The ageing pilgrimage tourist: Role of local accessible tourism development

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The proportion of people aged over 60 years is growing faster than any other age group because of both longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates. However, research has rarely considered the associations between pilgrimage tourism, companionship with friends, neighbours and family, and ageing persons' psychological health. This article proposes meaningful strategies, based on a survey of 690 valid responses from a group of elderly pilgrimage-tourists. In contrast to the previous related works, emphasis is placed on the importance of the spiritual function in the general pattern of pilgrimage tour. The case of this study findings determined that the enjoyment factor is almost equal to spirituality. In addition, the results revealed that the respondents desired accessible facilities and attentive services. The results of this empirical study will inform the travel industry and local tourism sector.

Key words: Ageing society, mutual pilgrimage, pilgrimage tourist, accessible tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important social indicator to be widely recognised, for example, approximately 80% of adults in the United States hold some self-described religious identification (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Academic studies usually consider tourist activities related to religion as 'religious tourism'. Religious tourism, therefore, encompasses religion and religious beliefs as its main purpose. It is a kind of special tourism with preaching, following of preachers, seeking scriptures and acts of pilgrimage, where one starts by leaving one's permanent residence for a 'journey' (Zhang et al., 2007). Religious tourism, in practical terms, refers not only to the form of tourism with a strong or single-minded religious motivation for pilgrimage, but also, to those non-pilgrimage tourist activities e.g. travelling to religious sites and surroundings for sightseeing and recreation. In the case study presented within this article, this study attempt to determine the interviewees, several groups of pilgrimage tourists, attitude towards the spirituality, or enjoy their leisure time during visits the religious site surroundings.

The vast bulk of research on spirituality and health has focused on the populations with strong Christian religious affiliations (Williams and Sternthal, 2007; Benjamins, 2005; Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000). Despite the challenges to making cross-cultural comparisons, research into diversity in religious orientation and geography is necessary, to determine the generalisability of current findings on associations between religion and health. In addition, The role of soul religious treatment in Taoist thought, an ancient philosophy is recognised originated from Taoism, one of a Chinese inherent folklore belief, also have been discussed in Guo et al. (2006), Zhang et al. (2007) and Chang (2009); these studies were, however, seldom to in-depth discussion about the specific patterns of the existing spiritual healing driven by religious factor. In the benefits of spiritual growth, development of Chinese folklore belief in Taiwan has implications for the development of pilgrimage tourism, the renovation of old pilgrimage centres, and the building
of new sites. Due to data collection and sample representativeness, hence, the belief of monotheism and polytheism believers is excluded in advance; the study pays close attention to pantheistic folklore belief practice in Taiwan instead.

In several European Union (EU) Member States, people over the age of 64 years represent the lowest proportion of tourists. Demographic trends suggest, however, that the proportion of people older than 64 years in the total population will increase over time. Urhausen (2008) predicts that the elderly population will nearly double its share, reaching 30% of the total population, by the year 2060. Consequently, the share of older people represented in the tourist population will also increase. Their segment will probably increase even faster than projections based on current demographic trends predict due to various influencing factors, such as improving health conditions (Uhrasen, 2008). By contrast, the extent of tourism-industry awareness of the organisational benefits that may flow from an accessible product supply in tourism is unknown. Many businesses in Taiwan meet their statutory requirements towards the elderly tourists that participate in pilgrimage, for example, by providing accessible parking. Relevance industry does not yet associate a high standard of access provision with other elements of corporate performance, as with, for example, the inadequacy of accessible facilities at the regions important pilgrimage sites.

To provide some background for this article, we briefly introduce, the Chinese folklore belief as practiced in Taiwan, and review the current state of the ageing population in the Nordic and Baltic countries and in Taiwan. This research then describe the aims of tourists on a pilgrimage trip, and describe to some interesting implications for the local tourism sector, and the pilgrimage tour organiser, or community, willing to improve service provision for increasing numbers of elderly pilgrimage tourists in the future. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Related literatures discuss the origin of folklore belief and practiced in Taiwan, a special pilgrimage pattern originated towards the unique characteristics and the important role of the ageing tourist’s participation in tourism. Then, we present a sampling procedure and preliminary analysis. Subsequently, the survey illustrated and describes the results. Next, this study follows the survey results, proposes several managerial implications on this case. Conclusions are finally drawn in the last section.

