

## **BRAND CHINA: TOUR GUIDE PERCEPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DESTINATION BRANDING AND MARKETING**

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This research investigates the attitudes and experiences of China tour guides that mediate contact between Western visitors and Chinese residents. This mediator role can have considerable influence over destination branding and marketing, as tour guides have much information about how China's tourism brand is perceived by tourists. Tour guides were interviewed in three locations intended to capture a cross section of experiences with travelers, including: Beijing, the cultural and historical center of China; Shanghai, the country's commercial center; and Guilin, a major nature-based tourism destination. Through collecting and analyzing tour guides' narrative lens, the article explores: (1) initial brand knowledge by potential visitors, (2) China's brand image, and (3) the country's implicit or explicit brand promise. With this information, implications are then drawn for the country's branding and marketing. The article then discusses how these perceptions and interpretations can be used to improve China's destination brand marketing, development, and management.

Key words: China; Tour guides; Destination branding; Destination marketing;  
Destination management organizations (DMOs)

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### Introduction

When China opened its doors to visitors in 1978, only 1.81 million tourists entered the country, and China ranked 48th as a world destination. After 20 years of economic and sociopolitical reform, the Chinese tourism industry has developed rapidly, gradually gaining importance as a major industry within the country as well as a force to be reckoned with globally. By 1994, China had

become a top 10 inbound tourism destination. In 2000, the number of tourists visiting China was 83.44 million, up more than 14% over 1999, ranking as the fifth most popular destination in the world. By 2020, China will be the top tourism "brand" in the world.

With its ascent, Brand China will serve as a natural laboratory for tourism branding and marketing, increasingly reaching out to visitors from all over the world. Tourism researchers already

have much to gain by understanding the actors and mediators at work conveying China's brand image and how this image is received by potential and current visitors.

This article investigates the attitudes and experiences of China tour guides that mediate contact between Western visitors and Chinese residents. Tour guides have much information about how China's tourism brand is perceived by tourists. While the literature on branding and marketing supports the importance of frontline and service staff in developing organizational brand equity and loyalty (De Chernatony, Cottam, & Segal-Horn, 2006; Harris, 2007; Keller, 2003), the role and significance of tour guides serving the front lines of tourism and how that influence destination branding outcomes remain under researched. Through collecting and analyzing the tour guides' narrative lens, the article explores: (1) initial brand knowledge by potential visitors, (2) China's brand image, and (3) the country's implicit or explicit brand promise. With this information, implications are then drawn for China's branding and marketing. Based on these findings, the article then discusses how these perceptions and interpretations can be used to improve destination brand marketing, development, and management in China and in other countries.

### Conceptual Framework

Tourism destinations have evolved to become branded experiences. Destinations are no longer marketed as mere places to see and visit (or products to consume). Instead, destinations promise well-crafted brand identities and portray themselves as unique branded journeys to be experienced by visitors. Branded places are no longer geographic locations or points in visitors' itineraries but meaningful journeys experienced in place and time. Brand development for destinations has become critical in tourism marketing, as evidenced by numerous recent studies covering this emerging field (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Cai, 2002; Gnoth, 1998, 2002; Hosany, Ekinici, & Uysal, 2006; Niall & Joao, 2004). National tourism organizations and destination management organization (DMO) marketers have come to realize the strategic importance and effects of branding and

distinguish it from traditional marketing outcomes. A growing body of case studies provides convincing evidence of positive outcomes associated with the branding of destinations (Konecnik & Go, 2008; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002, 2003). Brand development, however, poses tremendous challenges for destinations and is known to be a complex undertaking (Blain et al., 2005; Pike, 2005; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). Morgan et al. (2003), for example, highlight the difference in branding outcome between the US of Oregon's and New Zealand's experiences, which they interpret as reinforcing the importance of a thorough and politically inclusive consultative process needed in determining a destination's brand value and its successful conveyance to target visitors. This task is easier said than practiced because in a globalized world of rapid and easy exchange acquisition of information, potential visitors to a destination can easily establish as wide range and specific set of brand knowledge and expectations. Moreover, a destination's brand promise requires it to be continuously affirmed and reaffirmed in a process beginning from the formation of visitor expectations and knowledge, delivery (or performance), and postexperience stage of consumer loyalty and equity generation (Arjun & Morris, 2001; Cadotte, Woodruff, & Jenkins, 1987; Mano & Oliver, 1993).

