Case Study

The motivations and expectations of international volunteer tourists: A case study of “Chinese Village Traditions”

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ABSTRACT

International volunteer tourists devote not only financial support but also time and effort to conservation, preservation, or humanitarian projects outside their original countries. The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a qualitative study on the motivations of ten international volunteer tourists who joined the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition of the Earthwatch Institute in the summer of 2008. The main research question was, “Why do people join international volunteer tourism trips?” Eleven themes dealing with motivations emerged and were categorized into three groups: personal, interpersonal, and other. Four personal factors were measured: authentic experience, interest in travel, challenge/stimulation, and other interest. Four interpersonal factors were also considered: desire to help, interaction with locals/cultures, encouraged by others, and enhancing relationships. Other factors included unique style of the trip, time/money, and organization goal. The findings of this study echo previous literature reviews in different settings.

1. Introduction

Travel, originally intended for trade and conquest, had shifted over time to focus on pleasure and to serve as a symbol of social status. After WWII, the increase of disposable income, new technology, and greater political freedom led to major growth for mass tourism (Mieczkowski, 1995). Influenced by media promotion, longer holidays, and greater leisure awareness, tourism became one of the fastest growing industries in the world (Holden, 2000). After the 1970s, due to the shrinkage of financial support, many governmental and non-governmental organizations started looking for volunteers who could contribute both financially and physically to field research or reconstruction work (Ellis, 2003a). By the 1980s, environmental concerns began to influence consumption behavior. Although mass tourism was still the mainstream of the market, new tourism styles emerged, including “alternative,” “green,” “sustainable,” and “natural” (Holden, 2000). The push force of alternative tourism and the pull force of the need for volunteering promoted this novel type of tourism. Volunteer tourism has become a significant phenomenon for decades.

This new form of alternative tourism has become increasingly popular under a variety of names: “volunteer tourism” (Henderson, 1981), “volunteer vacation” (McMillion, Cutchins, & Geissinger, 2006), “mini-mission” (Brown & Morrison, 2003), “mission lite,” “pro-poor tourism” (Ashley, Roe, & Goodwin, 2001; Hall, 2007), “vacation volunteering,” “altruistic tourism” (Singh, 2002), “service-based vacation,” “participatory environmental research tourism (PERT)” (Ellis, 2003b), and “voluntourism.” Based on the studies of the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (2008), the volunteer tourism market has grown rapidly, with a current yearly total of 1.6 million volunteer tourists contributing a value between USD 1.7–2.6 billion. The significant growth and the uniqueness of the style have attracted many researchers and practitioners.

This type of excursion includes two elements: tourism and volunteer service. The definition of a visitor is “any person travelling to a place different from that of his/her usual environment for less than twelve months and whose main purpose of travel is another than the exercise of an activity remunerated within the place visited” (UN et al., 2001, p. 13). For the purpose of this study, tourists are visitors who stay in a particular country for at least one night, while visitors are all types of travelers (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). Wearing and Neil (2001, p. 233) explain, “Tourism is a complex experience, often involving subtle interaction among the tourists, the site and the host community.”

Volunteerism is defined as “a specific type of sustained, planned, prosocial behavior that benefits strangers and occurs within an
organizational setting” (Marta, Guglielmetti, & Maura, 2006, p. 222). Combining the definition of tourism and volunteerism, Wearing (2001) defines volunteer tourists as people who invest their time, budgets, and manpower at a destination far from home to gain cultural, environmental, and spiritual experiences.

From the definitions above, volunteer tourism is clearly a tourism activity incorporating volunteer services that is concerned about environmental, cultural, or humanitarian issues and intends to benefit not only tourists but also locals. It satisfies a need for tourists who want to “travel with a purpose” (Brown & Lehto, 2005) and “make a difference during their holidays” (Coghlan, 2006), enjoying a tourist experience with the benefit of contributing to others. This kind of trip usually provides authentic experiences in places fewer general tourists approach, such as protected natural areas or distant villages.