RELATED LITERATURES

The phenomenon of pilgrimage had existed hundreds of years before tourism appeared in human behaviour. Studies have commonly considered currently existing tourism and travel to be derived from medieval Christian pilgrimages to Rome and Jerusalem. Each relevant historical period had its own lodging needs. From the viewpoint of Christian history, during the late period of the Roman Empire, Christians often gathered to mark a saint’s annual celebration. Under the swarm of pilgrims approaching shrines from further afield, travellers made the annual journey to Rome for the June festival, the Christian birthday of the city at the traditional heart of the Roman Empire. While each locality acquired a new Christian topography and constructed an identity around its churches and martyr shrines, the map of the Roman Empire at large was being redrawn to focus on the Holy land at its centre. As early as AD 333, an anonymous traveller from the European continent set out on a distant pilgrimage to Jerusalem, intent only on the objective of visiting the holy places of the Bible.

It well known that Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Israel, attracts about 700,000 thousand pilgrims in yearly pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000), and every year millions of pilgrims from around the world gather under extremely crowded conditions in Mecca, Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj (Clingingsmith et al., 2008). The appearance of pilgrimage, following Chinese folklore beliefs is very different to Christian and Muslim practices. Diachronic folklore belief in Chinese society and Chinese religious culture has developed over several thousand years, and a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Belonging to the identical culture circle and philosophical thought, specifically, religions in Taiwan are syncretised and pantheistic (Chang, 2009). Taiwan folklore beliefs are heavily influenced by Fujian and Guangdong, two provinces of Mainland China, due to the ancestral homes built during the immigration wave during the 17 to 19 century. As the immigrant population adjusted to a new living environment and an uncertain future, communal rituals and folklore beliefs grew from the immigrants’ original religions became widespread on the island. These events have shaped the belief system of contemporary Taiwanese people. According to an official statistics from the government in 2009, more than ten thousands religious sites of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism which correspond with the dominant Taiwanese pantheistic beliefs structure as shown in Table 1. In a relatively rare phenomenon, pilgrims gather in the so-called holy land for specific festivals, such as that held on January 9th of the every Lunar year, to celebrate the birthday of the Jade Emperor (yu huang da di), the supreme deity of Taoism.

The folklore belief is a form of religion that recognises all deities as gods. Temples (miao yu or si yuan) dedicated to the deities commonly form alliances with several temples of similar character, which are dedicated the same deities. Under Chinese pantheistic belief, the deity is the doppelganger of a soul or spirit. This belief may derive from Taoist religious communal rituals. Aligned temples, traditionally regularly exchange visits (or, mutual pilgrimage) as a part of various communal rituals e.g. incense conveying, temple fairs, parades, and deity tours
Figure 1. The difference of the general and the mutual pattern of pilgrimage.

Table 1. General conditions of oriental religions in Taiwan of 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion belief</th>
<th>Temple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taoism</td>
<td>9249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>2308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I-Kuan Tao</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confucianism</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syuan Yuan Jiao</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiender</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li-ism</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tienti Teachings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>11796</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Statistical yearbook of interior, Ministry of Interior (MOI), Taiwan, R.O.C.

In addition, ageing is a universal phenomenon that adversely affects human beings. Society's complex infrastructure and the unique life course of individuals can change dramatically by progressive increase in the global population. Population ageing is unprecedented, without parallel in the history of humanity. Increases in the proportions of those aged above 60 years are accompanied by declines in the proportions of young people aged under 15 (UNDESA, 2002). There is an extensive economic and political economy literature on the effects of an ageing population on the welfare state, and on social security systems in particular (Feldstein and Liebman, 2002; Clark et al., 2004). An ageing society tends to decrease the profitability of a welfare state system that features a Pay as You Go (PAYG) pension system (Galasso and Profeta, 2007), and may result in a process of globalisation affecting migration patterns and taxation systems due to distribution of population throughout the age groups is uneven (Anderson, 2006). The world is facing on-going ageing population phenomenon. The health of the elderly has a great impact on the population, and an aging population describes an inverted pyramidal distribution. This article is focusing on whether group pilgrimage tourism can improve elderly tourists' satisfaction with their physical and mental health. Results from this study can inform discussion among the tourism sector, tour group community, event organisers,
Table 2. The percentage of the descriptive statistics for the group pilgrim recognitions (N = 690).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey dimension</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality on pilgrim individual perception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praying to the dedicated Land Deity</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel the deity is belonging to him/herself</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment on pilgrim personal perception</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do some sightseeing around this area</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light-hearted with the companions</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local sightseeing infrastructure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible facilities should be increased in the sightseeing spot</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People-friendly public transport system</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and others interested in meeting the needs, and wishes of elderly tourists.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and variable selection

