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Changes in Travel Behaviour Caused by COVID-19: The Case Study of Outbound Chinese Tourists

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Introduction

Effect of the Pandemic on Chinese Tourist Behaviour

The sudden advent of the COVID-19 pandemic severely impaired the Chinese tourism market (Huang et al., 2023), especially international trips, and caused a rapid drop in Chinese outbound tourism expenditures (Buchholz, 2023). Travellers' hesitant behaviours are mainly attributed to the intense fear of coronavirus infection (Zheng et al., 2023), which still seems to hamper the rise of long-haul trips (Statista Search Department, 2022). Uncertain situations, inflated prices, political upheaval, and the perception of unfriendliness are also playing a crucial role in keeping

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S. W. Maingi et al. (eds.), *Tourist Behaviour and the New Normal, Volume I*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-45848-4_4

them away from travelling abroad (Ye et al., 2023; Smith, 2023; Dragon Trail Research, 2023a). Although safety is of paramount importance for Chinese travellers (Dragon Trail Research, 2023a), their eagerness to travel abroad is highlighted (EU SME Centre, 2021; Dragon Trail Research, 2022; Dragon Trail Research, 2023b), even during the pandemic (Ivy Alliance Tourism Consulting et al., 2020). The ease of China's measures and especially the end of the Zero-Case policy (European Travel Commission, n.d.), in conjunction with an expected rise in outbound Chinese tourists' expenditures, make international destinations anticipate market growth in the foreseeable future (Smith, 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Wenqian & Xueqing, 2023).

Based on several research results, it is obvious that travelling with family members after the pandemic is a prerequisite (China Tourism Research Institute, 2021; Dragon Trail Research, 2023b). Despite the fact that individualism is gradually gaining ground, family is still the foundation of Chinese society (Accenture, 2022). On the other hand, surveys have revealed that the Chinese are now highly receptive to travelling as independent travellers (Dragon Trail International, 2022). Chinese travel agencies predicted that among the most popular future travel types, self-driving and semi-guided tours, independent travel, personalised tours, and small groups are expected to prevail in the next few years (ITB China, 2020). Since the Chinese population is digitally immersed, asking for more technological experiences, not only while planning their trip, but also at the destination, is the new trend (Chen et al., 2023).

Additionally, the Chinese are looking for authentic experiences through which they feel fulfilled by combining leisure, entertainment, and self-improvement. The type of experiences, the quality, and the benefits these experiences offer are crucial factors in their decision-making process (Accenture, 2022). Outdoor trips, scenic and culturally significant destinations, rural and nature-based areas, local food, and novel experiences constitute the most dominant post-pandemic desires (Huang et al., 2023; Dragon Trail Research, 2023a; Chen et al., 2023). Research also reveals that the Chinese are seeking excitement, happiness, relaxation, comfort, and value-for-money services during their trips abroad (Dragon Trail Research, 2023a; Chen et al., 2023). Taking into account all that mentioned above, we deduce that the Chinese outbound market has become extremely cautious as regards health protection, while simultaneously a demand for more specific products that serve that market segment is required.

Examining Chinese Tourists' Post-pandemic Behaviour

In the context of the recovery and strengthening of the tourism industry, it is considered particularly beneficial to focus on markets that can enhance the sector's profits, such as China's outbound tourism market (Johnson et al., 2020). Outbound Chinese tourism, until 2019, was a rapidly growing phenomenon with a steady growth rate that exceeded 20% (UNWTO, 2019). Regarding the increase in travel, the Chinese made 169.21 million outbound trips in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020), compared to 4.5 million in 2000. Profoundly, China can be characterised as having the most intensively expanding market power worldwide (UNWTO, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020). Regarding the ever-increasing rates of Chinese tourism spending, in 2019, they reached $254.6 billion (STATISTA, 2021). New measures marked the restart of China's tourism industry. Now, it is not necessary to quarantine upon entering the country. The opening of borders and the issuance of travel documents also followed while the sale of the outbound groups and organised travel will be allowed from February 6 of the same year for travel to 20 countries (European Travel Commission, n.d.). All these actions are important steps that herald the restart of Chinese outbound tourism (Kuščer et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023).