Volunteer tourism products are new to both the tourism and volunteer markets. Many stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-governmental organizations, commercial operators, and even academic institutions, have begun to offer such products and services (Ellis, 2003b). Although the content of their projects may be similar as far as the volunteer and tourism elements, their goals and missions vary widely. For example, some expeditions emphasize the tourism aspect, while others include more volunteer services. Trips may target young people, mature adults, families, unskilled laborers, students, or professionals. The duration of a trip may be less than a week, multiple weeks, months, or even years. Some expeditions require the volunteer tourists to perform extensive labor, such as building houses, and some only take one or two days, perhaps working with orphans. The concept of volunteer tourism includes a great diversity of projects and involvement of volunteer tourists.

Because of the diverse characteristics of participants and the distinct context of the trips, volunteer tourism studies have shown a great breadth of motivations. Wearing (2001) explains that motivations of volunteer tourism include altruism, travel and adventure, personal growth, cultural exchange and learning, professional development, organization goal or mission, and right time or place. The four reasons why people travel with a purpose as defined by Brown and Lehto (2005) are cultural immersion, the desire to give back (altruism), camaraderie (friendship), and family.

The key motives of volunteer tourism in Caissie and Halfpenny’s study about a nature conservation program (2003) include pleasure seeking, program “perks,” place and nature-based context, leaving a legacy, and altruism. The researchers found that the participants focused more on self than altruistic reasons and expected their trip not only to fulfill a higher need such as self-actualization but also the basic needs of relaxation and stimulation (Caissie & Halfpenny, 2003). Mustonen (2007) claims that altruism, egoism, socializing, and individuality are four interactive dimensions that motivate volunteer tourists.

Callanan and Thomas (2005) suggested classifying volunteer tourism into three groups: “shallow,” “intermediate,” and “deep” as Sylvan (1985)’s idea of ecology which cited in Acott and Trobe’s study (1998, p. 242) Analogue to the concept of “shallow ecology” which means being more concerned about the welfare of humans alone than nature as a whole, “the shallow volunteer tourism” means being more concerned about self-development and career/academic achievement than about the welfare of local community or project itself (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). The level of involvement, contribution, trip duration, skill requirements, and the importance of self-interest motives could be the factors to categorize “shallow, intermediate, and deep” volunteer tourism (Callanan & Thomas, 2005).

For Rehberg’s motivation study (2005) in international volunteer program among young Swiss adults, he sorted 12 motivations from 118 participants into three categories: “achievement something positive”, “quest for the new”, and “quest for oneself”. The first group of motive focuses more on the ethical values and consideration while the second one focuses on new experience, culture, and friends. The third one focuses more on self-interest reason and mainly on career, professional, or academic field (Rehberg, 2005).


1.1. Tourists’ motivations

Cohen (1972) classifies tourists into four groups, sorted by motivation: the organized mass tourist and the individual mass tourist seek familiarity, while the explorer and the drifter seek strangeness or novelty. Volunteer tourists are frequent travelers (Brown & Morrison, 2003) and they pursue more novelty than familiarity. From the sociological point of view, they are more close to the explorer in Cohen’s classification.

From a social–psychological perspective, Iso-Ahola (1983) proposes that people may tend to travel as an escape after encountering personal troubles or failures, while the gained travel experience in turn could improve intra- and interpersonal esteem and social status. A similar concept appears in Dann’s theory of anomie and ego-enhancement (1977, 1981).

From Dann’s point of view (1981), tourist motivation is “a meaningful state of mind which adequately disposes an actor or group of actors to travel, and which is subsequently interpretable by others as a valid explanation for such as decision” (p. 205). Dann (1977, 1981) further proposes that the reasons people engage in travel are influenced by the attraction of the destination (pull factors) and their psychological needs (push factors). The push factors related to the motivations include anomie and ego-enhancement: anomie means that people’s desire to escape from daily life can be fulfilled by traveling, while ego-enhancement means people need to be recognized by others. Travel provides opportunities to satisfy the need to escape and to re-establish a tourist’s ego, albeit temporarily (Dann, 1977, 1981). Applying the concept to volunteer tourism, people who can afford this alternative tourism might be regarded in a more positive way by sharing money, free time, ability, courage, and goodwill, which can increase self-esteem or social status.