Prior to the start of our survey, researchers interviewed two management committees dedicated to the Land Deity temple. Historically, these two committees have shared a firm partnership. Traditionally, two Land Deity temples, visit each other at least once a year with many pilgrims. This survey employed cluster sampling that the units sampled of the two temple committees provide lists of pilgrims that pray and contribute regularly was chosen in clusters. The lists are cross-referenced to exclude duplication. An interesting finding is that the most pilgrims are local, and are temple alliance community resident based (943 of 1150 sample units; 82%). One month following a series of meetings with the two temple board committees, four communities were selected as the study subjects for our research. The surveys excluded the interviewee who were not willing to answer, total of 900 questionnaires were issued and conducted in person. Invalid respondents were ruled out, leaving 690 valid interviewees (n = 690, approximately 76.6%) used in this study. The survey period was from 1 September, to 31 October 2010.

The primary purpose of the study was to gain a clear idea of the motivations for pilgrim participation in folklore belief travel as organised by residential community groups. In addition, the results from this study can help sacred site regional tourism offices to determine effective tourism strategies for group pilgrimage, and further suggests how service content might be enhanced for pilgrimage-oriented tour group operations. The shared involvement between community and pilgrimage is defined as ‘mutual pilgrimage’. In the initial stage, this study designed the survey for a group pilgrimage-tourist-community. Hence, the questionnaire consisted of three main dimensions: group pilgrim individual perception on spirituality and enjoyment factors, local tourism infrastructure around the pilgrimage site (or sacred site) that through the numerous discussion and modification with two Land Deity temple committees, regional tourism sector between two temples located, and pilgrim tour organizers, respectively. In the pre-test stage, each sub dimensions were generated by opinions of respondents. And this survey also employed the Likert 1-to-5 rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire construction fully considered internal consistencies for each survey item, and prevented reliability and validity less than the normal value (Cronbach’s alpha value = 0.7).

Identity of respondents

The respondent profile in this study was as follows: The percentages of female respondents were 63 % while 37 % were male. The survey finds a most significant was that the majority of respondents of average age distribution were between 60 to 69 years old (42 %) and above 70 (45%). The marital status of respondents was 62% married and living with their spouse, 38% were single (including widow/widower). 82% of interviewees answered they have no current household financial burden for example, mortgage or rent. The average disposable annually income was NTD 20,000 (approximately USD$ 7,954), 92% rely mainly on company or labour pensions and personal savings for income. Most of the respondents were retired (88%).

RESULTS

The KMO value is 0.24, and the Bartlett test is significant (p < 0.001) in this survey. Table 2 illustrates subject recognition of key factors for sub dimension with large percentages under each main dimension. In the group pilgrim-tourist perceptions on spirituality, the principle purpose is praying to Land Deity (45.1%), the next is attempting to feel that the Land Deity dedication at the alliance temple relates to them personally (40%). The most significant item for enjoyment of pilgrimage excursions to the sacred sites surrounding area, is sightseeing (44.2%), and to enjoy other pilgrims’ companionship while on the journey, is a secondary item (37.9%). It is worth mentioning that subject motivation for participation in tours, places spirituality only slightly higher than enjoyment. Regarding the pilgrimage-site area sightseeing infrastructure, respondents considered that the local tourism authority should emphasise the accessible facilities in the sightseeing spot (45%). Of transport, 38.1% of interviewees expressed that a passenger-friendly mass transit system would encourage
them to journey to the alliance temple sacred site next time by themselves. The final observation dimension is that a trusted tour program design can help pilgrimage tourists participate with confidence (21%). In addition, satisfactory levels of service are a significant item for tourists (13.5%).