The purpose of the primary study was to gain insight into the behaviour of Chinese outbound travellers before, during, and after the pandemic. Based on this general aim, the specific objectives of this study were: (a) to investigate the general travel habits of Chinese tourists, such as frequency, duration, travel companions, and the perception of travel as a group activity; (b) to examine the behaviour of Chinese travellers when searching for a suitable destination, including booking habits, destination selection criteria, and keywords frequently used in online searches;

(c) to identify the activities, attractions, transportation, travel costs, and other key factors when choosing an international destination by Chinese tourists; (d) to assess and investigate their next trip intention and the role played by COVID-19 in this decision; and (e) to detect the changes (behaviour before, during, and after the pandemic) in order to formulate suitable tourism services and products to attract Chinese tourists after the pandemic.

In order to conduct this research, the quota sampling method was chosen. The population of this research is composed of Chinese tourists who have made or are going to make trips abroad. The sample was stratified and selected based on previous studies of the Chinese population with two primary criteria: income-related purchasing power and a proclivity to travel overseas. According to statistical data, middle-aged individuals in the Chinese socioeconomic scale's affluent tier appear to have more purchasing power than other age groups (Bao et al., 2019). Furthermore, in terms of the second criterion, Chinese aged 26–35 account for the majority of the Chinese outbound tourism industry (Talking Data and Tencent Culture and Tourism, 2018).

An in-depth literature review on the behaviours and habits of Chinese tourists before, during, and after the pandemic was conducted in order to design the questionnaire and detect differences in Chinese tourists' behaviour by emphasising the examination of their habits and desires both before and after the pandemic outbreak. The questionnaire comprised a range of dichotomous, single- and multiple-choice questions, scales, and other elements. The SPSS statistical analysis program was used to evaluate and confirm the reliability of this measurement instrument. The Cronbach's alpha index was found to be 0.885, indicating that the questionnaire was a reliable instrument. The questionnaire was prepared in English, reviewed by research staff from the University of Piraeus, translated into Mandarin Chinese, and sent to the Chinese Embassy in Greece for review prior to distribution.

The quantitative survey was conducted from June to September 2022. The questionnaire was distributed by the Chamber of Greek-Chinese Economic Cooperation, the Hellenic Tourism Organization (Beijing Branch), the General Secretariat for International and Economic Relations of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Greek Embassy, and the Greek Consulate in China. Several Chinese organisations and networks, such as the China – Central and Eastern European Countries' Tourism Coordination Centre (CEEC), the Cultural Trade Exhibition, the China Asia Networking Group, the China Outbound Tourism Marketing Network, the China Travel Executive, and the Online Travel and Tourism Group, also distributed the survey questionnaire through their member lists.

Conducting research outside of China presents technical challenges due to the presence of numerous online research tools and programs and China's Great Firewall, which could cause slow page loading speeds or difficulties in loading. Wenjuan was ultimately chosen as the best option for the online survey because it was extremely user-friendly and allowed the distribution of the online questionnaire via WeChat. Respondents were invited to answer the questionnaire by either scanning the QR code or using a special link.

Sample and Survey Results

The research sample consisted of 174 Chinese individuals, of whom 100 were women and 74 were men. Individuals aged 31–40 (34.48%), 41–50 (35.63%), and 51–60 (16.09%) provided the majority of answers. The majority of the sample were residents of Shanghai (31.82%) and Beijing (22.73%). Notably, a large percentage of the participants held managerial positions (20.93%).

Findings

General Travel Habits

Exactly 98.8% of respondents had travelled abroad, with the majority reporting travelling two to three times a year before the pandemic (93.7%), while 97.14% had not travelled after the pandemic. In addition, the proportion of respondents who have travelled abroad reported having travelled 814 days before the pandemic (94.87%). However, when asked the same question about how long they travelled after COVID-19, 93.75% responded that they travelled one to three days. In particular, the female population appeared much more cautious, opting for significantly fewer or no travel days after COVID-19 compared to the male population in the sample. Respondents were then asked to describe how they typically choose to travel and the company they prefer to travel with. A high percentage of respondents (70.11%) stated that they usually travel with family members, 50.57% with friends, and 19.54% with their partners. Both the 31–40 and 41–50 age groups responded that they usually travel with their families (see Fig. 4.1).