Wearing, Deville, and Lyons (2008), linking to symbolic interactionist in sociology, argued that individuals could transform leisure into self-exploration through volunteer tourism. Volunteer tourism as a leisure activity satisfies individuals for searching for a more meaningful experience or life and provides a chance of self-discovery and self-understanding which one cannot get from his/her routine daily life as Kelly (1983) mentioned cited in Wearing et al. (2008, p. 64).

Considering volunteer tourism trips with different characteristics, Broad’s study (2003) of volunteer tourists with long duration trips concluded that the motivations of volunteer tourists focus on personal interest and travel. For university students in eco-oriented volunteer research program, motivations include personal development and academic achievement (Galley & Clifton, 2004). Weiler and Richins (1995) investigated a more scientific oriented project, the Australia Earthwatch expedition, and found participants’ main reasons for joining the project were a desire to do something meaningful or conservation oriented, an interest in the subject matter, a desire to learn new things or be challenged, and an interest in helping researchers. Also, the demographics of participants, such as age, have some effects on motivation (Okun &
Schultz, 2003). Clearly, the details about participant’s characteristics and project content are related to participant motivation.

The primary motives mentioned in previous research can be separated into three categories: (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) other factors to fit the diverse motives. Table 1 expresses the sorted categories and themes of volunteer tourism motivation discussed above.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The previous literature shows that most volunteer tourism studies have focused on natural conservation or humanitarian projects (Brown, 2005; Broad, 2003; Caissie & Halpenny, 2003; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Coghlan, 2005; Galley & Clifton, 2004; Weiler & Richins, 1995). Furthermore, the majority of volunteer tourism studies have been done in western countries such as Australia, the United States, the UK, and Canada (Halpenny & Caissie, 2003). Only a few studies focus on destinations in eastern countries (e.g., Singh, 2002, in India; Broad, 2001, in Thailand).

Possibly, because the concept of volunteerism originated in western society, the standard of living in developed countries has provided those people with more disposable income and more flexible schedules (free time and holidays); moreover, the market of volunteer tourism also started in these developed countries.

After considering the lack of studies in eastern developing country settings as well as the accessibility, budget, time frame, and cultural background of the primary researcher (speaking Mandarin), the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition of the Earthwatch Institute in China was selected as the research target. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the motivation of international volunteer tourists by using qualitative methods in an eastern developing country setting in order to compare and contrast with previous literature reviews. The main inquiry question is, “Why do people join international volunteer tourism trips?”

2. Study method

As utilized in previous volunteer tourism studies (Brown, 2003; Brown & Lehto, 2005; Caissie & Halpenny, 2003; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Carter, 2008; Coghlan, 2005; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Weiler & Richins, 1995), qualitative methods were used to answer the question, “Why do people join international volunteer tourism trips?” A qualitative approach is frequently used to explore a new phenomenon. Addressing participants’ point of view, the study intended to investigate the key motivations of the participants who joined the international volunteer tourism trip. To conduct the study in a natural setting, the primary researcher joined an international volunteer tourism trip to immerse self in the experience and used purposeful sampling to collect data. Creswell and Clark (2007) define purposeful sampling as when “researchers intentionally select participants who have experience with the central phenomenon or the key concept being explored” (p. 112).

Therefore, the international volunteer tourists in the expedition were the target interests in the study.

