



# Chinese recreational vehicle users in Australia: A netnographic study of tourist motivation



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Chinese recreational vehicle (RV) travellers in Australia.
- A netnographic methodology: focusing on the travel opinion leaders.
- Different from the mature RV markets in both North America and Australia.
- A core image: young Chinese travelling independently and social media empowered.
- RV trips are undertaken for diverse motivations.

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## ABSTRACT

This study analysed the blog postings of an influential set of Chinese tourists who share on-line their recreational vehicle (RV) travelling experiences in Australia. It used a netnographic approach to collect qualitative data from 22 rich and detailed Chinese blogs which in total consisted of 77 pages of Mandarin text plus images. The archival work was supplemented by online messages and email interaction with the RV travellers. Coding followed a consultative thematic approach. Segments from the narratives were used to illustrate some of the themes. The travellers' motive items were consistent with much previous motivation work and fitted into an experimental and experiential framework and revealed parallels with the career patterns of experienced western tourists. The need for further samples and contexts, and suggestions for exploring and developing this emerging market were offered.

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## 1. Introduction

[Qyer.com](http://qyer.com), the most popular Chinese outbound travel community, recently released a special issue on "RV tour on the road". It suggested:

"We are contrary. On the one hand, we embrace being at home with our families. On the other hand we are not happy to be restricted at home. With a RV (recreation vehicle), we can finally combine a home with a vehicle. A RV is a home on wheels. It is fluid comfort, because it is seeing the world at home. There is nothing more romantic than appreciating nature (e.g. sun rising, sunset, the movement of moon and stars) with your family. There is nothing more beneficial than learning about different regions and being exposed to a

diversity of cultures. This special issue is about RV on the road. Let us evolve our travel into life."

(<http://event.qyer.com/feature/59.html>).

This study is centrally concerned with representing Chinese RV travellers' motivations for driving an unfamiliar vehicle in an unfamiliar country. The study is pursued within the context of the rise of Asia, especially China, as a tourist generating source (UNWTO, 2011; Winter, Teo, & Chang, 2009). It highlights Chinese tourists' interests in experiencing other parts of the world in diverse ways (Aramberri & Liang, 2012; Pearce, Wu, & Osmond, 2013). Three areas of literature provide a background for this study. They are the studies of tourist motivation, including a brief assessment on assessing expectations and reflections about motives, Chinese tourism and its recent growth, and the work on the special interest topic of drive tourism. An examination of these topics in the academic literature both informs and poses some questions for the current study. Additionally, attention will be given to the emerging

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unobtrusive methodology of netnography which will be employed in the present work.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Motivations, expectations and reflections

Studies concerning tourist motivation have been a part of the core tourism literature since the field of study began (Bowen & Clarke, 2009). The earliest studies tended to identify single traits as defining tourists' desire to travel, resulting in simple classifications such as sunlust and wanderlust Gray (1970), or a motivation dimension underpinned by anxiety about travel (Plog, 1974), or an assumed search for authenticity (MacCannell, 1976). One early distinction which has widespread implicit agreement among researchers is the distinction between true psychological drivers of behaviour (push factors) and the appeal of specific characteristics of destinations (pull factors) (Compton, 1979; Dann, 1977, 1981). The push factors approach aligns tourism researchers' work with that of psychologists, while the pull factors are often defined as motives by marketers.

In the last few years, some of the founding figures of this area of study have reflected on their earlier work and noted the evolution and greater sophistication in dealing with this topic (Crompton, 2005; Iso-Ahola, 2011; Pearce, 2011; Plog, 2011). The trajectory of change in tourist motivation studies has been to move away from broad, all encompassing ideas about what motivates tourists and instead considers more specific studies of well-defined motive items assessed for specific travel groups. One methodological direction in this work has been to use structured scale items to assess tourists' motives (Ryan, 1995). A typical example of this kind of work is to be found in the study by Prebensen, Woo, Chen, and Uysal (2013) examining the influence of motivation and involvement on the perceived value of six predominantly nature based tourist attractions in Norway. The researchers employed 14 motives from the Beard and Ragheb (1983) leisure motivation scale and then followed the pathway of reducing these items into a smaller subset and exploring the inter variable links. While a good deal of valuable empirical work has been conducted in this tradition, there are views that asking individuals to consider such lists of motives may be problematic. These challenges arise because those who write about tourism as a post modern activity assert that individuals shift and change their motives during the flow of their activities and according to the demands of the context (Rojek & Urry, 1997; Urieli, Yonai, & Simchai, 2002). In common with the work on expectations, critics have also contended that individuals may not be willing to reveal all their perspectives and, additionally, they may be unsure of exactly how to phrase their psychological needs (Kozak, 2001; Pearce, 2005). It is therefore possible that the researchers' words and phrases may be copied or used but they may not fully reflect the nuances defining people's travel purpose.