Only 4.6% of participants answered that they usually travel in groups. Participants responded that both before and after COVID-19, they preferred to travel in groups of less than eight people. It is worth mentioning, however, that after the pandemic, the percentage of Chinese people who prefer to travel with fewer than eight members has increased dramatically, and few respondents seem willing to travel in larger groups. Regarding the reasons that led to the above answer, the majority believe that the feeling of familiarity in a small group is important (48.84%).

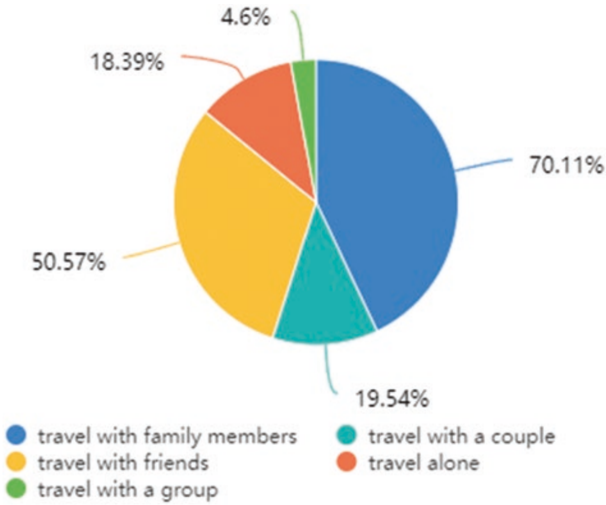

Fig. 4.1 Travel groups

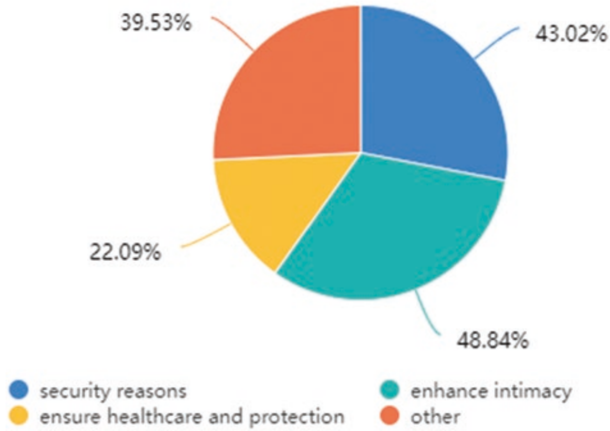

Fig. 4.2 Reasons for joining groups

Interestingly, women consider intimacy less important (40%), compared to men (61.11%). Also, many Chinese claimed that smaller groups make them feel safe (43.2%) and ensure healthcare and protection (22.09%) (see Fig. 4.2).

Destination Search

This section focused on the search process prior to the trip. In the question "How do you usually make your travel reservations?" more than half of the participants (68.97%) stated that online travel agencies are their first choice. Exactly 35.63% seem to book through hotel websites, 31.03% trust nearby travel agents, and 29.89% prefer booking through travel websites such as TripAdvisor (猫途鹰). Based on the sample responses, Ctrip (晗程网) was selected as the most popular online travel agency. The results also revealed that Chinese people want to travel more independently, with 48.68% stating that they would prefer to book a flight-hotel or customised activities-flight-hotel—in other words, choose the activities that best suit their preferences and personalities. This is followed by booking flight-hotel tours to main attractions (42.53%), and only a small percentage of participants (12.64%) prefer booking flight-hotel-full-day and daily activities.

Participants were also asked to record the most frequent keywords they used when searching for their trip online. Interestingly, they gave many keywords (see Figs. 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5), with most of the answers related to the attractions in the destinations. For example, participants type in "attractions," "attraction name," or "local attraction." Food searches are extremely popular in "food," "local cuisine," "local food," and "food reviews." In addition, Chinese people seem to search more for destinations, hotels, and transportation by typing words like "location name," "destination name," "hotels," "transportation," and "local transport."

Fig. 4.3 First fill-in gap

Fig. 4.4 Second fill-in gap

Fig. 4.5 Third fill-in gap

Finally, in this particular section, the respondents were asked to answer based on the criteria by which they usually choose a place to visit. The majority of the sample stated that the popularity of the location (77.01%) was a determining factor in their choice of destination to visit. The uniqueness of the place (52.87%) and social media posts and photos (37.93%) follow, while social media advertising seems to have little effect on Chinese tourists (17.24%).

