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## **Minimizing Dissonance When Hosting Mainland Chinese Tourists: A Model of Understanding Their Role-clarity and Self-efficacy in Service Delivery**

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## Introduction

Since 2005, when the Chinese government relaxed its policy toward leisure travel abroad from “restriction” to “regulation,” outbound leisure tourism from mainland China has taken off. Figure 1 shows the trend of this market from 2005 to 2009. Statistics show that China is currently Asia's largest source market without counting trips to Hong Kong or Macao. Chinese tourists are also known for their “free-spending” travel behavior. A research report by AC Nielsen stated that the average expenditure per visitor by mainland Chinese travelers on each shopping trip was US\$928 on average and US\$1408 in Europe, thus making Chinese travelers the top spenders in Europe. Among Chinese travelers visiting Switzerland, the average daily spending per person was as high as 500 Swiss francs, which equaled the spending of three German or four Dutch tourists (Zhang & Liu, 2008, p. 432). ChinaContact (2009) reported that the average amount a Chinese tourist spends per trip to Australia is almost US\$3,000, compared with US\$3,600 per Japanese visitor and US\$3,870 per American visitor. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the Chinese were on average among the top five spenders on leisure tourism and were expected to exceed other nationalities to become the world's top tourist spenders in the future (Zhang & Liu, 2008, p. 432).

[Insert fig 1 here]

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, China will be the world's fourth largest source of outbound tourists by 2020, with 100 million overseas visits (Yu, 2010). Spotting the huge market potential, many countries, especially emerging destinations such as North Korea, India, and Sri Lanka, have opened their arms to welcome mainland Chinese tourists by designing special tourism events and promotional activities and making long-term marketing plans (Yu, 2010).

These positive traits, however, have been overshadowed by a certain market dissonance: Service providers who have hosted mainland Chinese tourists are “shocked” by their “uncivilized behavior.” A search on Google with key words “Chinese outbound tourists” results in approximately half a million listings reporting both “good” and “bad” news about the market. The “good” news, of course, refers to how the market is contributing to the recovery of the world economy. But the “bad” news, unfortunately, portrays a “bad” image of mainland Chinese outbound tourists. For instance, the media in Singapore reported that hotel staffs were upset with mainland Chinese tourists spitting in their rooms and smoking in bed. The hotels had to shampoo the carpet and replace bed linens after a Chinese tour group passed through (Watts, 2006). Singapore airline companies have also criticized Chinese tourists for talking loudly and being very rude (Arnold, 2005). In Hong Kong, the media have complained of mainlanders spitting, lighting up in no-smoking areas, and displaying a general lack of courtesy (e.g., Watts, 2006). After the opening of Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005 many locals were upset by a newspaper picture of a mainland mother allowing her child to urinate against a wall in the amusement park (Watts, 2006). Overall, the “common forms” of the “bad behavior” of mainland Chinese outbound tourists can be summarized as follows: (a) mistaken expectations toward and high demand on service providers; (b) “bad” personal manners such as talking loudly, spitting, refusing to line up, smoking in no-smoking areas,

disregarding traffic lights, taking pictures regardless of whether they are permitted to or not, and jumping over barriers when signs say 'No trespassing; and (c) unwillingness to participate in travel activities.

Reports on how mainland Chinese outbound tourists perceive their travel experience can also be obtained from Google and academic studies. Many of these tourists have expressed disappointment at and dissatisfaction and frustration with some tourist destinations and service providers. For instance, some Chinese tourists traveling and shopping in Hong Kong claimed that the sales personnel in shopping stores were unable to describe the product in detail or to communicate in Mandarin, and worse, they did not show enough respect or care (Choi, 2008). An empirical study by Wang, Vela, and Tyler (2008) reported that Chinese tourists felt that the employees in a UK hotel had little empathy toward them. A face-to-face interview with Chinese tourists in Auckland City, New Zealand, showed that some Chinese tourists were very disappointed in their visit to Auckland because they felt they did not "see" or "learn" anything on the trip, but instead were ripped off by being forced into shops (Tian, 2008). A recent video clip broadcast by the TV station of Guangdong province (a southern province in China adjacent to both Macao and Hong Kong) showed a local Hong Kong tour guide cursing and threatening a group of Chinese tourists who were unable to spend as much money in shopping stores as the tour guide required (cnngo.com, July 19, 2010). This video clip provoked enormous debate and anger among the Chinese community, and its long-term impact on the image of Hong Kong as a favorite destination of Chinese tourists awaits to be seen.

