas. Compared with hotel staff, tour guides in China show lower job loyalty, in part because of low social status and poor opportunities for career progress. This paper concludes that it is essential for Chinese government agencies at a national and provincial level to practice effective and sector-sensitive measures to attract, train, retain and develop appropriate talent in order to meet the needs and challenge of the international tourism industry.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of China's hospitality and tourism sector has created a great increase in demand for human resources. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) forecasts that, by the year 2014, China will become the largest tourist destination and the fourth largest tourist generating country. According to China National Tourism Administration (CNTA, 2007), China received 124 million inbound travelers in 2006, ranking fourth in the world. As a result, this will lead to a major increase in the number of people employed in the tourism industry. UNWTO and China's National Tourism Administration (CNTA) also forecast that, over the next 10 years, the number of tourism employees will increase at an annual rate of 1 million. The fact is, however, that graduates from tourism universities and colleges of all levels will only reach 100,000 a

year, which seriously fall short of demand. What is more, the problem of turnover is even serious both in hotels and travel agencies, with turnover rate of 24.6% and 45%, respectively (Zhang, 2005).

In terms of both their importance and the employment that they generate, hotels and travel agencies are two of the main pillars within the sector. It is widely accepted that human resources in these two fields play decisive roles in improving service quality and determining the success of a country's tourism and hospitality industry. Although there is a clear challenge in terms of skills shortages, employees' perceptions of their jobs actually vary across different areas of work. The comparative analysis aims at scientific explanation of the establishment of general relationships among two or more variables (Lijphart, 1971). Therefore, understanding these differences will assist the country to increase the quality and skills of the sector's employees and, by delving into the attitudes and ideas of employees in both hotels and travel agencies, enable businesses to attract more and better qualified talent. The importance of such comparative analysis in tourism and hospitality research cannot be underestimated (Baum, 1999). Discussion about work and skills in this sector is frequently characterized by liberal use of generalizations without critical consideration of their application in differing work contexts, whether relating to cultural and national boundaries or between different service or product quality levels or between various task or skills areas – hotel front office, airline stewarding, restaurant service, tour guiding, for example. Comparative consideration of work across these different dimensions enables us to challenge generalizations and create responses that are relevant both within specific job areas across differing national and operational contexts (see, for example, Baum et al, 2006) as well as between different job areas within hospitality and tourism, as represented by this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers (Bai and Cen, 2006; Lam, Zhang and Baum, 2001; Ma, 2005; Mok and Finley, 1986) both at home and abroad have undertaken considerable work in order to study the perceptions and job satisfaction levels of hotel staff. In the Chinese context, Kong and Baum (2006) addressed the relationship between skills and service propensity of employees in hotels with the aim to learn more about the skills profiles, work background, attitudes and career plans of the hotel staff. Based on a study of job perceptions, Lam and Wei (2005) and Lin and Dai (2005), analyzed the relationships between job satisfaction and employee turnover and tried to identify practical solutions to perceived problems in this regard.

There are several studies exploring role and duty of tour guide (Kong, 2006; Tao, 2003; Wang, 1997), guides' financial transactions, and job burnout (Liang, 2005; Feng, 2005). Other researchers discussed tour guides' professional rights and interests (Chen, 2006; Tian, 2006). Although much has been written on tour guides' financial transactions, practices and management, not much attention has been paid on attitudes and perceptions of their job from the guides' point of view. What is more, studies relating to China's hotel employees or tour guides were mainly published in Chinese language. There has been constraint of the dissemination of China's tourism and hospitality research output to the international tourism community (Wang, 2008).

As regards to comparative studies between sub-sectors of tourism and hospitality or across cultural contexts, few examples are readily available. The works of Baum (2005),

Baum and Odgers (2001) as well as that of Baum, Devine, Kattara, Osoro, Texeira and Wong (2006) are exceptions and these studies direct their work towards a comparative analysis of the social construction of skills in hospitality. As to a comparative literature which looks at hotel staff and tour guides, there are no evident examples to hand.