Destination Visit

Chinese participants seem to travel mainly for relaxation (87.36%), to gain new experiences (66.67%), and to achieve family happiness (41.38%). Of particular interest is the fact that family happiness is more important to men (54.05%) compared to women (32.65%). Other reasons are entertainment (34.48%), mental health (34.48%), communication with locals (28.74%), business reasons (24.14%), and adventure (17.24%). Afterwards, the respondents answered what their preferred activities are when travelling abroad. The sample responses highlight the importance of cultural tourism for travelling abroad (81.4%). Second, Chinese people are keen on shopping (53.49%) and exploring islands and beaches (53.49%). Further analysis reveals that female respondents prefer cultural activities (78%) and shopping (62%), while male respondents prefer cultural activities (86.11%) and island beaches (55.56%). The sample also highlights outdoor sports (32.56%), cruises (31.4%), and rural tourism activities (such as wine tasting) (26.74%). Among the most popular attractions in an international destination, Chinese participants chose historical attractions (82.76%), city landmarks (63.22%), and museums (58.62%). Theme parks (33.33%), islands (33.33%), and lakes (28.74%) also seem to be attractive to Chinese tourists (see Fig. 4.6). For those travelling with family or friends, there is a clear preference for historical sites and theme parks, while historical sites and museums seem to attract more free independent travellers (FITs).

According to the responses, Chinese people usually spend 13,901–20,900 RMB (33.72%) on overseas travel (see Fig. 4.7). They, in their majority, choose to book flights, hotels, and tours to main attractions (44.83%) and express their desire for cultural tourism activities (89.66%). Furthermore, it

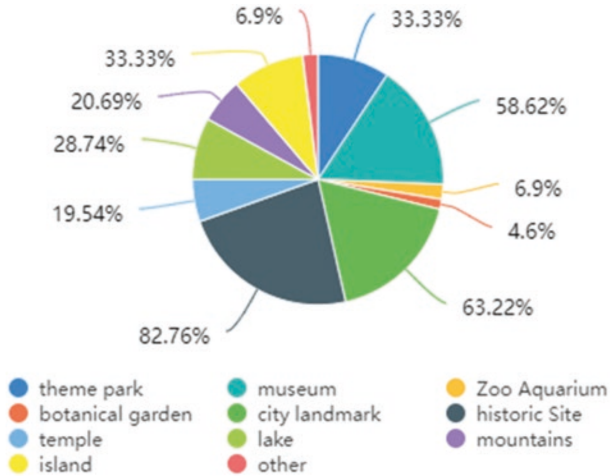

Fig. 4.6 Popular attractions

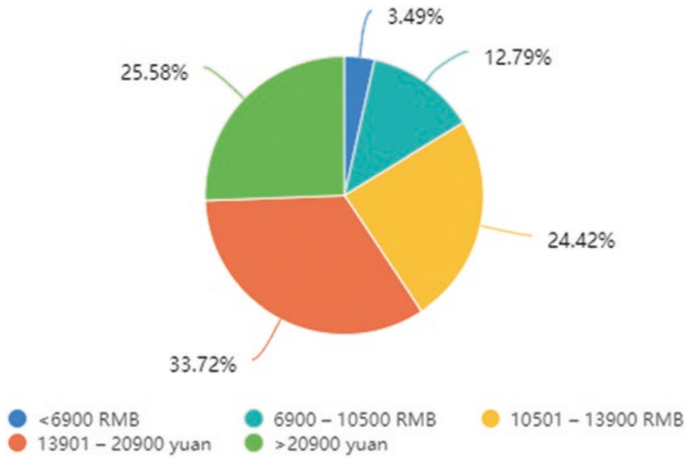

Fig. 4.7 International travel budget

appears that Chinese travellers are particularly willing to invest significant funds in European travel. For example, 68.97% will spend 13,901–20,900 RMB and 40.91% more than 20,900 RMB to travel to Europe.

Regarding the choice of accommodation, it is obvious that resorts are their first choice (74.71%), followed by ordinary hotels (31.03%), then eco-friendly hotels (29.89%), and Airbnb rooms (14%). Questions about preferred means of transport to international destinations were also included. Before COVID-19, respondents mainly used the metro (97.14%), bus (95.24%), and taxi (90%) for their transportation, while after the pandemic these percentages decreased (metro 45.71%, bus 38.1%, and taxi 50%), and now walking (75%) and private buses (74.07%) are becoming more popular.