### Brand Confirmation and Disconfirmation

This article adopts disconfirmation theory (EDT), a framework rooted principally in consumer satisfaction–dissatisfaction literature (Oliver, 1977, 1980, 1993; Oliver & Winer, 1987), to interpret the brand status of China as a developing tourism destination through the lens of Chinese tour guides' reactions, perceptions, and sense making of their interaction with international visitors. The adoption of EDT is based on the premise that the overall effectiveness of a destination's brand is contingent on how all the elements of the brand—knowledge, image, promise, marketing, and development—are consistently presented and delivered before, during, and after visitors acquire and experience them. Incongruity between expectation and actual experience (Foley & Fahy, 2004) or the disconfirmation of previously built-up expectations

of the destination brand can result in seriously diminished brand equity and loyalty, impeding promotional effectiveness, brand development, and hindering a destination's long-term marketing potential. Expectancy confirmation posits that consumers develop preconsumption expectations, compare such expectations with perceived product performance, and develop confirmed or disconfirmed cognitions and affect from which satisfaction evolve. A similar process can be theorized to occur in the context of experiencing a destination on the premise that such experiences have been developed and marketed in relation to a certain brand definition. The open hypothesis in this study, however, is whether a destination's brand is enhanced or diminished as result of expectancy confirmation or disconfirmation arising from visitors' interaction with official tour guides in China. The impact of expectancy disconfirmation on brand loyalty, trust and brand equity, among others, has been empirically shown to be severe and negative (Arjun & Morris, 2001; Elena & Munuera-Aleman, 2005; Mano & Oliver, 1993; Oliver, 1977) yet none address it specifically in the context of destination marketing. Few, if any, studies in tourism address the brand confirmation–disconfirmation process in terms of destination marketing with the possible exception of Gilbert and Gao (2005), whose work on customer experiences in travel agencies highlight EDT's effect on overall brand trust. Most tourism studies that draw upon EDT principally revolve around measuring and assessing visitor satisfaction (for a recent review, see del Bosque & Martín, 2008).

#### Tour Guides as Agents of Brand Confirmation and Disconfirmation

Although they realize only a part of the overall experience for guided visitors, tour guides embody the first and key element in the destination brand confirmation process. For large, diverse, and culturally distant destinations, tour guides not only act as pathfinders (Cohen, 1985) or sources of information through which destination brand knowledge, values, and promise are conveyed but they also act as interactive media through which they correct and alter visitor beliefs and perceptions, serving to confirm or disconfirm emergent or al-

ready established brand cognitions. In this sense, tour guides shape and mentor (Cohen, 1985) the destination's image and knowledge as they materialize in visitors' mind, thereby actively directing visitors' understanding of what, in the long-term process, will emerge as the destination brand. In many cases, tour guides can very well be considered the personification of the destination brand itself, in so far as they reflect or “live in congruence with the ideals they are presenting” (Cohen, Ifergan, & Cohen, 2002, p. 929). As “endorsers” (Keller, 2003) guides can be source of important brand knowledge—they mediate how visitors understand the significance of attractions (MacDonald, 2006) and they influence how visitors “think, feel and behave in the short term (on site) and possibly in the long term once they have returned home” (Armstrong & Weiler, 2002, p. 104). Further, a guide's sphere of influence is such that their activities are often employed as a political instrument (Dahles, 2002).

