



## Shopping experiences: International tourists in Beijing's Silk Market



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Considers international tourists in China – an important and under-studied group.
- Focuses on shopping experiences at the most well-visited Chinese tourist market.
- “Bargaining” can be an experience of “fun” for many tourists.
- Different satisfaction groups represented their experience differently.
- Satisfaction for male tourists was higher than female shoppers.

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines international tourists' experiences in Beijing's Silk Market, one of the China's most well-known tourist markets. Tourists' spontaneous reviews on TripAdvisor were analyzed through Leximancer, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The study confirms that markets can be major tourism attractions and can provide important experiences for international tourists. Most international tourists were impressed with their Silk Market trip. The dominant narratives of their experiences were the “price” of the items they “bought”, the “fun” of “bargaining”, and the “fake” quality of the products. Further analyses show that different satisfaction groups used somewhat different narratives to represent their shopping experiences and that male international tourists enjoyed the Silk Market experiences more than their female counterparts.

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## 1. Introduction

As Timothy (2005) observes, shopping by tourists has multiple goals and takes many forms. Tourists may spend considerable discretionary holiday time in searching for bargains for themselves, hunting for gifts for others or simply ‘window shopping.’ For international tourists, the process of purchasing goods and local products is often an interesting social process representing a specific form of engagement with local citizens. Further, the shopping environment and context in which the purchase is made may be a critical stimulus to spend money. For example, in Asia, traditional markets and tourists shopping streets are prime places of engagement for tourists and local vendors. Shopping has been and is, therefore, a fertile subject of exploration for tourism researchers,

not just in an economic sense but also in terms of tourists' motives and social encounters.

In the contemporary tourism world, China attracts much attention from destination marketing organisations and tourism researchers because it generates large numbers of tourists with high expenditures for many other destinations (UNWTO, 2013). The growing size of the Chinese middle classes, their increasing mobility and, most importantly, their considerable ability to consume have been widely acknowledged (Arlt, 2013; Sparks & Pan, 2009; Xu & McGehee, 2012). At the same time, China is also an important tourist receiving country. In 2012, China attracted 57.7 million international arrivals and was ranked as the third highest tourist receiving destination. It is fourth in terms of tourism receipts (US\$ 50 billion) (UNWTO, 2013). However, little research about international tourists' experiences and expenditures in China has been undertaken. This research addresses this topic by exploring international tourists' shopping experience in Beijing's Silk Market – the most visited tourist market in China.

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## 2. Literature review

In this section, three sets of ideas will be reviewed: literature on tourist shopping, Chinese inbound tourism, and undertaking tourism experience research in the digital era. The first two pertain to the subject of the research whereas the third has implications for the research methods that are adopted. Research opportunities will be identified in each part of review and then will be synthesized as the basis for the current research. Research aims will then be identified at the end of this section.

### 2.1. Tourist shopping

Shopping opportunities have long played important roles in travel supply and demand and are a vital aspect of tourism (Cohen, 1995; Falk & Campbell, 1997; Timothy, 2005). Tourists may purchase a variety of products when they are away from home, including clothes, groceries, luxury goods (Park, Reisinger, & Noh, 2010) and crafts and souvenirs (Bowen & Clarke, 2009). Shopping can be one of tourists' most memorable experiences (Swanson & Timothy, 2012). It can also be at the top of the tourists' expenditure list (Cai, Lehto, & O'Leary, 2001). For some city destinations, shopping is a key pull factor that attract tourists (Henderson, Chee, Mun, & Lee, 2011; Heung & Cheng, 2000; Yeung, Wong, & Ko, 2004).

Research has been conducted on many aspects of tourist shopping, including cross border shopping behaviors (Bojanic, 2011; Timothy & Butler, 1995), motivations to visit shopping villages (Getz, 1993; Murphy, Benckendorff, Moscardo, & Pearce, 2011), the pleasure of store shopping (Cox, Cox, & Anderson, 2005), the multiple meanings of souvenirs and their sustainability (Swanson & Timothy, 2012), shopping satisfaction among different nationalities (Lloyd, Yip, & Luk, 2011), strategies to enhance shopping experiences (Yeung et al. 2004), motivations for and experiences with bargaining (Darke & Freedman, 1993; Lee, 2000; Pizam & Sussmann, 1995), as well as the increasing popularity of online shopping among tourists (Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011). Such research provides insights into shopping's essential role in many tourists' experiences and destination development. The current study examines an aspect of tourist shopping: shopping in the tourist-oriented markets.