Finally, participants emphasised the significance of a variety of variables when selecting a travel destination. Excellent value for money (3.73 average importance score, based on a 5-point scale), convenient air connections between their region of origin and destination (3.93), the best date to visit the destination (3.93), the weather of the destination (3.85), activities they might be interested in (3.93), reviews of the destination (3.93), friends' recommendations (3.79), travel distance from the destination (3.57), and less crowded places (3.92) are important to them. As very important, respondents chose flight and hotel prices (4.01), suggested things to do in the destination (3.98), and made suggestions based on their interests (4.14). Further analysis reveals that whenever Chinese travel with family members or couples, it is very important for them to be offered many interesting activities (70.49%). In addition, suggestions based on their interests are very important to women (78.72%), as are suggestions from friends (68.75%).

Also, while travelling abroad, the sample stated that safety (4.7), health protection (4.59), cultural background (4.23), friendliness of locals (4.26), local culture (4.23), transport systems (4.14), mobile phone signal (4.25), and network coverage (4.22) are very important. Network coverage (Internet) is very important, especially for those who book a flight-hotel-personalised activity tour package (4.42) and a flight-hotel-tour to the main attractions (4.22). An eco-friendly atmosphere is also very important for the sample as a whole (4.4) and even more so for those travelling for family happiness (4.64).

Future Travel Trends

In the last section, we tried to detect the intentions, desires, and needs of their future trips. Chinese are extremely cautious since their next destinations should be safe (4.66 average importance score), they have strict and effective pandemic control measures (4.02), and there is a reduced number of coronavirus cases (3.93). In addition, in locations (3.88), accommodations (3.82), and transportation (3.83), it is important that there be no overcrowding. More than half said they wanted to visit European countries (51.16%) after the pandemic (see Fig. 4.8). The findings show that Beijing residents (64.71%) are more willing to plan a trip to Europe after the pandemic. Figure 4.9 illustrates the best European