These examples show that some mainland Chinese outbound tourists appear to be vulnerable to unruly business practices when traveling overseas. News reports also show that mainland Chinese tourists face other issues when traveling overseas, including safety, security, and cultural sensitivity. For instance, as reported by New York Times (Arnold, 2005), a group of 300 mainland Chinese tourists took umbrage at illustrations of a pig's face on their check-in vouchers at a casino resort in predominately Muslim Malaysia; although the resort said the drawings were meant only to distinguish their Chinese guests from Muslims, who cannot eat pork or gamble, the Chinese group demonstrated their pique by staging a sit-in the hotel lobby and belting out their national anthem; it took 40 police officers with dogs to clear them out (Arnold, 2005).

In response to the loud complaint against the "bad" behavior of its citizens overseas, the Chinese government launched a 3-year campaign to "enhance the civil quality of tourist behavior," as part of which an intensive tourist educational campaign was implemented in cooperation with tour operators and transport providers (Chang, 2009). Although much progress has been made and many mainland Chinese tourists are becoming more sophisticated, the work is far from finished. The question thus arises: What can those service providers desiring to target mainland Chinese tourists do to minimize the aforementioned dissonance? Given the importance of this emerging market, understanding and developing remedies for market dissonance is necessary. A

close survey of the existing literature on the travel behavior of mainland Chinese tourists, however, has revealed little information; a qualitative study, which should be complemented by a quantitative approach, is thus deemed important.

Built on role theory and its applications to service marketing and management, this study proposes a framework of understanding tourists as coproducers in service delivery. Its main purpose is to offer an alternative approach to travel service providers in enhancing positive travel experiences and minimizing dissonance at service encounters. The study begins with a review of the literature concerning the travel behavior of mainland Chinese outbound tourists. Subsequently, an alternative model highlighting the role and participation of tourists in service delivery and related propositions are presented, and the literature from which the model is derived is elaborated. Finally, by drawing upon media coverage, the applicability of the proposed model in managing mainland Chinese outbound tourists at service encounters is explained.

## **Literature Review**

### Studies on Mainland Chinese Outbound Tourists

Mainland Chinese outbound tourism has attracted a growing interest, although still small, from academia. A content analysis shows that research studies have examined important consumer behavior issues such as travel motivation (Huang & Hsu, 2005; Sparks & Pan, 2009), information search (Sparks et al., 2009), destination selection attributes (Kim, Guo, & Agrusa, 2005; Sparks et al., 2009), sociodemographic characteristics (Guo, Seongseop, & Timothy, 2007; Qu & Li, 1997; Wong & Lau, 2001), perceptions (Humborstad, Cheng, & Ng, 2008; Wang, Vela, & Tyler, 2008; Yeung & Leung, 2007), satisfaction (Heung, 2000; Qu & Li, 1997), and preferred travel activities and needs (Tian, 2008; Yoopetch & Shannon, 2003). The major conceptual models used in these studies include SERVQUAL (e.g., Humborstad et al., 2008), Hofstede's cross-cultural dimensions (Yang et al., 2008), push-and-pull motivational theory (Jang & Wu, 2006), theory of planned behavior (Sparks et al., 2009), and the service gap model (Qu et al., 1997).

It is evident that these studies have contributed to our overall understanding of the travel behavior of mainland Chinese outbound tourists. They have, however, left untapped the aforementioned dissonance in the market, which they appear to attribute to the inexperience of Chinese tourists. This study is designed to fill this void. The following text proposes a conceptual model for service providers to use so that dissonance can be minimized when hosting mainland Chinese outbound tourists.

## Tourists as Coproducers in Service Delivery

Quality-of-service encounters rely not only on the service provider but also on the client. This argument is firmly grounded in service management, role theory, and relationship marketing. As described by Broderick (1999), the origins of role theory derive from social penetration theory; social interaction approaches to sociological thinking in the 1970s emphasized its focus on interactivity within social exchange patterns. Role theory regards the enactment of behaviors by individuals in a social encounter as a key determinant of both the boundaries of social exchange and its future possibilities. Scholars later expanded upon and applied this theory to explain relationships in service industries (e.g., Broderick, 1998; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990). One of these relationships is that between service provider and client in service delivery. As noted by early management researchers, such as Peters and Waterman (1982), Davis (1983), Czepiel et al. (1985), and Bowen (1986), a central difference between service and manufacturing firms is that in the former, customers are often physically present as the service is offered, whereas in the latter, customers are only rarely present during production. As this encounter takes place, the outcome of a service is influenced not only by the service provider but also by the customer. This framework was later termed “the role inseparability of services” in marketing (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985).