2.1. Study unit

“Chinese Village Traditions” was one of 121 expeditions offered by the Earthwatch Institute in 2008. The Earthwatch Institute, founded in 1971, is an international non-profit organization. It supports scientific research by providing volunteers to help produce fieldwork. Since 1971, it has supported nearly 1350 projects in 119 countries and 36 states. More than 81,000 volunteers have contributed over $57 million and 10.8 million hours to essential fieldwork. Over 4000 volunteers per year have devoted their time, labor, and financial support to scientific research around the world through the Institute (Earthwatch & Fact sheet, Oct. 28, 2008). It is one of the largest volunteer tourism organizations in the world.

The Earthwatch Institute supports scientific research on climate change, sustainable resource management, sustainable oceans, and sustainable cultures in a unique way. The organization requests proposals from doctoral post-dissertational researchers around the world who need labor and funding for their research. Once the proposal is approved, the Institute posts the expedition on the website for members to register. Generally, there are 4–5 teams for a project with 5–12 volunteers per team. Each team spends 8–15 days in the field. Total volunteers for an expedition number from 30 to 60 per field season (Earthwatch & FAQ, Oct. 28, 2008). The contribution fee from the volunteers goes partially to the Earthwatch Institute and partially to support the project. The transportation expenses from volunteers’ homes to the field are excluded from the registration fees. The principle investigators (hereafter PIs), aided by student helpers or staffs, lead the team of volunteers to complete the expedition.

The primary researcher contacted the PIs of the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition directly in February 2008 by email and phone. The PIs agreed to let the primary researcher serve as a student helper for 2 teams during the summer of 2008. The primary researcher interviewed the PIs and student helpers before the expedition began to get broad views of the previous experience.

2.2. Study site

The “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition was held in an underdeveloped village in Shaanxi, China, during the summer of 2008. The expedition included 4 teams, which were led by four PIs. Trip duration was 10 days for each team. The location was a small village of 45 households. The team stayed with a host family in a cave dwelling complex with primitive living conditions. In Chinese, these caves are known as yao. The cave dwellings are built on the cliffs according to the natural topography of the mountains. The complex included four yao for bedrooms, three yao for kitchen and dining areas, and an outside yard. Each bedroom yao accommodated four to six people. Volunteers slept side by side on a platform bed made out of bricks.

Water is scarce in the region, with only one well for daily water usage. Water is used for food preparation and drinking, but there is not enough for showering. There are three dry pit toilets available for the whole team and the host family (about 15–20 people). Electricity is also limited. The expedition joined by the primary researcher (project Team 2 and Team 3) occurred during the fourth year that the expedition was sponsored by the Earthwatch Institute. From 2005 to 2008, 102 international volunteer tourists participated in this expedition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Pleasure seeking/relaxation/travel</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal growth/professional development/career-building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adventure/stimulation/challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Care for others/altruism/leaving a legacy/the desire to give back</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural exchange/culture immersed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendship/family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other factors</td>
<td>Organization mission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Right time/places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Project context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3. Project content

To improve the living conditions of the area, new settlements were funded and built by the government, and the villagers in the Miao Jia Getai areas will be relocated. Therefore, the main tasks of the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition were to collect, document, and record the religious, architectural, and local traditions and art of this current living culture before the traditions were lost through the relocation process. No special skills were required to join the expedition. Given the total duration, level of involvement, and the skill requirements, these participants were “shallow volunteer tourists” according to Callanan and Thomas’s definition (2005).

For Team 2, the fieldwork included recording information about 14 temples around the Miao Jia Getai areas. All the temples were located among the hills within 10–40 min’ walk from the living areas. The task was to take pictures and measure the dimensions of the temples. For Team 3, the fieldwork included interviewing the locals about their religious beliefs and perceptions about temple festivals. Interviews were conducted in the host family’s yard or a local household. The contents of the interviews were translated and recorded in English.

Fieldwork usually took place between 8:30 a.m. and noon. Due to the high noon temperature in summer, afternoon fieldwork lasted from 4 to 6 p.m. After dinner, there were meetings or data processing time. In a typical day, participants did volunteer work for 7–8 h. During the 10-day expedition, volunteers dedicated 6–7 days to fieldwork and 2–3 days to sightseeing.