Employees' perceptions of their job, especially those relating to training and development, and the compensation systems, have significant and positive effects on their trust in organization. Furthermore, employees' trust in organization is likely to result in higher loyalty and commitment to employers, and low turnover intentions. The objective of this study, therefore, is to consider employees' perceptions of their own job in hotels and in travel agencies, their differing attitudes, ideas and plans for career development, with a view to gaining insights into what different skills are important for staff in these two fields, and how to use this comparison to identify methods to address identified problems.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected by conducting two surveys in major tourist cities in China, including Beijing, Tianjin, Jinan, Qingdao and Weihai. One was conducted within hotels and another in travel agencies. The methodology adopted within this study was based on convenience sampling. The respondents were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire which was collected on the spot by the researcher to ensure the confidentiality of the information provided.

Participants of hotel survey are staff working in front office in four and five star hotels. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed and 276 of these returned were usable which form the basis of this analysis of hotel work in China. In the sample, females represent 64% of the respondents and 79% of the total group are single. The hotels where respondents work include business hotels (65%), beach resort hotels (20%), conference hotels (6%) and countryside resort hotels (1%).

The survey of tour guides was conducted in January 2007 in two stages. First, a total of 180 questionnaires were distributed to guides on a training class offered by Shandong province. Second, with the help of the local tourism authority, another 120 questionnaires were sent to tour guides in other parts of China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Guilin. These cities were selected because they are major tourist destinations with thousands of tour guides, and therefore can reflect a reasonably broad sample of target populations. In summary, a total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to potential respondents and 210 usable questionnaires were collected and analyzed, representing a response rate of 70%. Participants of guide survey were permanent tour guides and freelance tour guides. A permanent tour guide (known in China as full-time tour guide) works as a permanent tour coordinator and usually has a monthly basic salary and can earn extra money by obtaining guide fees or allowances for each assignment, tips from tourists, and commission on shopping and selling optional tours. Freelance tour guides (known in China as part-time tour guide) have no monthly salary and usually work on tour-by-tour or hour-by-hour basis. In all, 300 questionnaires were distributed and 210 usable questionnaires were collected and analyzed, representing a response rate of 70%. Of the 210 tour guides, 87.1% were female, age ranging from twenty to thirty. Only 5.3% of respondents had a foreign-language-speaking guide licence, and most of them-94.7% work as Chinese-speaking guides. The travel agencies where guides work can be grouped

into two types — 15.7% international travel agencies engaging in international tourism, and 84.3% national agencies targeting domestic tourism business.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Education and training for China’s hospitality and tourism industry

Responses were received from hotel staff and tour guides, across a range of levels in all research locations—management and supervisory level, senior staff members, junior staff and trainees. As illustrated in table 1, in all, 99.4% of hotel staff and 61.1% of tour guides were full-time while 0.6% and 38.4% respectively took part-time jobs. The percent of people taking part-time work in travel agencies is clearly much higher than in hotels.

The job scope of the respondents in hotels was generally wide, with all staff being directly involved with reception work, accounts, reservations and cash desk exchanges, concierge, telephone operations, and sales and marketing. Other responsibilities included porter and night auditing. As to tour guides, all respondents held responsibilities with respect to reception work in support of destination and site guiding. In addition to reception work in peak season, they were also responsible for other kinds of work in the travel agency, such as planning and coordinating, booking tickets, accounting, sales and marketing. Those working in small travel agencies companies have responsibility for sales or marketing activities.

Table 1 indicated the educational attainment of all respondents. The research shows that the main labour force in both hotels and in travel agencies is made up of graduates from tourism colleges and professional schools at the senior high school level, with the percentages of 75% and 58.6%, respectively. The findings show that the number of staff with a bachelor or master degree working in travel agency (31.4%) is higher than that in hotel sector (18.2%). However, it is surprised to find that these respondents with higher education background were mainly students at universities who regarded guiding only as a part-time job to make pocket money. Few of them planned to devote themselves to guiding because of the low social status and unclear career development opportunities. This highlights the problem of human resource in quality and quantity terms in China’s tourism and hospitality industry.

Table1: The demographic profiles of the respondents (%)

	<i>Hotel staff (N=276)</i>	<i>Tour guide(N=210)</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	36.6	12.9
Female	63.4	87.1
<i>Position of Respondents</i>		
Department Manager	3.30	2.90
Supervisor	26.0	13.0
Junior Staff Member	60.9	57.7
Trainee	9.8 0	26.4
<i>Educational Level</i>		
Primary/ Elementary	0.00	1.40
Secondary/ High school	3.90	4.30

Vocational/ Technical	26.1	24.8
Certificate/Diploma	48.9	33.8
Bachelors	17.1	23.3
Master Degree	1.10	8.10
Others	2.90	4.30

In addition, since joining the tourism industry, only 30.3% of the tour guides surveyed had completed part-time or short courses. Compared with travel agencies, hotels in China financed more on their employees' training, with a rate of 41% of respondents participating in programs. However, the low level in these two areas suggests that neither hotels nor travel agencies invest significantly in staff training.