This conceptual framework has been well accepted by scholars. It is not only taught in college marketing courses (e.g., Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2008), but has also led to a growing body of relevant literature. A close survey of this literature, however, indicates that most such studies have been conducted in the context of health care and finance. Similar studies pertinent to the context of hospitality and tourism are hard to find. With respect to hospitality, three publications were found that addressed the roles and role management of guests in service delivery (Ford & Bowen, 2004; Ford & Heaton, 2001; Namasivayam, 2003). Ford and Heaton (2001) argued that hospitality firms manage their customers as quasi-employees, supported further by Ford and Bowen (2004). Namasivayam’s (2003) study empirically examined the relationship between customer participation and a sense of control and fairness. His findings revealed that hotel guests wanted a sense of control in service delivery and if they didn’t get the control they wanted, then they wanted a sense of fairness.

With respect to tourism, one study (Otto & Ritchie, 1996) was found that addressed explicitly the importance of the tourist’s role in service outcome assessment. The authors contended that tourism is a service industry that focuses on creating an experience, and thus industry practices are concerned with service quality. But they also strongly suggested that industry practices should be more concerned with the “service experience” as felt by tourists about travel-related activities and events than about the service provider and physical attributes. Disappointingly, no study could be found that discussed how a tourist’s service experience could be enhanced through tourist role management.

The present study thus focuses on understanding the tourist's role in service delivery, and specifically on examining the role clarity and self-efficacy of the tourist as a coproducer of or a participant in the creation of a service experience. In doing so, it reinforces both role theory and role inseparability in service delivery. The study also argues that a tourist plays an important role in creating his or her own travel experiences and other positive outcomes; therefore, it is imperative that travel service providers understand whether and how a tourist understands his or her role in service delivery, in what form and to what extent a tourist participates in creating a service experience in service delivery, whether different levels of participation influence service outcomes differently, and what factors influence a tourist's motivation to participate in service delivery in certain way. The following text presents and explains a model that maps this thinking process.

#### A Proposed Model

Figure 2 illustrates the key concepts and their relationships in understanding how a tourist's role as a coproducer can influence service outcomes. From right to left, this model shows the following relationships: Some outcomes of service interaction in tourism, including ethical/unethical behavior, increased/reduced operational costs, achieved/unachieved service experiences, customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction, exit/repeat visits, positive/negative word of mouth, and price sensitivity/insensitivity, are influenced by a tourist's participation; this in turn has three levels: high, moderate, and low. Specifically, a tourist's participation in service delivery is directly influenced by his or her willingness or motivation to participate, and indirectly influenced by his or her role clarity and self-efficacy in the coproduction process. In turn, role clarity and perceived self-efficacy is determined by a set of external and internal factors. The following text elaborates upon each of the concepts and makes propositions concerning these relationships.

[Insert fig 2 here]

*Service Experience Coproduction/Participation.* Service customers play different roles in a service system. As identified in the literature, customers can be viewed as resources, coproducers, users, products, and buyers (Lengnick-Hall, 1996), contributors and competitors (Bitner, Franda, Hubbert, & Zeithalm, 1997), or managers, inspectors, consultants, and marketers (Ford & Heaton, 2001). Instead of addressing each of these roles, however, this study focuses on the customer's role as a coproducer in a set of service encounters during travel. A service encounter, also called a "moment of truth" (Normann, 1991), occurs every time a customer interacts with a service provider, which in tourism can consist of any of multiple stakeholders such as airports, immigration officials, tour bus companies, and managers at various tourist attractions (Gopalan & Narayan, 2010).

Service coproduction, also termed "participation" (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih, 2007), is a process in which a tourist cooperates with the service provider to create a service experience. But in what forms a customer participates in service delivery is controversial. Regarding patient behaviors, Shaffer and Sherrell (1995) found that patients could be classified into three distinct

groups with respect to the kind of interaction they had with their physician during office visits: assertive, active, or permissive. As described by the authors, the first two groups of patients asked not only for information, but also for alternative treatment options and self-help information, whereas the third group tended not to ask many questions but instead placed lots of trust in the ability of the doctor to help them. Through the critical incident identification method, Kellogg, Youngdahl, and Bowen (1997) identified four forms of customer participation, which are (a) an information search through a wide range of behaviors, including seeking referrals, researching competitors, and making plans; (b) an information exchange with the service provider to clarify service requirements and to ensure that the customer understands his or her role in service delivery; (c) relationship building with the service provider in the service delivery process; and (d) intervention if the customer believes the service provider is unlikely to produce a satisfactory outcome.