2.4. Interviewees’ profiles

Each team consisted of 1–2 PIs, 2–3 student helpers, and 6–10 volunteer tourists (domestic and international). International volunteer tourists are defined as volunteer tourists whose destination is outside their country of birth. The primary researcher stayed with Team 2 and half of Team 3 for 15 days in the field during July 2008. There were 5 international volunteer tourists in Team 2 and 6 in Team 3. One volunteer tourist joined both teams, making a total of 10 international volunteer tourists who contributed to this study: 4 males (two father-son duos) and 6 females (two of them were future co-workers). The respondents represented all participants from both Team 2 and Team 3. In 2008, a total of 21 people participated in this expedition (4 in Team 1 and 7 in Team 4). Table 2 shows the characteristics of the interviewed international volunteer tourists from Teams 2 and 3.

All of the interviewees were from western developed counties such as the U.S. and the U.K. with a great deal of international travel experiences. They had all visited at least three continents (America, Europe and Asia). Six of them (60%) had not been to China before this trip. Seven of them (70%) were first-time participants of the Earthwatch expeditions. One of them (10%) did not have prior volunteer experience. Six of them (60%) first learned about the trip through word of mouth.

2.5. Data gathering

Based on conversations with the PIs, 5–8 participants from different countries had been on each team in previous years. Due to the design of the study and the small sample size, all participants from one team were invited to join the study and all agreed. The primary researcher explained the nature of research and invited the participants to join in the first day of expedition. The unit of analysis is the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition. The data were collected during July of 2008 to answer the research question, “Why do people join international volunteer tourism trips?” The primary researcher interviewed the participants based on two sub-questions:

1. What do you expect from this trip? (expectation)
2. Why did you want to join this trip? (motivation)

Three types of data were collected: participatory observation, documentation (field notes, meeting minutes, and blogs of participants), and open-ended, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Observation took place during volunteer work, sightseeing, and leisure time. The primary researcher recorded events during interactions among participants, student helpers, staff leaders, and locals in field notes. One to two formal interviews with the international volunteer tourists were conducted on the first or the last days of the trip. Each interview was recorded on a digital recorder and later transcribed.

There are three types of validity according to Yin (2003): construct, internal, and external. For construct validity, this research used a framework that has been used repeatedly in previous or similar studies (Broad, 2003; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007) to measure motivation and experience. The primary researcher also used multiple sources of evidence to validate the findings. To confirm the accuracy of the interviews, the results were summarized by the primary researcher and checked by interviewees to clarify any misunderstandings. To secure internal validity, the interview transcriptions were reviewed and confirmed with the interviewees. The themes identified in the study were compared to previous findings to achieve the external validity. According to Yin (2003), the process provides “analytical generalization”. In addition, the primary researcher joined two teams, repeating the procedure with slightly different context to assure reliability.

2.6. Data analysis

In the qualitative method, a human is the instrument used to collect and analyze data. After transcribing all the interviews, the primary researcher used content analysis to find the key themes or patterns of the motivation of the international volunteer tourists. Content analysis typically allows for the identification of patterns in qualitative data (Patton, 1990). In a quantitative study, content analysis focuses more on “the frequency and variety of messages,” while in qualitative study, analysis focuses more on the communication of meaning (Merriam, 1998, p. 160). Based on Merriam (1998), content analysis “involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the documents’ content” (p. 160). Throughout the process, the primary researcher constructed categories (units of data) that met two criteria defined by Lincoln and Cuba (1985); being heuristic, which discloses information related to the study and encourages the reader to think, and being the “smallest piece of
information about something that can stand by itself” (p. 345). The primary researcher repeated the procedure twice to gain consistency in finding the themes of expectations and motivations from the transcriptions.

3. Findings

The main interview questions for participants referred to expectations and motivations. The following themes emerged from 10 interview transcriptions, the primary researcher’s observations, and personal documentation.