Respondents' career plan and development

The tourism and hospitality sector is widely associated with high levels of staff turnover and data in table 2 are proof of this situation. Most employees surveyed regarded jobs both in hotels and in travel agencies as temporary ones. As can be seen in table 2, only 30.8% employees in hotels and 31.4% in travel agencies wanted to remain in their current employment for between one to five years, and a further 41.7% and 43.8% respectively had no career plans at this stage.

The survey indicated that about 42.3% of tour guides have changed their employer since they started to work in the sector. By contrast, the job mobility rate in hotels is relatively low, constituting 24.6%. The majority of hotel staff and tour guide hoped to be promoted in their current jobs. However, still others chose to move out of their job sector.

Table 2: The respondents' career plans (%)

	<i>Hotel Staff (n=276)</i>	<i>Tour Guide(n=210)</i>
<i>Is this your first unit?</i>		
Yes	75.4	57.2
No	24.6	42.3
<i>How long do you plan to remain in the current job?</i>		
Less than 6 months	8.00	4.8
6 months—1 year	19.5	17.1
1 year—5 year	30.8	31.4
No plans at this stage	41.7	43.8
<i>Next Career Move</i>		
Promotion in my current job	53.3	52.4
Move elsewhere in this hotel/travel agency	9.4	3.3
Move to another hotel/travel agency	5.4	4.8
Move out of the hotel/travel agency sector	17.8	18.6
Other	14.1	16.2

There are many reasons why employees choose to leave, such as low wages, low social status and perceived hard work. One of the most telling, most frequently

overlooked factor is a perceived lack of career development opportunities. About 48.9% of staff in hotels and 49.8% of tour guides thought opportunities for promotion and development in their current job were poor or uncertain. It is widely accepted, in tourism and hospitality, that less importance is attached to training and development than in other sectors. In addition, tourism operators lay too much stress on pre-job training and find that training can be provided as and when required or, in other words, on an ad hoc basis. From the operators' perspective, they hope all their workforce will have finished their training or received relevant education before joining their employment, possibly to save training costs. As to the satisfaction with job promotion and development, hotel employees showed, comparatively, a slightly higher positive response than staff in travel agencies.

Perspectives on work in the hospitality and tourism industry

When it comes to perspectives about their job, both hotel staff and tour guides strongly agreed that their jobs were a challenging and demanding area in tourism and hospitality and they also particularly enjoyed the level of customer contact in the job. As to the organizational parts of job, hotel staff enjoyed this more than tour guides. Data in Table 3 also indicates that neither hotel employees nor guides thought their job were highly respected by their family and friends. What is more, they were extremely dissatisfied with their work and career progression; of the two, the situation of tour guides was even worse.

Table 3: Statements about work in tourism and hospitality

<i>Statement about work</i>	<i>Mean and rank response on 5 points scale (hotel staff)</i>	<i>Mean and rank response on 5 points scale (tour guide)</i>
This work is a challenging and demanding area of work	4.30 (1)	4.84 (1)
I enjoy meeting and greeting customers within my job	4.19 (2)	4.17 (2)
I enjoy the organisational parts of my job	4.16 (3)	3.72 (5)
I enjoy the use of technology within my job	4.11 (4)	4.10 (3)
My area of work is well respected by my family and friends	3.77 (5)	3.59 (6)
This is my preferred field for work and career progression	3.74 (6)	3.01 (8)
A specialist college course (in hospitality/tourism) is useful for this work	3.60 (7)	4.06 (4)
I am familiar with most of the tasks in my job prior working in this area	3.38 (8)	3.21 (7)

The respondents were also asked to respond to statements about skills requirements for their work based on a scale of 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly). It was widely accepted by both hotel staff and tour guides that communication (oral) was the most important skill needed in their jobs, followed by understanding of professional and

ethical standards as well as team work and leadership qualities which also play a decisive part. Most tour guides insisted that only by combining excellent oral communication skills and rich knowledge of heritage and the destination with excellent service skills can they really contribute to the visitor experience.