Bitner, et al (1997) offered a different view by classifying customer participation into one of three levels: a low level, in which only a customer's physical presence is involved; a moderate level, in which not only a physical presence but also some input from the customer, such as information, time, effort, or physical possessions, is required; and a high level, in which the customer is involved in co-creating the service. In a study on the impact of participative service relationships in the bank sector, Ennew and Binks (1999) used a three-dimensional construct to measure stakeholder participation in service delivery, which consisted of information sharing between service provider and customer, responsible behavior such as making financial plans and monitoring expenditures, and personal interaction between the service provider and the customer based on trust, commitment, and friendship. Finally, Uzkuurt (2010) in turn proposed four dimensions of customer participation, consisting of information participation, behavioral participation, emotional/interactive participation, and the willingness and ability to participate.

Although no consensus has been achieved over the forms of customer participation in service delivery, three patterns can be identified from the aforementioned models: information, action (relationship building, interaction, co-creation, and responsible behavior), and emotional involvement. Integrating these patterns with the nature of travel, this study suggests that tourist participation in service coproduction comes in three main forms. The first is information participation, which includes an information search such as collecting information on attractions on the travel agenda and making plans, and an information exchange with the service provider before, during, and after a trip. The second involves behavioral participation, referring to a set of actions a tourist takes to create with the service provider, which could be an organization or an individual, the best possible travel outcomes. The last form is affective participation, which includes factors such as trust, reliability, support, cooperation, flexibility, commitment, respect, and friendliness (Ennew et al., 1999).

*Impact of Participation on Outcomes.* Well-managed customer participation in service delivery can have profound impact on service outcomes, such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty (e.g., Bowen, 1986; Bowen et al., 1988; Kelley et al., 1990). In addition, it can directly influence a firm's bottom line through reduced price sensitivity (Hsieh & Chang, 2004), reduced unethical behavior and reduced operational costs (Ennew, 1996; Webb, 2000; & Harris, et al., 2001). The outcomes in the proposed model in this study are listed with antonyms to highlight negative outcomes if customer participation is not well managed. In applying this above discussion to tourism, this study makes the following proposition:

*Proposition 1: The extent to which a tourist participates in experience production can significantly influence his or her perceived travel experience.*

*Motivation.* Whether a customer voluntarily participates in a service delivery process may depend on whether he or she has the willingness to do so. As stated by Bowen (1986), customers, like employees, need motivation to perform in service delivery. Thus, the relationship between a tourist's role clarity and self-efficacy can be mediated by this person's motivation.

This study identifies five streams of thought in the literature on when a customer is motivated to play a role in service delivery. One stream is represented by Bowen (1986), who suggested that customers be treated as employees and be given "rewards" or "benefits," such as increased control over the outcome, time savings, and even monetary savings. The challenge here is to know what rewards a customer will value. Another stream is that a customer will be willing to participate in service delivery if the service or experience is of high involvement or very important to him or her (Cermak, et al., 1994). For instance, in tourism, traveling to a foreign country is for many tourists a once-in-a-lifetime experience; because it is so important, travelers are likely to participate actively in every stage of the journey. The third stream derives from motivation theory, which contends that the environment in which the service encounter occurs can influence a customer's willingness to participate. This environment includes the attitude of service agents (e.g., whether encouraging or not), the atmosphere of the service setting, and the attitude of other customers.

The fourth stream is the concept of self-efficacy, which is defined as "one's belief in one's capability to perform a task" (Gist, 1987, p. 472). As summarized by McKee et al. (2006), self-efficacy consists of three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and ability (KSA). This does not mean that an individual needs a college degree to be a customer. As Canziani (1997) has argued, customer competency should be the goodness of fit between a customer's KSA and his or her corresponding tasks in the service delivery process. Strieter, Celuch, and Kasouf (1999), however, have contended that a high level of perceived self-efficacy could better



motivate an individual to perform a particular role. On the other hand, an individual who perceives him- or herself as less efficacious tends to avoid such activity (Tucker & McCarthy, 2000).