Discerning China's destination brand profile based on the perceptions and narratives of tour guides is problematic considering that narratives collected from tour guides—even if elicited within a defined topical focus—embed two kinds of information than can be coded for interpretation. On one hand, tour guide narratives reflect relevant issues and indicative of themes regarding the marketing of China as a tourism destination and concretized as brand expectations. This article posits that if these issues and themes are frequently mentioned enough to be perceptible from the narratives, they can be identified, coded, interpreted, and critically evaluated using Keller's framework incorporating brand knowledge and image (Keller, 1993, 2003) as well as brand promise. In addition, the study anticipates themes and issues revolving around brand marketing and development to be revealed. Conversely, tour guide narratives can also be interpreted from narratives that echo positive and consistent descriptions of interaction. Brand disconfirmation can be inferred if tour guides' narratives speak of discordant tone and differences in brand expectation with perceived reality. This interpretative framework is depicted in Figure 1 in which the shaded area highlights the focus of analysis for this study.

Figure 1 also includes factors outside the dy-

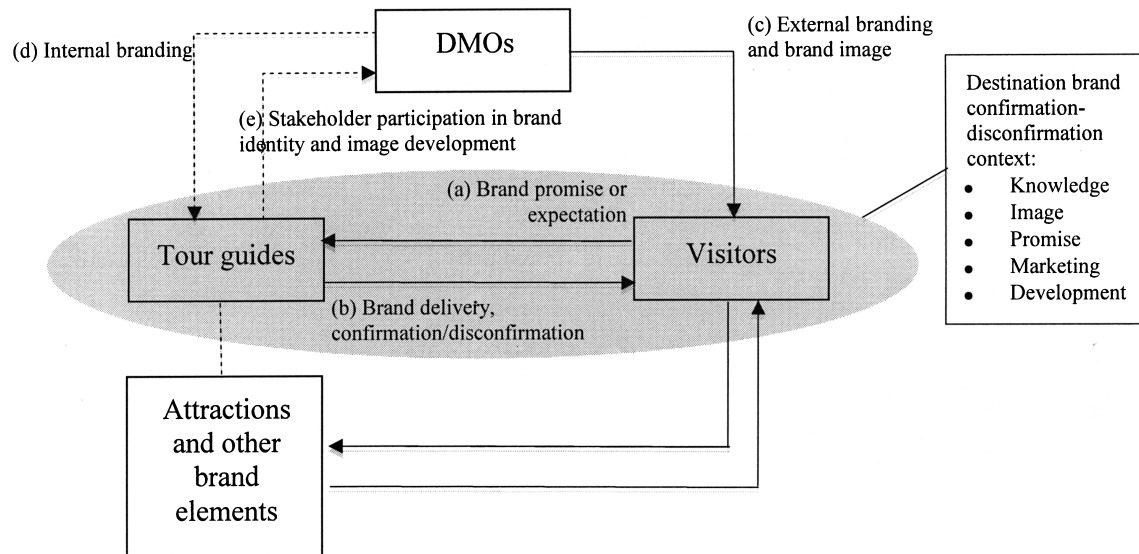


Figure 1. Interaction between tour guides and visitors as a source of brand confirmation–disconfirmation.

adic interaction between tour guides and visitors that can theoretically influence or moderate the brand confirmation–disconfirmation outcome. These factors principally center on the role of national tourism or DMOs in the branding and marketing of destinations. For example, brand confirmation or disconfirmation can arise from DMO’s efforts in “overmarketing” the destination image from a lack of international destination brand development, or excluding relevant stakeholders—including tour guides—from the brand building and development process. Aside from the actions and programs of DMOs, other elements of the destination brand experienced by visitors, such as attractions, contribute equally or more in moderating visitors’ brand experience and whether they also confirm or disconfirm brand expectations. Using the above framework, this study poses the following questions in interpreting Chinese tour guide narratives: (1) Is China’s destination brand confirmed or disconfirmed as evident in tour guides’ discourse of how they regard and interact with visitors? (2) In what branding element—knowledge, image, or promise—is the resulting confirmation or disconfirmation mostly intensely manifested? (3) What do these findings suggest in terms of the status of China’s destination brand marketing and development? (4) What do these findings suggest

for other countries? And finally, (5) how is the field of destination marketing and branding enriched by the application of disconfirmation theory to the Chinese example?