When faced with the choice as to whether specialist college courses in hospitality are useful for their work, the agreement rate of tour guides was higher than that of hotel employees. Due to the different types of work, hotel staff treated use of job equipment as one of their important skills, while tour guides, on the contrary, rank this skill as the lowest in order of importance. Compared with people working in the hotel industry, travel agency employees cared more about health and safety, and legal issues. This is partly due to a lack of this knowledge and partly due to the current situation of tour guides. Tour guides in China now are facing various forms of complaints and challenges by tourists and the public, mainly in matters relating to health and personal injury.

Table 4: Importance of skills in the workplace

<i>Importance of Skills</i>	<i>Mean and rank response on 5 point scale (hotel staff)</i>	<i>Mean and rank response on 5 point scale (tour guide)</i>
Communication (Oral)	4.56 (1)	4.74 (1)
Professional and ethical standards	4.43 (2)	4.63 (2)
Team work	4.33 (3)	4.54 (3)
Leadership qualities	4.31 (4)	4.53 (4)
Use of job equipment	4.29 (5)	3.92 (10)
Customer Care	4.25 (6)	4.46 (5)
Marketing	4.17 (7)	4.19 (8)
Health and safety	4.02 (8)	4.33 (6)
Communication (Written)	3.92 (9)	4.29 (7)
Legal issues	3.67 (10)	4.12 (9)

CONCLUSIONS

From a broad perspective, both hotels and travel agencies in China are faced with a shortage of high quality human resources, especially those with specific knowledge and a rich experience of the wider environment. Contributing factors include perceptions of demanding work, low wages and uncertain opportunities for promotion. As a result, the main source of skills for tourism and hospitality are to be found in students from professional schools and vocational schools which may be seen to contribute to a relatively low educational level and low quality of workers in the industry. Although the number of tour guides who have received higher education is greater than that in hotels, few of them want to devote themselves to this job for the long-term, and most of them only regard guiding as a part-time or temporary job. This reflects an urgent need for effective measures by government and other employers to ensure a supportive environment for staff together with flexible salary packages in order to attract and keep talent.

Compared with travel agencies, China's hotel industry shows relatively higher employment stability and provides more opportunities in career development. However,

the high rate of turnover intentions undoubtedly reflects low job loyalty of staff in hospitality. Trust in the organization has been reported to have a negative impact on turnover intentions. In other words, the higher the level of employee trust that is found in an organization, the less likely that an employee will leave that organization. As a result, it is essential for travel agencies as well as hotels to adopt career development as one of their basic management policies so as to improve employees' trust and loyalty to their organizations. The result of an effective professional development system may make workers more optimistic and confident both with regard to their careers and their working units.

The challenge for the tourism and hospitality sector in China as it becomes increasingly international in focus is to attract personnel with the range of language, communications, emotional and wider generic skills that are necessary for effective work in the contemporary global industry. The evidence here points to some gaps in this regard. The rapid development of the tourism industry also suggests an urgent requirement to have better employability skills to meet the demands and challenges of their jobs. In particular, due to the important roles of these two jobs in meeting the needs of visitors, both hotel staff and tour guides should also seek to adapt themselves more effectively to the industry and to the wider society. In addition to commonly-used skills like communication and team working ability, they must also learn some new skills, such as health and safety and foreign languages. It is also important for tourism and hospitality operators to provide their workforce with further education and enable all employees to grasp not only the skills needed at present but also skills to be used in the future. The availability and extent of training and development programmes convey the message to employees that they are valued, supported, and cared for by their organizations. Such positive feelings of well-being experienced by employees are likely to encourage them to reciprocate by having faith in the actions of their top management, and a willingness to contribute longer to the organization.

Finally, this paper highlights the value of studies that consider common dimensions of employment across different fields of work within hospitality and tourism. The findings of this study highlight the dangers of generalizing about such work. They also point to clear opportunities for learning about those aspiring to enter the industry, by highlighting the differences in expectations and perceptions of work held by those working in different areas. This learning is relevant to both employers and educators who provide training and development programmes for those entering the industry. This conclusion also points for the need for further comparative research in this area as the basis for authoritative commentary on work and employee expectations in hospitality and tourism.

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