Another important influence on motivation is role clarity, also termed “role understanding” (Webb, 2000). This concerns whether the customer understands what he or she is expected to perform in service delivery, and how to do so (Bowen, 1986). Canziani (1997) contended that a “customer role description” is pretty much like a job description for an employee. If the customer is uncertain about his or her precise responsibilities and tasks, role ambiguity results, and the customer is then likely to be unwilling to participate in service delivery (Webb, 2000). Applying the above argument to tourism, this study makes the following propositions:

*Proposition 2: The extent to which a tourist participates in experience coproduction (i.e., low, moderate, or high) is greatly influenced by his or her level of motivation or willingness to do so.*

*Proposition 3: A tourist’s motivation to participate in experience coproduction is influenced by such factors as perceived rewards, the high involvement of the experience, the service-encounter environment, tourist self-efficacy, and tourist role clarity.*

*Proposition 4: The extent to which a tourist understands his or her role and self-efficacy can significantly influence his or her participation in the service co-production process.*

*Determinants of Role Clarity and Self-efficacy.* Learning theories in consumer behavior suggest that consumers have two types of knowledge about a product: first-hand knowledge, which they learn directly from personal experience, and secondary knowledge, which they learn from other people (e.g., friends or travel agents) and vicarious information sources such as TV, the Internet, billboards, brochures, and flyers. This study therefore uses “prior experience” and “exposure to relevant secondary information” to categorize the main influencers of role clarity and self-efficacy. Applying this argument to tourism, the study makes the following additional proposition:

*Proposition 5: A tourist’s prior experience and exposure to relevant secondary information about a service system can significantly influence his or her role clarity and self-efficacy with respect to experience coproduction.*

### **Implications for Service Providers of Mainland Chinese Outbound Tourists**

It’s hoped that this proposed model can be used to explain the market dissonance mentioned at the beginning of this study.

Patterns can be identified among complaints against mainland Chinese outbound tourists, many of whom seem to be insensitive

to or ignorant of their surroundings, do not know the appropriate way to interact with service providers and local people, and worse, do not know how to appreciate the local culture. The incidents quoted in the introduction of this study and many other reports traced from Google are good examples of these patterns. Reports also show that mainland Chinese tourists have different expectations toward service providers. For instance, Dr. Wolfgang Georg Arlt, president of the China Outbound Tourism Research Project Association, noticed that mainland Chinese tourists largely think it is the tour guide's job to tell the story about a destination, and all they need to do is to be there, which is very different from their counterparts from other countries, who actively seek information about a destination from different sources before and during travel (Arlt, 2009).

Another example comes from Disney Hong Kong. When the park first opened in 2005, mainland Chinese flocked to see it. But as reported by The Wall Street Journal (Fowler & Marr, 2006), although many of them had a positive time, they did not understand the park and did not know how to enjoy it. Luckily, Disney management was quick to discover this and fix the problem. In summary, mainland Chinese outbound tourists in general have exhibited low role clarity and self-efficacy in service encounters with different stakeholders when traveling abroad, and this may dramatically influence their motivation to participate appropriately in the travel experience coproduction with service providers and other stakeholders.

An examination of the history of Chinese tourism sheds more light on the above assumption. Traveling overseas for many Chinese people is a new concept. Figure 1 shows that in 1992, only 2.93 million mainland Chinese traveled abroad, and most of these were part of government delegations. Civilians first started to travel abroad a little more than a decade ago, when the mainland Chinese government loosened its passport application requirements. In 2009, more than 45 million mainland Chinese traveled internationally and spent US\$42 billion overseas. It's predicted that in 2010, a total of 54 million mainland Chinese citizens will be taking international vacations. However, this important development in Chinese outbound travel isn't led by the super-rich, but is a result of a growing middle class and many of which are first-time international travelers (Arlt, 2009).