An alternative approach to tourist motivational studies can also be noted. This style of work uses tourists' remarks, blogs and interview content to produce categories of motives (Bowen & Clarke, 2009). Many researchers working in this qualitative style create labels for tourists' motives, some of which follow the ideas portrayed in earlier empirical studies. Typical examples here include Hsu, Cai, and Wong (2007) writing about senior tourists' motivation in China, and the study by Podoshen (2013) on dark tourism motivation. The work in these kinds of studies usually produces a listing of motives deduced from grounded theory approaches or content thematic summaries. It is important to note that this work is not really directly measuring pre-trip motivation any more. Rather, it is making an assumption that in looking at the post-trip reflections it is valid to infer that pre-trip motives did exist

and are now being expressed through the written or interview material (cf. Pearce & Caltabiano, 1983). This approach of inferring motivation is seen by some researchers as really describing preferences and reflections on motives. In defence of this approach, there is spontaneity and a freedom for the travel blog writers, diarists or interviewees to express a range of perspectives and travel experiences and for the researcher to code these details in novel ways. This style of work will be pursued in the present study because in dealing with a relatively new market segment in a cross national research study, there is value in identifying inferred motives from the tourists' own voices. The value can be cast in two ways, it can form a stimulus to further academic studies possibly using more formal pre-trip assessments in the tourists' home country and it can have implications for destination marketers who are struggling to identify important perspectives on a new market niche. The present study will use the rich source of Chinese tourists' blogs to infer their travel motives for the drive tourism activity.

### 2.2. Chinese outbound tourist behaviour in the digital era

Changes in the origins of tourists, especially the growth in traveller numbers from non-Western countries, has characterised recent trends in the contemporary tourism world (Cohen, 2011). As a part of this diversification, Chinese outbound tourists have become more and more influential, both because of their large numbers and their growing ability to be significant consumers (COTRI & PATA, 2010). Accompanying this major trend, there is a rapidly increasing body of research about Chinese outbound tourists. The following section of our literature review highlights three pertinent themes.

- (1) The distinctiveness of the Chinese market compared to western and Japanese groups

Confronted by the rising numbers of Chinese tourists (Li, Harrill, Uysal, Burnett, & Zhan, 2010; UNWTO, 2011), a new wave of research has been conducted to understand this market. For example, compared with the traditional western markets, Chinese tourists have particular expectations in terms of amenities and service standards (Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011), food preferences (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010), shopping behaviour (Wong & Law, 2003), and interpretation preferences for both natural landscapes (Xu, Cui, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2013) and heritage sites (Ballantyne, Hughes, Ding, & Liu, 2012). Meanwhile, notable differences exist between Chinese tourists and the travellers from the Japanese tourist boom in the late 1980s (Breakey, Ding, & Lee, 2008). The most notable differences are the greater independence of the Chinese, their sophistication in terms of social media use and their growing competencies in speaking English (Arlt, 2013; Pearce, Wu, De Carlo, et al., 2013; Pearce et al., 2013; Shao, Li, & Li, 2012).

When comparing Chinese tourists' and their western counterparts' vacation values, Fu, Lehto, and Cai (2012) suggested that a commonality is that they both appreciate scenery, food and social interactions during a vacation. A closer look, however, revealed that Chinese tourists and western tourists interpret these three vacation features quite differently. The researchers observed that the subtly different interpretation of the vacation values was generated by unique cultural dispositions. For the Chinese, the scenery is linked to appreciating the world through aesthetic lenses, their food appraisal is driven by different tastes and traditions, and their social interaction is intense within their group, but also led by curiosity and a desire to know others outside of their travelling unit (Fu et al., 2012). The influences of Chinese culture on Chinese outbound tourists' behaviour have also been recorded by Mok and Defranco (2000) and Kwek and Lee (2010). Indeed, Chinese outbound

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