3.1. Expectations

Only a few of the volunteer tourists had previous knowledge of China or prior preparation for the projects. Most of them were first-time visitors. Their most frequently mentioned expectations related to Chinese traditions, the main theme of the project. Mf2 mentioned that he likes seeing the traditions: “Hopefully I can get inside how are they going to preserve that (tradition), because it vanishes so rapidly, and it is scary.” F1 and F2 also discussed learning Chinese traditions, seeing how old and new mix, being able to contribute, and experiencing the culture. F3 said she wanted to know everything. F4 talked about getting feedback and contributing to the project. F5 wanted this experience to change her stereotype of China as based on western media. F6 mentioned concerns about living conditions in the village.

3.2. Motivation

According to the frequency of use in interview responses, 11 themes were extracted as motivators. The primary researcher grouped them into three categories: personal, interpersonal, and other factors to include all 11 themes. The extracted themes and frequencies are shown in Table 3.

3.2.1. Personal factors
3.2.1.1. Authentic experience. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons attracting international volunteer tourists to join this trip was the desire for an authentic experience. For example, F1 said, “I want to get the real story by going there myself and experiencing it.” Mf1 stated, “We spend more time and actually live in the village. And this is an opportunity to get a close look at how are they going to preserve that (tradition), because it vanishes so rapidly, and it is scary.” F1 and F2 also discussed learning Chinese traditions, seeing how old and new mix, being able to contribute, and experiencing the culture. F3 said she wanted to know everything. F4 talked about getting feedback and contributing to the project. F5 wanted this experience to change her stereotype of China as based on western media. F6 mentioned concerns about living conditions in the village.

3.2.1.2. Interest in travel. Although not all interviewees specifically mentioned an interest in travel, all of them had multiple international travel experiences (at least three continents); clearly, they all appreciated travel.

3.2.1.3. Challenge and stimulation. Most of the interviewees did not speak Chinese (Ms1 studied Chinese for 2 years). They knew little about Chinese culture and what they did know came mainly from the media. They treated their experience as an adventure and a challenge. F1 stated, “I want to do something extraordinary for me…something that stretches me, pushes me.” F2 said, “I love to throw myself into completely different places. It is, like, what is going to happen to me? It is like an experiment, you know…It is the whole point.” F6 mentioned her concerns before the trip about the village conditions, such as the dry pit toilet and no shower facilities, but she finally overcame her fears. She said, “I also like to challenge myself and push my limits…So it is definitely doing that.”

3.2.1.4. Other interests. Mf1, a professor, was interested in environmental and social issues in China. Ms1 had studied Chinese and wanted to use it during the trip. F4, a former communist, was “interested in how things are different in different countries—the same political philosophies.”

3.2.2. Interpersonal factors
3.2.2.1. Desire to help. Some interviewees expressed a desire to help and were concerned about preserving Chinese culture and traditions. F1 explained, “I want to contribute towards these issues and feel good about helping where needed.” F2 was concerned about the rapid growth of capitalism. She was afraid the village traditions would be overwhelmed by economic development, so that was why she came here to protect and help to preserve the traditional village culture.

3.2.2.2. Interaction with locals/cultures. International volunteer tourists most frequently described a desire for interaction with new people and cultures. The intense involvement with locals distinctly separates volunteer tourism from conventional tourism, as the latter provides fewer interpersonal encounters (Wearing, 2001). Volunteer tourists want to interact with locals, fellow travelers, cultures, environments, and events while at their destination. For example, F5 stated, “I chose that because it seems to have the most direct human interaction…I really want to do something with other people.” Ms2 explained, “There are real people, and we want to spend time with real people, which is what I like.” F2 clarified, “The reason I am interested is because I am fascinated by Asian