The rapid growth of mainland Chinese outbound tourism reflects the newfound wealth, changed lifestyles, changed attitude toward travel, and increasing personal freedom of the mainland Chinese people. It also reflects more inexperienced international travelers who are eager to see the world, but who do not understand the service systems in other countries. Therefore, to minimize dissonance when hosting mainland Chinese outbound tourists, service providers must take proactive steps to determine whether the tourists understand their roles, whether they have sufficient knowledge about different aspects of or interactions in a travel process, whether they have sufficient skills and abilities to participate in experience coproduction (e.g., perhaps not being able to appreciate a local show in local language), whether they are motivated to perform their roles, and how much they participate in service delivery. Evidence from news reports shows that some service providers have been engaged in some level

of similar efforts to minimize dissonance with Chinese tourists. The above-mentioned report about Disney Hong Kong (Fowler & Marr, 2006) also noted that “to help confused visitors, Disney has started producing special one-day trip guides in Chinese, beyond the basic maps, to explain in clear terms exactly how to enjoy Disneyland and why it is enjoyable.”

Educating new customers about products and services is not a new practice in the business world. The healthcare industry, banks, hospitality, and other service industries have been practicing this strategy for a long time. However, to be effective, market segmentation based on tourist levels of role understanding, travel self-efficacy, and levels of motivation and participation should be conducted so that appropriate educational materials can be customized to cater to different groups of tourists.

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

#### Limitations

This major limitation of this study is that the proposed model is not empirically tested. Although some components of this model have been tested by authors (e.g., the relationship between participation and outcomes), it is important that this model is tested in the hospitality and tourism settings. In addition, service quality is a well-studied area. A vast amount of literature information has been created in this area. Therefore, it's impossible the author of this study conducts an exhaustive literature review. Finally, the observations in this study are from mainland China only. It's important to collect evidence from different emerging markets.

#### Future Studies

Several future studies can be derived from the current study. The immediate study is an empirical investigation and statistical testing of the relationships proposed in the framework. The proposed model in this study can be applied not only to host mainland Chinese tourists, but also to treat inexperienced tourists from other markets. As said by Arnold (2005), “the tide of travelers from mainland china mirrors the emergence of virtually very group of overseas tourists since the Romans, from Britons behaving badly in the Victorian ear and ugly Americans in postwar Europe to the snapshot-happy Japanese of the 1980s.” Thus, a follow-up study to validate the generalizability of the model in other emerging markets seems to be important. In addition, the model can be tested in specific service settings such as hotels and restaurants since it is vital to have a systematic approach when hosting new and inexperienced guests.

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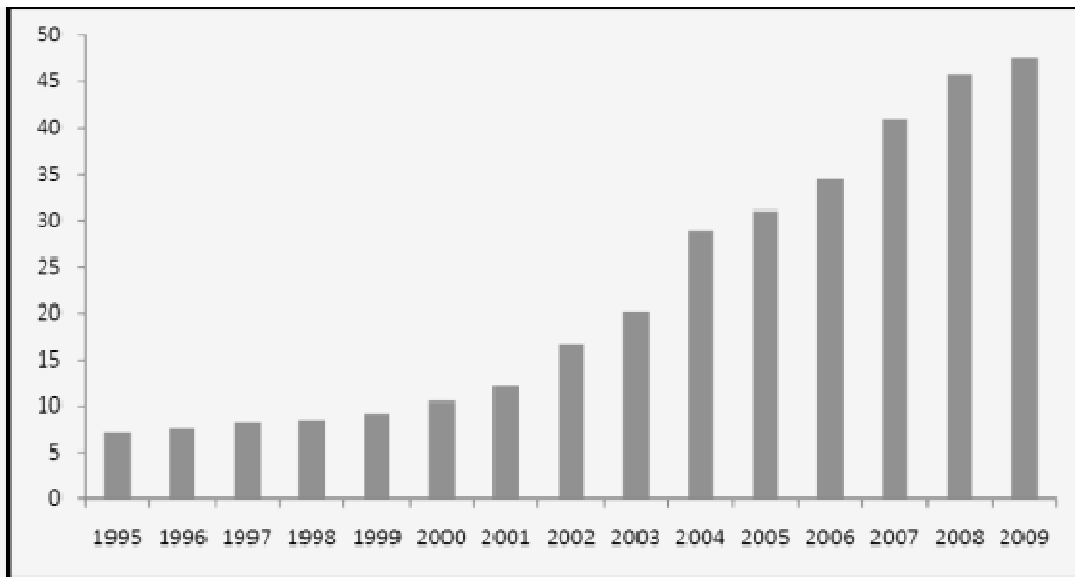
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Figure 1 China Outbound Tourism Development 1995-2009  
(number of borders crossings by mainland Chinese citizens, in millions)



Source: CNTA, COTRI

Figure 2 Model of Understanding Tourists' Role Clarity and Self-efficacy in Service Delivery