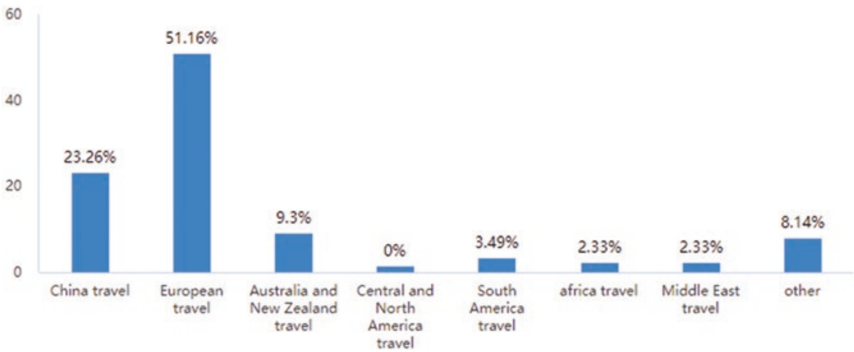

Fig. 4.8 Post-pandemic trips

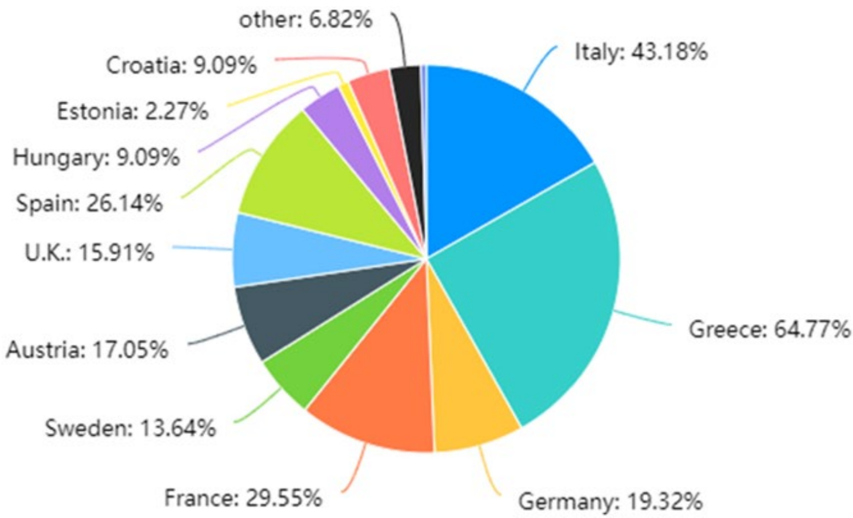

Fig. 4.9 The best European destinations

destinations for the Chinese. Greece (64.77%), Italy (43.18%), France (29.55%), Spain (26.14%), and Germany (19.32%) are among the top five. Interestingly, Chinese travellers who plan to visit Greece are more likely to prefer a flight-hotel-main sightseeing tour package (43.86%) than those planning to visit Italy, who tend to prefer a flight-hotel-customised tour package (50%).

Discussion and Implications

This study sheds light on several important insights regarding the behaviour of Chinese outbound tourism travellers before, during, and after the pandemic. Almost the entire sample consists of experienced travellers who take advantage of the numerous opportunities to profit from convenient flight connections or favourable ticket and hotel prices. These tourists expect personalised experiences and are ready to spend a significant amount of money to get them. They plan trips after conducting extensive research in order to receive the greatest number of benefits. The priorities of this market segment seem to be healthcare and safety. These tourists expect the elimination of the pandemic to make them travel more. Hesitation to travel and the crucial role of implementing safety measures prevail. Therefore, authorities and governments should effectively control the pandemic. On the other hand, the tourism industry should also comply with that by creating small groups, providing less crowded means of transport, and providing clean and safe lodgings. Packages to popular destinations during low seasons are highly suggested, as is the gradual promotion of new destinations with unique natural scenery, culture, history, and fascinating activities. They also want to feel cared for and welcomed by the host nation. As a result, services should consider this need and combine it by developing personalised packages tailored to Chinese culture.

Except for the implementation of hygiene protocols, the preferences that our sample showed for specific services, such as accommodation in resorts, private transport buses, convenient air connections, value for money, and a sophisticated need for relaxation, make it clear that comfort, safety, and profitable opportunities are also important issues for the

Chinese traveller. Thus, businesses operating in the sector are suggested to take into account a good price-quality ratio but also ensure comfort and relaxation in order to increase their market share in Chinese outbound tourism.

Although making domestic trips is more feasible, the great willingness of the Chinese to travel outbound after the pandemic, especially to Europe, heralds the future trend. Results suggest that Chinese outbound tourism may have significant potential and economic benefits for both the European and Chinese tourism industries. The tourism providers' services and products targeting Chinese tourists may consider the above data in order to price the offered services accordingly.

In addition, the tendency of Chinese people to follow the recommendations of friends and read reviews from other customers about destinations and activities, combined with the limited impact of media advertising on social networking, leads to the conclusion that common advertising practices have little impact on them. Instead, what seems to matter most is the authenticity that comes from quality service, which results in real and positive reviews. Thus, the strengthening of good reviews and the word of mouth (WOM) of a business is very important.

Also, the popularity of a destination and the importance of attractions for Chinese tourists become clear through the frequency of keywords that users search for. The importance of the popularity and distinctiveness of a destination or landmark symbolise their need to follow something they know in advance will meet their needs and will be a safe choice. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of the sample chooses cultural visits over historical sites and museums, making the preference for cultural tourism in this market segment clear. Acquiring new information and broadening their knowledge is fundamental. Chinese people are also willing to pay a lot for cultural tourism activities, showing high respect for the culture and a preference to invest in meaningful activities that will benefit them through learning and self-improvement. Moreover, online users seem to show particular interest in searching for information that is related to the local cuisine and gastronomy of a region. Thus, cultural and culinary tourism are among the fields we should focus our attention on, as they will be a pole of attraction for Chinese tourists.

After the pandemic, this market segment is asking for interesting experiences and travel packages with personalised activities and suggestions that align with their preferences. They are also looking for activities to do in the destination, and this is especially true for travellers accompanied by relatives and friends. This trend creates a need to promote new travel packages that meet their interests, many of which will consist of personalised suggestions. We realise that Chinese tourists are not satisfied by simply visiting a place and admiring the sights. Instead, they wish to actively participate in learning and leisure activities through which they have the opportunity to explore, have fun, and learn new things.