**IMPLICATIONS ON THE STUDY**

Ageing takes place within the context of friends, work associates, neighbours and family members. ‘Health’ refers to physical, mental and social well being as expressed in the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of health. Maintaining autonomy and independence for the elderly is a key goal in the policy framework for active ageing. In practical terms, the ageing ‘Baby boomers’ (the demographic born during the Post-World War II period) will have both time and money to spend on holidays. Particular areas of interest to this demographic are recreation and leisure experiences, educational experiences, and ageing-friendly products and services.

Pilgrimage may be purposeful, serious, and faithful; on the other hand, from a tourist perspective pilgrimage also provides recreation, leisure, and a joyous path to the deity. In our survey, enjoyment rated slight below spirituality, and this result echoes in the comments aforementioned. Additionally, at least 60% of the world population are adherent to a religion (UNESCO, 1995). Such a large number of religious followers are indeed a driving force for religious tourism. Thus, religious tourism is a worthy development policy for the regional tourism sector and the pilgrim tour organiser or community.

UNWTO formed a resolution in 2005 supporting ‘accessible tourism for all’. The document provides a key reference for guiding the development of the tourism sector towards greater accessibility. Also of importance for equal access is the UNWTO’s global code of ethics for tourism (1999), which sets a frame of reference for the responsible and sustainable development of world tourism. A combination of a lack of tourism products, and inadequate information availability are reasons that the travel and tourism industry provides a perceived inadequate service to people with accessibility requirements. Consistent with this sentiment, the one-stop-shop for accessible tourism in Europe (OSSATE) defines ‘tourism for all’ as ‘making travel and tourism destinations, products, and information suitable for all those who have particular accessibility needs, their families, and friends’ (Buhalis et al., 2005). The findings of this study reveal that most respondents are interested in the service content dimension of the folklore belief travel-community, were they trust the details of a pilgrimage travel programme, and the quality is satisfactory.

For the reasons aforementioned, adapting to the reality of an increasingly ageing pilgrimage tourist, providers of the folklore pilgrimage packages should consider the five key points summarised as follows:

1. The vital prerequisite for the tourist route is quality; not just in the form of the natural environment, but also in buildings and facilities. Travelling along tourist routes should provide alternatives to the main roads, with activities and attractions to enhance the experience. Services should meet the needs and wishes of elderly group members.
2. Enhance the overall, barrier-free, public space and facilities that are available at pilgrimage and sightseeing locations, by partial government financial support, and religious contributions, including accommodation, restaurants, shopping outlets, and toilets other amenities.
3. The overall accessibility of the destination: including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive demands, due to the physical and mental state of the tourist group. For example, interactive tourist location websites and promotions highlighting distinguishing religious and spiritual features for visitors.
4. This study revealed that the majority of respondents expressed the opinion that a passenger-friendly mass transit system would attract them to travel to the alliance sacred site individually. Therefore, the regional transport sector might improve public transport accessibility (low floor buses, accessible trains, and train platforms), and provide direct access to local religious destination sites in the interest of the economic efficiency such as by increasing the frequency of public transport services to the site, and providing for concessionary fares for the elder passenger.
5. The community or organiser of the local pilgrimage tour should avoid an excessively concentrated travel schedule for elder travellers, while providing for sufficient time for physical and psychological rest to provide for a better experience at the pilgrimage site during an excursion.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to consider, through an exploratory case study of a group of elderly travellers to the alliance temple spiritual site, while participating in mutual pilgrimage following an Eastern folklore belief. The survey found that respondents’ desire for recreation was almost equal to that for spiritual content, and this observation has implications for the strategic planning of future events for the study demographic.

The following will find this research especially beneficial: the tourist opinions regarding the local sightseeing accessible infrastructure, collected as a part of this study, can inform the regional tourism sector of the needs, wishes and perspective of elderly religious tourists. This would help in addressing some areas in order to meet the needs of the elder pilgrims. Acting upon this information will facilitate an expansion of market share by the critical players of the folklore pilgrimage-tourism industry by provision of accessible facilities and services.

Finally, future research may engage in developing hospitality services for elder pilgrims in the tourism
industry. There is a need for further, similar studies, to a
variety of other destinations, for example, historic
heritages, natural scenic, and city with a rich cultural
atmosphere, thus there is still much work needed in the
analysis and empirical testing of these new ideas.

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