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Motivators</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic experience</td>
<td>Mf1, Ms1, Mf2, Ms2, F1, F2, F4, F5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interest in travel</td>
<td>Mf2, Ms2, F1, F2, F4, F5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge/stimulation</td>
<td>Ms2, F1, F2, F4, F5, F6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other interest</td>
<td>Mf1, Ms1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire to help</td>
<td>Mf1, Ms1, Mf2, Ms2, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interact with locals/culture</td>
<td>Mf1, Ms1, Mf2, Ms2, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged by others</td>
<td>Mf1, Ms2, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing relationships</td>
<td>Mf1, Mf2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unique style of the trip</td>
<td>Ms1, Mf2, Ms2, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time/money</td>
<td>Mf2, Ms1, Ms2, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization goal</td>
<td>Mf2, F1, F2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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cultures... Since I was little, I always liked Chinese folk tales, poetry and most of all... designs.”

3.2.2.3. Encouraged by others. F2 and F4 had positive previous experiences with the Earthwatch, so they were willing to sign up for another expedition. The new employer of F5 and F6 sponsored their trip to facilitate their fellowship before they started work. F5 and F6 encouraged each other to join this trip.

3.2.2.4. Enhancing relationships. Mf1/Ms1 and Mf2/Ms2 are father and son teams. When the primary researcher asked Mf2 why he wanted to join the trip, he said, “The motivation started out as wanting to do something with my son. We wanted to do something really unique.” Similarly, Mf1 pointed out, “The biggest reason is my son wants to.” He also said:

The truth is, this is the last summer he will be at home because he is in college. So it gave me an opportunity to have a 10-day trip alone with my son. Because, you know, I am not going to have so many chances to interact with him.

F5 and F6 are future colleagues. For F6, she thought the trip provided an opportunity to “get to know somebody (F5) better whom you are working with”.

3.2.3. Other factors

3.2.3.1. Unique style of the trip. Participants chose this trip because of its differences and freedoms when compared to other package tours. For example, Ms2 stated, “Normal vacations are touristy. You don’t see the real people living real life... We came here because it is not touristy... the alternative is like the big bus tour... Earthwatch is pretty much the only one that does this.” Ms1 said, “It is just different from most other trips you take. It is not sitting on the beach, seeing the tourist spot. It is doing something and getting to know the place better.” Mf2 said:

They (the Earthwatch) provide opportunities for an average person to experience something like this. ... I speak no Chinese... If I came to Yulin (the nearest city from the village) without speaking Chinese, I could not go anywhere... and also it gives us a fair amount of freedom.

Living and working with locals is a characteristic of volunteer tourism trips. Interviewees experienced daily life with villagers within each team unit, where they also had both freedom and protection. Many described how the trip was different from a normal tourist vacation.

3.2.3.2. Time/money. Most of the interviewees were taking a break from school or work. Although Mf1, Ms1, and Ms2 did not mention time or money as motivating factors, Mf1 was a professor, while Ms1 and Ms2 were college students, all of whom were on summer vacation during the expedition. Mf1 had the ability to pay for the trip, while the parents of Ms1 and Ms2 covered their expenses. Though not explicitly stated, all interviews obviously had to have time and money to participate.

3.2.3.3. Organization goal. The interviewees all mentioned that they agreed with the missions of the Earthwatch Institute, including its contribution to others and environmental protection.

4. Discussion

The delimitation of the study is two teams of “Chinese Village Traditions” expeditions of the Earthwatch Institute in 2008. All international volunteer tourists of the two teams were invited to join the study. The findings were mainly based on the interview transcriptions, the primary researchers’ observation, and the related documentations collected from the participants (field notes, meeting minutes, and blogs).

In this study, the limitations were the small sample collected in the interview and the length of observation. Due to the nature of international volunteer tourism trip, the number of participants is often limited when compared to that of mass tourism. The small numbers of interviewees may not reach the saturation point in finding motivation and expectation themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, when interpreting the findings, the readers may be cautious about the fact that this study observed only 2 teams of participants for a voluntary task.