Furthermore, it seems that family trips are preferred, but a large percentage also wishes to travel with friends. Family happiness is the second most popular reason for a Chinese person to travel, again supporting the great importance of family bonds. Therefore, it is suggested to provide packages and offers that will benefit travelling families, such as reduced tickets and activities that will appeal to all age groups and bring their members closer to their families and friends while also enhancing their various developmental stages.

In terms of travel type, the free independent travellers (FITs) trend seems to be gradually dominating. Chinese tourists were found to prefer first flight-hotel bookings or flight-hotel-personalised activities and second booking flight-hotel tours to main attractions. Their preferences undoubtedly highlight the growing trend of independent trips. Additionally, we observe more individualistic behaviours, with the female population appearing to be more prone to individualistic attitudes. The fact that family happiness (during travel) is less important for women than for men, in combination with a lower need for intimacy during travel, is an indication. However, it is essential to thoroughly examine it in order to draw clearer conclusions.

Online bookings are thriving, mainly through bookings made via online travel agencies (especially Ctrip). For people who wish to have personalised activity packages and excursions to important attractions, Internet access is considered vital. We expect that in the near future, many Chinese outbound tourists will wish to be more independent and will use their phones to explore locations. Applications that use technological solutions to provide a unique location experience are expected to flourish as Chinese travellers seek more independence.

Finally, the research revealed that travelling to an environmentally friendly destination area is a very important feature when travelling abroad, and indeed, it is vital to ensuring the family happiness of Chinese travellers during vacations. Rural areas and natural landscapes such as islands, lakes, and mountains turned out to be among the top 10 attractions to visit in a foreign destination. Of course, interpretation and conclusions must be ascertained through more extensive study; however, we observe the interest of Chinese tourists in environmental issues.

Conclusions and Future Research

Summarising the findings of this study, we find that Chinese tourists, while still cautious, are ready to travel. Although inbound travel is favoured, outbound travel, especially to European destinations, is very popular and appears to be highly profitable for the tourism industry. Providing healthcare, local friendliness, comfort, and dependable services are critical conditions for the reception of Chinese visitors following the pandemic. Furthermore, the popularity of both the destination and the attractions and the variety of activities available are important considerations when choosing where to go next. Authentic experiences, quality services, cultural tourism, and meaningful activities with family and friends are also identified as future requirements in the research. In addition, FITs are also a significant part of the Chinese market, mainly due to the growing trend of independence and individualism. Technology also seems to play a significant role for Chinese travellers, as the majority prefer to make online reservations and use smartphones during their trip, even as a guide. Last but not least, the study shows that, at least, the environmentally conscious profile of Chinese travellers is steadily evolving.

The findings of this study have important implications for tourism management in the post-pandemic era. First and foremost, it is essential to prioritise the health and safety of visitors, especially in the context of inbound travel. This requires providing high-quality healthcare, friendly services, and reliable amenities to ensure that Chinese visitors feel comfortable and secure during their trip. As outbound travel becomes more popular, tourism operators should also consider these factors to attract Chinese tourists to their destinations.

Another important factor to consider is the popularity of the destination, the attractions' variety, and authentic experiences. Chinese tourists are drawn to places that offer a diverse choice of attractions and activities, providing cultural experiences as well as meaningful activities. Tourism operators should try to deliver high-quality services and cultural tourism experiences that represent the distinctive qualities of their destinations in order to meet these needs.

The growing popularity of FITs among Chinese travellers has major implications for destination marketing. As Chinese travellers want greater independence and individualism in their travel experiences, independent travel is becoming increasingly popular. This trend emphasises the necessity for tourism operators to provide personalised packages and activities that appeal to individual travellers' specific interests and preferences. Additionally, to meet the expectations of tech-savvy Chinese travellers, the usage of technology, such as online reservations and smartphone apps, should be prioritised.

Finally, the study emphasises the growing significance of environmental sustainability among Chinese tourists. This tendency can be seen in the desire for ecologically friendly destinations as well as in the interest in natural landscapes and rural areas. To fulfil the changing expectations of Chinese tourists in this area, tourism operators should consider implementing sustainable practices into their operations.

Overall, to attract Chinese tourists in the post-pandemic era, the study's findings recommend that destination marketing should focus on delivering high-quality services and authentic cultural experiences, catering to independent travellers, and prioritising environmental sustainability.

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