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Purpose and criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select experienced Chinese tour guides who conduct tours of international visitors. The reliability of tour guide perceptions regarding the behavioral characteristics of visitors have been shown to be robust regardless of their nationalities, attributable perhaps from experience through which they evolve a theorized “common mental model” (Pizam, 1999). Guides also possess the ability to be highly sensitive in detecting behavioral differences among their charges (Pizam & Jeong, 1996).

English-speaking tour guides were selected from three Chinese cities—Beijing, Shanghai, and Guilin—each of which is considered a major destination for international tourists. These cities offer three unique environments for experiences and stories as told by the tour guides. However, despite these unique environments, it is posited that these guides’ perspectives also conform to Pizam’s (1999) common mental model. Beijing

appeals primarily for its cultural heritage and political significance as China's capital. Shanghai is a tourist destination mainly due to the area's commercial and retail amenities. Guilin is known for its emerging nature-based tourism. Eight tour guides were selected for each city for a total of 24 informants. Tour guides were recruited by sending announcements to tour agencies in each of the three cities. An incentive of approximately US\$50 was offered for participation. More guides volunteered than were needed, so the researchers could select a mix that included roughly equal numbers of males and females and state and private tour agencies. Overall, there were 13 male tour guides and 11 female tour guides. Work experience ranged from 2 to 29 years, with the average being 10.6. Pseudonyms are used in this article identifying gender.

Informants were asked standard, open-ended questions. The interviews involved questions about the following general areas: international tourists' understanding of Chinese culture; Chinese understanding of international tourists; misunderstandings and conflicts between international tourists and Chinese residents; and local Chinese resident attitudes toward tourism development. A Chinese tourism scholar with extensive interviewing experience conducted each interview. Follow-up questions were used when informants did not address questions directly or when the interviewer sought clarification or elaboration. Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Bilingual Chinese undergraduate students undertook the latter task, and then two of the bilingual researchers each independently examined the accuracy of all translations.

English-speaking tour guides were chosen for several reasons. First, because two of the researchers are North Americans, the researchers were most interested in interactions between Chinese and English-speaking tourists. Second, English-speaking tour guides are likely to serve tourists of most nationalities because it is most frequently a common language when there is a shortage of tour guides who have language fluency of non-English-speaking tourists. Finally, English-speaking tour guides are most accessible in that they constitute the majority of foreign language-speaking tour

guides. In fact, as of 2002 there were 10,913 English-speaking tour guides, which constituted 54% (out of 20,338) of all foreign language guides in China. Besides Japanese-speaking (4,952) and Russian-speaking (2,196) guides, no other language is represented by more than 800 Chinese guides.

### *Brand Knowledge*

Brand knowledge is the initial data or information about the destination received by the potential visitor. This formative knowledge comprises early impressions that in time can become a destination's brand image. Due perhaps to the geographic distance of China from Western markets, as well as restricted tourism before 1978, a priori knowledge about China remains very limited. Aside from major tourist attractions such as Beijing's Great Wall or Xi'an's Terra Cotta soldiers, a large segment of potential visitors know very little about Chinese society and culture. A common misconception about China is that the country lags behind the rest of the world developmentally by several decades. These misconceptions often lead to question that seem embarrassing or even disrespectful to Chinese hosts. According to one tour guide:

Sometimes they don't know China very well so they'll ask some questions we think are pretty silly, such as "do you have television at home? Do you have a computer?" or ask some questions about our old problems that existed decades ago. They [tourists] come from everywhere. The only thing [they have] in common is [that] they don't know China very well.

These misconceptions not only have a dampening effect on host-guest relations, but may also influence some destinations away from comprehensive development programs.