This study explored the expectations and motivations of international volunteer tourism in an eastern developing country. Regarding their expectations, most were related to the mission of the expeditions. The motivation themes from the study echo the findings from previous literature. The characteristics and setting of this study are most like McIntosh and Zahra’s study (2007) of Australian volunteer tourists in a Maori community in New Zealand. Several similar themes were found in both studies, such as “not just be tourists,” “to give,” and to “experience.”

For personal factors, interest in travel and challenge/stimulation are consistent with the previous findings. Among other interests, the most frequently mentioned is professional development, such as language or career-building skills. Having an authentic experience was often mentioned in this study, though not frequently shown in the above literature. However, several papers initiated discussion of the importance of authentic experiences in volunteer tourism (Carter, 2008; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Zavitz, 2005). Interpersonal and other factors appeared to overlap with previous literatures.

Overall, the themes of international volunteer tourists’ motivations are consistent with literature reviews, regardless of setting. These results of searching for authentic experiences, interacting with locals intensively, immersing themselves into a host’s culture associated with self-exploration and the meaning of one’s life which echo volunteer tourism provides the transformation process through leisure to self-exploration for individuals (Wearing et al., 2008).

5. Conclusion

The case study of the “Chinese Village Traditions” expedition illustrated a typical international volunteer tourism trip. The site was located in a remote village that foreign tourists seldom approach. The majority of the expedition was devoted to volunteer services helping PIs collect and record research documents; a few days were also allotted for sightseeing. The volunteer tourists stayed with a host family during the expedition, offering even deeper cultural interaction. The primary researcher utilized qualitative method to explore the expectations and motivations of the participants in this expedition.

The most frequently mentioned motivations in this study are authentic experience and interaction with locals or culture. The desire to trade the standard daily environment for a brand new world prompts participants to join international volunteer tourism trips. To satisfy these needs, approaches encouraging the interactions between locals and participants such as using local houses as accommodations should be taken into account. Although such arrangements may be difficult and take more effort, it promotes culture encounter for both participants and the locals.

On the other hand, most participants were first-time visitors who had little or no knowledge about the local culture or language in this study. Therefore, cultural barriers are indeed expected in
such a trip. Participants with various motivations and expectations may have different levels of culture difficulties and copying strategies in one team. From managerial viewpoints, giving pre-trip orientations and detailed information regarding living condition in the village visited are crucial that could help participants to cope with apprehension owing to cultural shock. For example, some participants may consider limited water sources and pit holes as exciting residential experience while some may really concern about the sanitary issues. Also, the acquired trip experience by past participants could be utilized as a guidepost for new participant to prevail cultural barriers.

Finally, the study targets a group known as shallow volunteer tourists, based on Callanan and Thomas (2005). Shallow volunteer tourists prefer short-term trips (e.g., few weeks), demonstrate few skills, experience low levels of direct contributions to locals, and tend to be more passive in participation. According to Callanan and Thomas (2005), the destination of the project and self-interest motives plays significant roles in participants’ decision making processes. Also, the meaning of the project must be emphasized. International volunteer tourists spend considerable amounts of money, time, and labor volunteering and sightseeing. The importance of the project is a major point of their concern. To attract and retain international volunteer tourists, operators should pay specific attentions to these points.

In summary, the eleven themes of motivation extracted from the comments of 10 international volunteer tourists of the “Chinese Village Traditions” expeditions were categorized into three groups. There are four themes within personal factors: authentic experience, interest in travel, challenge/stimulation, and other interest; four themes within interpersonal factors: desire to help, interaction with locals/cultures, encouraged by others, and enhancing relationships; and three themes within other factors: unique style of the trip, time/money, and organization goal. By comparing the previous literature review, the motivations themes found in the study were confirmed with other research. Since this qualitative study is considered as an exploratory research, it is suggested that the findings of 11 motivation items can lead to the construction of an international volunteer tourists’ motivation scale by using a large-scale survey which may further streamline the motivation dimensionality.

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