Local markets provide opportunities for tourists to purchase a range of goods, sometimes locally produced, and add life and color to the areas in which they trade (Henderson, 2000). Local markets meet tourists' needs for novelty, socialisation and better understanding of different places and their cultures, and they are often deemed to provide authentic experiences (Chang, Min, Lin, & Chiang, 2007; Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007; Ooi, 2002). In addition, local markets may offer the allure of bargains, where some tourists may feel rewarded both psychologically and economically (Cox et al., 2005; Henderson, 2000; Hsieh & Chang, 2006). They can be the most visited attraction in some destinations where they form an important part of the tourists' experience (Chang & Chiang, 2006; Tsang, Tsai, & Leung, 2011) and can contribute to the destinations' images (Henderson, 2000; Ryan & Cave, 2005). In cases in which a market is associated with particular cultural products, it can even enhance the destination's competitiveness by distinguishing one location from others (Timothy, 2005).

Tourist market studies can be separated into two main types. The first is concerned with the vendors, their livelihoods and their interactions with tourists (Cukier & Wall, 1994; Henderson & Smith, 2009; Ishii, 2012; Steel, 2012; Timothy & Wall, 1997). This set of studies is tangential to the present work although it confirms the importance and popularity of markets in certain economies, especially in Asia. The second theme focuses upon the tourists in the markets and is particularly germane to the current study. Night

markets have attracted the interests of a number of scholars. For example, Chang and her colleagues in Taiwan assessed the leisure motives of local residents for eating out in night markets (Chang & Hsieh, 2006) and also noticed the attractiveness of night markets for international visitors. The motivations of American and Japanese tourists visiting Taiwanese night markets were explored and separated into segments, e.g. conservative tourists, moderate novelty-seekers, and well-planned explorers among Japanese tourists (Chang & Chiang, 2006; Chang et al., 2007). They also examined the key motivations for Hong Kong Chinese visitors visiting Taiwanese night markets. The leading motives for this group were eating out, everyday shopping and novelty seeking (Hsieh & Chang, 2006). Tourists' interests in night markets have also been explored in Singapore (Henderson, 2000; Ibrahim & Leng, 2003) and Thailand (Bishop & Robinson, 1999). Other types of markets have also been the subjects of research; for example, street markets in New Zealand (Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007), craft markets in Africa (Küsel & Ras, 2010), the photographic representation of the Pike Fish Market in the USA (Aiello & Gendelman, 2008) and open-air markets in Hong Kong (Tsang et al., 2011).

Our assessment of the literature suggests that there is a growing interest in research on shopping by tourists but studies on tourist markets are usually narrowly focussed. The research in Taiwan has emphasized night markets and tourists' motivations and experiences in them. Opportunities exist for studying other types of tourist markets in other contexts, including mainland China.

### 2.2. International tourists in China

As mentioned above, China receives many international tourists. For financial and political reasons, the Chinese government, made inbound tourism an early priority when it opened its doors to the world in 1978 (Lew, Yu, John & Zhang, 2003; Yang, Lin, & Han, 2010). Domestic tourism and outbound tourism was not encouraged until 1999 when the system of three week-long holidays was introduced (Chen & Pearce, 2012).

Reviews of research on tourism and hospitality research in China were consulted in order to place the current study in context. Twelve review articles were found, with two focusing on Chinese outbound tourism (Cai, Li, & Knuston, 2007). None of the remaining ten review articles identified inbound tourism as one of the categories resulting from their content analyses. A contemporary review article on the "current state of China tourism research" was published online by Leung, Li, Fong, Law, and Lo (2013). They searched for China tourism-related research through ScienceDirect (<http://www.sciencedirect.com>) and EBSCOHost Hospitality and Tourism Complete (<http://search.ebscohost.com>), which are two of the largest and most popular online databases and search engines (Buhalis & Law, 2008). They gathered 147 articles published between 2010 and 2012 and grouped the studies into 24 categories based on the research content. Their review confirmed Tsang and Hsu's (2011) assessment of publications from 1978 to 2008 in key tourism journals that research on tourists' behaviors, motivations and experiences is gaining in popularity. Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis (2013) and Leung, Li, et al. (2013) identified 43 publications on tourists' experiences and 16 motivation articles about China tourism published in 2010–2012.

These 59 articles were potentially relevant to the current research. However, it was found that the domestic tourists' travel experiences (33/59) and Chinese outbound tourism (20/59) has attracted most academic interest. Of the 59 publications, only nine explored international tourists' experiences in China and, of these, three only incorporated international tourists in their research sample when looking at events, hotel, and entertainment experiences in China (Boo & Gu, 2010; Hsu, Oh, & Assaf, 2012; Huang,

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