In addition, many tour guides reported that detailed knowledge about Asia in general and China specifically was low to nonexistent. However, at least one tour guide acknowledged that such lack of knowledge was not meant to demean China, but reflects a lack of geographical education in general:

The Americans know little about the geographical culture of China, even of their [own] country.

Sometimes, when I chatted with them about the Lao and Myanmar, they just showed ignorance of them. Sometimes they told me, that I had more knowledge about America than they did, like which states and which cities were around the west coast, and what they were like. Even many tiny places were known by us. That's because the more we had contacts with the visitors, the more we were informed as return.

Another tour guide indicated that there was geographical misunderstanding on both sides:

Some Chinese don't know the capital of the United States—some even say it's New York. It is the same with the Americans. Some even think Shanghai is the capital of China.

These quotes demonstrate superficial brand knowledge about China from a geographical and cultural perspective. Initially, tourism officials may view such superficial knowledge as detrimental to China as a destination, and residents might view such a lack of knowledge as disrespectful. Conversely, such a lack of knowledge might also be viewed as an opportunity to shape fundamental knowledge about the country resulting to positive brand images.

#### *Brand Image*

Based on these early impressions, a destination's brand image begins to emerge in the mind of potential visitors. These images can be formed by exposure to numerous sources, including family, friends, and relatives; Internet and the Web; radio and television; movies; print media; and even word of mouth. While many visitors have almost no prior knowledge of China, other visitors hold a distorted view of the country due to these media images that contribute to the overall brand image. Because of visitor expectations of what they will see and do once they arrive at the destination, a framework for experience is assembled from received media images. It is well established by tourism research that the extent that expectation conforms to experience has great influence on repeat visitation (Bowen, 2002; Gilbert & Gao, 2005; del Bosque & Martín, 2008). For residents, however, daily life is often predicated upon adaptability, which in turn is built upon an expectation

for change, rather than social and cultural stagnation:

To be clear, even for Old China, they don't have a comprehensive understanding. They always focus on its backwardness, which is the answer they wanted to verify in Shanghai, in China. Technically speaking, do they really know China? They possess a prejudiced impression towards old China, so it is even harder for them to know this Modern China. We ourselves don't know it well enough. This is an interesting remark: no one, no matter foreigner or Chinese, can give a precise and simple definition or conclusion of China. What kind of country is China? Foreigners like to give definitions to things, so before coming to China, they put China in a certain frame, and they focus more on the results. But easterners, such as Chinese, pay more attention to the process instead of the results.

Almost uniformly, the tour guides agreed that China's brand image is based on historical and cultural stereotypes, specifically related to its dynasties (such as the recent Qing) or the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). For many residents, these historical stereotypes are troubling because they tend to portray the country as underdeveloped in comparison with the West. Movies and television are perhaps the most significant source of these stereotypical images:

I have not been to the US, but I have been to Europe. The number of all high buildings and large mansions in Europe is smaller than that in Shanghai. I just came back from London. Their houses are much worse than ours. Their ancient things are what we publicize in China. We are sometimes bothered with movies directed by Zhang Yimou [a Chinese film director]. We know those things belong to a century ago, but foreigners believe that we are dressing in braids nowadays after they watch the movie. There is a lack of positive publicity.

Although potential harmfully, these images are very important and often held in high regard to potential visitors seeking experiences with “simple, ordinary, and traditional” Chinese life. They may feel confused or even misled about the brand if these images do not conform to their experience.

### *Brand Promise*

Over time and repeated exposures to these images, an implicit guarantee emerges from the destination to the visitor about the assets, attractions, and amenities that will be found and experienced once the destination is reached. If the discrepancies that developed during the brand image stage have not been adequately resolved, then visitors may actually ask for what they were “promised”:

A lot of them [tourists] told me that Beijing and Shanghai was like Washington DC and New York of the states, one is [the] political center and one [is the] economic center. One can find the same prosperity, the same fast-food culture, but it is hard to find the feeling of typical China in the cities. So tourists ask for places that can give them the feeling of typical China, they want to see the original and traditional part of China. Cities cannot satisfy their appetite for seeking novelty.

The Chinese tour guides indicated that this brand promise is most frequently broken by the historical and cultural stereotypes communicated to potential visitors through the media. Even though these images may be inherently negative, visitor confusion may lead to decreased visitation in the long term:

He [the tourist] was confused why China appeared so modern. In his mind, China should not be this way. It should still be in the Qing Dynasty, everyone growing a long braid and dressed in long gowns, unlike what they saw in Shanghai. He was especially surprised to see how modern Shanghai was. It felt like London, like New York. It means before they come here, their countries do not have a wide coverage on China, or even if they do, the guests will not necessarily care for what is happening in China every day. I think their understanding of China before they come still stays in a stage about thirty or forty years ago. He thought China was a backward and poor country. It should not be the way he saw, such as in Shanghai, people dress so fashionably, or this guy speaks good English, or the city is well developed.

At this stage, the cumulative effects of knowledge, images, and promises have a profound influence on current and future branding and marketing efforts. The marketing strategy now is not only

designed to lure potential visitors to the destination, but to combat negative stereotypes that cause brand confusion and break the destination’s brand promise.

### *Brand Marketing*

These negative images that bombard potential visitors form a kind of antimarketing images that misrepresent the destination, yet still may attract tourists. The goals and objectives of China’s destination marketing campaigns are not only to project positive images of China’s diverse tourism product potentially appealing to many marketing segments, but to project images that balance or correct the influence of antimarketing. According to some tour guides, the wealth of media outlets can have the affect of overwhelming potential visitors. Conversely, attempts to restrict this volume of information can result in an increasingly narrow perception of China as a destination. According to one tour guide, these selective outlets are a type of “advertising” with potentially negative implications:

Commonly before they [tourists] come, they collected information through [the] Web and books, which is rather convenient nowadays. Now China has been open, and most information can be found from pole to pole. Certainly some of them are all-inclusive, for they one-sidedly emphasize some part like Chinese culture, Chinese industry or Chinese food, not overall. Same thing happens to the guidebooks introducing China, because I’ve seen different versions of such books written in English. They also choose parts of them, for example, restaurants. How many restaurants do you think are there in Beijing? Maybe thousands upon thousands. But only twenty or thirty of them can be referred to, which is advertising.

Although antimarketing may lead to broken brand promises and dampen visitation, there is some evidence to suggest that these images are more easily malleable than previously thought, can be corrected before, during, and after a trip, and can even promote a certain amount of intercultural education and understanding:

Generally speaking, most people see and experience things differently in this country from what they formerly pictured in [their] mind. [Though]

many have known China through media, friends, newspapers or pictures in their own country but after they see things with their own eyes, they change their mind towards Chinese culture and opinions against certain people. It is a normal phenomenon. The main cause, I think, is the Cold War. The western world demonized communist countries. Naturally they do not know much about our country. Compared to our knowledge of Europe and America, it is extremely limited, that is, they do not have a complete understanding of us, sometimes even the wrong impressions.

To correct antimarketing images, China's marketing campaign might feature both traditional and modern historical and cultural images showing a range of experiences a visitor might have in China, but also to combat erroneous stereotypes that may be embarrassing or disrespectful to hosts. This marketing campaign both supports and results in brand (and possibly product) development.

#### *Brand Development*

The best of destination scenarios product development enhances and supports an effective and comprehensive brand. From brand knowledge to brand development can be quite far apart in the visitor's mind. As mentioned, the social psychology shows that customer satisfaction is directly related to real versus perceived satisfaction. If China's image in the mind of the potential visitor is "ordinary, simple, and traditional" due to received distorted images, then tourism planning and urban design programs used for product development may be reconsidered:

Local governments think that large architectures and new buildings will surely bring more economic benefits. You may think Yangshuo is beautiful because you haven't been there before, but I think it's much worse than ten years ago, just like a countryside girl who goes to a big city, neither traditional nor modern. In the past we had regulations that buildings should not be higher than eight stories. So that's why the Sheraton hotel here hasn't been over eight stories. But buildings constructed now are higher and higher.

The Chinese are now beginning to consider the relationship between tourism, planning, and economic development and efforts to disperse Beijing and Shanghai will result in new tourism attractions

being built in the hinterlands. Just as marketing images might juxtapose the traditional and the modern, the new attractions might also be thematically related to historical and cultural periods and situations desired by tourists, but also a healthy mix of modern tourism opportunities such as those that might be represented by world-class retail, sport, and entertainment.

If the Chinese manage to learn from Western mistakes and avoid urban sprawl in favor of pedestrian-friendly tourism towns and villages, they will have the rare opportunity to develop a viable, globally competitive brand from the ground up:

You know, in the past years, Beijing is developing like a big cake. New York in America was dubbed the "big apple," and we're the big pancake. What our government found is that the big pancake is not so good. What to do? We must learn something good. So we build satellite cities around, central pressure being dispersed. With the pressure getting less, people's anxieties of traffic jams are relieved. That's really good. Now many people have moved from the center to the [sub]urbs. It's proved by facts that, the houses we bought in the [sub]urbs, for example in Huairou and Changping, are pretty good with the picturesque scenery. Its proved that things are getting better.

However, in China there are great disparities in brand development. For example, the rural countryside still lags far behind cities in basic infrastructure, not to mention basic amenities such as lodging and hospitality.

#### Implications

China is a case study of a rapidly evolving destination where visitor expectations can be wildly divergent from product reality. These differences not only have implications for China's destination branding and marketing, but can also result in "loss of face" for residents, crucial to future host-guest relations. Information on both are lacking, and the pace of development creates a situation where up-to-date marketing data can seem like an impossible task, especially given the sheer size of the country. As conduits to the outside world, tour guides are frequently asked to mediate visitor expectations and experiences with resident attitudes toward tourism development.

Overall, the study findings show that, true to their roles as mediators, tour guides in China struggle to “manage” or “fix” the nation’s brand identity, seeking to alter established stereotypes and expectations of visitors. Rather than confirming visitor expectations and understanding of China’s brand image and promise, data arising from this study suggest that tour guides focus more on their effort toward disconfirming and correcting what they consider to be erroneous knowledge, identity, and attributes of Brand China. Internationally, there are examples where disconfirmation is even more pronounced such as Colombia new marketing slogan, “Colombia, The Only Risk Is Wanting To Stay.” Ultimately the findings show an unhealthy clash of brand identity and beliefs that need to be addressed.

The tour guides quotes with respect to brand knowledge illustrate that many tourism destinations are often challenged by lack of knowledge on part of visitors. For residents, this lack of knowledge may be interpreted negatively—as having “no brand.” Large areas of the global relatively new to tourism—some former Soviet republics come to mind here—have or will face this conundrum. Most tourism professionals will recognize however that a general lack of knowledge about a destination means that brand and market development are relatively malleable requiring the introduction of an effective brand and marketing campaign with stakeholder participation. These opportunities can extend to actual destination development, where attractions may be enhanced or constructed as part of overall brand concept. Of course, resident reservations may also be correct if negative destination images are allowed to fill the vacuum where “no brand” conditions persist over time.

By accident or design, a destination’s brand image begins to emerge in the mind of potential visitors. At this point, negative images—usually shaped by media distortions and stereotypes—may begin to shape visitor perceptions negatively. Here the Chinese tour guide quotes begin to reflect two major stereotypes that challenge tourism brand development: (1) that China is a country grounded in the historical past and (2) that China is a nonmodernized, rural country. Issues associated with an emerging brand image must eventu-

ally be addressed through marketing. In sum, during image creation, the brand is delivered and in the process of being confirmed and disconfirmed. As a “brand promise” has not been made yet, but tour guides know that they must work hard to shape visitor expectations.

With brand promises, visitors actually match what they expect with what they are experiencing, assessing discrepancies and inconsistencies. The tour guide quotes show how negative brand images now have become internalized in the visitor’s mind. In terms of historical and development stereotypes, visitors demand to see what they perceive as China’s bucolic, rural lifestyle that was “promised” to them by external media images. Here the tour guide is placed in an increasingly awkward position.

In some respects, a destination brand might be thought as a collection of travel promises. Expectancy disconfirmation if widespread may result in an antimarketing campaign, where negative images and perceptions of a destination are prevalent and readily accessible through several media. Perhaps the most notorious antimarketing campaign is related to Vietnamese tourism. From 1965 to 1975, American television viewers were subjected to negative images of that country on the evening news. However, as that market segment begins to fade demographically and wounds heal, the country has begun to attract cultural, historical, and adventure travelers. Branding and marketing has become important to Vietnam as regional competition increases from Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. China should also target markets least susceptible to antimarketing and relatively open to new destination brands, images, and messages.

Finally, the physical development of destinations can be influenced by expectancy confirmation or disconfirmation. Without proper tourism planning, destinations can be created that only confirm negative images and stereotypes and in turn send mixed marketing messages to potential visitors. In the case of China, rapid growth without planning may result in the same strip development and unmanageable suburban growth that has long plagued US cities. It is no coincidence that the world’s greatest destinations are typically pedestrian friendly (and tourist friendly) with a health mix of retail, entertainment, and residents.

Destination such as China must be actively involved with not only marketing, but also consumer education, therefore addressing the challenges of underlying brand knowledge. Similarly, brand image shaping must take place through marketing so that the brand promise, implicit or explicit, is not broken in the eyes of the consumer. Further, the development of assets and attractions are somewhat permanent in influencing perceptions of tourism in both the eyes of visitors and residents. Lack of coordination between planners, designers, and tourism officials lead to unsustainable destinations, but might be compared to a comprehensive negative advertising campaign costing millions in disappointed visitors each year. This is not only a problem for China, but for tourism destinations all over the world.

#### Conclusions

As China becomes the world's foremost tourism destination, it also becomes the world's primary test case for global tourism branding and marketing. This destination giant has emerged from behind closed doors to tourists after 1978 to find a world with little familiarity of its assets and attractions, clouded by historical and cultural stereotypes. China makes no explicit brand promises and her marketing messages do little to communicate the reality of a country that is at once traditional and modern, and that is both in the process of becoming a world economic power and a country that is the result of thousands of years of human history. Product development remains unevenly drawn across rural and urban lines. Ambiguous perceptions from visitors as reported by tour guides are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Because of immense population changes, substantial environmental impacts, and profound economic growth, China is a laboratory for the emerging discipline of destination branding and marketing. Despite occasional growing pains, the country has potential for achieving the appropriate balance of marketing and management, balancing the expectations and interests of visitors and residents. By extension, this study may be especially relevant to large, diverse (ethnically and geographically) countries (e.g., Brazil, India, and Russia) with multiple historical and cultural narratives and

numerous tourism products both developed and undeveloped.

This study contributes to the field in relevant areas. By focusing on tour guides' perceptions and narratives, the study provides a very different perspective in terms of research into destination brand development and adheres to alternative methods supported by others (Bowen, 2002). The study also seeks to alter the minor role attributed to tour guides in the overall destination brand development process. Though exploratory and not definitive, the findings of the study suggest that long-term success and strength of a destination brand is contingent on whether the brand's promise and value is effectively and consistently confirmed over the course of numerous repeated interactions between visitors and tour guides. Traditionally overlooked in terms of the brand building process, tour guides should be regarded as a resource in brand development efforts championed by DMO marketers and managers. Finally, this study lends substance to the critical role and significance tour guides enact in such a process: as agents of confirmation or disconfirmation, they are either allies or enemies of the destination brand.

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